

teorema

Vol. XLI/3, 2022, pp. 25-45

ISSN 0210-1602

[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2022) 41:3; pp. 25-45

Unamuno on the Ontological Status of God and Other Fictional Characters

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RESUMEN

En este artículo argumentaré que Unamuno concibió a Dios (y, en general, a los personajes de ficción ordinarios, no religiosos) en términos realistas, aunque no evidenciales. Señalaré que esta manera de concebir a Dios permitió a Unamuno afirmar la existencia real de Dios (aunque como un personaje de ficción, creado por el hombre) y, con ello, la posibilidad de afirmar una relación real entre la persona religiosa concreta y Dios, sin tener por ello que prescindir de su afirmación central que la fe religiosa es tan solo una reacción subjetiva humana, aunque natural y por ello inevitable.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *personajes de ficción; Dios; Miguel de Unamuno; ontología; ficcionalismo religioso.*

ABSTRACT

In this paper I will argue that Unamuno was conceiving of God (and ordinary, non-religious fictional characters more generally) in realist, though non-evidentially grounded, terms. I will point out that this way of conceiving of God allowed Unamuno to claim the actual existence of God (though as a fictional, purely humanly created character) and, with this, the possibility of there being an actual relationship between the concrete religious person and God without having to dispense with his own core claim that religious faith is just a subjective, though natural and thus inevitable, human reaction.

KEYWORDS: *Fictional characters; God; Miguel de Unamuno; Ontology; Religious Fictionalism.*

I

In his major philosophical work, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* [Unamuno (1913b); *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations*, Unamuno (1913a)], the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno formulated a fictionalist, non-evidential notion of Christian religious faith. It differs mainly but not exclusively from other more recent contemporary religious fictionalist positions in that he did not justify it on pragmatic grounds, as it *just* being a so to say “useful fiction” worthy of becoming

immersed in for some alleged given earthly benefit we may obtain. Rather, he defended it in terms of its (alleged) natural foundation, as it being the subjective, though natural (and thus inevitable and non-voluntary) reaction of our most basic and natural inclination to aim at reinforcing our own singularity. Unamuno referred to this (alleged) most basic and natural inclination as the “*hambre de inmortalidad*” (“hunger for immortality”), since from this aiming at the increase of our own singularity it follows, according to Unamuno, that we seek an endless existence (see, Unamuno (1913a), pp. 3–10 [Unamuno (1913b), pp. 109–113]; Unamuno (1913a), pp. 227–228 [Unamuno (1913b), p. 232]). Unamuno’s position can be summarized as follows.¹ Unamuno’s religious faith consists in a non-evidentially grounded but experientially felt religious understanding of the world, according to which the world ceases to appear as a mere “it” and is revealed to us as a personal and loving Being who suffers as we do and who asks for our compassion and love (see, e.g., Unamuno (1913a), pp. 225–227 [Unamuno (1913b), pp. 231–232]). We become immersed in this religious understanding of the world once we become aware of the universality, not only among human beings but in fact among all singular things, of the “*congoja*” (“anguish”), which carries with it the impossibility of escaping from what Unamuno named as the “*sentimiento trágico de la vida*” (“the tragic feeling of life”) (see, e.g., Unamuno (1913a), pp. 152–154; [Unamuno (1913b), pp. 191–192]). By the “*sentimiento trágico de la vida*”, Unamuno was referring to the irresolvable (i.e., “*trágico*”) struggle (“*agonía*”) that, according to him, we all naturally (i.e., “*de la vida*”) and intimately experience (i.e., “*sentimiento*”) between our longing for the Christian God and His salvation through Resurrection, and our incapacity to form the belief that the Christian God exists and that He is going to save us on an evidential, rational basis.² In its turn, this religious understanding of the world moves us to what Unamuno referred to as the practice of charity — i.e., to an agapeic, and so properly Christian, way of conducting our own life and of relating with the whole world (see, e.g., Unamuno (1913a), pp. 229–231; [Unamuno (1913b), pp. 233–234]). And it is through the practice of charity, through an agapeic giving ourselves over to the world, that the *feeling* of being in a loving communion with the whole world emerges in us, thereby coming to feel that our own singularity is increased without ceasing to be the same “*bombres de carne y hueso*” (“men of flesh and blood”) that we are here and now (see, e.g., Unamuno (1913a), pp. 304–307; [Unamuno (1913b), pp. 274–275]).

It is important to emphasize that this non-evidentially grounded but experientially felt religious understanding of the world that Unamuno's religious faith consists in does not amount to a *description* of how the world actually is. Our situation remains "*trágica*" no matter what we do (see, *e.g.*, Unamuno (1913a), p. 354; [Unamuno (1913b), p. 300]). Unamuno's religious faith does not solve the "*sentimiento trágico de la vida*" by allowing us to form the belief that the Christian God actually exists and that He is going to save us. As I said at the beginning, Unamuno's religious faith is our subjective, though natural (and thus inevitable and so non-voluntary) reaction to the "*sentimiento trágico de la vida*" we all suffer from and the anguish it brings with it, meaning that, without the uncertainty referred to in the "*sentimiento trágico de la vida*", we would not be moved to Unamuno's religious faith. According to Unamuno, the way the subject conceives the world emerges from himself, and it is in this sense that the subject "creates" his own world. And it is only in this sense that the subject creates the world: the religious understanding of the world that Unamuno's religious faith consists of is a subjective reaction, emerging from the concrete "*hombre de carne y huesos*" and not from any given trait of the world; and this is why, even while determining how the concrete subject practically relates to the world, it does not determine how the world actually is — *i.e.*, it does not imply a creation of facts and, therefore, it does not offer any kind of justification for forming the evidential belief that the world is such and such and not otherwise (see, *e.g.*, Unamuno (1913a), p. 5; [Unamuno (1913b), p. 110]). To put it more succinctly: Unamuno's religious faith has nothing to do with the world actually being such and such and not otherwise, but just refers to the concrete subject, the "*hombre de carne y hueso*", and what emerges from him — which is why Unamuno's faith, even if it cannot provide us with any knowledge of how the world actually is, may nonetheless help us in forming a clearer and more vivid comprehension of ourselves and our anguished natural existential condition (see, *e.g.*, Unamuno (1913a), p. 205; [Unamuno (1913b), p. 220]).

The question I will address in this paper is what kind of entity is the God referred to in Unamuno's notion of religious faith — *i.e.*, what is the ontological status of God in the context of Unamuno's philosophy of religion. I will argue that Unamuno was conceiving of God in realist, though non-evidentially grounded, terms. This way of understanding God is similar to the way he conceived of ordinary, non-religious fictional characters, and it seems to be the implicit foundational assumption behind Unamuno's peculiar literary style and his continuous attempt,

throughout all his literary works with perhaps the exception of his first published novel, *Paz en la Guerra* (Unamuno (1897b); [*Peace in War*, Unamuno (1897a)], to blur the distinction between fiction and reality. Unamuno, then, assimilated God's ontological status to that of a fictional character, although it is important to emphasize that he conceived of both God and ordinary, non-religious fictional characters in realist terms, as actually existing.

I will begin my exposition by focusing on the way Unamuno conceived of ordinary, non-religious fictional characters, and I will do so for explanatory purposes only, mainly because I think that Unamuno's novels offer us a more intuitive way of capturing the core claims behind his theological position. However, I will not be distracted by the debate as to what came first — *i.e.*, whether it was Unamuno's way of conceiving ordinary fictional characters that influenced his notion of God, or whether it was the other way round. The discussion seems idle to me mainly because it is nothing more than a biographical issue, and therefore not only lacking any serious philosophical interest but also completely unresolvable unless there is an Unamuno scholar in a position to claim full awareness of Unamuno's intimate philosophical and intellectual evolution. What is paramount in the context of this paper is that Unamuno conceived of ordinary fictional characters in a way similar to how he conceived of God and that some of his novels and literary works emerge from, and only to that extent illustrate, aspects of his philosophical reasoning. Let me emphasize that this is not to say, as is popularly claimed, that Unamuno's novels are somehow philosophical essays under literary form. Unamuno's novels are nothing more (and nothing less) than literary works; and Unamuno's philosophical reasoning is clearly and systematically formulated in his two major philosophical works, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos* and *La agonía del cristianismo* (Unamuno (1924b); [Unamuno (1924a), *The Agony of Christianity*]). Nonetheless, Unamuno's novels are still interesting when clarifying Unamuno's philosophical position in the sense that most of them aim to *illustrate* in quotidian, non-technical philosophical jargon, the coherency of some of Unamuno's philosophical claims. Again, however, Unamuno's novels are not, in any relevant sense, philosophical argumentations for such claims — they do not constitute conclusive logical arguments for the philosophical claims they aim to illustrate. Probably the most obvious and well-known example in this regard is his short novel *San Manuel Bueno, mártir* (Unamuno (1930b); [Unamuno (1930a) *Saint Manuel Bueno, Martyr*]), which illustrates the coherency of being engaged in an agapeic,

Christian religious practical way of life even when lacking of an evidential, rational justification for accepting the claim that God actually exists and that He is going to save us. There are other examples, and I will mention some of them in the next section, including *Niebla* (Unamuno (1914b); [*Mist* (Unamuno (1914a))] which, among other things, aims to illustrate in commonplace, non-philosophical jargon the coherency of Unamuno's philosophical claim that fictional characters have their own singularity distinct from that of their creator(s); or *Tulio Montalbán y Julio Macedo* (Unamuno (1920d) [*Tulio Montalbán and Julio Macedo*]), which aims to illustrate the possibility of a concrete, flesh and blood person developing loving feelings towards a purely fictional character.

II

The text in which Unamuno most explicitly expounded his way of conceiving ordinary, non-religious fictional characters is, I think, the prologue included in his *Tres novelas ejemplares y un prólogo* (1920c); [*Three Exemplary Novels and a Prologue*]. There Unamuno made the surprising affirmation that the fictional characters of his novels and fictional stories, his “*entes de ficción*” (“fictional beings”) as he commonly referred to them, even having been created by Unamuno himself, are nonetheless “real, very real” (“*reales, realísimos*”):

And I call these novels exemplary because I give them as examples – thus, as it says –, examples of life and reality. Of reality! Of reality, yes! Their agonists, that is, fighters – or, if you want, we will call them characters –, are real, very real, and with the most intimate reality, with the reality they bestow upon themselves in purely wanting to be, or in purely wanting not to be, and not with the reality the readers bestow upon them [Unamuno (1920c), p. 972]³.

In fact, in this same prologue, Unamuno goes as far as claiming that fictional characters are as real as their creators of “*carne y hueso*”:

Which is the intimate reality, the real reality, the eternal reality, the poetic or creative reality of a man? Whether he be a man of flesh and bone, or of what we call fiction, which is the same. Because Don Quijote is as real as Cervantes; Hamlet or Macbeth as real as Shakespeare, and my Augusto Pérez may have had his reasons for telling me, as he told me – see my novel (and surely enough a novel!) *Niebla*, pages 280 to 281 – that perhaps

I was nothing but a pretext for his story, and those of others, including my own, reaching the world [Unamuno (1920c), pp. 972–973]⁴.

Later on, in the same prologue, Unamuno goes on to claim that fictional characters, despite being created by some concrete person(s) of “*carne y hueso*” at some concrete time, have their own singularity which escapes even the control and will of their creator(s). As he himself says in the prologue, the clearest illustration of this claim among his literary works can be found in the fictional character of Augusto Pérez from *Niebla*. Despite being an “*ente de ficción*”, and as such his existence depends exclusively on Unamuno having created him when he wrote *Niebla*, once created Augusto Pérez has a singularity of his own, independent and even colliding with that of his creator, as illustrated in the last chapters of *Niebla* when Augusto Pérez rebels against Unamuno’s decision to kill him (see, Unamuno (1914a), pp. 216–227; [Unamuno (1914b), pp. 665–670]):

‘But Augusto Pérez is you yourself?’ — I’ll be told. But no! One thing is that all my novelistic characters, all the agonists I have created, I have taken out of my soul, out of my intimate reality —which is a whole people— and another thing is that they are myself. Because who am I myself? What is the one who signs as Miguel de Unamuno? Well...one of my characters, one of my creatures, one of my agonists. And that ultimate and intimate and supreme I, that transcendental —or immanent— I, who is it? God knows... Perhaps God himself... [Unamuno (1920c), p. 975]⁵

Another illustration of this claim that fictional characters, once created, have a singularity of their own which differs from that of their creators, though admittedly less dramatic than Augusto Pérez and his rebelling against Unamuno, can be found in Unamuno’s *Cómo se hace una novela* (1927b) [Unamuno (1927a) *How to Make a Novel*]. In it, the fictional character Jugo de la Raza, despite somehow being inspired by the real, flesh and blood concrete Miguel de Unamuno during his exile in Paris, is actually a rather different entity from the concrete Miguel de Unamuno, though equally real in the sense of him having his own singularity and his own story. Thus, despite Unamuno’s claim that *Cómo se hace una novela* is “[...] a novel in which I would put down the most intense experiences of my exile and thereby create myself, eternalize myself under the sign of banishment and proscription” (Unamuno (1927a), p. 420; [Unamuno (1927b), p. 734]) and that Jugo de la Raza is “naturally, myself” (Unamuno (1927a), p. 420; [Unamuno (1927b), p. 734]), it is evident that *Cómo se hace una novela* is not an autobiographical work in the ordinary sense and

that Unamuno distances himself from the character of Jugo de la Raza (see, e.g., Unamuno (1927a), p. 423; [Unamuno (1927b), p. 736]: “Thus did the novel of my Jugo de la Raza evolve, my novel of Jugo de la Raza. And meanwhile I, Miguel de Unamuno, a novelistic figure also, scarcely wrote a line, scarcely worked at anything for fear of being devoured by my acts”). In fact, it seems to me that one of the implicit motivations behind *Cómo se hace una novela* is precisely to illustrate Unamuno’s claim that there is no way of identifying a concrete, flesh and blood person with any fictional character, even when that fictional character is somehow taken to represent a concrete person. The characters that appear in a fictional story may be created by drawing inspiration from some given concrete “*hombre de carne y hueso*”, but once created they are unique, different entities of their own, as shown by the fact of them having their own distinctive singularity. This is what is behind Unamuno’s comments in *Cómo se hace una novela* regarding Miguel Primo de Rivera, the Spanish Monarch Alfonso XIII, and other politically relevant figures in the Spain of the time who were, either directly or indirectly, responsible for Unamuno’s exile in France:

Those of us who are authors and poets put ourselves into our work, create ourselves in the poetic characters we create, even when we make history, when we make poetry, when we create people who are, we think, live flesh and blood people outside ourselves. Are not my Alfonso XIII de Borbón y Habsburgo-Lorena, my Primo de Rivera, my Martínez Anido, my Conde de Romanones, more of my creatures, parts and portions of myself, as much mine and part of me as my Augusto Pérez, my Pachico Zaballide, my Alejandro Gómez, and all the other creatures of my novels? All of us who live chiefly from reading and in reading cannot separate historical characters from poetic or novelistic characters. Don Quixote is as real and affective for us as Cervantes, or rather, the latter is as real as the former. [...] Here you may have me making my own legend, my novel, and making their novel, the novel of Primo de Rivera, the novel of Martínez Anido, figments of my imagination, creatures of fiction. Do I lie when I attribute certain intentions and feelings to them? Do they exist as I describe them? Do they even exist at all? Do they exist, in any way at all, outside of me? Insofar as they are my creations, they are creatures of my love even if that love is disguised as hatred. I said that Sarmiento admired and loved the tyrant Rosas; I will not say that I admire our king, but that I love him I will admit, for he is mine, I made him. I would like him out of Spain, but I like him, I love him (Unamuno (1927a), p. 416 and p. 439; [Unamuno (1927b), p. 732 and p. 745]).

Fictional characters are as real as any concrete person of “*carne y hueso*”, not just in the sense that they have their own singularity independent of that of their creator(s), but also because, according to Unamuno, they can engage in actual, genuine personal relations with the concrete “*hombre de carne y hueso*” who becomes immersed in the fiction they play. According to Unamuno, then, fictional characters are not just humanly created abstract artifacts, but are persons in the full sense of the term, even if they are abstract entities (*i.e.*, neither spatially nor temporarily located):

[...] the most real man, *realis*, more *res*, more thing, that is, more cause – only what acts exists– is the one who wants to be or the one who wants not to be, the creator. Except that this man, whom we may call, in the kantian way, noumenic, this volitive and ideal man –from idea-will, or strength– must live in a phenomenal, apparent, rational world, in the world of the so-called realists. And he must dream the life which is dream. And from here, from the clash between these real men, ones against others, emerge the tragedy and the comedy and the novel and the nivolas. [...] a man, and a real man, who wants to be or who wants not to be, is a symbol, and a symbol can become a man. And even a concept. A concept can end up becoming itself a person [Unamuno (1920c), p. 975].⁶

The most dramatic illustration of Unamuno’s claim that fictional characters can actually relate to the concrete person that is immersed in the fiction they play a part in can be found, again, in the last chapters of *Niebla*, where the reader is directly addressed by the fictional character of Augusto Pérez just as if they were another fictional character (see, Unamuno (1914a), p. 226; [Unamuno (1914b), p. 670]). In this regard, also worthy of mention is Unamuno’s short novel *Tulio Montalbán y Julio Macedo*. This novel is relevant when discussing Unamuno’s way of conceiving of fictional characters because, apart from the fact that the dichotomy between the characters of Tulio Montalbán and Julio Macedo illustrates Unamuno’s already commented claim that a fictional character, even if drawn from some concrete “*hombre de carne y hueso*”, cannot be identified with him, the novel also aims to illustrate the coherency of a concrete flesh and blood person developing loving feelings towards a purely fictional character. Hence, we find in the novel the character of Elvira Solórzano, who is obviously a fictional character but inside the fictional story posited in *Tulio Montalbán y Julio Macedo* is taken to be a flesh and blood concrete person, yet who falls in love with the character of Tulio Montalbán, who is conceived as a fictional literary character even inside the fictional story posited by the novel.

Another of Unamuno's peculiarities in his way of conceiving of fictional characters which, as I will now point out, is a key aspect of his understanding of God, is his emphasis on fictional characters being continuously (re)created by the concrete person who becomes immersed in the fiction in question. By becoming immersed in a fiction (be it a novel, a play, or even, as in the case of Unamuno's faith, a fictionalist religious understanding of the world), the concrete person (re)creates his *own* fictional characters. Obviously, this (re)creation does not emerge from the void, since the concrete person draws inspiration from some given fiction which was first formulated at some concrete time by some concrete "*hombre de carne y hueso*", but is nevertheless a *unique* creation of the person that gets immersed in that fiction, distinct from the fictional character conceived by the first creator. It is in this sense that the reader of a novel, and more generally, the spectator of any fiction who truly becomes immersed in a fiction, and not the author(s) who first formulated that fiction, is the creator of that fiction in which he is immersed. This is what explains Unamuno's claims "Because it is known that he who enjoys a work of art does so because he creates it in himself, re-creates it and entertains himself with it" [Unamuno (1920c), p. 974]⁷ and that "[...] every reader who is an inward human being is author of what he reads and is now reading. What you are reading at this moment, reader, on this page, is something you are saying to yourself, and it is as much yours as it is mine. And if such is not the case, then you are not even reading it" (Unamuno (1927a), p. 467; [Unamuno (1927b), p. 761]). Similarly, in his prologue to the *Tres novelas ejemplares y un prólogo*, Unamuno defended himself from those who criticized his *Vida de Don Quijote y Sancho* (Unamuno (1905b); [Unamuno (1905a) *The Life of Don Quixote and Sancho*]) on the grounds of it being rooted in an erroneous reading of Cervantes's novel:

Although there is no lack of those who will jump up at me and say that the Don Quijote and Sancho of my work are not those of Cervantes. Which is very true. Because neither Don Quijote nor Sancho belong to Cervantes or are mine, but they belong to everyone who creates and recreates them. Or better, they belong to themselves, and we, when we contemplate and create them, we belong to them. And I don't know if my Don Quijote is other than that of Cervantes, or if being the very same one, I have discovered in his soul depths that the first who discovered him for us, who was Cervantes, did not discover. Because I am sure, among other things, that Cervantes did not appreciate everything that in the dream of the life of the *Caballero* that shy and silent love he felt for Al-

donza Lorenzo signified. Nor did Cervantes suss out all the quixotism of Sancho Panza. [Unamuno (1920c), p. 976].⁸

We have seen, then, that according to Unamuno, fictional characters are real, actually existing abstract entities, created at some concrete time by some concrete person, but which once created become independent of their creator(s) in the sense of them having their own singularity, completely independent of and even colliding, as in the case of Augusto Pérez in *Niebla*, with that of their creator(s). Moreover, fictional characters are not merely humanly created cultural abstract artifacts, but are persons in the full sense of the term, inasmuch as, in Unamuno's view, they are capable of engaging in genuine personal relationships with the concrete individual who becomes immersed in the fiction in which they play a part. Besides, in Unamuno's view, when one becomes immersed in a fiction one is not a mere "spectator" but is the creator of that fiction and the fictional characters that play a role in it. The fictional characters, and in fact the whole fiction more generally, thereby become no more than a purely subjective reaction of the spectator to the fictional story first raised by some concrete author of "*carne y hueso*". This is why becoming immersed in a fictional story, just as being immersed in a fictional, non-evidential religious understanding of the world, does not provide us with any kind of knowledge regarding the world actually being such and such and not otherwise, but it may help us to reach a better understanding of ourselves and our own existential condition — *i.e.*, to clear the "*niebla*" ("mist") that surrounds our own existential situation. Fictional characters, even being distinct from us, emerge from us, and to this effect they provide us with knowledge about ourselves, which is why Unamuno claimed that: "Whenever a book is a living thing, it must be eaten, and, whoever eats it, if he is alive, if he is truly living, relives, is revived by the meal" (Unamuno (1927a), p. 396; [Unamuno (1927b), p. 720]).

If we turn to the contemporary philosophical debate on the ontological status of fictional characters it is easy to see some similarities between Unamuno's position and the one defended in recent decades with respect to ordinary, non-religious fictional characters by philosophers such as Schiffer [see, *e.g.*, Schiffer (1996)], Thomasson [see, *e.g.*, Thomasson (2003a) and (2003b)], and van Inwagen [see, *e.g.*, van Inwagen (1977), (1983), (2003)]. These authors argue for what is usually labeled as a realist, non-Meinongian artifactual understanding of fictional characters. More concretely, they conceive of fictional characters as actually existing as abstract cultural artifacts. To this effect, fictional characters are abstract in

the sense of their being neither spatially nor temporarily located, but as differing from platonic ideas in that they are not eternal and necessary preexistent objects the author(s) comes to know by means of *discovery*. Besides, fictional characters are not discovered but rather *created* by the author(s) of the fiction in which they appear, making their existence contingent in the sense that they depend on the contingent fact of the author(s) having created them. Artifactual realism, then, preserves the claim that fictions and their characters are purely contingent human products, created at some concrete time by some concrete author(s), while also preserving the platonist claim that fictional characters are actually existing abstract objects. The crucial difference between Unamuno and these more recent accounts is that, in his view, fictional characters are not merely humanly created cultural abstract artifacts but are persons in the full sense of the term — inasmuch as Unamuno conceived them as having their own intentionality and capability of engaging in genuine personal and affective relationships with the concrete individual who becomes immersed in the fiction in which they play a part.

III

In chapter eight of his *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos*, entitled “*De Dios a Dios*” (“From God to God”), Unamuno criticized the adequacy of arguments from natural theology on the basis that they are grounded in an erroneous theological conception, the “*Dios-Idea*” (“God-Idea”) as he named it, which fails to preserve the existential significance and affective dimension of Christian faith. Unamuno subsequently claimed that:

The attributes of the living God, of the Father of Christ, must be deduced from His historical revelation in the Gospel and in the conscience of every Christian believer, and not from metaphysical reasonings which lead only to the Nothing-God of Scotus Erigena, to the rational or pantheistic God, to the atheist God, in short, to the depersonalized Divinity. [...] God, who is Love, the Father of Love, is in us the son of love. Certain facile and superficial men, slaves to reason, to that reason which externalizes us, think they have said something meaningful when they say that far from God’s having made man in His image and likeness it is man who has made his gods or his God in his own image and likeness. So superficial are these men that they do not pause to consider that if the latter proposition is true, which it is, it is true because the first proposition is no less true. God

and man mutually create one another, in effect. God creates or reveals Himself in man, and man creates himself in God. God is His own maker — *Deus ipse se fecit*, says Lactantius — and we may say that He is continually creating Himself in man and being created by man. And if each one of us, in the thrust of his love, in his hunger for divinity, imagines God in his own way, and God makes Himself for him according to the same measure, there is a social, human, collective God, the result of the imaginations, all of them human, that imagine Him. For God is and reveals Himself in collectivity. And God is the richest and most personal human conception (Unamuno (1913a), pp. 184–187; [Unamuno (1913b), pp. 208–209])⁹

A few pages later, Unamuno affirmed that:

And this God, the living God, your God, our God, is in me, is in you, lives in us, and we live and move and have our being in Him. And He is in us by virtue of the hunger, the longing we have for Him, and He makes Himself desired. And He is the God of the humble, for in the words of the Apostle, God “hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise: and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (1 Cor. 1: 27). And God is in each one of us according to the way in which each of us feels and loves Him. “If of two men,” says Kierkegaard, “one prays to the true God without sincerity of heart, and the other prays to an idol with all the passion of an infinite yearning, it is the first who really prays to an idol, while the second really prays to God.” It might be better to say that the true God is He to whom man truly prays and whom man truly desires. And there may even be a truer revelation in superstition itself than in theology. The venerable Father of the long beard and white locks who appears among the clouds carrying the globe of the world in His hand is more alive and more real than the *ens realissimum* of theodicy (Unamuno (1913a), pp. 195–196 [Unamuno (1913b), p. 214])¹⁰

Similarly, near the end of this chapter, Unamuno added:

The God for whom we hunger is the God to whom we pray, the God of the *Pater Noster*, the God of the Lord’s Prayer; the God whom we beseech, before all and above all —whether or not we are aware of it — to instill faith into us, faith in He Himself, that He make us believe in Him, that He make Himself in us, the God to whom we pray that His name may be hallowed and that His will be done — His will, and not His reason — on earth as it is in heaven, all the while sensing that His will cannot be other than the essence of our will, the desire to persist eternally. And such is the God of Love. The *how* of why He is such is of no avail to question; rather let each one

ask his heart and allow his fancy to image Him in the remoteness of the Universe, gazing down with the myriad eyes of the nighttime heavens. He in whom you believe, reader, He is your God, He who has lived with you and within you, who was born with you, who was a child when you were a child, who became a man as you became a man, who will vanish when you yourself vanish, and who is your principle of continuity in the spiritual life, because he is the principle of solidarity among all men and in each man and between men and the Universe, and who is, like you, a person. And if you believe in God, God believes in you, and by believing in you He ceaselessly creates you. For in the end you are nought but the idea God has of you, but a living idea, as from a living God conscious of Himself, like a God-Consciousness, and, apart from what you are in the society, you are nothing. How to define God? Yes, that is our longing; it was Jacob's longing when, a man wrestling all night until dawn with a divine force, he said: "Tell me, I pray thee, thy name!" (Gen. 32: 29). [...] And I would add that "Tell me thy name!" is essentially the same as "Save my Soul!". We ask Him His name so that He may save our soul, so that He may save the human soul, so that He may save the human finality for the Universe. And if we are told that God is called He, or that He is the *ens realissimum* or Supreme Being, or given any other metaphysical name, we are not satisfied, for we know that any metaphysical name is an X, and we go on asking Him for His name. And there is only one name that satisfies our longing, and it is the name Saviour, Jesus. God is the love that saves (Unamuno (1913a), pp. 197–199; [Unamuno (1913b), pp. 215–216])¹¹

As the preceding quotes show, Unamuno conceived of God in rather similar way to how he conceived of ordinary, non-religious fictional characters. As in the case of ordinary fictional characters, Unamuno conceived of God as an actually existing, though non-evidentially grounded and humanly created abstract entity. Besides, Unamuno's God, despite being a humanly created entity, is conceived as a person in the full sense of the word. Moreover, God is continuously (re)created by each one of us once we get immersed in the kind of religious understanding of the world that Unamuno's religious faith consists in, and in which we get inevitably immersed, according to Unamuno's schema, once we become aware that all singular things share with us the anguished natural condition we suffer from, the "*sentimiento trágico de la vida*", and that only if (the Christian) God were to exist and save us through Resurrection would our most basic and natural inclination to seek an endless existence, the "*hambre de inmortalidad*", be satisfied.

Admittedly, Unamuno's position has the completely unorthodox consequence that each one of us has his own, actually existing, *unique*

God. Nonetheless, and in contrast with what happens in terms of ordinary fictional characters, Unamuno claimed that each of these Gods that each one of us imagines “in his own way”, turns into a common, universal faith. This is so not merely because all these Gods are created after drawing inspiration from the same source (*i.e.*, the Christian Revelation and Jesus Christ’s announcement of God’s salvation throughout Resurrection), but because these Gods emerge as the subjective, though naturally founded, human reaction of each one of us to the kind of religious understanding of the world that the “*sentimiento trágico de la vida*” moves us to — and as such they are the ultimate result of our (according to Unamuno) most basic and natural inclination to seek an endless existence, the “*hambre de inmortalidad*”. These God(s) are, then, a subjective individual reaction of each concrete person. However, since we are all the same kind of subjects, in so far as we are all, as the “*hombres de carne y hueso*” we are, essentially defined by our (alleged) natural and most basic inclination to seek an endless existence, this Christian God (or Gods) that each one of us intimately (re)creates is not just an idle, solitary divertimento, but actually constitutes “the richest and most personal human conception”. As I said before, Unamuno’s religious faith cannot provide us with any evidential, factual knowledge regarding the world actually being such and such and not otherwise, but it may help us to form a clearer and more vivid comprehension of ourselves and our own natural condition.

An important part of the earthly significance of religious faith (and so, a considerable part of its affective dimension and existential significance) relies on the sort of personal and affective relationship said to be felt by the religious person between them and God, the feeling of being in a loving and personal communion with God, thereby providing the concrete religious person with the comfort of their being fortified and accompanied when facing the vicissitudes of life, be they its joys or its misfortunes. Together with the possibility of enjoying of God’s salvation, which Unamuno’s notion of religious faith not only preserves in terms of its possibility but also succeeds in making the foundational religious motivation, this sort of feeling of being in a personal and loving communion with God is one of the fundamental aspects of Christian faith. Traditional theism usually grounds this felt personal relationship on evidential grounds, as it being the expression of a genuine relationship between the concrete religious person and God, even if no clear account is given as to how this personal relationship actually works. Here, the challenge for Unamuno, and for religious fictionalists and defenders of non-evidential notions of religious faith more generally, is to offer a coherent notion of

God which, despite being understood in fictional or non-evidential terms, allows those who become immersed in a fictional religious understanding of the world to conceive themselves as being engaged in this sort of felt relationship of personal and loving communion. Contrary to what is usually the case among more recent defenders of fictionalist accounts of religious faith who, as far as I am aware, do not seem particularly concerned about preserving this important aspect of Christian faith, Unamuno did take up this challenge. Unamuno's way of conceiving of God allowed him to claim the actual existence of God (though as a fictional, purely humanly created character), and with it the possibility of there being an actual personal relationship between the concrete religious person and God, thereby preserving the aforementioned feeling of being in a personal and loving communion with God together with the possibility of the practice of private prayer, without having to dispense with his own core claim that religious faith is just a subjective, though natural and thus inevitable, human reaction.

Unamuno took up this challenge although, of course, there remains the question as to whether his way of conceiving of God actually succeeds in preserving this kind of personal relationship between the concrete religious person and God that Christian faith is taken to involve. The main point of contention is not so much Unamuno's affirmation that a humanly created abstract entity, once created, can somehow actually exist independently of its creator(s) (though admittedly, this is also a disputable claim), but rather his claim that a humanly created object can be, properly speaking, a person; and not just in the sense of their having their own singularity, and so being distinguishable from their creator(s), but in terms of their having their own intentionality, and so their being capable of engaging in genuine personal and affective relationships. This is Unamuno's main controversial assumption here. I say controversial because, unlike Unamuno, I assume that most of us would say that a humanly created object, even if somehow actually existing (*e.g.*, as an abstract, artifactual object), is not a person given that it lacks any intentionality of its own, and so is incapable of loving and thus cannot be an active, genuine part of any personal relationship with a concrete person. Going back to Unamuno's already mentioned novel *Tulio Montalbán y Julio Macedo*, while we may concede that it is something coherent (though, I think we all would agree, extravagant) that a concrete person of "*carne y hueso*" such as Elvira Solórzano develops loving feelings towards a literary, purely fictional character such as Tulio Montalbán, it does seem wrong to claim that a fictional character such as Tulio Montalbán, even if

somehow existing as an abstract entity, is actually a person in the full sense of the term, with his own feelings and intentionality and thereby capable of engaging in a personal and loving relationship with a concrete person such as Elvira Solórzano.¹²

IV

In this paper have I argued that Unamuno was conceiving of God (and ordinary, non-religious fictional characters more generally) in realist, though non-evidentially grounded, terms. I have pointed out that this way of conceiving of God allowed Unamuno to claim the actual existence of God (though as a fictional, purely humanly created character) and, with it, the possibility of there being an actual relationship between the concrete religious person and God without having to dispense with his own core claim that religious faith is just a subjective, though natural and thus inevitable, human reaction.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work has been funded by national funds through *Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia* (FCT) under the projects 2020.01635. CEECIND and UIDB/00183/2020.

NOTES

¹ 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); on why Unamuno considered his notion of religious faith to be an exercise in self-affirmation, and why it can be considered as a convincing response to Nietzsche's criticisms of the Christian, agapeic way of life, see: Oya (2020b); on why, against what seems to be the most common reading among Unamuno scholars, Unamuno should not be considered as a pragmatist philosopher in any philosophical relevant sense of the term, and why his reasoning cannot be identified with William James's argument for religious belief as stated in his "The

Will to Believe”, see: Oya (2020c); on Unamuno’s notion of the “*hambre de inmortalidad*” and its (alleged) relation with the contemporary philosophical debate on the desirability of enjoying an endless existence, the so-called “Makropulos Debate”, see: Oya (2022).

² According to Unamuno’s schema, we all long for God’s salvation through Resurrection since this is the only way that our “*hambre de inmortalidad*” would be satisfied; see, e.g., Unamuno (1913a), p. 81; [Unamuno (1913b), p. 152]; Unamuno (1920a), p. 295; [Unamuno (1920b), p. 485]; Unamuno (1927a), p. 446; [Unamuno (1927b), p. 749]. However, according to Unamuno, arguments from natural theology fail in that they assume an erroneous theological conception, conceiving of the Christian God as an explanatory theoretical scientific entity, no different from what an atom or an electron may be, to be established through abductive reasoning; see, e.g., Unamuno (1913a), pp. 172–186; [Unamuno (1913b), pp. 201–209].

³ My translation. The Spanish text reads: “Y llamo ejemplares a estas novelas porque las doy como ejemplo – así, como suena –, ejemplo de vida y de realidad. ¡De realidad! ¡De realidad, sí! Sus agonistas, es decir, luchadores –o si queréis los llamaremos personajes–, son reales, realísimos, y con la realidad más íntima, con la que se dan ellos mismos, en puro querer ser, o en puro querer no ser, y no con la que le den los lectores”.

⁴ My translation. The Spanish text reads: “¿Cuál es la realidad íntima, la realidad real, la realidad eterna, la realidad poética o creativa de un hombre? Sea hombre de carne y hueso, o sea de los que llamamos ficción, que es igual. Porque Don Quijote es tan real como Cervantes; Hamlet o Macbeth tanto como Shakespeare, y mi Augusto Pérez tenía acaso sus razones al decirme, como me dijo – véase mi novela (y tan novela!) *Niebla*, páginas 280 a 281 – que tal vez no fuese yo sino un pretexto para que su historia y la de otros, incluso la mía misma, lleguen al mundo”

⁵ My translation. The Spanish text reads: “¿Es que Augusto Pérez eres tú mismo...! –se me dirá–. ¡Pero no! Una cosa es que todos mis personajes novelescos, que todos los agonistas que he creado, los haya sacado de mi alma, de mi realidad íntima –que es todo un pueblo– y otra cosa es que sea yo mismo. Porque, ¿quién soy yo mismo? ¿Qué es el que se firma Miguel de Unamuno? Pues... uno de mis personajes, una de mis criaturas, uno de mis agonistas. Y ese yo último e íntimo y supremo, ese yo trascendente –o inmanente– ¿qué es? Dios lo sabe... Acaso Dios mismo...”.

⁶ My translation. The Spanish text reads: “[...] el hombre más real, *realis*, más *res*, más cosa, es decir, más causa –sólo existe lo que obra–, es el que quiere ser o el que quiere no ser, el creador. Sólo que este hombre que podríamos llamar, al modo kantiano, numérico, este hombre volitivo e ideal – de idea-voluntad o fuerza – tiene que vivir en un mundo fenoménico, aparential, racional, en el mundo de los llamados realistas. Y tiene que soñar la vida que es sueño. Y de aquí, del choque de esos hombres reales, unos con otros, surgen la tragedia y la comedia y la novela y las nivelas. [...] un hombre, y un hombre real, que quiere ser o que quiere no ser, es un símbolo, y un símbolo puede hacerse hombre. Y hasta un concep-

to. Un concepto puede llegar a hacerse persona.”. See also Unamuno’s criticisms of the literary works written in the Spain of his time: “And now I tell you that those crepuscular characters – belonging neither to the day nor to the night – who neither want to be nor want not to be, but rather let themselves be swayed to and fro, that all those characters that our contemporary Spanish novels are full of are not, with all their idiosyncrasies, with their pet expressions, and their tics and their gestures, they are not for the most part persons, and they do not have an intimate reality. There is no moment when they empty themselves, when they strip their soul naked.” [Unamuno (1920c), p. 975]. My translation, the Spanish text reads: “Y ahora os digo que esos personajes crepusculares – no de mediodía ni de medianoche – que ni quieren ser ni quieren no ser, sino que se dejan llevar y traer, que todos esos personajes de que están llenas nuestras novelas contemporáneas españolas no son, con todos los pelos y señales que les distinguen, con sus muletillas y sus tics y sus gestos, no son en su mayoría personas, y que no tienen realidad íntima. No hay un momento en que se vacíen, en que desnuden su alma”.

⁷ My translation. The Spanish text reads: “Porque sabido es que el que goza de una obra de arte es porque la crea en sí, la re-crea y se recrea con ella”.

⁸ My translation. The Spanish text reads: “Aunque no falte acaso quien me salte diciendo que el Don Quijote y el Sancho de esa mi obra no son los de Cervantes. Lo cual es muy cierto. Porque ni Don Quijote ni Sancho son de Cervantes ni míos, sino que son de todos los que los crean y recrean. O mejor, son de sí mismos, y nosotros, cuando los contemplamos y creamos, somos de ellos. Y yo no sé si mi Don Quijote es otro que el de Cervantes, o si siendo el mismo he descubierto en su alma honduras que el primero que nos le descubrió, que fue Cervantes, no las descubrió. Porque estoy seguro, entre otras cosas, de que Cervantes no apreció todo lo que en el sueño de la vida del Caballero significó aquel amor vergonzoso y callado que sintió por Aldonza Lorenzo. Ni Cervantes caló todo el quiotismo de Sancho Panza”. Unamuno made exactly this same point in his *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida en los hombres y en los pueblos*: “What do I care what Cervantes did or did not mean to put into that book or what he actually did put into it? The living part of it for me is whatever I discover in it –whether Cervantes put it there or no– and it is whatever I myself put into or under or over it, and whatever we all of us put into it. And I sought to track down our philosophy in it” (Unamuno (1913a), pp. 335–336; [Unamuno (1913b), p. 290]).

⁹ I have modified Kerrigan’s translation of the last three sentences of this quote. In the original Spanish text these sentences read as follows: “Y si cada cual de nosotros, en el empuje de su amor, en su hambre de divinidad, se imagina a Dios a su medida, y a su medida se hace Dios para él, hay un Dios colectivo, social, humano, resultante de las imaginaciones todas humanas que le imaginan. Porque Dios es y se revela en la colectividad. Y es Dios la más rica y más personal concepción humana” [Unamuno (1913b), p. 209]. Kerrigan translated it as: “And if each one of us, impelled by love, by a hunger for divinity, creates for himself an image of God according to his own measure, and if according to His measure God creates Himself for each man, then there is a col-

lective, social, human God, the result of all the human imaginations that imagine Him. For God is, and God reveals Himself, in our collectivity; at the same time, He is the most ample and the most personal of all human conceptions” [Unamuno (1913a), pp. 186–187]. The problem with Kerrigan’s translation is that it misreads the possessive “*su*” (“his”) as if it were referring to “*Dios*” (“God”), while it actually refers to “*cada uno de nosotros*” (“each one of us”).

¹⁰ I have modified Kerrigan’s translation of the fourth sentence of this quote. In the original Spanish text this sentence reads as follows: “Y es Dios en cada uno según cada uno lo siente y según le ama” [Unamuno (1913b), p. 214]. Kerrigan translated it as: “And God is in each one of us in the measure in which each one feels and loves Him” [Unamuno (1913a), p. 195]. The problem with Kerrigan’s translation is that the “según” does not refer to any sort of degree in which God is present in each one of us, but to the way in which He is present in each one of us.

¹¹ I have slightly modified Kerrigan’s translation of the first sentence of this quote to make it more faithful to the original Spanish text. In the original Spanish text, the sentence I am referring to reads as follows: “[...] el Dios a quien pedimos, ante todo y sobre todo, démonos o no de esto cuenta, que nos infunda fe, fe en Él mismo, que haga que creamos en Él, que se haga Él en nosotros, el Dios a quien pedimos que sea santificado su nombre y que se haga su voluntad [...]” [Unamuno (1913b), p. 215]. Kerrigan translated it as: “[...] the God whom we beseech, before all and above all—whether or not we are aware of it—to instill faith into us to make us believe in Him, to create Himself in us, the God to whom we pray that His name may be hallowed and that His will be done [...]” [Unamuno (1913a), p. 197].

¹² On why a realist, non-Meinongian artifactual fictionalist understanding of God, despite allowing the possibility of the religious person standing in an actual relation to God, fails to preserve a genuine personal relationship between the concrete religious person and God, see: Oya forthcoming.

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