



Unamuno and the Makropulos Debate

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Abstract

In a paper published recently in this journal, Buben attempted to show the philosophical relevance of Unamuno's philosophical works when addressing the current debate on whether an endless existence would be something desirable—a debate which is nowadays commonly known as “The Makropulos Debate” since it was Bernard Williams's “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” (1973) that aroused interest in this question among contemporary analytic philosophers. Unfortunately, Buben's paper fails to capture or even outline the reasoning behind Unamuno's claim that we all *naturally* (and so, inevitably) long for an endless existence—and consequently it also fails to clarify how Unamuno's position may (if so) contribute to the current philosophical debate on the question as to whether an endless existence would be something desirable. In this paper I will point out that Unamuno's affirmation that we all, without exception, long for an endless existence is grounded in his metaphysical claim that the most basic and natural inclination of all singular things is to increase their own singularity. In doing so, I will also be showing that Unamuno's proposal is not philosophically relevant when addressing the current debate on the question as to whether living an endless existence would be something desirable.

Keywords Immortality · Makropulos debate · Miguel de Unamuno

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the scholarly philosophical literature addressing the question as to whether an endless existence would be something desirable. The discussion has come to be commonly known as “The Makropulos Debate” because it was Bernard Williams's “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” (1973) that aroused interest in this question among

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contemporary analytic philosophers.¹ Participants in the Makropulos Debate often quote the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno as illustrating the most extreme position that, no matter what, an endless existence is something desirable by itself. However, the truth is that in this debate Unamuno is simply quoted and, at least as far as I know, there has been no serious attempt to analyze in depth the philosophical relevance (if any) of Unamuno's position when addressing the current debate on the question as to whether living an endless existence would be something desirable. In a paper published recently in this journal, Buben (2021) attempts to fill this gap in the literature, affirming that "Building on Unamuno's position, one could argue that pessimism about the value of immortality is actually indicative of a flawed character and an impoverished relationship with life" (Buben, 2021, p. 133). Despite Buben somehow being right in that, according to Unamuno, to not long for an endless existence (if such a thing were possible, which, as we will see, according to Unamuno it is not) is something against one's own nature, Buben's paper fails to capture or even outline the reasoning behind Unamuno's claim that we all *naturally* (and so inevitably, and thus non-voluntarily) long for an endless existence—and consequently, it also fails to clarify how Unamuno's position might (if so) contribute to the current philosophical debate on the question as to whether an endless existence would be something desirable. In what follows I will clarify how we should understand Unamuno's claim that we all, without exception, long for an endless existence. My comments here will show that Unamuno cannot contribute in any relevant philosophical way to the current debate on the question as to whether an endless existence would be something desirable.

The foundational claim that grounds Unamuno's entire philosophical project is his affirmation that we all, without exception, suffer from what he named as "*hambre de inmortalidad*" ("hunger for immortality"). It is from the (alleged) universality of this "*hambre de inmortalidad*" that Unamuno constructed and defended his own non-cognitivist understanding of Christian faith.² He vividly expresses this "*hambre de inmortalidad*" in what has probably come to be his most popularly known quote:

The problem is tragic and eternal, and the more we try to escape it, the more it is thrust upon us. The serene Plato—was he really so serene?—allowed a profound cry to escape from his own soul, twenty-four centuries ago, in his dialogue on the immortality of the soul, where he speaks of the uncertainty of our dream of being immortal, and of the *risk* that it may be vain [...]. Faced with this risk, I am presented with arguments calculated to eliminate it, arguments to prove the absurdity of a belief in the immortality of the soul. But these ratiocinations do not move me, for they are reasons and no more than reasons, and one does not feed the heart with reasons. I do not want to die. No! I do not want to die, and I do not want to want to die. I want to live always, forever and ever. And I want to live, this poor I which I am, the I which I feel myself to be

¹ In turn, Bernard Williams's paper takes its name from Karel Čapek's theatre play *Věc Makropulos* (*The Makropulos Case*), first performed in November 1922 in the Vinohrady Theatre in Prague.

² For a detailed and systematic analysis of Unamuno's notion of religious faith and the reasoning he offers in defense of it, see Oya (2020a).

here and now, and for that reason I am tormented by the problem of the duration of my soul, of my own soul (Unamuno, 1913a [1972], pp. 50–51 [Unamuno, 1913b [1966], pp. 135–136]).

Now, the point to emphasize is that by affirming this “*hambre de inmortalidad*”, Unamuno was not making the psychological, empirically contingent claim that we, human beings, desire for an endless existence, but the stronger, metaphysical claim that the most basic and natural inclination (or *appetite*, if we are to use Spinoza’s jargon) of *all* singular things (that is, not only human beings but also *prima facie* non-sentient beings such as plants and rocks) is to increase their own singularity—which is tantamount, according to Unamuno, to claiming that all singular things naturally and primarily seek for an endless existence. I have recently offered a detailed analysis of why Unamuno’s “*hambre de inmortalidad*” should not be read in terms of human desire but as referring to the (alleged) most basic and natural inclination of all singular things (see: Oya, 2020a, pp. 13–27; see also: Oya, 2020b, and Oya, 2020c). For the purposes of this paper, I think it suffices to point out Unamuno’s explicit endorsement of Spinoza’s argument for the *conatus* at the very beginning of his *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* [*The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*] (Unamuno, 1913a [1972], pp. 3–10 [Unamuno, 1913b [1966], pp. 109–113]). The difference with Spinoza is that, according to Unamuno, Spinoza’s argument for the *conatus* does not merely prove that all singular things strive for their own preservation, but it actually shows that all singular things naturally and primarily aim at the *increase* of their own singularity without losing that which defines them as the concrete individuals they are here and now—in Unamuno’s words:

The essence of a being is not only the endeavor to persist forever, as Spinoza taught us, but also the endeavor to become universal; it is a hunger and thirst for eternity and for infinity. Every created being tends not only to preserve itself in itself, but to perpetuate itself, and moreover, to encroach upon all else, to be all others without ceasing to be itself, to extend its limits to infinity, but yet without breaking them down. It does not wish to demolish its walls, and thus lay everything flat, communal, defenseless, confounding and losing its own identity, but wishes to push its walls to the extreme limits of creation and to encompass everything within them. It seeks the maximum of individuality with the maximum also of personality; it aspires to identify itself with the Universe, it aspires to God. (Unamuno, 1913a [1972], pp. 227–228 [Unamuno, 1913b [1966], p. 232])

Such longing for an endless existence which, according to Unamuno, we all suffer from is, then, a subjective, though natural (and so inevitable, and thus non-voluntary) reaction of us. In other words, Unamuno justified his claim that we all long for an endless existence in terms of its (alleged) natural foundation.³ Unamuno’s

³ This is what is behind Unamuno’s repeated emphasis on his being incapable of stopping longing for an endless existence. Such longing for an endless existence is an essential, and so inalienable and thus non-voluntary, part of our own natural constitution—which means that, according to Unamuno, there is no possibility of not having that longing. Those who deny longing for an endless existence are simply attempting to deceive themselves by pretending to silence the essential part of their own natural condi-

reasoning, therefore, is not grounded in any ethical, pragmatic, or existential aspect of living an endless existence. Rather, it is just the corollary of an a priori, foundational metaphysical claim, which is why Unamuno's claim of the "*hambre de inmortalidad*" cannot offer any relevant philosophical contribution to the current debate as to whether an endless existence would be something *desirable*. In fact, even conceding that we have some sort of natural tendency towards seeking an endless existence along the lines claimed by Unamuno, this by itself will not settle the Makropulos Debate. Even if some seeking for an endless existence were a natural (and so, inevitable, and thus non-voluntary) inclination of us, it may still be argued that living an endless existence would be something undesirable or inadequate for other ethical, pragmatic or even existential reasons.

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Footnote 3 (continued)

tion—which is why Unamuno calls them "*hipócritas*" ("hypocrites") (Unamuno, 1913a [1972], p. 21 [Unamuno, 1913b [1966], p. 119]).