

CHAPTER 16

THE MAKROPULOS CASE REVISITED

REFLECTIONS ON IMMORTALITY AND AGENCY

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We die like beasts. God, what comes after life, what is the immortality of the soul but a desperate cry against the shortness of our lives? Man has never accepted this animal span of life. We can't endure it, it's too unjust. Man is more than a tortoise or a raven. Man needs more time to live.¹

IN Karel Čapek's play *The Makropulos Case*, Emilia Marty, an opera singer renowned for her talent and beauty, appears at an attorney's office to inquire about one of his cases. The litigation concerns an estate valued at 150 million, and it has dragged on over four generations of disputants and their sons, and lawyers and their sons. It seems Emilia knows of facts favorable to the attorney's client, Albert Gregor. In particular, she knows of the existence of a will supporting Gregor's claim to the estate, which is likely in an old chest in the possession of Jaroslav Prus, Gregor's adversary. All of the parties to the dispute initially express disbelief, then bewilderment as to how Emilia could know what she does, given that the testator of the newly recovered will had died nearly 100 years earlier. We discover

in the fourth act that the apparently 30-odd year-old Emilia Marty—a.k.a. Elina Makropulos, a.k.a. Ellian MacGregor, a.k.a. Eugenia Montez—has lived to the ripe old age of 337.² As she recounts it, her father, personal physician to the Emperor Rudolph II, was ordered to test on her the elixir of life he had invented for the Emperor.³ The serum extends life, allowing one to “stay young” for 300 years, and as we encounter the seeming effects of this extension on Emilia, we find a life of boredom, apathy, and emptiness.⁴

Why, then, has Emilia appeared? Gregor, it turns out, is her great great grandson, and he is about to lose the case. Emilia has not come, however, to aid him in his cause. In fact, she has only just learned of the dispute, and she arrives apparently unaware that the document supporting Gregor’s claim remains hidden.⁵ In any event, she is as indifferent to Gregor’s lineage as she is to nearly everything else. What moves Emilia is not familial affection but apprehension of her own impending death: she seeks to recover the formula for the elixir, which she also believes to be in the old chest that is still, as she learns, in Prus’s possession.⁶ Once her story is revealed, a heated discussion ensues about what to do with the formula, and Čapek’s characters debate the merits of immortal existence, teasing us with questions about meaning and value and the nature of a life worth living. In the end, all, including Emilia, decline to take the formula, and amidst some protest, the aging parchment on which it is written is destroyed.

It is uncertain what lessons, if any, Čapek intended us to draw from his tale. Bernard Williams, in a striking essay, takes Čapek’s play to illustrate that immortality would be intolerable: an endless existence would be a dreary, meaningless existence, simply because of what it is to have a human character and to live a human life.⁷ Perhaps Čapek meant to convey just this, but the play is more suggestive than conclusive. As will become clear, Williams’s reasons for insisting that an endless life would be endlessly boring, that “in a sense, death gives the meaning to life,” are ultimately unpersuasive.⁸ His claims are, in any case, somewhat puzzling.

As Williams would surely acknowledge, his claims conflict with common intuitions about value, as well as with widespread fantasies, long reflected in art, religion, and literature, about magical potions extending our existence in this life or divine dispensation extending it in an “afterlife.” The conflict runs yet deeper, however, for his claims collide not only with common beliefs and imaginings but with a most basic and irresistible force: the felt imperative *to live*.⁹ We cling to life, ferociously at times, even the nihilists among us, and it seems, to most of us at least, that we are rational to do so. How, then, could too much life be a bad thing, and what would “too much” of it be? Our finite lives can, it seems, be both richly rewarding and profoundly meaningful. Why think, then, that a life without death would become deadeningly dull? Why think that a life without end would become a life without point?¹⁰

Whether or not Čapek intended any particular message, we are free to draw our own morals, and so we might as well draw ones that leave us well instructed. I am inclined to think that Williams misses the significance of the Makropulos case. His negative answer to the question of whether immortality would be desirable is, as I shall explain, an answer to no determinate question at all, and to the extent

that his arguments bear on any clear question about the desirability of extending our lives, they fail to support his assessment. For pretty obvious reasons, then, we ought to view with skepticism any effort to appraise the desirability of an endless or substantially extended existence. I here revisit Williams's essay, then, not to defend an alternative assessment, but the better to reflect on our mortal lives. In my view, Williams's position rests on questionable ideas about desire, character, meaning, and human life. As a consequence, he leaves unexplained what seems critically in need of explanation, namely, *the widespread and seemingly rational longing for extended existence*.¹¹

In what follows, I suggest that the rational appeal of extended existence rests on the fact that, although we are each humans with something like an individual human character, we are also autonomous agents with a distinctively agential character. The widespread longing for an extended existence is an expression of our agency, and contra Williams, satisfying that longing need not be practically at odds with satisfying the perhaps equally widespread longing for a meaningful existence. Whatever message it may impart about a limitless life, the deeper lessons of *The Makropulos Case* concern how to live the limited life each of us has. Absorbing those lessons may, in one sense, do more to burnish than to diminish the appeal of an "eternal life." For the lives we each do best to seek may be ones in which we find at least "intimations of immortality."¹²

1. IN SEARCH OF A QUESTION

Human lives, as we know them, have a characteristic cycle: an early stage of physiological and psychological development; a middle period of intense learning, social expansion, production, and reproduction; and a final phase of physical and mental decline and social contraction, ending in death. Of course, individual lives vary markedly, and development and decline of many sorts need not be limited to a single period. Psychological growth, thankfully, can occur throughout a life. Decline and decay, sadly, can occur far too early, due to injury or illness or owing to our own self-destructive choices. With social, economic, and technological advances, we have ever increasing flexibility in how we structure our lives, in our opportunities for charting a new course, and for correcting or overcoming defective or deficient conditions. Both the fact of something like a typical human life cycle and the fact of its malleability bear importantly on the possibilities for value and meaning in any life we could know.

A fundamental difficulty arises in efforts to assess the desirability of immortality, for our ordinary judgments about value and meaning are tied to our sense of a typical, if-variable, finite human existence. When we try to imagine an *eternal* human existence, our judgments lose their natural mooring. The difficulty is not that we must assess a very different sort of human life; rather, unless we can