Miguel de Unamuno

(1864–1936)
SPANISH

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Unamuno took great pride in the fact that his philosophy was distinctively Spanish. Writing just after the devastation of World War I until the eve of the Spanish Civil War, he was obsessed with the problems of coping with a life so filled with anxiety, brutality, and disappointment. Unamuno was one of those very individual voices, crying out passionately on behalf of honesty and integrity. He supported the Allies against Germany in the first World War and he opposed Francisco Franco, the fascist dictator. He wrote elegantly about the "tragic sense of life," in poetry and novels as well as in philosophical essays and literary commentary. Kierkegaard was Unamuno's philosophical hero, and he, too, bemoaned the failure of objective science and reason to answer life's questions and defended a version of subjective truth. According to Unamuno, passion and commitment are more important in life than reason and rationality. Reason inevitably leads to skepticism, and skepticism to despair. Faith, by contrast, offers its own guarantees, even if they are "only" subjective. "All or nothing," Unamuno would say. What a human being wants is immortality, nothing less. Reason and science tell us that immortality is impossible. Faith satisfies that ultimate demand. For Unamuno, one "philosophizes in order to live," not the other way around.

❖ *from* The Tragic Sense of Life ❖

Several times in the wandering course of these observations I have been bold enough to define, in spite of my horror of definitions, my own position vis-à-vis the problem I have been examining. But I know there is bound to be some dissatisfied reader, indoctrinated in some dogmatism or other, who will say: "This man cannot make up his mind; he vacillates; first he seems to assert one proposition, then he maintains the opposite; he is full of contradictions; it is impossible to place him. What is he?" There you have me: a man who affirms opposites, a man of contradiction and quarrel, as Jeremiah said of himself; a man who says one thing with his heart and the opposite with his head, and for whom this strife is the stuff of life. It is a clear-cut case, as clear as the water which flows from the melted snow upon the mountain tops.

I shall be told that mine is an untenable position, that a foundation is needed upon which to build our actions and our works, that it is impossible to live by contradictions, that unity and clarity are essential conditions for life and thought, and that it is imperative to unify the latter. And so we are back where we started from. For it is precisely this inner contradiction which unifies my life and gives it a practical purpose.

Or, rather, it is the conflict itself, this selfsame passionate uncertainty which unifies my action and causes me to live and work.

We think in order that we may live I have said, but perhaps it would be more correct to say that we think because we live, and that the form of our thought corresponds to the form of our life. Once more I must point out that our ethical and philosophical doctrines in general are no more than a posteriori justifications of our conduct, of our actions. Our doctrines are usually the means by which we seek to explain and justify to others and to ourselves our own mode of action—to ourselves, be it noted, as well as to others. The man who does not really know why he acts as he does, and not otherwise, feels the need to explain to himself his reason for so acting, and so he manufactures a motive. What we believe to be the motives for our conduct are usually mere pretexts. The reason which impels one

man carefully to preserve his life is the same reason given by another man for shooting himself in the head.

Nevertheless it cannot be denied that reasons, ideas, exert an influence on human actions, and sometimes even determine them by a process analogous to that of suggestion in the case of a hypnotized person, and this is due to the tendency of all ideas to resolve themselves in action—for an idea in itself is but an inchoate or aborted act. It was this tendency which suggested to Fouillée his theory of idea forces. But ordinarily ideas are forces which we reconcile with other deeper and much less conscious forces.

But leaving all this to one side for a moment, I should like to establish the fact that uncertainty, doubt, the perpetual wrestling with the mystery of our final destiny, the consequent mental despair, and the lack of any solid or stable dogmatic foundation, may all serve as basis for an ethic.

Whoever bases or thinks he bases his conduct—his inner or outward conduct, his feeling or his action—on a dogma or theoretical principle which he deems incontrovertible, runs the risk of becoming a fanatic; moreover, the moment this dogma shows any fissure or even any weakness, he finds the morality based on it giving way. If the ground he thought firm begins to rock, he himself trembles in the earthquake, for we are not all like the ideal Stoic who remains undaunted among the ruins of a world shattered to pieces. Luckily, the matter which underlies his ideas will tend to save him. For if a man should tell you that he does not defraud or cuckold his best friend because he fears hellfire, you may depend upon it that he would not do so even if he stopped believing in hell, but would instead invent some other excuse for not transgressing. And this truth is to the honor of the human race.

But whoever is convinced that he is sailing, perhaps without a set course, on an unstable or sinkable craft, will not be daunted if he finds the deck giving way beneath his feet and threatening to sink. For this type of man acts as he does, not because he believes his theory of action to be true, but because he believes that by acting thus he will make it true, prove it true, and that by thus acting he will create his spiritual world.

My conduct must be the best proof, the moral proof, of my supreme desire; and if I do not finally convince myself, within the limits of the ultimate and irremediable uncertainty, of the truth of what I hope for, it is because my conduct is not sufficiently pure. Virtue, therefore, is not based upon dogma, but dogma upon virtue, and it is not faith which creates martyrs but rather martyrs who create faith. There is no security or repose—so far as security and repose are attainable in this life which is essentially insecure and lacking in repose—save in passionately good conduct.

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What is the anti-rational truth of our heart? It is the immortality of the human soul, the truth of the persistence of our consciousness without any termination whatever, the human finality of the Universe. And what is its moral proof? We may formulate it thus: Act so that in your own judgement and in the judgement of others you may deserve eternity, act so that you may be irreplaceable, act so that you do not deserve death. Or perhaps thus: Act as if you were to die tomorrow, but only in order to survive and become eternal. The end-purpose of morality is to give personal, human finality to the Universe; to discover the finality it possesses—if it does in fact possess any—and discover it by acting.

More than a century ago, in 1804, the deepest and most intense of the spiritual sons of the patriarch Rousseau, most tragic of French men of feeling (not excluding Pascal), Sénancour . . . wrote the words . . . "Man is perishable. . . . That may be; but let us perish resisting, and if annihilation must be our portion, let us not make it a just one." If you change this sentence from a negative to a positive form—"And if annihilation must be our portion, let us make it an unjust reward."—you get the firmest basis for action by the man who cannot or will not be a dogmatist.

All men deserve to be saved, but, as I have said in the previous chapter, whoever desires immortality with a passion and even against all reason deserves it most of all. The writer H. G. Wells, who has given himself over to prophecy (not an uncommon phenomenon in his country), tells us in his *Anticipations* that "Active and capable men of all forms of religious profession today tend in practice to disregard the question of immortality altogether." And this is so because the religious professions of these active and capable men of whom Wells speaks are usually no more than a lie, and their lives are a lie, too, if they pretend to base them upon religion. But perhaps what Wells tells us is not basically as true as he and others like him imagine. Those active and capable men live in the midst of a society imbued with Christian principles, surrounded by institutions and social

reactions produced by Christianity, so that a belief in the immortality of the soul runs deep in their own souls like a subterranean river, neither seen nor heard, but watering the roots of their deeds and their motives.

In all truth it must be admitted that there exists no more solid foundation for morality than the foundation provided by the Catholic ethic. Man's end-purpose is eternal happiness, which consists in the vision and enjoyment of God *in saecula saeculorum*. Where that ethic errs, however, is in the choice of means conducive to this end; for to make the attainment of eternal happiness dependent upon believing or not believing that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son and not from the Father alone, or in the divinity of Jesus, or in the theory of the hypostatic union, or even in the existence of God is nothing less than monstrous, as a moment's reflection will show. A human God—and we can conceive of no other—would never reject whoever could not believe in Him with his head; it is not in his head but in his heart that the wicked man says there is no God, that is: he does not *want* God to exist. If any belief could be linked with the attainment of eternal happiness it would be the belief in this happiness itself and in the possibility of attaining it.

And what shall we say of that other notion of the emperor of pedants, to the effect that we have not come into the world to be happy but to fulfill our duty ("Wir sind nicht auf der Welt, um glücklich zu sein, sondern um unsere Schuldigkeit zu tun")? If we are in this world *for something* (*um etwas*), whence can this *for* be derived but from the very essence of our own will, which asks for happiness and not duty as ultimate end? And if we were to attempt to attribute some other value to this *for,* an "objective value," as some Sadducean pedant might say, then we would have to recognize that this objective reality—the reality which would remain though humanity should disappear—is as indifferent to our duty as to our happiness, as little concerned with our morality as with our felicity. I am not aware that Jupiter, Uranus, or Sirius would allow their courses to be affected because we do or do not fulfill our duty any more than because we are or are not happy.

Karl Jaspers

(1883–1969)
GERMAN

Jaspers entered philosophy from a medical career in psychiatry. Accordingly, his philosophy displays a fascinating combination of scientific knowledge and antiscientific humanism. Jaspers, perhaps the most systematic of the existentialists, is heavily influenced by Kant, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. Like Kant, he is interested in the limits of experience, the limitations of science. Like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, he is interested in the individual, in "philosophizing as an exception." Philosophy for him is an activity, one developing out of the need to communicate to others one's own *Existenz*. *Existenz* is a notion Jaspers takes directly from Kierkegaard to refer to the authentic self. *Existenz* is, still following Kierkegaard, lived and not merely an object of knowledge. It is an experience of subjective freedom within certain boundary situations, exemplified by death and guilt. Authentic *Existenz* is the human attempt to push past these boundaries and reach the Encompassing ("transcendence"). This "will to infinity" is also called faith, the ideal attempt to go beyond the limits of experience. Again, one is very much reminded of Kant's philosophy—the separation of the world of our experience and world-in-itself, the world of knowledge and the world of faith. But this is Kant with a Kierkegaardian twist: for Jaspers there is no rationality to faith as there always is for Kant.

The selection here is taken from Jaspers's "Existenz" from *Philosophy,* vol. II, his most systematic exposition of these themes.