

EMILIO URANGA AND JORGE PORTILLA ON ACCIDENTALITY AS A DECOLONIAL TOOL

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Abstract: Call ‘a substance’ a person who is at home in a relatively stable and unified sense-making framework: a social structure that to some degree specifies which categories are important for interpreting reality, which goals are worth pursuing, which character traits are admirable, etc. Call ‘an accident’ a person who is not at home in one such framework. It is tempting to think that being a substance is preferable, but I present some considerations for thinking otherwise. Mexican philosophers Emilio Uranga and Jorge Portilla, I argue, present notions of accidentality as decolonial tools. Uranga’s account enables Mexicans to have positive valuation of *their being* independently of the approving gaze of the colonizers and their standards of value. Portilla’s thought distinguishes between pernicious accidentality resulting from the disintegration of sense-making frameworks and authentic accidentality as a condition for freedom, self-creation, and ultimately for individual and communal liberation.

Consider a child living in a city in the United States whose family immigrated from Latin America; call him Pedro. When Pedro is home his parents speak Spanish; they encourage him to remember his roots or cultural heritage, to long for the tranquility of rural life, to appreciate nature, to promote the well-being of everyone in the family, to cherish intimacy with friends, and to be mindful and forgiving of other’s mistakes and limitations. Pedro’s parents also warn him of the dangers of greed and insatiable ambition, of being idealistic or disconnected from reality, and of losing himself in a foreign culture. When Pedro attends public school, however, his teachers emphasize the importance of higher education, of financial independence, of pursuing a fulfilling career, of developing individual talents and passions, and of traveling abroad and knowing the world. Pedro’s teachers warn him of the dangers of poverty and ignorance, of lack of motivation or drive for personal excellence, and of failure to take advantage of the opportunities that come his way. Some of the things Pedro hears from his parents and from his teachers overlap, but he can tell that they come from fundamentally distinct ways of *making sense* of the world. Pedro real-

izes that both his parents and his teachers care for him and that they want what is best for him, but he is puzzled.

Pedro, let's further suppose, feels uncertain about how to act and uncertain about how to think of himself and his place in the world; he is not even sure *how to feel*. He finds himself caught between two seemingly incompatible *sense-making frameworks*: social structures that to some degree specify which categories are important for interpreting reality, which goals are worth pursuing, which life trajectories are feasible or viable, which actions are desirable or reprehensible, which character traits are worthy of admiration or condemnation, etc.

Following Manuel Vargas's interpretation of mid-twentieth-century Mexican philosopher Emilio Uranga (Vargas 2020), I say that a person is *a substance* when she finds herself at home in a relatively stable and unified sense-making framework,¹ like Pedro's parents and teachers; and I say that a person is *an accident* when she does not find herself at home in a relatively stable and unified sense-making framework.² One way to be an accident is to find oneself caught between two incompatible sense-making frameworks, like Pedro. Undoubtedly, there are clear attractions to being a substance; they have relatively stable guidelines for navigating the world, for assigning significance to their choices, for structuring their priorities, for being satisfied with their life trajectories, and, more generally, for *making sense* of themselves and their place in the world. Accidents, to a large extent, lack these things.

Because accidents lack the *sense-making stability* enjoyed by substances, it is tempting to think that, when possible, one should aspire to be more substance-like than accident-like, that being a substance is a more desirable or even a more valuable way-of-being. Perhaps surprisingly, Emilio Uranga thinks otherwise. Uranga argues that being an accident is *preferable* over being a substance. Responding to Uranga with perceptible irritation, Vargas writes: "it remains frustratingly elusive what the grounds could be for any recommendation that we persist" in accidentality (2020, 402). My guess is that many philosophers share Vargas's worry here.

Uranga's main recommendation for accidentality is *authenticity*. For Uranga, accidentality often arises from *zozobra*, a fundamental feeling of oscillation or uncertainty. In Uranga's existentialist phenomenology, *zozobra* plays a role structurally analogous to the role played by anxiety, angst, and nausea in other classical existentialist phenomenologist's characteriza-

¹ I leave the expressions "being at home" or "finding oneself at home" at their intuitive level of understanding. Gallegos (2023a) does an outstanding job of elaborating on this notion; virtually everything he claims about this notion can be incorporated into the interpretation I advance in this paper.

² Vargas 2020 provides a more detailed description of what it is to be a substance and an accident. He also uses the experience of young immigrants to motivate and illustrate the experience of being an accident. Gallegos (2023a) has recently connected Uranga's account of accidentality to Gloria Anzaldúa's influential memoir as a member of the Latinx community in the United States (1987).

tion of the fundamental elements of the human condition. Those feelings purportedly capture or express a connection with reality *phenomenologically prior* to any theory-laden interpretation or personal narrative coloring experience. For Uranga, then, “if man is constitutionally accidental, then it is comprehensible why . . . [someone] is to be described as *authentically human* when he *lives* in extreme proximity with the accident . . . in the vicinity of his own being” (*Análisis* 45, II.2.5, emphasis added).³ As Uranga sees it, then, Pedro’s position is a *privileged one*, for it puts him in more direct contact with the primordial human condition; Pedro’s accidentality makes him more authentic because it allows him to be “in the vicinity of his own being” (*Análisis* 45, II.2.5). By contrast, the *comfort* that comes with being at home in a relatively stable and unified sense-making framework must, to some extent, be a *distraction* from this fundamental zozobra-infused human condition. Substances have greater sense-making stability, but such stability comes at the expense of being *out of tune* with the primordial element in the human condition, which “is constitutionally accidental” (*Análisis* 45, II.2.5).

Thinkers who are already committed to a classical existentialist phenomenology are likely to be satisfied with this reply. As Carlos Alberto Sánchez, in a recent article on Uranga, notes: “Any self-respecting existentialist or self-loathing postmodernist would agree” with Uranga on the constitutionally accidental nature of the human condition (2019, 66). However, for a philosopher not antecedently committed to this philosophical methodology, Uranga’s basic defense of accidentality may seem unattractive. A philosopher sympathetic to Vargas’s worry, for example, may be tempted to *tollens* Uranga’s *ponens* and conclude that classical existentialist phenomenology’s embrace of accidentality is a reason not to embrace accidentality but to reject classical existentialist phenomenology. A philosophical impasse is at hand.

The main point of this article is to put forth some considerations *in favor* of accidentality from an angle that bypasses at least some of this philosophical impasse, though my discussions remain largely within the bounds of existentialist phenomenology. I take for granted that decolonization is a worthy goal, and I look at the thought of Mexican philosophers Emilio Uranga and Jorge Portilla and inquire into the extent to which their versions of accidentality can be construed as decolonial tools. As a first approximation, a *decolonial tool* is a philosophical account or notion that can either (a) be used by a person or a people to do away with the yoke of their colonial past, or (b) be used by a philosopher *to understand* what it is for a person or a people *to successfully* do away with the yoke of their colonial past, or both. What decolonization itself amounts to is a controversial matter. There is a substantial body of literature engaging in topics like decoloniality, decolonizing knowledge, or decolonizing the mind; authors

³Translations are my own unless a translation is cited. “*Análisis*” = Uranga 2013; cited by part and section number.

writing on these topics engage in interrelated but often distinct projects.⁴ The type of decolonization I have in mind is one conceptually connected to liberation: the emancipation from oppressive social, economic, and political structures resulting from a people's colonial past.⁵ Furthermore, as thinkers like Anibal Quijano have pointed out, oftentimes the oppressive consequences of colonization include a type of colonization of the imagination or mind of the colonized, an internalization of the very values and categories used by the colonizers to establish an oppressive system (2007, 169). This observation is poignantly noted by Frantz Fanon: "However painful it may be for me to accept this conclusion, I am obliged to state it: for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (1986, 12). Thus, decolonization requires not only the undoing of oppressive social structures but often also a type of *epistemic decolonization* of the mind of the colonized.

This sketch of the type of decolonization I am interested in leaves central theoretical questions unanswered. What makes a social structure *oppressive*? Which values and categories in the colonial order are *yokes*, and what makes them so? What constitutes successful collective or individual decolonization? And so on.⁶ One of my contentions is that Uranga and Portilla help us to answer some of these central theoretical questions in credible ways and thus help us to provide more substantive accounts of decolonial tools.

My contention is not that either Uranga or Portilla construed their philosophical methodology and orientation in the way that proponents of philosophy of liberation, critical phenomenology, critical race theory, or decolonial theory, see their philosophical practices as speech acts or counter-discourses specifically designed to do away with various structures of oppression. My goal, rather, is to argue that adequate historical understanding of the thought of both Uranga and Portilla involves the recognition of a type of proto-decolonization orientation, and the contention that

⁴ Some of writers see themselves and their work as natural extensions of the complex and multi-layered philosophy of liberation movement (see Maldonado-Torres 2007 and 2008, Dussel 2014, and Bartholomew 2020). Others are influenced by, and see themselves as responding to, intellectual currents coming from Critical Theory and Habermas in particular (Mignolo 2011a and 2011b, Bartholomew 2018). Others see themselves as engaging in a particular topic within politics (Mills 2015), sociology (Waghid and Hibbert 2018 and Mukherjee 2022) or cultural anthropology (Clammer 2008), and more.

⁵ These 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 counter-discourse 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.

⁶ Elsewhere (Garcia Torres 2023) I offer answers to some of these questions based on Portilla's thought.

such proto-decolonial thoughts can and should be brought into conversation with contemporary discussions on decolonization.

Here is the plan. In section one, after briefly situating Uranga and Portilla in their historical context, I sketch Uranga's account of accidentality in more detail. I argue that Uranga presents his account of accidentality as a type of Nietzschean transvaluation of values on traditional Western philosophy, an account that inverts the polarities of ontological significance from the substance to the accident in order to carve a conceptual space in which Mexicans can retain their dignity and have a positive valuation of *their being* independently of the approving gaze of the colonizers and their standards of value. In section two, I argue that in Portilla's thought we find two fundamentally different types of accidentalities, which for terminological clarity I call 'pernicious' and 'authentic' accidentalities, respectively. Pernicious accidentality emerges out of a disintegration of the sense-making frameworks in communities. Pernicious accidentality is often recognized in the secondary literature on Portilla (Gallegos 2018; 2023a; and 2023b), but this is not the case for authentic accidentality, which is an existential condition on the possibility of authentic freedom and self-creation. Finally, in section three, I argue that pernicious accidentality is an impediment to decolonization, but that authentic accidentality can be construed as a decolonial tool, for it is a condition for the possibility of individual and communal liberation, for Portilla.

1 Uranga on Accidentality as a Decolonial Tool

1.1 Brief Historical Context

One of the controversies in the literature on Mexican philosophy concerns its genesis. Should its history be seen as originating with the Spanish conquest of the Americas or extend back to include pre-Columbian thought? Alternatively, should we think of Mexican philosophy as originating with the political independence from Spain, in 1821, where a recognizable politically independent nation called "Mexico" emerges? (See Hurtado and Sanchez 2020; Hurtado 2006; Romanell 1975.) If we think of the history of Mexican philosophy as originating with the Spanish conquest, then the longest part of this history is the colonial period, ranging from 1519 to 1821. During the colonial period several philosophical methodologies loosely grouped under the title 'scholasticism' dominated much of philosophical speculation in Mexico, and much of the philosophical impetus came from philosophies originating in Europe.

Gaining political independence from Spain was a momentous event for the history of Mexican philosophy. Classical liberalism and positivism became dominant. 'Positivism,' as it applies to Latin American philosophy, refers broadly to the kind of philosophy championed by Auguste Comte, though Latin American positivists often incorporated the thought of John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer into their particular variation of positiv-

ism (Zea 1968, 17ff). Positivism was dominant during the latter part of the nineteenth century throughout Latin America, when a primary preoccupation was the building of independent nation-states after the political turmoil following the independence wars (Gracia and Vargas 2018, §1). Positivism was itself imported from Europe; its emphasis on empirical science and political pragmatism built upon a classical liberal model was welcomed throughout Latin America as a powerful instrument for independent and progressive nation-building (Gracia and Vargas 2018, §1).

It is not until the beginnings of the twentieth century that multiple philosophical currents begin to emerge in Mexico, and Latin America more generally, that explicitly aim to re-define the nature and extent of philosophical inquiry itself in a way that is not dependent upon the philosophical currents originating in Europe. Several of these currents explicitly understand themselves in opposition to the Eurocentrism that had dominated Latin American thinking up until then. It is in the middle of this formative period of Mexican philosophy that Emilio Uranga (1921–1988) and Jorge Portilla (1919–1963) are historically situated. They were members of an influential group of Mexican philosophers known as “the Hyperion group.”⁷ These philosophers were guided by an attempt to “situate philosophy in that which is concrete” and away from a philosophical methodology as “a vacuous invention of systems . . . [which] lead to sterility” (A 9).⁸ Their goal was “illuminating, rationally, the historical circumstance in which we find ourselves living, clarifying the world around us, so that we can understand ourselves within it” (A 9). Portilla and Uranga thought that classical existentialist phenomenology, roughly as developed by early Heidegger and Sartre, would serve their purposes wonderfully.

Uranga is by several standards the more successful of the two. He is commonly regarded as the most intelligent and promising member of the Hyperion group itself (Hurtado 2013). He had a successful career, and he enjoyed the respect and admiration of many of his most successful contemporaries.⁹ Furthermore, the Hyperion group itself is largely taken by a philosophical project of *la filosofía de lo mexicano*, an attempt to articulate the Mexican-way-of-being as an ontological category. Arguably, it is Uranga’s *Análisis del ser del mexicano* that constitutes the most impressive manifestation of this philosophical project. Importantly for our purposes, Uranga argues in *Análisis* that the Mexican-way-of-being is precisely that of *accidentality*, so Uranga’s philosophy of accidentality is placed at the service of his *filosofía de lo mexicano*. His account of accidentality, however, can be extirpated from most of this context without losing its central

⁷For more information on this important group, see Hurtado and Sanchez 2020, 8.4; Sánchez 2012, Ch. 1; Santos Ruiz 2016; and Dominguez 2015, Ch. 7.

⁸“A” = Olea, Rossi, and Villoro 1984; Cited by page number.

⁹He even appears in Octavio Paz’s Nobel Prize in Literature essay *El laberinto de la soledad* (1994).

flavor.¹⁰ In this article, we shall be concerned with Uranga's *filosofía de lo mexicano* only to the extent that it helps us make sense of his account of accidentality as a decolonial tool.

Portilla, by contrast, never attained an academic position, wrote little, wasted much time and energy drinking, and died at a relatively young age (Krauze 1966). Portilla's main work, *Fenomenología del relajo*, was only published posthumously with the help of Luis Villoro (1922–2014), another important member of the Hyperion group. Importantly for our purposes, Portilla's *Fenomenología* focuses on topics other than those of the philosophy of accidentality. Portilla does address the topic directly on an essay dedicated to describing important aspects of the Mexican community, but his words there are relatively few and deferential. After briefly summarizing some of Uranga's main points on the Mexican-way-of-being as an accident, Portilla adds: "We do not oppose Uranga's pronouncements. His descriptions seem to us to properly correspond to the way things currently stand" (CM 128/S 186).¹¹ At first blush, then, it seems that Portilla's thought has nothing important to add to the philosophy of accidentality, as developed by Uranga. As already stated, though unremarked upon in the secondary literature on Portilla, I think this is not the case. Despite saying relatively little *directly* on the philosophy of accidentality, Portilla's thought has several important contributions to this topic, I argue.

1.2 Uranga on Accidentality

One of Uranga's prime characterizations of accidentality is the following: "the accident is *par excellence* that which is extra . . . that which is fragile and broken . . . therein lies its essential vulnerability . . . the not knowing what to depend on, the not adhering definitively, the hesitating attitude, the *zozobra*" (*Análisis* 53, II.2.10). All of this sounds much like accidentality as defined at the beginning of this article—namely, as not being at home in a relatively stable and unified sense-making framework. However, Uranga thinks that this is only part of the story. In fact, to the extent that this characterization of accidentality remains sociological or psychological it remains a bit *metaphysically superficial*. For Uranga, both the terms "accident" and "substance" are, first and foremost, "ontological terms" (*Análisis* 38, I.1). Part of what Uranga has in mind is that the meaning of these terms cannot be reduced to terms operating at different levels of analysis of reality, like sociology or psychology. Rather, "The language of being is the ultimate basis of [explanatory] reduction, the one that descends most in the order" of explanation relations, the one that reaches "the foundation" (*Análisis* 38, I.1). The language of being, then, for Uranga is not

¹⁰ This fact matters for several reasons, one of which is that Uranga himself came to abandon the project of *filosofía de lo mexicano* later in his career (Hurtado 2013).

¹¹ "CM" = Portilla 1984a; cited by page number. "S" = Portilla 2017 (originally written in 1949 as "Comunidad, grandeza y miseria del Mexicano"); cited by page number.

reducible to the language operating at other levels of explanation. What, then, does Uranga mean by ‘substance’ and ‘accident’ as ontological terms?

As Uranga sees it, the meaning of the ontological term ‘accident’ is itself inexorably connected with the meaning of the ontological term ‘substance,’ for part of what it is to be an accident is not to be what it is to be a substance. For Uranga, “substance is plenitude or fullness of being . . . substance does not imply any change, its stability puts it beyond the reach of all transformation, it rests in itself, indifferent to all mobility, alteration or decomposition. Substance is sufficient” (*Análisis* 40, II.2.1). The combination of these features I call ‘ontological stability.’ For Uranga, then, *to be a substance* is *to be ontologically stable* in this fashion. By contrast, to be an accident is to be “inconsistent or lacking in foundation,” to be “a being degraded or ‘broken’ due to its mixture with nothingness” (*Análisis* 40, II.2.1). Furthermore, “As an unstable combination, the accident consistently thrusts itself to its extremes, its constitutive elements attract and repel it at once” (*Análisis* 40, II.2.1). In short, *to be an accident* is *to be ontologically unstable*, for it is to have *no foundation* upon which can rest the ontological stability enjoyed by a substance (*Análisis* 40, II.2.1). Accidents are thus ontologically “insufficient” (*Análisis* 40, II.2.1).

Uranga insists that the language of being he is using is not the more traditional language of Aquinas’s *esse*, but the language of Heidegger’s *Existenz-Dasein* (*Análisis* 47–48, II.2.7). The same word is used in both languages of being, but the meaning is equivocal—like ‘Leon,’ a Spanish word which can name either a city in Guanajuato Mexico or an animal, namely a lion (*Análisis* 47–48, II.2.7). An ontology built on *esse*, Uranga insists, is “a reality fixed and unalterable” (*Análisis* 42, II.2.2). By contrast, an ontology built on *Existenz-Dasein*, is one in which each of the fundamental ontological categories “has to be made or appears as a ‘task’” (*Análisis* 42, II.2.2). So “*the being* of man is not a being *given* but *proposed*. My being is a having-to-be my being” (*Análisis* 42, II.2.2, emphasis added). Thus, if it is said that “the being of man is substance, then this must be understood as if it were affirmed that we have to be substantialized. The same if we say that the being of man is an accident we want to say that [man] has to be accidentalized, not that it is an accident ‘given,’ but ‘proposed’ like a task to be realized” (*Análisis* 42, II.2.2). On an ontology built on *Existenz-Dasein*, then, *the being* of a substance is *not given* but is that which is *phenomenologically proposed* as task-to-be-substantialized, and *the being* of an accident is *not given* but is that which is *phenomenologically proposed* as task-to-be-accidentalized. These are the fundamental starting points in the project of constructing an *ontology* using classical existentialist phenomenology *a la* early Heidegger, for Uranga.

As we have seen, central to Uranga’s story is the affirmation that being an accident is preferable because it is a more authentic way-of-being than the way-of-being of a substance. This is so, Uranga thinks because accidental-ity often arises from *zozobra*, and *zozobra*—a fundamental feeling of un-

certainty and of oscillation between being and non-being—captures or expresses a connection with fundamental reality unmediated by theory-laden interpretations or distracting personal narratives (*Análisis* 52–53, II.2.10; 76, III.5). Thus, for Uranga to not be at home at a relatively stable and unified sense-making framework is to be *more authentic* because *sense-making instability* is *more proximal*¹² to the *ontological instability* that characterizes the primal zozobra-infused human condition. By contrast, substances are less authentic because their sense-making stability is out of tune with *their* underlying ontological *instability*, and thus predicated upon false-pretenses of ontological stability.

1.3 Uranga on Accidentality as a Decolonial Tool

Uranga notes that throughout the history of Western philosophy, the category of substance has enjoyed a type of ontological priority over the category of accident. Uranga proposes to invert this ontological valuation and regard accidentality as preferable to substantiality, and this proposal is self-consciously undertaken for decolonial purposes.¹³ In an ontology of *esse* this inversion may not make much sense—for that is an ontology in which substances *are* the ontological foundations upon which accidents *inhere*, and as such substances *are* ontologically prior. However, in an ontology of *Existenz-Dasein*—an ontology in which *being* is not that which is *given* but that which is *phenomenologically proposed* as task to be realized—the ontological distinction between the task-to-be-substantialized and the task-to-be-accidentalized does not phenomenologically present itself with an ontological priority built into the distinction itself. Uranga’s Nietzschean transvaluation of ontological value is feasible in an ontology of *Existenz-Dasein*.

Uranga writes, “Everywhere [we turn] we see, then, the affirmation of the radical tendency towards substantialization of the Western philosophical tradition” (*Análisis* 41, II.2.2). He insists, however, that this traditional tendency toward substantialization is predicated upon the unsavory pretensions of a particular culture, the European culture, to elevate some of its particularities to the status of universal ontological truths. He writes, “*that which pretends to be man in general, [is just] European humanity generalized, which it seems to us to define itself not by its accidentality, but by an arrogant substantiality*” (*Análisis* 43, II.2.3, emphasis in original). Uranga’s crucial move here is to argue that the traditional Western philosophical

¹² Uranga characterizes *proximity* thus: “that which is near is that which is present to our preoccupations” (*Análisis* 46, II.2.5).

¹³ That Uranga’s analysis of ‘accidentality’ involves decolonial elements has been previously commented on in the secondary literature (Sánchez 2019; Gallegos 2023a; and 2023b). However, what is left unremarked, and what I want to emphasize in this discussion, is the way in which Uranga’s discussion of ontology, or the language of being, makes intelligible this decolonial move.

preference of substance over accident is itself not built into ontology, but rather projected there by the aspirations of a particular culture.

Uranga further claims to find an opposite tendency in the Mexican culture, a tendency towards accidentalization. From this purported observation, Uranga develops his account of accidentality as a *definition* of the Mexican-way-of-being: “In a direction exactly opposite to this [European] we define the Mexican-being as ‘being for accident’ this is its being as a *having to be an accident*” (*Análisis* 41, II.2.2). Defining the Mexican-being as task-to-be-accidentalized, then, has the implication that “That which is inauthentic would be in this case to pretend to exit from the condition of accidentality and to substantialize” (*Análisis* 42, II.2.2).

So, for Uranga the European culture is characterized by a tendency toward substantialization, and the Mexican culture is characterized by a tendency toward accidentalization. He then prefers the latter in a self-conscious decolonial move:

In ontological terms: *all interpretations of man as a substantial creature seems to us inhuman*. In the beginnings of our history, we had to suffer precisely a devaluation for not resembling the European *man*. In the same spirit of partiality today we return this assessment, and we refuse to acknowledge as ‘human’ all that European construction which founds human ‘dignity’ in substance. (*Análisis* 45, II.2.4, emphasis in original)

As clearly stated in this passage, part of Uranga’s philosophical motivations for his philosophy of accidentality is explicitly decolonial. Mexicans, he notes, have historically been devalued by Europeans precisely because they approximate the accident way-of-being more than the substance way-of-being. Uranga’s explicit goal, in his Nietzschean transvaluation of ontological values, is to reinstate the dignity of Mexicans without giving into the values imposed by the colonizers, to create conceptual space for Mexicans to have a positive valuation of *their being* without the approving gaze of the colonizers and their standards of value. This is, undoubtedly, part of the attractiveness of Uranga’s philosophy of accidentality: it is a decolonial tool by design.¹⁴

1.4 Francisco Gallegos on Uranga

Francisco Gallegos has recently argued for similar conclusions (2023a; 2023b);¹⁵ thus, a few words about Gallegos’s proposal are in order. I find Gallegos’s work deeply insightful, and I agree with most of what he has to say about both Portilla and Uranga. However, instead of emphasizing the

¹⁴ See Sánchez (2019), Gallegos (2023a) and (2023b) for examples of philosophers who find this move attractive.

¹⁵ I would like to thank an anonymous referee for insisting that I address Gallegos’s recent work.

many similarities in our interpretations, it may be more profitable to readers for me to emphasize our differences and, in particular, what I take to be some of the relative advantages of my reading.

I think that an important relative advantage of my interpretation is that it better captures both the distinction between substances and accidents, and that it better illustrates why substances are more inauthentic than accidents, for Uranga. I find Gallegos's assessment of substances and accident insightful and mostly overlapping with my own reading. For example, Gallegos concludes that Uranga's picture of accidentality "would include everyone who can find no stable home in the world and who do not fit neatly into the identity categories offered by the dominant normative framework" (2023a, 18). This is very much in keeping with the picture I have presented here; however, Gallegos continues, "Ultimately, this would include everyone, since all human beings have only a tenuous hold on their identity and place in the world" (2023a, 18; see also 2023b, 131, footnote 23). According to this interpretation, then, part of what makes substances inauthentic is that they *fail to realize* they have "only a tenuous hold on their identity and place in the world" (2023a, 18). This claim seems not only a bit implausible, but actually in tension with a different reason Gallegos advances for the inauthenticity of substances: "Indeed, according to Uranga, the Spanish may be comfortable being honest even to the point of insulting others, but this does not make them authentic, because their confident self-assertion reflects a refusal or inability to question their own assumptions, perspective, and identities" (2023b, 131, footnote 26). Thus, Gallegos seems to want to claim that part of what makes substances inauthentic is that their hold on their identities and place in the world is *both* too rigid and too tenuous. It is too rigid because substance's hold on their identities and place in the world makes them incapable or unwilling to question the assumptions inherent in those identities and ways of being-in-the-world; this lack of self-reflective criticism is part of their inauthenticity. Substance's hold on their identities and place in the world is also too tenuous, however, for this is Gallego's interpretation of Uranga's ultimate "vision of humanity" (2023b, 131, footnote 26) and thus a feature of the human condition. From this latter observation it follows that substances *are*, unbeknownst to themselves, *really accidents*; this type of ignorance is also part of their inauthenticity. This part of Gallego's interpretation of Uranga, I find puzzling. Part of the puzzle here is that Gallego's assessment of the inauthenticity of substances threatens to do away with their very status as substances, for it is precisely their *sense-making stability* that makes them substances.

As I see it, part of the problem here is that Gallegos's analysis abstracts away from Uranga's discussion on the language of being and the ontological meaning of both 'substance' and 'accident.' As we have seen, this part of Uranga's analysis gives rise to my distinction between *ontological stability* and *sense-making stability*. As I see it, it is this distinction that

helps to clarify the mentioned puzzle that arises from Gallegos's otherwise insightful analysis. In sum, a *substance* is a being that enjoys relative sense-making stability, and an *accident* is a being that has relative sense-making instability. What makes accidents more *authentic* is precisely that their relative sense-making instability is *more proximal* to their ontological instability, and what makes substances more *inauthentic* is that their relative sense-making stability is predicated upon a false pretense of *ontological stability*. So, in my reading, it is not the case that substance's *hold* on their identities and place in the world is both too rigid and too tenuous. Rather, it is their rigid hold on their identities and place in the world that makes them *substances*, and it is the discrepancy between this rigid hold and the underlying ontological *instability* that makes substances *inauthentic*. What is tenuous in substances is their grasp of this discrepancy, not their hold on their identities and place in the world, in my reading of Uranga.

2 Jorge Portilla on Accidentality

I think that Portilla's thought gives us a distinction between two types of accidentalities, which for the sake of terminological clarity I hereby call 'pernicious accidentality' and 'authentic accidentality.' Pernicious accidentality is a type of disorientation of human agency that results from the fragmentation of a community's sense-making frameworks; we shall encounter this notion in subsection 2.3. Authentic accidentality, on the other hand, is in some sense inexorably intertwined with authentic self-creation. Let us begin with the latter notion.

2.1 Authentic Accidentality and the Metaphysics of Self-Creation

Portilla thinks that human existence "is something like a melody that whistles itself, that invents itself, writing itself into the notebook of being" (NH 109).¹⁶ In his less poetic moments, when trying to explicate the nature of self-creation, Portilla explicitly appeals to Heidegger's early views: "now, as Heidegger has demonstrated, the horizon of intelligibility of being is time" (CM 128/S 186). Further echoing Heidegger, Portilla explains:

On a concrete level, we construct our being from non-being; we construct our being out of a creation of possibilities whose foundations sink into uncertainty of a future, of an arrival; we construct our being from an uncertain and empty temporal enclosure and through an act of projection that is the originary movement begetting human existence. Our existence is a project, in the double sense of scheme and thrownness, the first outline of which we trace in the non-being of the future. It is not strange then, that human life, all human life, finds itself affected by an

¹⁶ "NH" = Portilla 1984c; cited by page number.

incurable nihilism, accidentality, or insubstantiality. (CM 129/S 186–187)

There is much packed into this passage. Most relevant for our purposes is that Portilla thinks a kind of incurable accidentality is to be expected in human life given that *our being* is a *construct*: it is an uncertain projection onto the future.¹⁷ Part of what Portilla means by *incurable accidentality* is that *the foundation* of our being is the *non-being of the future* and not an Aristotelian human essence that endures through change itself unaltered and that settles what is good for us and what it means to flourish as a human being.

All of this is in line with classical existentialist phenomenology. So is Portilla's postulation of a type of radical freedom that is itself ontologically prior to the self: "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 For Portilla, the self is not an enduring thing with an essence that acts freely, in a more traditional Aristotelian fashion; rather, echoing Sartre, Portilla claims that the self is constructed by *ontologically prior* acts of freedom realizing themselves in acting. The self thus *emerges* out of these acts in which freedom realizes itself when these acts constitute a projection that gives shape and unity to the self in time.

For Portilla, the self is thus *ungrounded* in a double sense: a) it is not, nor is it grounded on, something like an Aristotelian substance that endures through change itself essentially unchanged, and b) its ground is nothing other than ontologically prior acts of freedom realizing themselves by projecting onto the non-existent future. With this we get a first sketch of what it is to have authentic accidentality: it is to live with the full recognition of our radical freedom to construct ourselves, and thus with full recognition of the doubly ungrounded nature of our constructed self. A life in full recognition of such facts forgoes the *comfort and stability* provided by the metaphysical ontology of Aristotelian essences. As stated, this characterization of authentic accidentality is in line with mainstream Sartrean existentialism.¹⁹

Portilla's account of the nature of self-creation, and the type of authentic accidentality it requires, however, departs in important ways from this

¹⁷ Portilla's claims echo Heidegger's: "To Dasein's state of Being belongs *projection*—disclosive Being towards its potentiality-for-Being . . . Dasein discloses itself to itself in and as its ownmost potentiality-for-Being" (1962, 264).

¹⁸ Translation altered. "F" = Portilla 1984b; cited by page number. "MS" = Portilla 2012; cited by page number.

¹⁹ Sartre writes, for example, "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" (Sartre 1956, 566). Sánchez cites this passage from Sartre and tells readers that it "informs . . . Portilla's discussion of freedom" (Sánchez 2012, 52). Gallegos presents something very similar as Uranga's views taken more or less directly from Heidegger (2023b, 126).

otherwise mainstream existentialist phenomenological story. A central departure, unremarked upon in the secondary literature, is Portilla's account of the nature of authentic freedom. He writes, "freedom is a perpetual surging toward value" (F 33/MS 142), and 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). For Portilla, then, our selves must be constructed out of the ontologically prior radical freedom that is itself oriented toward values as guides for valued self-constitution. It is the task of the next subsection to spell this out in more detail.

2.2 Authentic Freedom and Self-Creation

For Portilla, self-creation is an expression of authentic freedom as affirmative response to the demands of transcendent values. This characterization involves many notions central to Portilla's thought that stand in need of further elaboration.²⁰ One central notion is that of *values*. Values loom large in Portilla's existential phenomenological description of everyday human agency. He 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. . . . All of our acts are order toward the realization of some value" (F 32/MS 140–141). As we have seen, Portilla defines freedom partly in terms of value: "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). Authentic freedom, for Portilla, is thus a type of affirmation of a value. Importantly, for Portilla an agent is not phenomenologically indifferent to values, instead: "all value, when grasped, appears surrounded by an aura of demands . . . the value solicits its realization" (F 18/MS 129). Thus, as Portilla sees it, value presents itself in everyday life as value-as-demand-for-actualization, a value that "offers itself to my freedom, calling on my support in order to enter into existence" (F 24/MS 134). This demand for realization, Portilla insists, comes from "the very heart of the world that surrounds me" (F 32/MS 141); it is thus a demand that presents itself "like a small void . . . as something that things themselves are lacking" (F 32/MS 141). Value-as-demand also inexorably presents itself as value-as-promise-of-fulfillment, 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).

Furthermore, and importantly for our purposes, for Portilla, value also presents itself as value-as-promise-of-*self*-fulfillment: "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, emphasis in original). Value promises self-fulfillment precisely by being the

²⁰ For more details see my (forthcoming).

transcendent guide for self-constitution that unifies the self across time. Portilla provides 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 sign 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 transcendent 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 and combines these acts into a meaningful whole that is striving to be punctual. However: “the value has escaped me once again. I have not succeeded in incorporating value into myself, in constituting my being definitely, nor will I ever achieve this” (F 33/MS 141–142). Being and value cannot be fully identified: “My punctuality is but the ideal unity of all my actions geared towards it” (F 33/MS 142, emphasis is original). Thus, for Portilla there is a fundamental ontological gap between being and value: “Value and being do not seem to ever be able to unite in a definitive manner” (F 71/MS 176).

For Portilla, authenticity requires the recognition that values can never be incorporated into our being as constituent elements but must remain nothing but the *ideal unity* guiding our perpetual task of valued self-constitution. To live with authentic accidentality, then, requires living with full recognition that our selves are *fragile*, for their *existence and identity* is in perpetual need of being constructed by our authentic freedom’s affirmations of a value as a *personal project* that creates ourselves as value-creating-selves unified through time by this value-commitment.²¹

2.2.1 *The Breakdown of Authentic Self-Creation: Relajientos*

One way of getting a better understanding of Portilla’s account of self-creation, and the authentic accidentality it requires, is by understanding what happens when things go wrong. Portilla himself provides two important examples of self-creation gone awry: *relajientos* and *apretados*. Let us begin with the former.

The focus of Portilla’s most important philosophical work, *Fenomenología del relajo*, is to provide a phenomenological description of a social

²¹ Some of these points are not unlike Frankfurt (2006).

phenomenon designated in Mexico as ‘relajo.’²² Portilla describes *relajo* in relation to *seriousness*. Regarding the latter, he writes: “the subject . . . 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). To take a value seriously, then, is to respond affirmatively to its demands of actualization. By contrast, “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, the suspension of seriousness before a value is a crucial 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*, then, is that it embodies a distorted 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).

As Portilla sees it, if commitment to a value unifies a self across time, then suspension of seriousness toward values fragments the self in time:

It is evident that if value is a guide for self-constitution, the systematic negation of a value is a movement of self-destruction, at least at the level of a personality that could only be configured by an internal and responsible relationship with whichever value may be the case. In this way, *relajo* is, inexorably, a self-negation. In addition, one of the effects of this self-negation is a fragmentation of the subjective temporality of whoever adopts negation as a permanent style. (F 41/MS 149)

Someone who makes *relajo* their *style* is “an individual without projects, one who has fallen into the present, and who, precisely because of this, is incapable of giving unity to more or less long periods of objective temporality” (F 41/MS 149).

Relajientos suspend seriousness toward values, and in so doing they permit their selves to be temporally fragmented. This temporal fragmentation of the self is, for Portilla, a significant failure to construct the self, and so also a way to try *to escape* a life with full recognition of the constructive nature of the self and the ontologically prior freedom that actualizes itself in the acts of valued self-constitution. *Relajientos* fail to live up to authentic accidentality, for Portilla.²³

²² ‘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.

²³ It is worth noting that other thinkers have read Portilla’s account of *relajientos* differently. For example, Diana Taylor (2003, 129) characterizes *relajo* as a kind of weapon of the oppressed. Sánchez (2012, 107f.) reproaches Portilla’s criticisms of *relajientos* along similar lines: “The suggestion here is that *relajo* is creative, productive, or world-constituting in *some*

2.2.2 *The Breakdown of Authentic Self-Creation: Apretados*

As Portilla sees it, the people that most clearly fail to live with authentic accidentality are characters that, following Mexican slang, he calls ‘apretados’: “For *apretados*, values are not ever-unattainable guides for self-constitution, but rather actual ingredients of their own personalities” (F 88/MS 191).²⁴ *Apretados*, thus, embody “that attitude of consciousness which refuses to take notice of the distance between ‘being’ and ‘value’” (F 87/MS 191) and, in so doing, they mistakenly see themselves as *embodying* the values that give unity to themselves. This misunderstanding extends to the way they relate to others and the world more generally: “No doubt, *apretados* begin by conceiving themselves as an impenetrable block of *value-filled being*, and this attitude motivates all their way of relating to the world . . . [and this attitude] necessarily implies a relationship with others” (F 89/MS 193).

Importantly for our purposes, because *apretados* misconstrue the ontological gap between being and value, they do not live in authentic accidentality; rather, they cling to a false sense of security and to a “*stability* of their value-filled being” (F 90/MS 194, emphasis added) in the way they *make sense* of themselves and their place in the world: “*Apretados* live in calm possession of their ‘properties:’ intelligence, brilliance, talent, officialness” (F 88/MS 192). This *inauthentic sense-making stability* is predicated on the *apretado*’s misunderstanding of their own being: “The *apretado* considers himself valuable, without any considerations or reservations” (F 87/MS 191). *Apretados* disconnect their understanding of themselves from the role that choices play in self-constitution: “If an *apretado* says something stupid, if he makes a mistake, that doesn’t prove anything, since it will be a stupidity said by a very intelligent person; it will be a mistake of a very effective official” (F 88/MS 192).²⁵ Their misconstrual of the ontological gap between being and value blinds them to the reality of their radical freedom and its role in authentic valued self-constitution. In sum, for Portilla, *apretados*’ misunderstanding of themselves as *substance-like* distances their lived experiences from the merely constructed nature of their selves, and this gives rise to a type of inauthentic sense-making stability.

For Portilla *relajientos* and *apretados* constitute two different ways of failing to live with authentic accidentality—to live with full recognition that our selves are fragile, in perpetual need of being constructed by our authentic freedom’s affirmations of values as “perpetually evanescent regu-

sense . . . it creates a polarizing-event that constitutes its participants in the affirmation of the negative; and it is a creative response of the marginal in their marginality, whose resistance to value is, truly, an act of defiance” (2012, 110–111). Sánchez (2012, 109–110) ends up dismissing Portilla’s account of freedom and subjectivity as themselves contaminated by Portilla’s own colonized imagination, roughly along the lines popularized by Quijano (2000; and 2007). Gallegos (2013) and I (2023 and forthcoming) have come to Portilla’s defense.

²⁴ Translation altered.

²⁵ Translation altered.

latory ideas” (F 88/MS 191). We turn now to Portilla’s notion of a pernicious type of accidentality.

2.3 Portilla on the Break Down of Communal Interpretative Horizons

At the beginning of this article, I described the *sense-making instability* of accidents as resulting from a particular way of relating to relatively stable and unified sense-making frameworks, namely that of ‘not being at home’ in one of them. This is not Portilla’s entry point into this discussion, however. Portilla himself describes a type of disorientation in agency, comparable to my sense-making instability, that arises because the community to which the agent belongs suffers from *fragmented* communal “horizon[s] in which actions are articulated” or “interpretative horizons” (CM 125/S 183).²⁶

For Portilla, those interpretative horizons are social structures that “are critically important for human action. [For] one of their primary functions is to serve as a wall against which the *meaning* of our actions bounces back like an echo” (CM 126/S 184, emphasis added). Interpretative horizons, then, enable an agent to understand *the meaning* of her actions precisely by understanding the way in which those actions are going to be received by her community. Portilla further argues that human agency itself *existentially* depends upon the presence of these interpretative horizons, for all human action is essentially communal: “all action is performed always with the assumption that it will be accepted and that it will get a response from others or from a group” (CM 126/S 184). Not that an agent cannot act when no one is physically around, but no agent can act unless she *understands herself* as embedded in a community with relatively well-articulated interpretative horizons, Portilla insists. For example, an author can write a novel in the privacy of her own home, but Portilla insists only by understanding her writing in relation to an imaginary community of future readers and their future responses to her work.²⁷

Furthermore, these interpretative horizons operate at multiple but often overlapping levels of community organization:

We also always live in a multiplicity of communal horizons that mix and weave with one another and that always remain potential or actual, depending on whether our *action* reveals or conceals them. We always live simultaneously immersed in a national community that can take various forms, ranging from the political to the aesthetic: in a professional community, a guild, a class, a family; even, perhaps, within the horizon of a human community overflowing with nature and the universal totality . . . the

²⁶ Gallegos (2018; 2023a) provides an excellent discussion of this topic.

²⁷ This is how Portilla describes Roquentin’s resolution to write a novel at the end of Sartre’s *nausea* (NH 112–113).

cosmic community. (CM 125–126/S 183–184, emphasis in original).

Portilla’s suggestions here are intriguing. What matters most for our purposes is that for Portilla human agency itself depends upon an agent being embedded in a community with relatively well-functioning interpretative horizons, and that a pernicious type of accidentality occurs when one’s community has weak or fragmented interpretative horizons. When these horizons break down, he writes: “The result is . . . a general not-knowing what to depend on” (CM 126/S 184), a “lived experience of fragility and zozobra” (CM 129/S 187). This experience of zozobra, of ‘not knowing what to depend on,’ according to Portilla is the ground “of inactivity, of apathy, of that leaving-everything-for-tomorrow” (CM 129/S 187),²⁸ and even “a certain cynicism” (CM 130/S 188). Portilla claims that this type of accidentality permeates the Mexican culture of his time, but, unlike Uranga, Portilla diagnoses it *as a cultural malady* and *as originating* from the lack of well-articulated communal interpretative horizons (Portilla calls such a community a “sub-integrated” community). He writes, “All that has been said will appear to be quite negative and lamentable. Without a doubt, the state of sub-integration of our society is an evil” (CM 132/S 189).²⁹

For Portilla, such a fragmentation of communal interpretative horizons is “an evil” precisely because it truncates human agency: “Nothing slows down the impetus toward action more than uncertainty concerning how the work will be done and received” (CM 129/S 187). This undermining of human agency has additional crucial consequences: “It is clear that a failed, unnatural, or badly interpreted action will turn us into introverts, melancholics and hopeless” (CM 130–131/S 188). For Portilla, the consequences are even greater. Our very ability to create ourselves is threatened, for self-creation is a particular type of action, a projection, as we have seen. Thus, when our communal interpretative horizons are fragmented, our agency is in general truncated, and with it our very ability to create-ourselves and understand-ourselves is undermined: “Before our eyes, being in general, our own being, will take on a weak, imprecise, and fragile character because the foundation of our action is itself weak, imprecise, and fragile” (MC 129–130/S 187). This type of zozobra-infused accidentality is pernicious, for Portilla.

3 Portilla on Accidentality as a Decolonial Tool

Uranga’s account of accidentality involves an explicitly decolonial element. This is not the case for Portilla. Nonetheless, Portilla thoughts on acciden-

²⁸ Translation altered.

²⁹ Gallegos has recently pointed out that for Portilla a society that has too rigidly articulated interpretative horizons, a “super-integrated” society, can also constitute a type of restriction of freedom (2018; 2023a).

tality have important consequences for decoloniality. For Portilla, pernicious accidentality cannot be construed as a decolonial tool, and, in fact, it constitutes an obstacle to liberation and decolonization, for it constitutes an obstacle to human agency more generally. Authentic accidentality, by contrast, is a condition for authentic freedom and individual liberation, which Portilla understands as essentially embedded within the history of the community's liberation.

As Portilla sees it, the liberation of a community is essentially connected to its identity and its history: "The spirit of a people . . . is the whole of forms and styles adopted within time by the history of a freedom marching towards its liberation" (F 14/MS 124). For Portilla, then, a prime way of *individuating* a community is precisely in terms of the history of its march toward its liberation. Portilla writes:

Thus, it can be said that the history of a people, and even of humanity, is the history of a freedom (in the meta-physical sense, as ultimate origin of actions attributable to human beings and as a condition of a possibility of action) that marches towards its liberation (towards the total elimination of the societal and natural barriers that prevent the full realization . . . of the person and of the group). (F 58/MS 164–165)

For Portilla, then, the history of a people is the history of a collective march toward liberation, and a *community is liberated* when it completely removes societal, and even natural, impediments for the full realization of its members.

3.1 Liberating Dialogue

For Portilla, philosophy clarifies thought about "the most universal and traditional subjects of metaphysics" (F 15/MS 126), but also "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 has the societal role of bringing "before the collective consciousness" the different ontological and epistemological conditions that make human agency possible. Furthermore, for Portilla, the ability of an individual to bring more fully to consciousness the various conditions that facilitate human agency is itself intertwined with the community and its collective agency. Portilla writes, "Any work directed towards attaining self-consciousness and clarity is not a solitary endeavor; it is (in a way that I don't quite see very clearly yet) a collective venture that can only be achieved through dialogue" (F 14/MS 125). It is thus through a particular kind of dialogue that individuals and communities take steps in the march towards their joint liberation; for ease of reference, I shall call this type of dialogue a 'liberat-

ing dialogue.’ As Portilla acknowledges in the quoted parenthetical comment, he does not have a fully developed account of this kind of dialogue. He does, however, have several insightful things to say about the nature of this liberating dialogue.

A first ingredient of liberating dialogue is that it embodies “a will towards truth” (F 71). Speaking of Socrates, Portilla writes, “He affirms an absolute commitment to truth. . . . He doesn’t present himself as the possessor of a totalitarian system of knowledge . . . he *liberates* his interlocutor and his listeners and *liberates* us by opening up for us the path toward truth” (F 71/MS 176, emphasis added).³⁰ As Portilla sees it, Socratic dialogue “is capable of opening up a perspective for communication of some human beings with others in a constructive task: the investigation and establishment of truth” (F 71/MS 176).

A second ingredient of liberating dialogue is that it requires interlocutors to act with *authentic freedom* and to *recognize* and permit other interlocutors to act also with authentic freedom. Portilla writes, “freedom, the only possible basis for genuine recognition of people by people, and the freedom of others, the only element that could make the recognition of valuable” (F 77/MS 181). The kind of recognition, inherent in liberating dialogue, is the “genuine recognition of people by people” or the type of recognition of others that permits building authentic communities. For Portilla, this type of recognition is “a ‘you and I’ for whom the relation is immediate, without the interpositions of any previous scheme, without any conceptual game or without any image” (CM 135/S 192).³¹ This type of recognition grounds a “loyalty that is personal and free” (CM 136/S 193), and upon which “true communities” (CM 135/S 192) can be built. And this is the third essential ingredient of liberating dialogues: it helps to build communities. For Portilla, a liberating dialogue “points towards communication and in which thought can find an echo, and with it, its authentic path: the path that advances towards community” (F 14/MS 125).³²

As Portilla sees it, then, communities are created in an analogous way in which individual selves are created: by taking values seriously as transcendent guides of self-constitution. Portilla writes, “Indeed the foundation of a community, conviviality, can be thought of as the continuous self-constitution of a group in reference to a value. Value as a model guide for the constitution of the group turns out to be, for the group, just as unattainable as the guide-value is for the individual” (F 95/MS 198).³³ Liberating dialogue, then, is a collective venture that builds true community while pursuing the transcendent value of truth in mutual recognition of each of the participant’s authentic freedoms.

³⁰ Translation altered.

³¹ Translation altered.

³² Translation altered.

³³ Translation altered.

3.2 The Breakdown of Liberating Dialogue: *Relajientos* and *Apretados*

One way of getting a better handle on Portilla's notion of liberating dialogue is by seeing cases in which it breaks down. For Portilla, liberating dialogue creates a particular type of true community that is itself threatened by the attitudes of both *relajientos* and *apretados*: "in both attitudes there is a negation of community. One and the other dissolve the community" (F 94/MS 198). For Portilla, "*relajientos* prevent the integration of the community by preventing the manifestation of the value" (F 95/MS 199). One principal way in which liberating dialogue, and the community it creates, can break down is precisely by some of their participants *suspending seriousness* towards the value of truth, which unifies and makes intelligible the community created by liberating dialogue. *Relajientos'* dissolution of liberating dialogue is thus straightforward.

Apretados also dissolve community: "Dialogue is impossible with an *apretado*. Genuine dialogue presupposes the transcendence and the evanescence of value" (F 94/MS 197). Dialogue is impossible with *apretados* partly because in refusing to acknowledge the transcendent nature of values, they are incapable of entering into the type of *reciprocal recognition* of authentic freedoms that is required for liberating dialogue. Worse still, *apretados* demand a distorted type of recognition. *Apretados* think of themselves as embodying values, but they cannot *see* themselves as valued-filled-beings directly in introspection (F 90/MS 193). So, "they need witnesses. . . . An *apretado* cannot be an 'apretado' in the desert. These individuals need for their value to appear before other people. They need to be able to read their value in the gaze of others" (F 90/MS 193); *apretados* thus "are condemned to make themselves present before others in order to *seek recognition* by them" (F 90/MS 193, emphasis added), a "recognition of 'their' value as being-value" (F 90/MS 193). The recognition that *apretados* need is radically different than the recognition required for liberating dialogue. The latter facilitates expressions of authentic freedom and human agency, the former truncates both by distorting the values and the loyalty towards those values required for seriousness. *Apretados* cannot take values seriously, and their need for validation suffocates the prospects of others taking values seriously; they *kill the mood* in which values appear to human consciousness, as Gallegos likes to put it (2013, 15). Liberating dialogue, and authentic communities more generally, breaks down at the hands of *apretados'* distortions of values and seriousness.

3.3 Authentic Accidentality as a Decolonial Tool

For Portilla, authenticity lies between *relajientos* and *apretados*. The former fail to take responsibility for their valued self-constitution, and the latter live with the comfort of an inauthentic sense-making stability afforded to them by false pretenses regarding the nature of their own being. To live authentically, by contrast, is to live with full recognition of the fragility of

our constructed self, a recognition that our *identity* is in perpetual need of being constructed by our authentic freedom's affirmations of transcendent values as *personal projects*. For Portilla, this is authentic accidentality, and it is a condition for the possibility of authentic freedom and so a condition for the possibility of liberating dialogue and the prospects for individual and communal liberation that this type of dialogue affords. Because decolonization is a type of liberation—the liberation from the yoke of the colonial past—Portilla's notion of authentic accidentality is conceptually connected to decolonization, and in fact is a central part of the theoretical roadmap for communities to do away with the oppressive consequences of their colonial past. Communities will be liberated from their colonial yoke when, and only when, the social dynamics operating within them permit agents to act with authentic freedom, in reciprocal recognition, and actively engage in liberating dialogue, and all of this requires authentic accidentality.³⁴ It is these types of communities, Portilla thinks, in which the obstacles for individual flourishing would be finally removed.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I illustrated a particular philosophical impasse that arises from Uranga's recommendation that Mexicans remain in *zozobra* and accidentality. On the one hand, there are philosophers who find Uranga's recommendation appealing and straightforward—these are philosophers like Carlos Alberto Sánchez, whose commitment to classical existentialist phenomenology naturally leads them to think that something like accidentality is part of the human condition and that some variation of authenticity is a fundamental normative ideal worthy of being pursued. On the other hand, there are philosophers who are perplexed by Uranga's recommendation—these are philosophers like Manuel Vargas, who are not antecedently committed to classical existentialist phenomenology, and its proclivity for accidentality and authenticity, and who also find *sense-making stability* attractive.

My main goal has been to present some philosophical considerations in favor of accidentality in a way that bypasses some of this philosophical impasse by inquiring into the extent that Uranga's and Portilla's accounts of accidentality can be construed as decolonial tools. On the one hand, Emilio Uranga thinks that the preference for substantiality is a mere contingency of traditional Western philosophy, a contingency that he claims is not found in the Mexican culture of his day. Further, in a self-conscious decolonial move, Uranga prefers accidentality to create conceptual space for Mexicans to have positive valuation of *their being* independently of the approving gaze of the colonizers and their standards of value. Part of the

³⁴ Elsewhere (forthcoming) I argue for an interpretation of Portilla's account of liberation; and elsewhere (2023) I argue that Portilla's account of self-creation can be used for decolonial purposes.

attractiveness of Uranga's account of accidentality is that it is a decolonial tool by design.

I have also argued that Jorge Portilla's thought gives rise to two types of accidentalities: a pernicious accidentality that arises from the fragmentation of sense-making frameworks, and an authentic accidentality that is a condition for the possibility of authentic freedom and self-creation. The former type of accidentality truncates the prospects of individual and communal liberation, and as such it constitutes an impediment, not an aid, to decolonization, for Portilla. The latter type of accidentality is a condition for individual and communal liberation, for Portilla, and as such it can also be construed as a decolonial tool.

Some philosophers are likely to be moved by Uranga's Nietzschean transvaluation of ontological value as a decolonial move. Other philosophers of a stronger affinity to Vargas's philosophical orientation may be more attracted to Portilla's account of authentic accidentality, for it safeguards both (a) a type of *sense-making stability* afforded by transcendent values as *guides or norms* for perpetual self-constitution, and (b) a type of *ontological stability* afforded by Portilla's account of metaphysical self-creation and phenomenological account of values-as-promise-of-self-fulfillment, 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).

In either case, Pedro's position with which this discussion began—that of being caught between two incompatible sense-making frameworks—may be construed as an epistemologically privileged one, for it may afford valuable insights on the nature of the human condition and thus may prove to be the beginning of a more authentic way-of-being, and it may lead down the path of authentic decolonization. At least, Uranga and Portilla have given us some intriguing reasons not to dismiss this possibility outright.

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