

Jorge Portilla on philosophy and agential liberation

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Abstract

Jorge Portilla argues that authentic philosophical inquiry plays a liberating function. This function is that of bringing more fully to consciousness aspects of identities or ways of being-in-the world that have been, up until then, tacit or opaque to the agent herself to facilitate her endorsement, rejection, or modification of these identities. For Portilla, this function facilitates greater self-mastery by increasing the range of free variations of subjectivity available to the agent, and this increase in self-mastery itself constitutes a kind of *liberation*. The main goal of this article is to provide a substantive interpretation of the nature of liberation Portilla thinks is embedded in this central function of authentic philosophical inquiry. I argue that this type of liberation should be understood ultimately in terms of increases in human agency, so I label it “agential liberation.” For Portilla, agential liberation involves two central elements: (i) a type of *agential flourishing* central to human flourishing, and (ii) an increase in the reach of intentional action that I describe as an expansion in the *arena* of human agency.

Jorge Portilla¹ writes: “Philosophy, to the extent that it is a ‘logos’ on humankind, performs an educating and a liberating function” (F 16/MS 126).² This function is central to authentic philosophy: “perhaps the ultimate sense of all authentic philosophy is this liberating operation of ‘logos’ and not the creation of a framework of concepts as a mirror of reality” (F 16/MS 127). Philosophical inquiry aims at truth, to be sure, but Portilla claims this pursuit of truth is itself

¹Jorge Portilla (1919–1963) was a member of a group of important Mexican philosophers in mid-twentieth century called “The Hyperion Group” (for more details on this group see Hurtado and Sanchez (2020, p. 8.4); Sánchez (2012, ch. 1); Santos Ruiz (2016); and Dominguez Michael (2015, ch. 7)). Portilla himself never took a university position, published little, and died at a relatively young age, so his thought has not enjoyed the traditional academic means of transmission and has thus not received the attention it so richly deserves. Portilla's thought has received some brief attention in Spanish speaking circles (Krauze, 1966; Reyes, 2003, for example). His works have also come to the attention of English-speaking philosophers, see bibliography. An important moment in this rediscovery is the publication of an excellent translation of Portilla's main work, *Fenomenologia del relajjo*, in 2012 as an appendix to Carlos Alberto Sanchez's increasingly well-known book titled *The Suspension of Seriousness*.

²Portilla's works will be cited as follows: Olea et al. (1984) = A, cited by page number; Portilla (1984a) = DT, cited by page number; Portilla (1984b) = F, cited by page number; Portilla (2012) = MS, cited by page number.

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embedded in a historical march toward liberation, for “the truth sets me free” (F 16/MS 127). For Portilla, the liberating function of philosophy embodies the *logos* or “the transformative power of the word” (F 16/MS 126), and through this power “what is concealed and tacit becomes present and explicit, and something can be transformed by its enlightening action” (F 16/MS 126–27). The *logos* is, then, a power to articulate in human language elements of the content of the agent's experience that allows for personal transformation. Portilla illustrates the role of the *logos* in the liberating function of philosophy thus:

I cannot be the same person before and after knowing that, in a sense, the designation “*petit bourgeois*” applies to me. The word situates me; it creates me like a “*fiat*” pronounced by others which makes me emerge before myself with a new appearance that I barely recognize. . . .

But, just as the word integrates me into a whole that overwhelms and alienates me, it can also put me at that ideal distance from myself that is freedom . . . it allows me to adopt different attitudes in relation to myself, and it hands me over to my own decision: it allows me to choose, with full consciousness . . . in a direction opposite to that of psychological habit, tradition, class interest, and so on, the truth sets me free. (F 16/MS 127)

Philosophical inquiry can help a person understand and bring more fully to consciousness aspects of identities or ways of being-in-the-world, like being a *petite bourgeoise*, that have up-until-then been tacit or opaque to the person herself. In so doing, philosophical inquiry helps an agent liberate herself by allowing her “to adopt different attitudes in relation” to herself in a way previously unthinkable and thus unavailable to her. Thus, in making explicit these ways of representing or of being-in-the-world, the *logos* embodied in philosophical inquiry allows agents to increase *mastery* over themselves by allowing them to freely accept, reject, or otherwise mold these up-until-then tacit or opaque identities. For Portilla, these acts of self-mastery “are possibilities of freedom . . . [they] are free variations of attitude within pure interiority” (F 62–63/MS 168). These acts of self-mastery, “the free variations of my subjectivity, the changes of attitudes in pure interiority,” can be “characterized as *liberations*” (F 63/MS 169; emphasis added). In sum, for Portilla, the liberating function of philosophy is to bring more fully to consciousness ways of representing or of being-in-the-world that were up-until-then tacit or opaque to the agent herself, and thus philosophical inquiry increases self-mastery by facilitating free variations of subjectivity previously unavailable to the agent.³

As Portilla sees it, the liberating function of philosophy applies not only to individuals but to communities as well. In general, philosophy clarifies thought about “the most universal and traditional subjects of metaphysics” (F 15/ MS 126), but also about the historical conditions of the philosophizing subject: “clarity means a clear consciousness of the historical conditions of philosophizing, of the incidences of the factual, of social class, of nationality, of character, and so on, on thought” (F 15/ MS 126). For Portilla, the obligation of philosophy to clarify thought also applies at a societal level: “philosophy has the function of promoting reason in a specific society, of clearly putting before the collective consciousness the ultimate base of its thinking, of its feeling, and of its acting” (F 15/ MS 126). For Portilla, then, philosophy brings “before the collective consciousness” the different ontological and epistemological conditions that make human agency possible,

³As we shall see below, the liberating function of philosophy is not restricted to these self-examination exercises. Philosophical inquiry also increases self-mastery by revealing completely new possible ways of being-in-the-world and thus increasing the range of possible free variations of pure subjectivity.

and this clarifying function of philosophy is itself embedded within its liberating function. Philosophy thus enables a community and its members to “march towards their liberation” (F 14/MS 124).

The goal of this article is to develop a substantive interpretation of Portilla's account of *liberation* undergirding the liberating function of philosophical inquiry. I argue that Portilla's conception of freedom engenders a fruitful conception of liberation best understood ultimately in terms of an increase in human agency—an agency that creates values and constructs meaningful communities in which members flourish. Because of its connection to human agency, I label it “agential liberation.” My main contention is that Portilla's account of agential liberation involves two central elements: (i) a type of *agential flourishing* central to human flourishing, and (ii) an increase in the reach of intentional action that I describe as an expansion in the *arena* of human agency.

Philosophical discussions on liberation often center on emancipation from oppressive economic, cultural, or political structures; to be liberated, it is often understood, is to do away with these types of social shackles.⁴ Portilla's complex notion of liberation includes these social dimensions, and he, in fact, thinks that individual liberation coemerges with communal liberation.⁵ Part of the distinctiveness of his account, however, is that he subordinates the social elements of liberation to an *ontologically prior* account of agential liberation. For Portilla, agential liberation is a condition for the possibility of economic, cultural, and political liberation, and these social notions themselves are only intelligible in light of the ontologically prior account of agential liberation. Put differently, for Portilla, a central way of understanding a particular social structure *as oppressive* is precisely by understanding the extent to which this social structure *suppresses* the prospects of individual agential liberation. Understanding agential liberation, then, is fundamental for understanding Portilla's complex account of liberation.

Here is the plan. In Section 1, I present in some detail Portilla's description of freedom. This description of freedom sets the stage for my interpretation of Portilla's account of agential liberation, which I present in Section 2.

1 | FREEDOM

In his most important work, *Fenomenología del relajo*, Portilla provides a phenomenological description of a social phenomenon that he found troubling partly because it “dissolve[s] the community” and, in fact, constitutes “a negation of community” (F 94/MS 198). This social phenomenon is designated in Mexico as “relajo,”⁶ and Portilla argues: “The sense or meaning of *relajo* is the suspension of seriousness, that is to say, suspending or annihilating a subject's adherence to a value proposed to his or her freedom” (F 18/MS 128; emphasis added). For Portilla, seriousness is an affirmation of freedom before a value (F 19/MS 129), and the suspension of seriousness before a value is a failure of freedom: “*Relajo* mimes a movement of freedom that is actually a negation of freedom in search of an escape route towards irresponsibility” (F 83/MS 187). Part of what Portilla finds troubling about *relajo* is that it embodies a distorted

⁴These are some of the main themes in influential works like Enrique Dussel's *Filosofía de la liberación* (1977), Augusto Salazar Bondy's *Dominación y liberación. Escritos 1966–1974* (1995), and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogía del oprimido* (1970). In fact, the philosophy of liberation itself can be accurately characterized as a counterdiscourse emerging from “the experience of exploitation, destitution, alienation and reification” (Mendieta, 2020) aimed at critiquing central assumptions guiding mainstream European-American philosophical discourses and thereby challenging the longstanding pernicious economic, cultural, and political consequences of colonialism and imperialism.

⁵For more details of my interpretation of this existential codependence see Garcia Torres (2023).

⁶“Relajo” literally translates as “relax,” but, as we shall see in the main text, Portilla has in mind something much more specific than what this literal translation suggests.

notion of freedom, a “pseudo-freedom” (F 84/MS 187) that is really “a radical refusal to assume responsibility” (F 84/MS 187) because “*relajo*, literally, wants a freedom for nothing; [a] freedom to choose nothing. . . . *Relajo* has irresponsibility as an end” (F 84/MS 188). *Relajo* is thus troubling because it embodies a pseudo-freedom oriented toward irresponsibility that dissolves and negates community.

To better explicate his main topic, that of *relajo*, Portilla spends much time carefully characterizing freedom and its relationship to value and seriousness. It is crucial for his project to cleanly separate authentic freedom from the pseudo-freedom embodied in *relajo*. Portilla's careful characterization of freedom is also central to our own topic of liberation.

1.1 | Seriousness and value

Seriousness is an intimate movement of affirmation of a value presented to one's freedom. For Portilla, a person's grasping of a value “brings it from its pure ideality towards the world of reality,” and this “world of reality” is “the objective realm of the lived experiences” (F 18/MS 129). Thus, the mere act of grasping a value is one important step toward the value's realization. Importantly, grasping of a value is not neutral or indifferent toward the value, but rather “all value, when grasped, appears surrounded by an aura of demands. . . the value solicits its realization” (F 18/MS 129). Put differently, the very grasping of a value is inexorably intertwined with a recognition of a demand, even a duty, to realize the value in the world: “when value finds a duty for me, this duty seems to me imposed by reality itself: ‘Justice’ is ‘justice that is to be realized in the community’” (F 32/MS 141). When all goes well, after grasping the value, “the subject, in turn, performs an act, a movement of loyalty that is a kind of ‘yes,’ like an affirmative response. . . an intimate movement of loyalty and commitment. This is seriousness” (F 18–19/MS 129). Seriousness is “an adequate response to the demand for actualization inherent to the value” (F 19/MS 129). In responding *adequately* to the value and its demands: “I take the value seriously” (F 19/MS 129).

Portilla's notion of seriousness is thus straightforward. The same cannot be said for his notion of value, however. As we have seen, in describing value in “its pure ideality” and contrasting this ideality with “the world of reality,” which is the “realm of the lived experiences” (F 18/MS 129), Portilla sounds like a Platonist. However, Portilla also speaks of value as “simply a direction and limit of my transcendence” (F 33/MS 142), and thus sounds more like a Kantian. It is not clear to me that Portilla's writings enable us to have definitive answers for theoretical questions about the metaphysical nature of value. What is clear is that Portilla's commitment to existentialist phenomenology makes these kinds of questions secondary to questions regarding the way in which value presents itself to consciousness in daily life: “What matters is to find out the way in which a value manifests itself in spontaneous consciousness, independently from its ontological or metaphysical quality. . . it interests us little to know whether values are entities that float beyond being” (F 31/MS 140). Put differently: “What interests us is to clarify the way in which value gives itself in daily life, before any speculation about its essence, its hierarchy, or its polarity” (F 31–32/MS 140).

Thus, from an existentialist phenomenological perspective, the question of the ontological status of value is secondary, and the role of value in everyday life is unquestionable: “Before such [metaphysical] reflection, it is evident that values are something assumed or presupposed in the natural attitude of humans, who are turned toward the world and devoted simply to the task of living” (F 31/MS 140). The subsequent remarks on value, thus, aim to elucidate the role value plays in everyday life and its relationship to human action and freedom as they present themselves to human consciousness, and not to capture the metaphysical essence of value.

For Portilla, value manifests itself in human experience in two ways. Value can present itself as “value-thing” (F 37/MS 145) or as “constitutive elements of the things themselves” (F 36/MS 144). Some examples of these value-things are “the coolness of water or the delicate flavor of a fruit” (F 36/MS 144), “the gracefulness of the woman with whom one crosses paths in the street . . . the softness and the good design of the armchair in which I sit down to rest . . . the intelligence of this friend or the good humor of that one” (F 32/MS 141)⁷; these are all values. From an existentialist phenomenological perspective, all these values are classified as “value-things” because they present themselves to consciousness without requiring the subject's freedom to support them in existence (F 36/MS 144).

It is the second way in which value manifests itself in experience that is of most interest to Portilla and to us here. We have already been discussing this way value presents itself simply as “value” or “value-as-demand”; what is distinctive of value-as-demand is that it “offers itself to my freedom, calling on my support in order to enter into existence” (F 24/MS 134). For example, “Bookcases that must be organized, suits that must be ironed or any other small tasks that must be completed are likewise forms in which value appears” (F 32/MS 141) in human consciousness as a demand, as a value that solicits its realization. For Portilla, this value-as-demand appears in human experience as a demand coming from the very structure of reality, a demand “in the very heart of the world that surrounds me,” a demand that presents itself “like a small void . . . as something that things themselves are lacking” (F 32/MS 141). The demand to actualize a value seems to come from a *void in things themselves*, so value-as-demand also and inexorably presents itself as value-as-promise-of-fulfillment: the actualization of this value presents itself as enabling the world to reach a certain perfection or fullness of being. For Portilla, then, value-as-demand or value-as-promise-of-fulfillment appears to human consciousness as “an appeal by things themselves to my action, for the world to finish perfecting itself and to reach a certain fullness” (F 32/MS 141). Value-as-demand thus plays a central role in Portilla's phenomenology. Value-as-demand is of interest to us not only for its existential phenomenological centrality but also because it is this type of value that, for Portilla, gives meaning to human action and human ways of representing and being-in-the-world.

1.1.1 | Value as sense or meaning of human action

Portilla often presents a simple picture of human agency and its relationship to value. He writes: “All of our acts are ordered toward the realization of some value” (F 33/MS 141). He insists that a “responsible action” is an “action with sense” and that value is “the only thing that give[s] sense to action[s]” (F 85/MS 188). So, all human actions are creations of values and what gives meaning or intelligibility to those actions is precisely the value these actions are striving to create. It is in this frame of mind that Portilla writes: “all human life is steeped in value. Wherever we turn our gaze, value gives *sense* and depth to reality. . . . Value underscores and organizes the things in the world” (F 32/MS 140; emphasis added). For Portilla, to say that a value gives sense to human action is to say that value unifies and makes intelligible human action. A collection of things “such as gestures, bodily attitudes, words, laughter,” etc. “does not mean anything if it is abstracted from its sense” (F 18/MS 128). It is the “sense” that unifies this collection into an intelligible action: “A behavior is understood through its sense” (F 18/MS 128), and without this unification such collections would not constitute a meaningful action. For example, “At the *fiesta*, the value to be attained is joy. [The *fiesta*'s] sense is to actualize joy” (F 37/MS 146). Something *is a fiesta*

⁷Translation altered.

only to the extent that it is unified or structured in particular ways by the value of joy: “in order for there to really be joy at the *fiesta*, it is necessary for the participants to maintain a behavior regulated by that vital value [joy]” (F 37–38/MS 146). It is the value of joy that makes a complex social arrangement into a unified and meaningful collective venture that is a *fiesta*. In general, Portilla's simple picture is that all human actions, whether individual or collective, are creations of values, and that it is those values that unify and make intelligible those human actions themselves.

However, Portilla's views on the nature of human agency and its connection to value are significantly more complex than this simple picture suggests. For example, Portilla thinks that there are “senses” that unify and make intelligible different social phenomena, but which are not themselves values. As we have seen the *sense* of *relajo* is not a value but the suspension of seriousness toward a value: “The *sense* of *relajo* is precisely to frustrate the effectiveness of this spontaneous response that accompanies the grasping of the value. *Relajo* suspends seriousness; that is to say, it cancels the normal response to the value” (F 19/MS 129–30).

Portilla's view on human agency is also more complex in ways more directly relevant for our topic of liberation. As I argue below, for Portilla human agency itself is gradable. As I read him, there is an inherent *normativity* in human agency, or “agential normativity”: to grasp a value and to spontaneously comply with its demands to actualization, to take it seriously, is “the normal response to value” (F 19/MS 129–30), which is a kind of *flourishing* of human agency, a way of acting *more fully*. Deviations from this normal response to value are *failures* that in one way or another truncate or diminish human agency. I suggest, then, that we should read Portilla's simple picture of human agency as describing only the natural or normal cases of human agency, the cases in which human action happens as it *ought* to, in the agential normativity sense of “ought.” This simple picture is not meant to capture or explicate the different failures of human agency or the failures to act in accordance with agential normativity, as Portilla understands it.⁸

1.1.2 | The evanescence and transcendence of value

A fundamental part of Portilla's understanding of value-as-demand merits further attention. For Portilla, values that give sense to human actions “cannot attain . . . stability and solidity”; rather, their “evanescent reality has required the support of multiple generousities, and it rests on this support” (F 37/MS 145). When a value is realized in the realm of human experience, it only possesses an “evanescent reality” that must be kept in existence perpetually by the “multiple generousities” of freedoms *taking the value seriously*. This is, then, a fundamental commitment of Portilla: “the value never comes to attain definite being” (F 37/MS 145), for all values are transcendental, or “value always transcends its contingent actualizations” (F 71/MS 176).

For Portilla, then, there is a fundamental ontological distinction between being and value: “Value and being do not seem to ever be able to unite in a definitive manner” (F 71/MS 176). Agents *are*; they are constituent elements of the world, and they strive to actualize values in

⁸One of the interpretative advantages of this account is that it provides *the grounds* for Portilla's criticisms of both *relajientos* and *apretados*. Portilla criticizes *relajientos* for failing to take values seriously and *apretados* for directing their loyalty toward distortions of themselves instead of transcendent values. However, if we read what I am calling “Portilla's simple picture of agency” as his full account, then both *relajientos* and *apretados* fail to meet Portilla's account for what it is to act responsibly and, in fact, fail to act at all, and so it is puzzling what grounds Portilla can have for criticizing people who are not in fact acting at all. My interpretation provides an answer: what is problematic is that both *relajientos* and *apretados* fail to live up to the demands of agential normativity.

action, but these values remain transcendent, and their *being* is perpetually evanescent, always dependent upon freedom's "generosities" to take them seriously.

1.1.3 | Value as guide for self-constitution

One fundamental way in which value is transcendent is by being a perpetually evanescent guide or norm for self-constitution. For Portilla, value "is but the ideal unity of all my actions" that serves as the "guide" or "direction and limit" of my "valued self-constitution" (F 33/MS 142). Portilla illustrates the role of value in self-constitution in the following example:

Getting dressed hurriedly in the morning, drinking a cup of coffee in a rush, walking down the street in long strides, and, perhaps running, distressed, after a bus that barely stops to let me get on—[these] are nothing but the external signs of my determined (intentional) pointing toward the constitution of my own "punctual being." If after all of this, I finally do arrive on time to the office at the hour stipulated by a set of rules, and breathe a sigh of relief, then, am I punctual yet? It is evident that this is not the case. It is simply that today I got to work on time.

(F 33/MS 141)

Punctuality is the value that unifies and makes intelligible a collection of other acts, like drinking a cup of coffee in a rush and walking down the street in long strides; it is the value of punctuality that guides or directs these individual acts and thus combines them into a meaningful whole that is striving to be punctual. But "the value has escaped me once again. I have not succeeded in incorporating value into myself. . . . *My punctuality* is but the ideal unity of all my actions geared towards it" (F 33/MS 141–42).

Furthermore, just like the demands of value appear to consciousness "as something that things themselves are lacking," as "an appeal by things themselves to my action, for the world to finish perfecting itself and to reach a certain fullness" (F 32/MS 141), so "value can also appear as a demand, as a need to fill a void in the very center of my existence. It appears then as a norm of my self-constitution, as the perpetually elusive and evanescent indication of what *my being* ought to be" (F 32/MS 141). Value is not only an evanescent and transcendent sense that unifies and makes intelligible social arrangements, like a *fiesta*, but, for Portilla, value similarly unifies and makes intelligible my very self to myself in the process of taking the value seriously. Humans are sensitive to the demands of value in self-constitution partly because it is a means, perhaps the most important means, of self-understanding: "Value attracts us like a whirlwind in the center of which our own self appears, illuminated by the value's aura" (F 32–33/MS 141). In taking a value seriously, I understand myself because my commitment to the value unifies myself and thus makes myself intelligible to myself. For Portilla, value promises not only illumination of self but a kind of perfection or fullness of being of self. Value presents itself as a guide to attain "the fullness of our own being," as a possibility "to fill a void in the very center of my existence" (F 32/MS 141). Value-as-demand also presents itself to human consciousness as value-as-promise-of-*self*-fulfillment. In taking a value seriously, an agent creates herself as a value-creating-self and thereby undertakes the *personal project of self-fulfillment*.

Importantly, for Portilla, the self is unified across time by taking seriously a value: "when I give an adequate response to the demand for actualization inherent to the value, I tacitly commit myself to a behavior, I mortgage my future behavior. . . I make a pledge with myself in order to maintain a value within existence" in the future (F 19/MS 129). In taking a value seriously

across time, one commits oneself to a *personal project* that unifies the self across time (F 35/MS 144).⁹ Self-creation is essentially “valued self-constitution” (F 33/MS 142).¹⁰

1.2 | Freedom

Portilla's account of freedom is deeply influenced by Sartre's account. Sartre insists that “freedom has no essence”; that “it is not subject to any logical necessity”; and even that freedom is “indefinable and un-namable” (Sartre, 1956, 565). Sartre does think, however, that freedom is fundamental to human experience: “Thus my freedom is perpetually in question in my being; it is not a quality added on or a *property* of my nature. It is very exactly the stuff of my being” (566). Echoing Sartre, Portilla insists that freedom grounds attributing authorship and responsibility to human beings: “Attribution presupposes the idea of the freedom of human beings, to whom we can attribute responsibility for their actions because we live ‘always already’ in the atmosphere of freedom” (F 51–52/MS 159). For Portilla, humans live *always already* in an atmosphere of freedom because “freedom is so inextricably intertwined with all aspects of human existence . . . it is inherent to action” (F 53/MS 160).

Furthermore, Sartre's radical freedom makes it conceptually possible to understand both acts of defiance and acts of compliance to the demands of values as equally authentic manifestations of freedom. Portilla himself voices this thought: “I am free when I refuse to follow the indications of value or of duty, but I am *equally free* when I consent to following them” (F 82–83/MS 186; emphasis added). It is thus undeniable that Portilla is greatly influenced by Sartre's conception of freedom.¹¹

A main contention of this article, however, is that Portilla's thought departs in important ways from this Sartrean account of freedom. I argue that central to Portilla's complex account of freedom is a deeply un-Sartrean conception of freedom. For the sake of terminological clarity, I hereby introduce the expression “basic freedom” to refer to the Sartrean notion of freedom present in Portilla's account—that is, *basic freedom* is the pervasive type of freedom in which humans live *always already* and which grounds attribution of authorship and responsibility. By contrast, the un-Sartrean conception of freedom in Portilla's thought is conceptually connected to seriousness.

As we have seen, Portilla understands seriousness as the “intimate movement of loyalty and commitment” toward a value (F 19/MS 129). Portilla even *defines* seriousness in relation to freedom: “seriousness is nothing less than freedom's response to the call of value” (F 34/MS 142). This conception of seriousness leaves it open for freedom to be authentically manifested in other ways, say, in defiance of value or in *relajo*. But Portilla, as I read him, wants to avoid this and to connect freedom closer to seriousness. In the closest Portilla comes to a definition of freedom, he writes: “value always hangs on freedom; it emerges precisely because of it, or I should say, freedom is a perpetual surging toward value” (F 33/MS 142).

That Portilla is coming as close to defining freedom as he feels comfortable is made clear by a worry that he articulates shortly after characterizing freedom as “surging toward value” (F 33/MS 142). Portilla notes the following theoretical worry:

⁹Portilla's claims echo some of Heidegger's claims: “To Dasein's state of Being belongs *projection*—disclosive Being toward its potentiality-for-Being . . . Dasein discloses itself to itself in and as its own most potentiality-for-Being” (1962, p. 264).

¹⁰For more details on my interpretation of Portilla's account of self-creation see Garcia Torres (2023); I have also argued that this account of self-creation can be used to build an account of decolonization of the mind (2023).

¹¹Commentators often point this out; see Sánchez (Sánchez, 2012, p. 52), Krauze (1966, p. 10), Gallegos (2013, p. 15), and (A 10).

We have already said that *relajo* is a suspension of seriousness and that seriousness is nothing less than freedom's response to the call of value. This being so, how can one say that freedom is an emergence toward value [?]. If freedom is an emergence toward value, it doesn't seem possible to conceive of any attitude in which freedom negates a value or deviates from it. But, on the other hand, if such attitudes of free deviation or free negation of value are possible, can one still speak of freedom as an emergence toward value?

(F 34/MS 142)

This theoretical puzzle only makes sense if Portilla is flirting with defining freedom as an emergence toward value and is uncomfortable with the implication that acts of *relajo* are not free at all.¹² My reading of Portilla's solution to this puzzle is to adopt two different conceptions of freedom, a basic one and a normatively loaded one. As I read him, it is *only* the Sartrean notion, that is, "basic freedom," that permits of *relajo*. By contrast, the second conception, which I shall call "authentic freedom," is "an emergence toward value,"¹³ and it is normatively loaded in the sense that manifestations of *authentic freedom* are manifestation of freedom as it *ought* to be, in the agential normativity sense previously described. It is in seriousness, and in seriousness only, that agents act with *authentic freedom*. Like seriousness, authentic freedom is straightforward for Portilla, but more needs to be said about his conception of basic freedom.

1.2.1 | Basic freedom

I have presented basic freedom, for Portilla, as a fundamental freedom in which humans live *always already* that grounds attribution of authorship and responsibility. But what exactly is this basic freedom? Portilla is far from being at his clearest here and is also aware of this fact. Almost apologetically, he notes that basic freedom cannot be seen the way things are seen; that basic freedom is both omnipresent and omniabsent in human experience; that it has no concept and thus no definition; that nothing is harder than describing basic freedom perhaps because freedom is inherent in action and not thought (F 53/MS 160).¹⁴ Given all these limitations, the best philosophers can do "is to point to the experience or experiences in which freedom allows itself to be seen with the greatest precision" (F 53/MS 160).

For Portilla, the most fundamental experience in which basic freedom manifests itself is in the experience of oneself as source or origin of one's actions:

In general terms, it can be said that the most universal experience among those that found the notion of freedom is the experience we humans have in living ourselves as the *origin* of certain actions that we face in the position of *authors*.

¹²Something structurally analogous to Portilla's theoretical puzzle emerges for philosophers who think that responding to value is an important element in freedom. For these philosophers, an agent acts with the most freedom when she is responding to value as she understands it, and thus cases of wrongdoing seem to necessarily involve diminutions of freedom and responsibility (see Garcia Torres, 2022, and McCluskey, 2017). It is possible that Portilla's thought is influenced by the way this puzzle arises for Aquinas, given that Portilla was a committed Catholic well-versed in the Catholic intellectual tradition (Krauze, 1966). Portilla had great respect for Aquinas: "it is doubtful that a clearer, more objective, and more loving gaze than that of Thomas Aquinas has ever rested on this world of ours" (DT 169), and he echoes much of the relevant views of Aquinas: "evil is that which is unintelligible . . . like nothingness . . . in a background of innocence, evil reveals all its irrationality and it becomes unbearable. It appears precisely as *evil*; as something unjustifiable, unintelligible, absurd" (DT 177). Much like Aquinas, Portilla thinks that evil as such is unintelligible and absurd, so *choosing* evil must itself be absurd and thus involve a distortion of the will or a distortion of true freedom. True freedom is choosing that which is good.

¹³Portilla calls this type of freedom "positive freedom" (F 83/MS 187) or "responsible freedom" (F 87/MS 190).

¹⁴Sartre's influence can also be detected in these remarks.

In this type of action, one experiences a centrifugal movement, in contrast to processes of the opposite type, in which the subject is in the position of *patient*. Artistic creation and illness. . . are the most immediate examples of these two possibilities.

Nevertheless, being absolutely a patient or absolutely an author would be only two purely ideal extremes of this polarity of freedom. There can be no experience—no matter how privileged we assume it to be—in which a person experiences him or herself as an absolute author of an act.

(F 53/MS 160)

Basic freedom, for Portilla, is fundamentally to be understood in terms of agency, in terms of being the source or origin of one's actions. Thus, basic freedom is "*capacity of origin*" (F 54/MS 161), or an agency that grounds authorship. And, for Portilla, this agency is itself gradable: basic freedom is present as long as the person is the author of the action to some extent, but no person can ever be fully an agent or "absolutely an author" for "a person of 'flesh and blood' is unavoidably affected by a facticity (a body, social situation, etc.) that imposes itself on, and conditions him or her and that—if not entirely determinant—cannot be completely eliminated" (F 54/MS 160). Human agency is always constrained to some extent by the various factors causally-explanatorily alien to the agent's own freedom, factors that diminish her agency. Portilla continues:

When we understand a human action by means of the hereditary, social, economic, and educational, and so on, history of its agency, all we are doing is establishing a series of convergent lines—in and of themselves incapable of causing the given action to emerge or of explaining it. This action will always be attributable to a person. . . . Freedom resists being eliminated. No matter how overwhelming the volume of information we contribute to transform our subject into a pure *patient* or to turn our subject into a link in the series, we will never be able to strip this person of his or her character of author.

(F 54/MS 161)

For Portilla, basic freedom is a capacity for origin or agency that cannot in principle be reduced to other causal-explanatory factors, a freedom that is itself irreducibly part of the causal-explanatory story of an action. This means, for Portilla, that an action can never be truly explained simply by citing a causal story involving nonfreedom factors like genetics, social conditionings, educational history, and the like. Anything that can be so explained is itself not really an action properly speaking, but merely an event. Actions, properly speaking, are essentially free or essentially involve freedom as part of their causal-explanatory history. This causal-explanatory irreducibility is thus a first essential element of basic freedom.

A slightly different way of articulating this fundamental element of basic freedom is in terms of the irreducibility of "interiority" to "exteriority" (F 56/MS 162). Portilla writes: "This action will always be attributable to a person. It will always be an event that is *understandable within a biographical outline* that is personal, *internal* relative to the person, and not simply a link in a chain of events that are *external*" (F 54/MS 161; second and third emphases added). Thus, a person's status as an agent and author is inexorably intertwined with her interiority or mental life—thoughts, perceptions, convictions, and the like. This interiority is an irreducible part of the causal-explanatory story of an action. By contrast, a person is reduced to "an irresponsible being; in other words, someone who cannot be position at the origin of her own actions" if her actions are adequately explained "as a result of chance intertwinements of natural conditions or of other's actions, in the way of a mushroom emerging from the putrid

floor . . . [like] an excrescence of the circumstances” (F 55/MS 162). Such explanations *explain away* actions and human agency.

Portilla's commitment to this causal-explanatory irreducibility of interiority makes him at least flirt with, and perhaps outright endorse, a kind of natural causal indeterminism. He writes: “This connection [between freedom and responsibility] is founded, precisely, on an ‘interiority’ that cannot be suppressed; it makes the human being . . . an entity that cannot be inserted into the chains of linear processes that are, perhaps, the form *par excellence* of nature's intelligibility” (F 55/MS 162). Portilla, however, is committed to a kind of unity and mutual causal efficacy between interiority and exteriority: “we can characterize freedom as a passage or transfer, a passing from interiority to exteriority” (F 56/MS 162). This transition from interiority to exteriority is one central way of describing the capacity “of being a source of actions” (F 56/MS 162), or one central way of describing basic freedom.

Describing basic freedom as a causal efficacy of interiority on exteriority naturally leads to its second essential characteristic: basic freedom is transcendent. Portilla writes: “my transcendence towards the world is precisely my freedom” (F 33/MS 142). For Portilla, a central element of this transcendence is that my freedom enables me to causally interact and redirect the order of events that constitute the world up until the moment I act: “A human is a facticity (body, situation, irrevocable past, etc.) that is at the same time transcendence, in other words, a going beyond all of this” (F 60/MS 166). Basic freedom transcends “facticity”; it is not fully determined by the natural causal flow of “exteriority.”

Basic freedom, for Portilla, is thus a transcendent capacity for origin, a capacity that grounds attributing authorship and responsibility to an agent by essentially involving a causal-explanatory irreducibility of interiority, or mental life of the person, in the causal history or explanation of human actions.

1.2.2 | Basic freedom and *relajo*

One of Portilla's main goals is to elucidate the relationship between freedom and *relajo*. Portilla acknowledges that: “freedom appears like the horizon of *relajo*, like a condition of its possibility” (F 51/MS 159).¹⁵ Portilla further recognizes that from a certain perspective: “*relajo* appears like a ‘deviation.’ To the restrictions imposed by the value it responds with a ‘no.’ To a demand it responds with an avoidance. *Relajo* then appears like a form of liberation” (F 51/MS 159).¹⁶ However, Portilla unequivocally rejects the kind of “pseudo-freedom” that makes *relajo* seem like a *liberation* from the demands of value; this “negative freedom” is “twice illusory” (F 82/MS 186), “not more than a mirage and a deception,” for “*relajo* goes into a blind alley, into the illusions of negative freedom, and it attains only infecundity” (F 83/MS 187).

Importantly for our purposes, Portilla rejects this type of freedom because it truncates agency: “Thus, to the degree that it is effective, *relajo* is effective for failure. It pursues a mirage of value: freedom as a simple *no*; that is to say, it pursues the value that can exist in not realizing value. It is an action ordered toward disorder, toward tangling and confusion the pathways of action” (F 83/MS 187). *Relajo* is not really an action *properly speaking*, but a distortion of an action, a distortion of what human agency *ought* to be. For Portilla, negative freedom and positive freedom are *not* equally authentic manifestations of a more fundamental freedom¹⁷; rather, basic freedom *flourishes* in positive freedom and is *distorted or*

¹⁵Translation altered.

¹⁶Translation altered.

¹⁷As we have seen, Portilla himself seems to deny this: “I am free when I refuse to follow the indications of value or of duty, but I am *equally free* when I consent to following them” (F 82–83/MS 186; emphasis added). As I read him, however, Portilla has in mind only basic freedom and not authentic freedom in passages like this one.

sabotaged in negative freedom. Negative freedom truncates agency and positive freedom augments it.

2 | LIBERATION

We are finally in a position to articulate Portilla's conception of liberation undergirding the liberating function of philosophy. Portilla claims that the basic experience of liberation is that of removing obstacles to facilitate action (F 60/MS 166), so liberation is oriented toward agency. Furthermore, the experience of liberation also enables an agent to experience herself as a free agent: "Freedom would experience itself, for the first time, upon encountering the first consciousness of an obstacle and [freedom] would realize itself for the first time upon overcoming it" (F 61/MS 167).¹⁸ Liberation, freedom, and agency are thus intimately connected in Portilla's thought.

My main thesis is that Portilla's notion of liberation should be understood ultimately in terms of increase in human agency, so I call it "agential liberation." My contention is that Portilla's account of agential liberation involves two central elements: (i) a type of *agential flourishing* central to human flourishing, which is the transition from basic freedom to authentic freedom, and (ii) an increase in the reach of intentional action that I describe as an expansion in the *arena* of human agency.

2.1 | Agential liberation and agential flourishing

As I read Portilla, the most important element of agential liberation is the type of agential flourishing that occurs in the transition from basic freedom to authentic freedom. In a central part of Portilla's work, he applauds what he calls "Socratic irony,"¹⁹ because by it Socrates "affirms an absolute commitment to truth, to which, certainly, all of us human beings are obligated" (F 71/MS 176). Importantly for our purposes, Socratic irony *liberates* agents: it "*liberates* us in opening up the way towards truth... Irony is *liberation* that founds freedom towards value" (F 71/MS 176; emphasis added).²⁰ For Portilla, then, Socratic irony *liberates* an agent by orienting them toward truth, and this orientation itself "founds freedom towards value" or *facilitates* the agent's transition from basic freedom to authentic freedom. This transition is itself a type of *agential flourishing*, for it is acting as one *ought* to act, in the agential normativity sense of "ought."

Portilla sometimes describes this transition from basic freedom to authentic freedom as an agent taking responsibility for her humanity: "to the extent that man makes himself responsible, he makes himself free, and to the extent that he makes himself free, he affirms himself as a man. [He] assumes the mode of being of man and he distances himself from the mode of being of things" (F 55/MS 162).²¹ What Portilla seems to have in mind here is that the mode of being of a person is that of freedom and agency and that the mode of being of a thing is that of being acted upon, so in taking responsibility for one's freedom and agency one flourishes as a human being. Portilla makes a very similar point when he writes: "positive freedom... is indeed *authentic* liberation, an opening up of the path for effective action in the realization of values" (F 83/MS 187; emphasis added).²² I read passages like these as Portilla insisting that the tran-

¹⁸Translation altered.

¹⁹Portilla's discussion of Socratic irony is insightful and multifaceted. Interested readers may consult Gallegos (2013) and Sánchez (2012, ch. 3) for further discussion of Portilla's account, and Lear (2003, 2011) for interesting overlap with influential contemporary discussions.

²⁰Translation altered.

²¹Translation altered.

²²Translation altered.

sition from basic freedom to authentic freedom constitutes a kind of agential flourishing that is central to human flourishing.

2.2 | Expanding the arena of agency

Portilla's main target is to carefully craft a phenomenology of *relajo* with an eye on clearly separating authentic freedom for the pseudo-freedom embodied in *relajo*. Because of this Portilla has a lot to say about what I am describing as a first element in agential liberation, that of agential flourishing. However, Portilla also includes, but fails to develop in detail, a very different yet important way in which human agency can be increased, which he also describes as a type of *liberation*. This is a type of increase in the reach of intentional action that I characterize as an expansion of the *arena* of human agency.

Human actions oftentimes have a very limited conscious scope. For example, a factory worker that experiences her actions as nothing more than the constant repetition of a minor task, say, repeatedly adding a tiny screw. This factory worker *intends* only this minor task and *experiences* her actions as confined to a tiny *arena* of agency: the tiny screws, the parts to which these screws should be attached, the moving assembly line, etc., and the interconnections and unity between these that make her action *intelligible* or meaningful to herself.²³ The rest of the world, that which is *external* to this arena of agency,²⁴ is experienced by the factory worker as external to the scope of her agency; her *intentions* in acting have a very limited scope. Yet, her agency can increase precisely by increasing this scope, by increasing her *arena* of agency.

For Portilla, one way this increase can happen is by *consciously internalizing* a larger part of the world into one's arena of agency. He writes: “a worker *internalizes*, in other words, makes actively his or her own, a situation that before was entirely meant to be endured and *external* and that, when internalized implies a certain *liberation*” (F 56/MS 163; emphasis added). As Portilla understands it, this internalization of a larger part of the world essentially involves an expansion in the agent's *consciousness* in acting. That is, by internalizing a larger part of the world, the agent *experiences* a larger portion of the world as the arena within which her intentional action is concerned. I expand my arena of agency “to the degree that I learn to take into account. . . to the extent that I make mine with full clarity” (F 56/MS 163) larger portions of the world in which my action is embedded. Larger parts of the world or the circumstances of my action “only confuse me and torment me if I resist integrating them into my behavior” (F 56/MS 163). By internalizing a larger part of the world and thus expanding her arena of agency, the agent experiences herself no longer simply as *adding a tiny screw*; rather, she now experiences herself as *helping to build a car*, or as *contributing to the technological development of her community*, or she might even internalize fundamental social dynamics at play and develop a “class consciousness” (F 56/MS 163), so she might experience herself as *participating in a class struggle between the proletarians and the bourgeoisie*.

²³Gallegos does an excellent job of developing what he calls a “context of significance” that enables agents to make sense of their own agency by delineating and constituting a “space of possibilities . . . a certain set of interpretations about what thoughts, feelings, and actions would be reasonable, fitting, and viable” for those agents in a particular social context (Gallegos & Sánchez, 2020, p. 146). I think that Gallegos is onto something very important, something that can and should be incorporated into what I am calling an “arena of agency” to make better sense of Portilla's views of what I am calling agential liberation.

²⁴By this I do not mean to deny Heidegger's idea of a “referential totality”; that is, the idea that in some sense the *meaning* of particular things we encounter, like the tiny screws for the factory worker, are embedded in and presuppose connections to the *meaning* of other things making up a type of meaning totality. My point is simply that at any particular time no agent is *conscious* of more than a small fraction of such a totality.

Thus, expanding the arena of agency extends the reach of *intentions* and the *experience* of agency. For Portilla, this increase in agency is a kind of liberation.

2.3 | Gallegos on liberation

This is a good juncture to address an alternative interpretation of Portilla's account of liberation. Francisco Gallegos has argued that, for Portilla, “the essence of genuine liberation” is a balancing act between two “competing demands of freedom,” that of “remaining totally committed to one's values” and that of “retaining the capacity to reflectively detach and even laugh at oneself” (2013, p. 15). As Gallegos sees it, genuine liberation is the golden mean between *relajientos*, who do not take values seriously enough and who laugh at themselves too much, and *apretados*, who take values so seriously that their reflective detachment capacities are dulled.²⁵

Gallegos argues that, for Portilla, “values ‘emerge’ in a *mood-like way*” (2013, p. 11). Gallegos's account of moods is powerful and persuasive. What matters for our purposes is that these moods involve *affective attunements* or emotional ways of relating to the world that enable agents to make sense of diverse ways in which objects reveal themselves in everyday experience. These affective attunements thus facilitate “our ability to flourish as sense-makers” (Gallegos & Sánchez, 2020, p. 149). Moods enable agents to take values seriously. However, Gallegos argues, someone who is “too serious,” an *apretado*, gets stuck in a mood and this prevents her from appreciating “many other kinds of things that matter” (p. 155).

For Gallegos, it is precisely the capacity for reflective detachment, one of the two elements of his account of genuine liberation, that enables agents to not get stuck on moods and thereby attain “affective liberation” (p. 156ff). As Gallegos puts it, this is liberation “from entrenched affective attunements that undermine individual's capacities to skillfully navigate moods and disclose the full range of meanings that the world has to offer” (p. 150).

I think Gallegos's interpretation of Portilla is fascinating. However, I have reservations about what Gallegos calls “the essence of genuine liberation” (2013, p. 15). I think that the demands of freedom highlighted are not in *direct* competition at all. Rather, these demands of freedom ought to be directed at different objects: one's commitments should be directed primarily at transcendent values, and one's reflective detachment should be directed at oneself, one's commitments, and one's ways of being-in-the-world. As I read Portilla, if these demands of freedom are directed at their respective objects, no *direct* tension emerges between them that stands in need of negotiation.

Nonetheless, Gallegos is onto something here. Even if, in principle, there is no *direct* conflict between the highlighted demands of freedom, these demands may be *indirectly* in tension with each other. For example, unreserved commitment to a transcendent value may loom so large in one's motivational profile that time dedicated to reflective self-critical detachment may be neglected, or excessive reflective detachment from one's commitments to transcendent values may indirectly weaken those very commitments, if nothing else by taking time away from acting on such commitments, etc. One or another of these excesses may indeed end up truncating the prospects of agential liberation, and avoiding such excesses may not incorrectly be characterized as a type of *indirect balancing act*. Furthermore, this type of indirect balancing act can be *useful* for (a) attaining what Gallegos calls affective liberation, thereby increasing access to a fuller range of meanings the world has to offer,

²⁵Both Sanchez and Gallegos characterize *apretados* as “overly serious” (Sánchez, 2007, p. 3; Gallegos, 2013, p. 12). As will be clear in the main texts, I have a couple of reservations about this characterization. I present more details of my interpretation of *apretados* in Garcia Torres 2023.

and thereby increasing the range of possible ways in which an agent can act in the world—that is, increasing an agent's *arena of agency*, or (b) providing occasions for taking newly disclosed transcendent values seriously and thus providing occasions for *agential flourishing*. Crucially, however, it is these latter factors that *constitute* liberation, not the indirect balancing act itself that may facilitate them, in my reading.

Furthermore, there is no such thing as *taking values too seriously* in my reading of Portilla, for taking values seriously is the essence of authentic freedom. Rather, what is wrong with *apretados* is that they mistakenly see *themselves* as “value-filled beings” (F 89/MS 193) and direct their misguided loyalty toward themselves instead of toward transcendent values; in so doing they *fail* to take transcendent values *seriously*. In my reading of Portilla, both *relajientos* and *apretados* lack authentic freedom because they both *fail* to take values seriously, though in very different ways.²⁶ Nonetheless, it may be said that *apretados* are *too serious* in the sense that they get stuck on moods, but it must be noted, this sense of “seriousness” is *other than* Portilla's notion of seriousness as spontaneous affirmation of the demands of a transcendent value that solicits its realization in the world of experience.

2.4 | The liberating function of philosophy

We are finally in a position to add central details to Portilla's notion of the liberating function of philosophy, adumbrated at the beginning of this article. As we have seen, for Portilla, the transformative power of the *logos* brings to fuller consciousness some of the agent's identities or ways of being-in-the-world that were up-until-then tacit or opaque to her, and thus she is *liberated* to endorse, reject, or modify these up-until-then tacit identities.

An important part of this liberation is an expansion of the arena of agency. In bringing up-until-then tacit identities unto fuller consciousness, the transformative power of the *logos* opens up horizons or vistas of possible agency previously not fully open to the agent. Of course, this transformative power of the *logos* is not confined to these types of self-examination exercises, but it can also reveal completely new possible ways of being-in-the-world previously unavailable. In increasing the possible range of free variations of pure subjectivity, a wider range of possible extensions of the arena of agency are also thereby opened to the agent. This is an important part of agential liberation.

The central way in which philosophical inquiry liberates agents, however, is by allowing them to *take seriously* the values embedded in the tacit identities the *logos* brings to fuller consciousness. As I read Portilla, an agent cannot be *fully serious* about a value when she is acting out of unreflective custom or habit. An agent can indeed *go along* with the demands of a value in a social arrangement uncritically, through passive inculturation, or even indoctrination. However, this type of *habitual* compliance with the demands of value is not yet *true seriousness*. Portilla insists: “in *genuine seriousness*, I am alone with myself before the value” (F 19/MS 129; emphasis added). Portilla contrasts this “genuine seriousness” with a kind of *going along* with a value as “a behavior towards others” (F 19/MS 129), or as a kind of public performance whose main concern involves the *gaze* of others, not the transcendent value as such. Authentic freedom, manifested in genuine seriousness, by contrast, is “pure spontaneity,” a direct response to the demands of value grasped in its “pure ideality,” unmediated by an unreflective and habitual compliance to one's traditions and culture, unmediated by “a behavior toward others” (F 19/MS 129).

The liberating function of philosophy thus enables agents to *deliberately take ownership* of their identities (or deliberately reject or modify them) with *authentic freedom*.²⁷ In bringing up-until-

²⁶For more details on my interpretation of *relajientos* and *apretados* see Garcia Torres 2023.

²⁷This part of Portilla's account nicely overlaps with Appiah's (2005) emphasis on taking ownership of one's identity.

then tacit identities more fully to consciousness, an agent can better grasp the values, or, rather, the commitments to values embedded in these identities, and she is thus *liberated* to take these values *seriously*. The liberating function of philosophy thus facilitates agential flourishing.

3 | CONCLUSION

Portilla thinks that authentic philosophy performs an educating and liberating function. Essential to this liberating function is bringing more fully to consciousness identities or aspects of identities that were up-until-then tacit or opaque to the agent herself in order to enable her to take fuller ownership, or reject or modify, these ways of being-in-the-world. Philosophy thus increases self-mastery by allowing for a fuller range of free variations of subjectivity previously unavailable to the agent. In this article, I have presented a substantive interpretation of Portilla's notion of liberation undergirding this liberating function of philosophy. I have labeled it “agential liberation” because, I argued, ultimately this type of liberation is to be understood in terms of an increase of human agency. My main contention is that Portilla's account of agential liberation involves two central elements: (i) a type of *agential flourishing* central to human flourishing, which is the transition from basic freedom to authentic freedom, and (ii) an increase in the reach of intentional action that I describe as an expansion in the *arena* of human agency.

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