

On the Very Problem of the Problem of God in Zubiri and Unamuno*

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Abstract

Perhaps one innovation brought about by Spanish philosophy is the notion that “God” names a *problem* instead of an *entity*. This is what Xavier Zubiri means when he uses the phrase “the problem of God.” Although he does not employ the Zubirian phrase, Miguel de Unamuno also addresses God as a problem. This paper compares Zubiri’s and Unamuno’s accounts of how God appears to human beings polemically. For both thinkers, God is a problem only for human beings; there is something about the structure of human existence that makes God come to mind. For Zubiri, God comes to mind because human beings find themselves implanted into reality. For Unamuno, God comes to mind because human beings understand their own mortality and seek to overcome it. After presenting their respective views on the structures of human beings that account for the problem of God, the philosophical implications of such a view are explored. If we take Zubiri and Unamuno to be correct about “the very problem of the problem of God,” true theism would not be evidentialist (this is the way “theism” works in traditional philosophy of religion). Also, true atheism (the claim that God does not exist) would be impossible, for even if the entity called “God” does not in fact exist, “God” as a problem (the problem of God) does.

Resumen

Quizás una innovación provocada por filosofía española es la noción de que “Dios” refiere a un *problema* en vez de una *entidad*. Esto es lo que Xavier Zubiri quiere decir al usar la frase “el problema de Dios”. Aunque él no emplea la frase zubiriana, Miguel de Unamuno también se dirige a Dios como un problema. Este ensayo compara el pensamiento de Zubiri y de Unamuno en torno a cómo Dios aparece polémicamente a los seres humanos. Para ambos pensadores, Dios es sólo un problema para los seres humanos; hay algo sobre la estructura de existencia humana que hace que Dios venga a la mente. Para Zubiri, Dios viene a la mente porque los seres humanos se encuentran implantado en realidad. Para Unamuno, Dios viene a la mente porque los seres humanos entienden su propia mortalidad y buscan superarlo. Después de presentar sus vistas respectivas de las estructuras humanas que explican el problema de Dios, se exploran las implicaciones filosóficas de tales vistas. Si supongamos que Zubiri y Unamuno sean correctos sobre “el problema mismo del problema de Dios,” el verdadero teísmo no sería evidencialista (ésta es la manera en que el “teísmo” funciona en la filosofía tradicional de la religión). También, el verdadero ateísmo (la demanda de que Dios no existe) sería imposible, ya que aun cuando la entidad llamó que “Dios” no exista de hecho, “Dios” como un problema (el problema de Dios) sí existe.

* In honor of Charles C. Seabrook, who introduced me to the wonderful philosophical tradition of Spain through an advanced Spanish grammar lesson

La oración del ateo

*Oye mi ruego Tú, Dios que no existes,
y en tu nada recoje estas mis quejas,
Tú que a los pobres hombres nunca dejas
sin consuelo de engaño. No resistes*

*a nuestro ruego y nuestro anhelo vistes.
Cuando Tú de mi mente más te alejas,
más recuerdo las plácidas consejas,
con que mi ama endulzóme noches tristes.*

*¡Qué grande eres, mi Dios! Eres tan grande
que no eres sino Idea; es muy angosta
la realidad por mucho que se expande*

*para acabarte. Sufro yo a tu costa,
Dios no existente, pues si Tú existieras
existiría yo también de veras.*

The Atheist's Prayer

Hear my prayer you nonexisting God,
and in your nothingness take up my laments,
you who never leaves poor men
without deceptive consolation. You do not resist

our prayers and you disguise our desires.
The more you move yourself away from my mind,
the more I remember the placid fables
used by my mom to comfort me on sad nights.

How great you are, my God! You are so great
that you are nothing but an idea; reality is steadfast,
no matter how much one tries to force

you to come to an end. I suffer at your expense,
nonexisting God, for if you were to exist
then I would truly also exist.¹

Introduction

For Spanish existentialists, “God” is the name of a problem, not an entity (theology deals with the entity). In other words, the problem is not *what* God is, or *what* the problem of God is; rather, it is *that* God is a problem (for theists and atheists alike). Why do we even talk about God? This is what I refer to as “the very problem of the problem of God.” The very problem of the problem of God is directly tied to another great problem, the problem of being human. “Being human” is the name of the problem in which we find ourselves. I maintain that “the problem of being human” is equivalent to “the very problem of the problem of God;” that is, it is insofar as we are human beings that “God” is a problem. I shall not explore “the very problem of the problem of being human” here since this essay is on God, but it might be easiest to explain it by referring to Heidegger’s *Being and Time* as a good treatise on the issue.

Ever since Seneca and St. Isidore of Seville, the question of what it means to be a human being (in a sense different than

“rational animal”) has been posed most intensely, and most intimately, by thinkers from the Iberian Peninsula. For the Spanish philosopher, the problem of being human and the problem of God are inseparable. Failure to take up one of the problems results in the incapacity to take up the other. “God” is meaningless without human beings, and “human beings” are only such in light of God. Within the Spanish tradition, it seems that atheism is a kind of misanthropy, and a hatred of life is blasphemous.

Two 20th century Spanish existentialists offer the most congruency between the problem of God and the problem of being human. The philosopher who emphasizes this dual problematic most systematically is Xavier Zubiri, whose conception of “religion” explains the existential constitution of human life, the divine nature of God, and the origin of religions. Miguel de Unamuno, although not as systematic as Zubiri, yet definitely more passionate, views God and human life as mutual creative processes. In his account, humans make God and God makes them; creation is a mutual process.

The similarities between these two thinkers go beyond the fact that they are both of Basque descent. Neither accepts the traditional proofs for the existence of God as useful for truly understanding the problem of God. As a consequence of the failures of these proofs, mere rejection of them does not constitute atheism. Both hold that the human condition is a constitutive part of the idea of God. Neither believes that true atheism is possible, for being human automatically makes one have the problem of God, so atheists and theists both face the problem of God.

In this essay, I present Zubiri and Unamuno's respective views on the unity of being human and God as well as the refutation of theism and atheism, traditionally conceived, that results from those views. By doing so, I will offer a different, more Spanish way of thinking about humans, God, and the relationship between the two. To these ends, this essay is composed of four sections.

In the first section, I explicate Zubiri's jointure of the problem of being human (religation) to the problem of God (deity). Section two discusses Unamuno's union of the tragic sense of life (the problem of being human) and God (the problem of God). The point of these first two sections is to show that, for both thinkers, the problem of God is the direct consequence of the problem of being human. Only human beings are religious; "God" names an important fact about being human.

Sections three and four explore the consequences of understanding God in Spanish existentialist terms. These consequences challenge traditional philosophy of religion and call it back to its proper grounding. The third section deals with the critique of theistic evidentialism that comes along with understanding the problem of God in terms of the problem of being human. For the theistic evidentialist, God's existence is provable by demonstration. There have been many different demonstrations produced in the history of philosophy; the three main ones are the

ontological, cosmological, and teleological proofs for the existence of God. However, given that God is connected to the problem of being human, these proofs miss the mark and prove something different from the God expressed in this essay. Therefore, I will argue that theistic evidentialist arguments are insufficient for, if not detrimental to, true belief in God. Zubiri argues that such proofs only prove divinity and therefore fail to prove God. Unamuno worries that theistic proofs actually prove the wrong God, who Unamuno calls the "God-Idea," who is in reality no God at all.

The second consequence for the philosophy of religion is that arguments against the existence of God are equally insufficient. First of all, given that theistic arguments are insufficient, merely pointing out that insufficiency cannot be atheism. Second, and this is the bigger thrust of the section, atheism is itself a position inside of the problem of God. Atheists fail to see that the nonexistence of God only matters to the atheist insofar as the atheist is already religated to God through the problem of being human. In other words, atheism is one of the solutions to the problem of God. This, of course, does not remove the problem called "God." Zubiri argues that atheism is solipsistic self-divinization, and is therefore unsustainable. Unamuno sees the atheist as a desperate person frustrated by the difficulties of proving God's existence. However, once evidentialism is defeated, atheists will not have to despair about not finding proof, and true atheism is defeated.

I. Zubiri: Religation, Deity, Divinity, God

For Zubiri, being human means to find oneself *implanted* in existence. This implantation is understood in terms of what Zubiri calls "religation." The problem of being human is for Zubiri the problem of being religated. Since religation is an imposition, one must inquire into the imposer. This is the very problem of the pro-

blem of God. Zubiri explores the problem of God in terms of “deity” (the power of reality, which imposes itself onto us), “divinity” (the foundation of deity), and “God” (the absolutely absolute personal reality who gives reality its impressive force through love.). In this section, I will explain Zubiri’s conception of religation, deity, divinity, and God.

Humans, like other animals, are sentient creatures. Everything we encounter is encountered through our senses. Sensing is composed of three moments according to Zubiri: *affection, the moment of otherness, and the force of imposition*. Affection is the aspect of sensation in which “the sentient being ‘suffers’ the impression.”² This element is uncontroversial, and most traditional philosophy starts (and unfortunately ends) here.

The moment of otherness is the aspect of sensation in which impression “is the presentation of something *other* in affection.”³ Zubiri calls the other which presents itself in affection a *note*. Notes are not qualities, but things that are “noted” (noticed) in experience. For example, for animals that only see in black and white, “red” is not “noted” and therefore is not part of the sensation of an object (even if the object is “red” to those animals who “notice” color).

The force of imposition is the aspect of sensation in which “the note present in the affection imposes itself upon the sentient being” and “arouses the process of sensing.”⁴ We do not get to pick what is noticed; something is either a note or it is not. If something is a note, it imposed itself in sensation. By virtue of this imposition, the note is “noted.” Affection, the moment of otherness, and the force of imposition, although they are three different aspects of sensation, are unified in a singular event of sensing.

So far, Zubiri’s account of sensation (which Zubiri calls “sensible apprehension”) shows no differentiation between humans and other animals. The difference, Zubiri writes, has to do with a differentiation in the *modes* of sensible apprehension.

For animals, sensation merely serves as the experience of stimuli. The stimulus affects the animal; the animal responds accordingly. The example Zubiri gives is how animals respond to heat. Animals receive the stimulus “is warming” as a note imposed upon them as other. If the animal is seeking heat, it welcomes this “is warming” and draws towards the heat source; if the animal is too hot, it flees from the “is warming.” In very simple creatures, response to stimuli is instantaneous; in more complex animals (including humans when interpreted biologically), there is the power of “hesitation” (to use Bergson’s phrasing) that increases the more complex the creature. For example, even though I am hot in a sauna, I do not run away from it; I can hesitate.

Human beings, although they do receive and respond to stimuli, do something more in the moment of sensing. Zubiri argues that humans sense *reality* along with the stimuli. To return to the note of heat, of course humans experience the “is warming,” but they also experience “heat,” which is more than “is warming.” Rather, it is heat *de suyo* (in its own right). This “in its own right” is the reality of a given note. Humans can separate the heat from the source and let the heat be *de suyo*; it is because of this humans are capable of studying thermodynamics, for example.⁵

Therefore, humans have the affection of reality. The moment of otherness is the *de suyo* of a note. The note has an “in its own right” that makes it other than me. Animals, although they do experience the “other than me” of certain stimuli, fail to understand the “in its own right” of the stimuli. For humans, on the other hand, a note is “in and for itself ... heat is a way included in the sentient process, but only because it *already is* heat. Heat as something *de suyo* is ... prior to its being present in sensing.”⁶ In terms of the force of imposition, “what is apprehended is imposed upon me with ... the *force of reality*.”⁷ Reality forces itself upon me in the sensation of notes that are “in their own right” my apprehension of things.

Human beings, unlike animals, apprehend reality, the *de suyo* of notes that impose themselves on humans as something other. We are “implanted in reality.”⁸ This implantation is what Zubiri calls “religation.” Religation is the “seizure by the power of the real.”⁹ “The real” which has power over human beings is not a quality or property of the things humans experience; it, too, is *de suyo*. “The real” is enigmatic (Levinasian enough yet?); we experience that things are real, but reality *de suyo* of those things eludes us (except in certain cases related to our own reality as persons). The problem of being human, the very problem of the problem of God, lies in this seizure by the power of reality *de suyo*. The problem of our humanity is that “we are founded in an enigma, the enigma of the power of the real.”¹⁰ This enigma makes our life a mystery, leaving us to ask existential questions—e.g., “What is going to become of me?” and “What am I going to make of myself?”¹¹ Reality *de suyo* is an enigma that makes us who we are and grounds everything we experience. Therefore, everything is religated by the power of the real; the catch is that only humans experience that fact.

The problem of reality is “formally the problem of God. What religation manifests experientially and enigmatically is God as a problem. The problem of God belongs ... to the constitution of my own person.”¹² The problem of being human is the problem that brings us to the problem of God. Zubiri explores the problem of God in terms of a successive trio: deity, divinity, God.

Deity is the name Zubiri gives to “this ultimate, possibilitating, impelling power [of reality].”¹³ In other words, “deity” is the name of the enigmatic power of the real. It is found in humans not as something extra to experience (that is religation), but as the foundation of all experiences. As Zubiri writes, “[m]an does not *have* experience of deity, but rather *is* the very experience of deity in his own substantive being ... The personal act of religation is pure

and simply the experience of deity.”¹⁴ In other words, “religation,” the problem of being human, is the same as “deity,” the very problem of the problem of God. The problem of God is simply the exploration of the question “what constitutes this deity in which humans find themselves?” Notice that this means that “deity” is not equivalent to “God.” All that has been shown so far is that the problem of being human (the problem of being implanted in reality) and the very problem of the problem of God (the problem of reality *de suyo*) are linked together, therefore establishing for Zubiri the congruence of being human and God.

From deity, one can move to “divinity.” Divinity is “that fundament*, which undoubtedly belongs to reality without being deity, but is precisely the fundament of the deity of things.”¹⁵ This is demonstrable, as is done in arguments for God’s existence. All these proofs do is show that reality is really real, distinct from “subjective” experiences of it; nothing more, nothing less. Zubiri is quick to remind us that divinity “is not sufficient for reaching God, because a very important question remains unanswered. Is the first cause that which men call “God”, that to which man directs himself not only with demonstration, but will all his acts of submission, prayer, etc.? ... who is the first cause?”¹⁶ As I will explain in section three, Aquinas’s jump to God from “unmoved mover,” “first cause,” etc. is too big of a leap to make. Although Aquinas is right—God will be those things—he seems to equate the terms “divinity” and “God.” This is an error. After all, the unmoved mover can be “me” if I am a solipsist. We have to see the “who” of divinity as something *de suyo*.

God is beyond divinity, and cannot be demonstrated. Zubiri writes that God is “absolutely absolute reality ... it depends on nothing, not even that on which

* The word “fundament” is sometimes used in place of “ground” to translate the Spanish *fundamento*.

every human person depends, to wit, his nature ... but is rather a free act. The first cause as a personal and free reality: here we at last have God."¹⁷ This can only be affirmed by faith, which Zubiri describes in terms of donation—love. God is the giver of reality, and humans are the recipients of that reality. We have faith in God when we believe that the reality in which we find ourselves implanted is a gift and not a curse, an obligation and not a causal determinism; faith in God means seeing human beings as a finite moment of God, a participant in reality.¹⁸ To believe in God is to acknowledge the reality we find ourselves in and to embrace our religation. This is why for Zubiri God is an experience of being human, and being human is an experience of God.¹⁹

II. Unamuno: The Tragic Sense of God

Like Zubiri, Unamuno sees the problem of being human as a prerequisite to approaching the problem of God. Although not as systematic as Zubiri, Unamuno is definitely more passionate about the relationship between human beings and God. Unamuno's main philosophical opus, *Tragic Sense of Life*, outlines the relationship between human beings and God. Unamuno starts by explaining the tragic sense of life as the problem of being human. Human beings, who for Unamuno are concrete people "of flesh and bone," seek immortality against the awareness of their deaths. This fight for immortality opens up the problem of God, and God is described as a concrete, sentient volition for the eternity of human existence.

For Unamuno, human beings are defined tragically and concretely. To show that Unamuno is concerned with human beings in a non-abstract way, Unamuno uses the term "the man of flesh and bone" to describe a human life. The man of flesh and bone is described as one who "is born, suffers, and dies—above all, who dies."²⁰ The important *fact* about being human is that humans are mortal; we die, and we

are aware of that fact—this is what makes us human in comparison to other animals. Yes, animals die, but it is not a *fact* of their existence. Therefore, like Zubiri, Unamuno focuses on a formal, modal distinction here. Like animals, humans die; unlike animals, we devote our life to thinking about, worrying over, and overcoming death.

The *essence* of being human, however, is not in the *fact* that we die. Instead, the essence of being human is the desire to never die. Using Spinoza's definition of *res* from *Ethics*, Bk. III, Unamuno writes that "[e]verything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being ... This means that your essence, reader, mine, ... and of every man who is a man, is nothing but the endeavor, the effort, which he makes to continue to be a man, not to die."²¹ The essence of being human is the struggle to forever continue existing. Unamuno describes two aspects of being a human being, two aspects which must remain in order to have the immortality he desires: unity and continuity.

By unity, Unamuno is thinking of the body and its spatiality. We are always "focused" on something and direct our action toward things. Unamuno writes that "a man is so much the more a man the more unitary his action. There are some who throughout their whole life follow but one single purpose, be it what it may."²² Therefore, human beings not only desire *mere* immortality (e.g., the immortality of the soul), but actual corporeal perpetuity. What worries us about death is the dread of "having to tear myself away from my flesh ... from everything sensible and material."²³ We are of flesh and bone—remove the flesh and the bones, and we are not.

By continuity, Unamuno is thinking of the Bergsonian notion of memory.²⁴ Unamuno writes that "memory is the basis of the individual personality ... We live in memory and by memory, and our spiritual life is at bottom simply an effort of our memory to persist."²⁵ We are memory. The meaning of eternal life is to always be

remembered, and to always be remembering.

At death, it is assumed that one loses both unity and continuity. For the man of flesh and bone, this idea is revolting. As Unamuno writes, “[i]f consciousness is ... nothing more than a flash of light between two eternities of darkness, then there is nothing more execrable than existence.”²⁶ In other words, life is pointless and without worth if it is indeed mortal. Life is indeed mortal; therefore, by *modus ponens*, life is worthlessly pointless.

The essence of being human, Unamuno argues, is to deny the conclusion of this argument, even though it is both valid and sound. In short, the essence of being human is a contradiction between the head and the heart, between reason and volition, which “express[es] a longing for unending life, [yet] now affirm[s] that this earthly life does not possess the value that is given to it.”²⁷ This is the tragic sense of life, the absurd battle for immortality.

The very problem of the problem of God is the tragic sense of life. Unamuno notes that all civilizations have the hunger for immortality in one form or another. In short, as Unamuno exclaims, “I do not want to die—no; I neither want to die nor do I want to want to die; I want to live forever and ever and ever.”²⁸ Everything human beings do, including philosophy and religion, screams this mantra over and over. Unamuno uses the example of the artist to prove his point here: “a man who tells you that he writes, paints, sculpts, or sings for his own amusement ... lies ... He wishes ... to leave behind a shadow of his spirit.”²⁹ We seek eternity, and this eternity must preserve the unity and continuity of our being. Unamuno writes that “[i]f at the death of my body ... my consciousness returns to the absolute unconsciousness from which it sprang ... our toil-worn human race ... [is] the most inhuman thing known.”³⁰

Being human is the very problem of the problem of God. Animals do not have the problem of God, presumably, because

they lack the tragic sense of life and the hunger for immortality. God’s existence matters to human beings because human beings are aware of their being, and therefore seek its unity and continuity forever. Unamuno offers the following anecdote to show how tied together the hunger for immortality and the problem of God are:

Talking to a peasant one day, I proposed to him the hypothesis that there might indeed be a God who governs heaven and earth, a Consciousness of the Universe, but that for all that the soul of every man may not be immortal in the traditional and concrete sense. He replies: “Then wherefore God?”³¹

What is the point of God if there is no hope for immortality? For Unamuno, “God” is the name of that hope, that humanly concrete hope, of being oneself eternally. God is born from the projection of human hope into the universe. Unamuno reminds us that “[t]he divine ... was not originally something projective, but was rather the subjectivity of consciousness projected exteriorly, the personalization of the world.”³² Belief in God is the hope of immortality, in whatever form it is conceived throughout history. We want to be “God”—to be immortal. “God” is the name of our hatred of nothingness and the power of life over nihilism. Through God, human beings are created immortally, so that “if you believe in God, God believes in you, and believing in you He creates you continually.”³³ One’s unity is preserved in the constant sustaining, and one is remembered and remembering in God.

Like Zubiri’s move from divinity to God, Unamuno argues that faith is the only way to access God. Like with Zubiri, faith involves a personal relationship. Faith, Unamuno writes, “is not the mere adherence of the intellect to an abstract principle;” instead, it is a creation of God, who in turn creates us, and is therefore “continually creating Himself in us.”³⁴

Said differently, "God and man, in effect, mutually create one another; God creates or reveals Himself in man and man creates himself in God. God is His own maker."³⁵ And therefore we are *in* God, not *with* God. God is the highest expression of being human: immortal and concrete.

Unamuno's account of God on the one hand seems to lack the philosophical, systematic structure found in Zubiri's account of religion, but, on the other hand, better sets the stage for why the very problem of the problem of God is so important and yet so neglected in traditional philosophy of religion. Whereas Zubiri shows us *how* human beings move from religion/deity to divinity and ultimately to God, Unamuno shows us *why* human beings pursue God. *How* and *why* are *that* questions still unasked by philosophy of religion, which is still too focused on *what* questions.

III. Against Theistic Evidentialism

Having explicated Zubiri and Unamuno's respective existentialist accounts of God, I now address two consequences of their positions. The first consequence, which will be discussed in this section, is that the theistic evidentialist proofs for God's existence, insofar as they fail to account for the very problem of the problem of God, fail to prove God's existence. The second consequence, explored in section four, is that true atheism is impossible. Both of these consequences come from the same root issue: both theism and atheism fail to acknowledge the very problem of the problem of God; in other words, theism and atheism are both *inside* of the problem of God.

In this section I start with Unamuno's argument against what he calls "the God-Idea." For Unamuno, traditional philosophy of religion, insofar as it refuses to acknowledge the tragic sense of life and the concrete man of flesh and bone, misses God entirely and replaces God with "God," an empty metaphysical concept. I conclude by describing Zubiri's criticism of

the traditional proofs of God's existence. For Zubiri, traditional philosophy of religion is untrue to the sensible apprehension of reality that is given to humans, thus replacing reality *de suyo* (which leads to God) with the metaphysical (incorrect) notion of reality as being. It is this reality as being that Aquinas inherits from Aristotle, which causes his proofs to demonstrate a God that cannot be worshipped.

Unamuno

When it comes to religious matters, Unamuno believes that philosophy (traditionally conceived) is unhelpful and useless as a method. First of all, true philosophy (whose deficient mode is "philosophy" as we have come to know it) is a human activity that results from the tragic sense of life. To use philosophy to describe and solve the problem of God would be to put the effect before the cause. Humans philosophize *because* we suffer from the very problem of the problem of God; the problem of God is *prior* to philosophy. Second, as Unamuno writes, "[t]he will and the intelligence seek opposite ends."³⁶ "Philosophy" excludes the will, and, therefore, excludes forthright the very problem of the problem of God, which is better understood in terms of a *volition* than a *thought*. "Philosophy" cannot accept its origin in the hunger for immortality, the selfsame hunger that originally makes God come to mind. Unamuno is very clear about the fact that God will have to be a granter or guarantor of immortality in order to be significant to human beings.

The God proven in the philosophy of religion is unable to do this. Unamuno writes that the "traditional so-called proofs of the existence of God all refer to [the] God-idea ... and hence they really prove nothing."³⁷ All these proofs do, to use Zubiri's term, is prove that there is a ground to reality. But, for Unamuno, reality means nothing if life is pointless. Whereas Zubiri allows room for demonstration and reason at the move from deity to divinity, Unamuno is more suspicious of our intellectual capacities, preferring sentiment

over reason. In other words, God must not only provide for the existence of the world, but also give human life purpose (in a non-teleological way) through immortality. As Unamuno states, “the God who confers human meaning and finality upon the Universe and who is not the *ens summum*, the *primum movens*, nor the Creator of the Universe, nor merely the Idea-God. It leads us to the living, subjective God, for He is simply subjectivity objectified or personality universalized.”³⁸ God as the highest being, or the first mover—or any of the Thomist nomenclatures—cannot confer meaning on human life. The God that matters, Unamuno tells us, is the objectivity of subjectivity, the absolute expression of being-a-subject, and the universalization of personality, the highest expression of being-a-person.

The reason why such proofs fail, Unamuno writes, is that philosophy pretends to be free of personality and subjectivity. As a result, the philosophical understanding of what it means to be a human being is wrong, and, *a fortiori*, the philosophical understanding of God. The philosophical understanding of being human is simply non-human. As Unamuno writes,

[T]here is another thing [other than “the man of flesh and bone”] which is also called man, and he is the subject of not a few lucubrations, more or less scientific. He is the legendary featherless biped, the *zōon politikon* of Aristotle, the social contractor of Rousseau, the *homo economicus* of the Manchester school, the *homo sapiens* of Linnaeus, or, if you like, the vertical mammal. A man neither of here nor there, neither of this age or another, who has neither sex nor country, who is, in brief, merely an idea. That is to say, a no-man.³⁹

Given that this idea of human being is a “no-man,” the God of this approach is also nothing. Unamuno writes that the philosophical God “is the projection to the

outward infinite of man as he is by definition—that is to say, of the abstract man, of the man no-man” whereas the God we pursue “is the projection to the inward infinite of man as he is by life, of the concrete man, the man of flesh and bone.”⁴⁰

It is important to note that both Gods work the same way; God in both cases is the infinite projection of the human being described in each case. When being human is understood abstractly (outwardly), God is abstract, dead, and immortal only in the way that ideas are; when being human is understood concretely (inwardly), God is alive, concrete, and immortal in the fullest sense. Philosophical theists prove the existence of the God of the no-man, the abstract “no-God,” who “neither loved nor hated, because He neither enjoyed nor suffered, an inhuman God ... that is, an injustice.”⁴¹ It is the direct result of conceiving of being human in terms that make emotions and concrete situations accidental instead of essential.

Therefore, the move to God cannot be rational or demonstrative. Reason, Unamuno sates, “separates us from [God]. We cannot first know Him in order that afterwards we may love Him; we must begin by loving Him ... before knowing Him ... knowledge of God proceeds from the love of God ... To seek to define Him is to seek to confine Him ... to kill Him.”⁴² By starting with knowing, the philosophy of religion fails to explain both the motive for the pursuit of God and why anyone should love God, or why God should love us. Take, for example, the proof that God made the world because God is an intelligent designer. Unamuno reminds us that “[w]e do not understand the existence of the world one whit the better by telling ourselves that God created it.”⁴³ Humans are looking for a God that gives purpose to life, which helps one understand the world, not a mere trivial fact about its creator.

Zubiri

Like Unamuno, Zubiri argues that in reducing God’s existence to proofs one is

losing the importance of God in the first place. In other words, by reducing God to one more object of speculative reasoning, one loses the *fact that* one is exploring God's existence in the first place. Theists and atheists alike have to be able to explain why it is *that* God is of such a concern to them. By already making arguments for and against God's existence, the fundamental issue of religation/deity is already overlooked. The theist position means nothing to those who really believe in God, nor does it persuade in the slightest those who really do not believe in God.

We can see this in theistic proofs insofar as they work only for those who already expect them to do so. The example Zubiri gives us is the famous passage from *Summa Theologica* in which Aquinas discusses the proofs of God's existence.⁴⁴ Zubiri states that the point of that question is not really to prove God's existence (that part is actually uncontroversial for Aquinas and his contemporaries); rather, it is to show that the proposition "God exists" is not analytic and is therefore in need of an *a posteriori* demonstration. This allows Aquinas to prove divinity correctly *given the way humans are religated*. But, of course, Aquinas gives no arguments for the religation of humans, nor does he move from divinity to God. To Aquinas's credit, the reason he gives no proof for the religation of humans was because Aquinas and his peers already had the notion of divinity; that is, they acknowledged that God is a problem. Zubiri claims that "since there was no question for the men of his epoch and environs that someone was coming, it was natural that St. Thomas should pass over this point limiting himself to a statement of evidence, in order to delve into the question of who it is that comes."⁴⁵ Of course, in all reality, Aquinas never gets to who is coming because he never gets past divinity unless "...and this is what we call 'God'" is a moment of faith. But Aquinas is not professing faith here; rather, he is claiming to demonstrate God's existence by pointing the reader back to the standard

definition of God *qua* entity. Granted, "God" is the correct answer; but Aquinas's demonstration is faulty. In our age, one does not have to make the leap to God to answer the question of "who" the prime mover, the first cause, etc. is. We moderns can easily answer "the laws of physics," thus not only not moving from divinity to God, but also removing the point of divinity in the first place. The "who" for Aquinas can be replaced by a "what." However, if we start with religation/deity, such a move to physics is frustrated. The "who" is personal because we are persons; our reality is personal, implanted into existence by reality itself, which is also a person. And, in spite of Aquinas, *this* is what we mean by the word "God."

Zubiri writes the following in an attempt to explain where Aquinas erred:

I am not maintaining that the five arguments are invalid. Rather, I am saying that contrary to what is expressly affirmed in them, they do not start from facts but from something quite different, namely, from a metaphysical interpretation of sensible reality ... the basis of St. Thomas' discussion is not the *facts* but the *metaphysics* of Aristotle, which for St. Thomas is reason itself ... [But] the metaphysics of Aristotle is neither of common sense nor a datum of experience.⁴⁶

Reason clouds the *facts*, namely, the *fact* of being human. God can be understood because there are *facts* about being human which point us straight to the problem of God. For Unamuno, it is the tragic sense of life; for Zubiri, it is the sensible apprehension of reality. Therefore, the point of departure is wrong; Aquinas fails to account for the true facts of the matter. For example, in the teleological argument, Aquinas correctly notes that we sense that nature has "design," but fails to explain why humans are the kind of beings that seek design (the answer: religation/deity – we sense the reality of the world as organized other, but that is not metaphysics;

rather, it is the concrete way humans find themselves *implanted* in existence).

In terms of religion, it is clear that the God that is worshipped, prayed to, etc. does not fit the descriptions Aquinas attributes to God. As Zubiri writes, “the *theos* of Aristotle has no religious significance whatever ... No one can address a prayer to the unmoved mover, at least unless you add a few other things.”⁴⁷ In other words, when Aquinas says “and this is what we call ‘God,’” there is clearly a large gap between the thing Aquinas proves (unmoved mover, first cause, etc.) and who he worships. Stated differently, “to the God of Aristotle no one can address supplications, or ask for help; he moves without being moved as the object of love and desire.”⁴⁸ The God that founds reality, however, is praiseworthy, because God is the experience of being human. When we worship God, we worship the whole of reality, a reality that only we as humans (and God) are privy to.

Unamuno and Zubiri are both correct for questioning traditional theism. By failing to account for human religation (the tragic sense of life), the God that results is incomplete; not only incompletely demonstrated, but unworthy of worship. Our relationship to God—the only way God matters to human beings—requires more than this. A *true* theism requires an acknowledgment of the tragic sense of life (relegation) so as to provide the correct starting point for our pursuit of God. Insofar as we have the correct starting point, we are only then able to have the correct end: a God with whom we can enter into relationship, worship, and ultimately through that worship, reaffirm what it means to be human. To use the phrase often cited at Loyola Marymount University, “the Kingdom of God is a human being fully alive.” This is not surprising: LMU is a Jesuit institution, and the Jesuits are a *Spanish* order.

IV. The Impossibility of True Atheism

In the previous section, the insistence on rational proofs for God’s existence leads to the wrong God—an abstract God that is incapable of being worshipped or entered into a relationship. In this section I move to the second consequence of Zubiri and Unamuno’s existentialist accounts of God. I argue that true atheism is impossible given the *fact* that humans are religated in the tragic sense of life.

There are two ways, perhaps, to consider oneself an atheist. One would be to not consider the proofs of God’s existence sufficient to warrant theistic belief. In section three we have already shown that theistic evidentialist proofs fail, yet Zubiri, Unamuno, and I believe that God exists. Therefore, rejection of rational proofs for God’s existence cannot constitute atheism. The second way to be an atheist is to offer a rational proof that God does not exist, as one finds, for example, in the problem of evil. The problem of evil shows that God does not exist by using a *reductio ad absurdum* argument:

1. Assume God exists.
2. God can stop evil if God wants to because God is omnipotent.
3. God wants to stop evil because God is benevolent.
4. Evil remains [unstopped].
5. Therefore, God is either unable to stop evil or does not want to stop evil.
6. If God is unable to stop evil, then God is not omnipotent.
7. If God does not want to stop evil, then God is not benevolent.
8. Premises 6 and 7 contradict premises 2 and 3.
9. Therefore, God does not exist.

The main problem with this objection is that it disproves the existence of God from God’s own definition, which presup-

poses that the definition of “God” being used is the correct one. If it is, then the ontological argument of St. Anselm would prove God’s existence, because the atheist knows what “God” means. Although both Zubiri and Unamuno have defenses of God’s existence against the problem of evil, I will instead focus on the *fact that* atheism is only possible inside of the problem of God.

I will start with Zubiri’s claim that atheism is only possible within the problem of God. Zubiri believes that the atheist is religated by the power of reality (deity), and is capable of understanding reality *de suyo* (divinity). So, the question of “who” remains, and the atheist does not answer the question with “God.” I will then turn to Unamuno, who claims that atheists are people who are stuck in the evidentialist rut of theistic proofs. Out of the despair of not being able to prove God’s existence, or getting the right God in those proofs, the atheist simply gives up the struggle.

Zubiri

Zubiri describes atheism as simply being “a negative position before the deity” because “[e]ven the intent to deny all reality to that which founds [existence] ... is metaphysically impossible without the realm of deity.”⁴⁹ In order to claim that something has existence or not requires that human beings be the kind of beings who find themselves *in* reality; that is, religated. Therefore, any statement about “what there is” (or “what there is not”) requires the power of the real—deity. The atheist claim that God does not exist is only possible due to deity itself, the power of the real that imposes itself upon human beings as other through affection. For Zubiri, “[t]o admit the existence of an ultimate reality—call it what you will—is not a question of option.”⁵⁰ Human beings are *implanted* in existence and are *obligated* to create themselves. We did not *ask* to be here. To use a Heideggerian term out of context (and Zubiri objects to this term for other reasons), we are *thrown* into the

world and face its reality head on. In other words, “not having a religion” is a religion, a way of understanding one’s religation to deity, and is therefore “a real and positive option just as much as being a Buddhist or a Catholic or a Muslim can be.”⁵¹

Zubiri claims that some call themselves “atheists” incorrectly. Simply saying that God is not the way traditional philosophy has described him, after all, is not atheism. Nor is the rejection of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It just means that one is not a part of those religious traditions. Since theism for Zubiri is the understanding of religation and deity, atheism has to also address these areas.

Zubiri writes that atheism is best described as the rejection of the *fact* of religation:

The possibility of atheism is the possibility of feeling “unbound.” And what makes this feeling possible is the “sufficiency” of the person for making himself through the successful outcome of his efforts at living. The successful outcome of life is the great creator of atheism. The radical confidence, the trusting to one’s own abilities for living, and the “unbinding” oneself from everything are one and the same thing.⁵²

Zubiri points to radical self-confidence as the essence of atheism. In other words, atheism is the idea that one is not religated to reality as explained in section one; it is to see oneself without obligation *to* reality. Levinas, perhaps influenced by Zubiri, uses the word “atheism,” correctly, to refer to the state of pure autonomy, the understanding of the self as *self-ruling*. However, it is important to notice that the atheist is still nevertheless religated; one thing an atheist (or a solipsist, who is equally atheistic perhaps) cannot do, even if she or he controls everything else in life, is pick when to be born. Atheism is only a possibility in light of religated reality. The reality of religation is deity, and atheists

experience the deity by being a moment of it, just like theists do.

The difference comes at the move from divinity to God. The atheist, Zubiri says, “affirms that he is God, and that he is sufficient unto himself;” however, “this is not properly denying God, but rather disputing over who it is that is God.”⁵³ The atheist is the one who proves the prime mover, and claims that she or he is it. Atheism is a claim of self-divinity; that the atheist is the reality *de suyo* of all real things. Zubiri correctly points out that there is still a “God” involved here; it is just that the atheist claims the title for her- or himself. A great Levinasian either-or emerges. Who is the divinity, the *de suyo* of the reality of things that I find myself implanted in: me or the Other (God)? Finally, on a Heideggerian note, Zubiri suggests that atheism is a deficient mode, an inauthentic mode, of the problem of God: “Atheism is not ... the primary situation of man. If man is constitutively religated, the problem will not be in *discovering* God, but in the possibility of *covering* Him.”⁵⁴ Atheism is the ignoring of the obligation to be found in religation. We can now say that true theism is the state of being open as the site of reality, both *de suyo* and of things (to borrow from Heidegger’s notion of “discoveredness”), and atheism is the deficient mode of this discoveredness, covering over the *fact* of religation. True atheism is impossible, just as for Heidegger there is no pure inauthenticity; the inauthentic, even in spite of itself, reveals the truth about Dasein. Likewise, atheism on Zubiri’s model reveals the religation of true theism, even when it is trying to supercede or ignore it.

Unamuno

Unamuno believes that human beings seek God because they desire immortality. All rational attempts to prove God either fail or reach the wrong God—the God-Idea, a no-God. Unamuno believes that one can rationally prove that there is no immortality, and that there is no God. However,

given Unamuno’s suspicions about rationality and its abstract methods, one can be a theist in spite of evidence, be the evidence for or against the existence of God. Atheism cannot be merely the adherence to the truth of the arguments that there is no immortality or that God does not exist. No one is truly a theist on these grounds, so neither can one be an atheist.

Being human is more about volition than reason for Unamuno. Therefore, true atheism would have to be a particular volition, a volition to not continue eternally in one’s unity or continuity. Atheists seek consolation for the tragic sense of life in reason, and reason leads them to confirm their fears, that they will die, and that will be it. They then become upset with what they see as the “ignorant consolation” had by believers in God, and deep down inside wish that they, too, could have such consolation. This is what Unamuno calls *odium anti-theologicum*, an anti-theological hatred, of human life. Simply put, for Unamuno, atheists are those who hate their lives, those who wish they had been someone other than who they are, those who shake their fists at God for giving them such a crappy lot. Unamuno clings to the last one: atheists, according to Unamuno, are those who hate God for giving them the taste of life only to withdraw it at death. As Unamuno writes, “[n]ote the greater part of our atheists and you will see that they are atheists from a kind of rage, rage at not being able to believe that there is a God. They are personal enemies of God ... their No-God is an Anti-God.”⁵⁵ God is always personal; those who seek God love God—those who do not seek hate God.

But either way one looks at it, theistically or atheistically, loving or hating, human beings face the tragic sense of life, which sets up the relationship with God of one sort or the other. Unamuno doubts that anyone can truly be an atheist; proclaimed atheists are those who have simply been defeated by the tragic sense of life. In other words, atheists are those

who see life as a curse instead of a blessing. Life is tragic, but life is what we have. Life is suffering; we suffer, God suffers—theism is the undying fight to suffer forever, to experience what Unamuno calls, citing St. Theresa of Avila, “sweet-tasting suffering:” “Suffering is a spiritual thing ... A man who had never known suffering ... would scarcely possess consciousness of himself.”⁵⁶

Unamuno writes that the tragic sense of life, the battle between the head and the heart, is the fight between atheism and theism, reason and life, nothingness and God. True atheism is impossible because the battle rages on:

“The wicked man hath said in his heart, There is no God.” And this is truth. For in his head the righteous man may say to himself, God does not exist! But only the wicked can say it in his heart. Not to believe that there is a God or to believe that there is not a God, is one thing; to resign oneself to there not being a God is another thing, and it is a terrible and inhuman thing; but not to wish that there be a God exceeds every other moral monstrosity; although, as a matter of fact, those who deny God deny Him because of their despair at not finding Him.⁵⁷

Even those who do not wish that there is a God do so only because they despair at the futility of their previous desires. However, at an existential level, the hope is still there. After all, atheists do not all commit suicide upon being convinced that life is pointless.

However, the best expressions of Unamuno’s views about atheism are not found in his essays or books. Unamuno is probably most famous in Spanish literature for his poetry. “The Atheist’s Prayer,”

found in Unamuno’s *Rosario de sonetos líricos* (*Rosary of Lyrical Sonnets*), and printed at the beginning of this essay, shows how important God is, even to an atheist (which Unamuno was constantly accused of being due to his rejection of rational proofs and other tenants of Catholicism). Like all sonnets, there is a distinct change of tone between the opening octet and the closing sextet. In the octet, Unamuno describes how God is nothing but an attempt to console oneself from the tragic sense of life. Stories of God are like fables told to children to help them fall asleep. However, it is the sextet that reveals the motive behind the atheist’s concern about God, and the true prayer begins. Unamuno’s atheist in the sonnet says the magic words, words that bind Unamuno with Zubiri: *es muy angosta / la realidad por mucho que se expande / para abarcarte*. Reality is steadfast, and forces me to deal with God, regardless of the attempts to put God to rest once and for all. I need God’s existence, because if God were to exist, then I would truly also exist [eternally].

Conclusion

Zubiri and Unamuno offer a unique way of rethinking the existence of God in a way that moves beyond the traditional philosophical methods of proving God’s existence and also overcomes the threat of atheism. Being human is the foundation of all inquiries into God, and the failure to address that foundation leads to a God that is never worth proving, or to no God at all. By grounding theism in the existential foundation of being human, both thinkers have navigated a new path towards how we know/love/are/live/create God, and how in turn God knows/loves/is/lives/creates us.

Notes

- ¹ UNAMUNO, Miguel (de). "La oración del ateo," *Antología poética*, ed. Roberto Paoli (Madrid: Espasa-Calpé, 1946), pp. 102-103; my translation.
- ² ZUBIRI, Xavier. *Sentient Intelligence*, trans. Thomas B. Fowler, Jr. (Washington, D.C.: The Xavier Zubiri Foundation of North America, 1999), p. 14. Future references to this text will be made as **SI** followed by the page number.
- ³ SI 14.
- ⁴ SI 15.
- ⁵ In a forthcoming essay, "A Zubirian Guess at the Riddle," I argue that Zubiri's notion of the reality of a note is equivalent to what Peirce refers to as "firstness." For Peirce, a "first" is a simple reality independent from other "firsts" that form "seconds" through a "third." To use Zubiri's example of heat, heat *de suyo* is a first; the laws of thermodynamics, thirds.
- ⁶ SI 25.
- ⁷ SI 26.
- ⁸ ZUBIRI, Xavier. *El problema filosófico de la historia de las religiones* (Madrid: Alianza, 1994), p. 31. I am consulting the unpublished English translation by Joaquín Redondo. Future references to this text will be made as **PFR** followed by the page number.
- ⁹ ZUBIRI, Xavier. *El hombre y Dios*, 7th ed. (Madrid: Alianza, 2003), p. 92. I am consulting the unpublished English translation by Joaquín Redondo. Future references to this text will be made as **HD** followed by the page number.
- ¹⁰ HD 99.
- ¹¹ HD 100.
- ¹² HD 110.
- ¹³ PFR 43.
- ¹⁴ PFR 53; cf. also ZUBIRI, Xavier. *Nature, History, God*, trans. Thomas B. Fowler, Jr. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1982), p. 329. Zubiri states there that "deity is manifested to us as a simple correlate of religation." Future references to *Nature, History, God* will be made as **NHG** followed by the page number.
- ¹⁵ PFR 62.
- ¹⁶ NHG 313.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Cf. NHG 314; cf. also HD, Ch. 4.
- ¹⁹ Cf. HD, Pt. 3. Zubiri was greatly influenced by Spanish mysticism, especially the writings of St. Theresa of Jesús (Avila), who makes a similar claim about finding God in the reality of life and the world.
- ²⁰ UNAMUNO, Miguel (de). *Tragic Sense of Life*, trans. J. E. Crawford Fritch (New York: Dover, 1952), p. 1. Future references to this text will be made as **TSL** followed by the page number.
- ²¹ TSL 6-7.
- ²² TSL 8; translation modified.
- ²³ TSL 47.
- ²⁴ Although Unamuno does not refer to Bergson in his discussion of unity and continuity, it is clear that Unamuno had read Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1901), where the body and memory are unified. For Bergson, memory is material, and matter is the persistence of something's existence.
- ²⁵ TSL 8-9.
- ²⁶ TSL 13.
- ²⁷ TSL 13.
- ²⁸ TSL 45.
- ²⁹ TSL 51.
- ³⁰ TSL 42.
- ³¹ TSL 5.
- ³² TSL 158.
- ³³ TSL 180.
- ³⁴ TSL 191-192.
- ³⁵ TSL 169.
- ³⁶ TSL 113.
- ³⁷ TSL 160.
- ³⁸ TSL 166.
- ³⁹ TSL 1.
- ⁴⁰ TSL 4.
- ⁴¹ TSL 167.

⁴² TSL 167-168.

⁴³ TSL 161.

⁴⁴ Cf. AQUINAS, St. Thomas. *Summa Theologica*, Bk. I, Quest. 2, Arts. 1-3.

⁴⁵ NHG 308-309. In this section of *Nature, History, God* Zubiri is describing divinity in terms of “someone is coming” and God in terms of “who is coming.”

⁴⁶ HD 121; emphasis his.

⁴⁷ PFR 40.

⁴⁸ PFR 55. I will say more about this fact in the next section.

⁴⁹ NHG 329.

⁵⁰ PFR 89.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² NHG 346.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ NHG 345; emphasis his.

⁵⁵ TSL 122.

⁵⁶ TSL 210-211. This is where I argue elsewhere that God allows suffering, not because God is impotent or malevolent, but that suffering is required for human consciousness, which in turn acknowledges the tragic sense of life, and therefore creates God. God is made up of suffering, albeit sweet tasting.

⁵⁷ TSL 184.

Biography of the author

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