

THE SUSPENSION OF SERIOUSNESS

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**THE SUSPENSION
OF SERIOUSNESS**
On the Phenomenology
of Jorge Portilla

Carlos Alberto Sánchez

The appendix contains Jorge Portilla's *Fenomenología del relajo*
translated by Eleanor Marsh and Carlos Alberto Sánchez

SUNY
P R E S S

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*For my parents,
Guillermina and Patricio,
and my sons,
Julian and Ismael*

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Appendix

Jorge Portilla, *Fenomenología del relajo*

Translated by Eleanor Marsh and Carlos Alberto Sánchez

What follows is a translation of Jorge Portilla's *Fenomenología del relajo*, first published by Ediciones ERA in 1966. The following translation based on the 1984 Biblioteca Joven edition, *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*. México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica. Carretera Picacho-Ajusco 227, C.P. 14738, México D.F. This Edition consists of 750 copies.

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PHENOMENOLOGY OF RELAJO

Translated by Eleanor Marsh and Carlos Alberto Sánchez

Introduction [13]¹

The present essay is an attempt to understand a fact that all of us are familiar with in our everyday lives. It involves understanding [the phenomenon of] *el relajo*, that form of repeated and sometimes loud collective mockery that emerges sporadically in the daily life of our country [Mexico].

But why should we think precisely about this subject? It seems that approaching it implies a lack of seriousness. Talking about *relajo* seems like something frivolous, especially in these times in which the human situation² has acquired such seriousness that it is resistant to even the most subtle humor.

Nevertheless, no subject is too insignificant for reason, and this is not because thought itself is something that conveys its own seriousness to any subject but rather because of deeper causes. Within the entire realm of reality, there is nothing that can be considered absolutely isolated and lacking in meaning. Nothing is completely outside the web of meanings that links things to each other, uniting them into an intelligible world. From the pack of cigarettes that sits on my desk there emerges, like a spider's web, a system of relationships that transports me on the one hand to the totality of the physical universe and on the other to the human world of labor, industry, and science. Human labor, the science of nature, and the sciences of the spirit are all present in its humble presence. My imagination can lead me, with the stimulus of its presence and with no need for reflection to evoke the struggle between capital and labor or between imperial powers and colonial peoples; it can serve as an example to distinguish between contingent being and necessary being, between being and entity, and so on.

In the same way, a form of consciousness so incidental and transitory as mockery or laughter can serve as a key to understanding essential characteristics of the human condition or to penetrate the spiritual structure of a people; because of the spontaneity and the lack of [14] reflection that usually accompany it, it can do this even better than other, more respectable forms of consciousness such as politics and art.

But none of this can be, or is, the reason that led me to fix my gaze on the subject of this essay. My intention is not, of course, to describe neutrally and objectively a form of expression of the [Mexican] national character in the way an entomologist studies the life of insects, among other reasons, because people are not insects, although some may behave as if others were.

The spirit of a people (allow me to use this expression for lack of a better one) is not something that is there, once and for all, like a stone. It is the whole of forms and styles adopted within time by the history of a freedom marching toward its liberation; and if in the course of

this liberation, one finds permanent configurations of [national] character, it does not mean that these cannot be affected by the flow of the nation's life, to the point of disappearing completely or of changing their meaning.

In this way, the purpose of this work is not analogous to that of a physician who offers a diagnosis, but rather to that of a person who begins a dialogue. It is an attempt to bring to full consciousness an aspect of Mexican morality on which I don't attempt, by any means, to say the last word. Other writers in the past have made valuable contributions to this issue, and others in the future will undoubtedly say wiser and more correct things [about it], if they condescend to take seriously subjects that are not that serious. Any work directed toward 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.

Indeed, it [the search for self-consciousness and clarity] can only be achieved individually and in the state of withdrawn concentration on work,³ but in a dialogic state of concentration that points toward communication and in which thought can find an echo, and with it, its own true path: the path that advances toward a community.

In light of these ideas, allow me to situate autobiographically the origin of this research, which on the surface could only precariously aspire to another type of justification: its purpose is simply to gain—for myself and for those who may find it useful—the greatest possible clarity regarding the subject.

I belong to a generation whose best representatives lived for many years in an environment of the most unbearable [15] and loud irresponsibility that could be imagined; in spite of this, I unfalteringly consider them the best representatives of that generation. Some of them were men of talent, others of a noble and generous character; all of them seemed absolutely incapable of resisting any occasion for releasing a stream of coarse humor that, once flowing, became uncontrollable and continuously thwarted the emergence of their better qualities. It was as if they were afraid of their own excellence and as if they felt obligated to forbid its manifestation. They would only bring their excellence out when in conversation with a friend or when in a state of inebriation. I almost never witnessed them taking anything with real seriousness, even less

so, their own capabilities and their own destiny. They were—I can see it clearly now—a Nietzschean generation *avant la lettre* that, in the midst of perpetual laughter, lived dangerously, devoted in actual fact to a slow process of self-destruction.

I find it a bit uncomfortable to add—due to the suspicions of romantic imagery that this could raise—that many of the members of this generation died tragically, or disappeared, swallowed up by the most extravagant varieties of vice.

On the other hand, I confess that I would not be able to establish a necessary or clearly visible link between these facts. In any case, I am trying to understand something that caught my attention more and more, as the frustration suffered by those who exhibited it so insistently before my eyes became evident to me.

An awareness of the facts themselves was already pointing toward a possible philosophy of *relajo*, no matter how funny this expression might sound.

I believed that it was worth it to examine this issue, not so much because of a Pharisee-like desire to warn youth of the dangers of the lack of seriousness, but rather because of the desire to understand—to the limits of my means—an issue that is alive and well in our community and—so to speak—to take philosophy out into the street (which is its natural place) by stripping it as much as possible of the “technical” shell that sometimes conceals it.

But the aspiration toward clarity is not simply a subjective aspiration based on personal experience. Clarity is an obligation for both the philosopher and the nonphilosopher, for the intellectual and for the *other*, as Ortega says. But for the philosopher, it is a double obligation.

On the one hand, to the degree that the philosopher is interested [16] in the most universal and traditional subjects of metaphysics, clarity means a clear consciousness of the historical condition of philosophizing, of the incidences of the factual, of social class, of nationality, of character, and so on, on thought. On the other hand, clarity is the very task of the philosopher, if one considers philosophy a specific function of the culture of a community. From this point of view, 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.

Philosophy, to the extent that it is a “logos” on humankind, performs an educating and a liberating function. Through it, what is concealed

and tacit becomes present and explicit, and something can be transformed by its enlightening action. A person is not exactly equivalent to him- or herself before and after being understood. The person cannot be [the same], because the power of the word has transformed him or her. 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 that I cannot reject outright either.

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, or at least one of the conditions of 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, a behavior that is not necessarily deducible from the situation in which I find myself. The word can pull me out of the magma of the situation and allow me to act in a manner contrary to the objective currents of obligation that flow from it. In a direction opposite to that of psychological habit, tradition, class interest, and so on, the truth sets me free, and 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.

In Mexico, nothing seems more necessary than this liberating action of “logos.” In Mexico, where the dominant spiritual attitude seems to be a reflection on the sense of our own history within the framework of universal history, [17] since, granted that a large part of what is currently being written here [in Mexico] points tacitly in this direction, not little of it ends up being a mysticism of the land analogous to the emotional backdrop of a certain sector of our film industry, coarse self-complimenting, or a confused self-denigration.

However, the honest will for self-understanding cannot remain content with an unfurling of more or less rational justifications of a feeling of self-satisfaction or self-disgust, although it might never reach total completeness in this respect.

Reflection directed toward the unequivocal establishment of being itself necessarily fails. The individual, as such, is ineffable, and the only path to individual knowledge is universal knowledge. Just as the structures of the self are not reachable by direct intuition, it is probable that the essential structures of a national spirit are not either. Just as I cannot

see my “self” in a direct way in reflection, and I am only capable of looking at it with stolen glances and out of the corner of my eye, in contemplating my states and actions, a national character is accessible to me only with the same marginality when I examine some specific aspect of that character or of the historical actions that marked its birth. I cannot see “Frenchness” in a pure state as I see these trees on the other side of the street, but I can see it sideways, as a style, as an atmosphere that is not directly graspable, found in the characters and actions of a novel, in a treatise on civil law, or in the work of a philosopher.

I. PHENOMENOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION OF *RELAJO*

NOTES FOR A DEFINITION

In Mexico, what is designated with the term *relajo* is not, obviously, a thing but rather a behavior. More than a noun, one can say it is a verb, since the expression denotes the unitary sense of a complex behavior, of an act or a set of acts performed by a subject, to which the subject itself grants a nonexplicit yet precise meaning.

I say “sense of a behavior” and not simply [18] “a behavior” because behavior—if considered a mere set of acts abstracted from its sense, precisely “lacks sense.” A series of actions such as gestures, bodily attitudes, words, laughter, or unarticulated sounds does not mean anything if it is abstracted from its sense. But there is no totally insignificant human action. Every action is composed of both physical movements and the meaning that holds together these movements from the inside. The error of behaviorism is exactly not conceiving the meaning of a behavior as a constituent part of that behavior, to suppose that the meaning of a behavior can be separated from it without radically altering the behavior, or to consider the sense of the behavior an extrinsic factor or as supervening within the group of acts that manifests that sense.

A behavior is understood through its sense. What is being referred to when [a behavior] is named is exactly that which “gives sense to it” and not a merely imagined series of movements only thinkable of in the abstract, outside of their sense.

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. It is not simply to provoke laughter

or, simply, to laugh, no matter that such a suspension often—although not necessarily—presents itself as a stimulus for laughter. *Relajo* has a certain relationship with the comic, but it is not the comic alone; there are comic situations that do not involve *relajo*. The comic, whose precise relationship with *relajo* we will attempt to determine later, is not an essential characteristic of this phenomenon but rather, at most, something concomitant and secondary [to *relajo*].

All value, when grasped, appears surrounded by an aura of demands, endowed with a certain weight and with certain gravity that brings it from its pure ideality toward the world of reality. The value solicits its realization. The mere grasping of the value carries with it the fulfillment of that demand, of that call to its own realization in the world; and in order for this demand—which appears in the objective realm of the lived experiences of the value—to be realized, the subject, in turn, performs an act, a movement of loyalty [to the value] that is a kind of “yes,” like an affirmative response. This is the first outline of what, when grasped reflexively, we call “duty.” This answer, this “yes” that corresponds—by means of the subjective aspect [19] of the grasping of the value—to the objective demand with which it presents itself, is an intimate movement of loyalty and commitment. This is seriousness.

When, in an immediate and direct (nonreflexive) way, I pronounce that “yes” inside myself, 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, making it agree beforehand with that demand: I take the value seriously. Seriousness is the intimate and deep commitment to which I make a pledge with myself in order to maintain a value within existence.

From now on it is necessary to distinguish between what I call seriousness and what is known, especially in recent French philosophical literature as “spirit of seriousness,” with which I will deal later on. The spirit of seriousness is pure gesticulation, an exaggerated exteriorization that tends more toward showing one’s own excellence and toward underscoring one’s own importance than toward the realization of the value. The spirit of seriousness is reflexive; seriousness is pure spontaneity; the former projects outward, while the latter is “intimate”; the former is a behavior toward others;⁴ in [the case of] genuine seriousness, I am alone with myself before the 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, freeing me from the commitment to its realization.

The behavior whose sense is designated by the term *relajo* consists of three discernible moments in abstraction. In the unity of a single act, these three meet: in the first place, there is a displacement of attention; second, the adoption of a position in which the subject positions him- or herself in lack of solidarity with the proposed value; and finally, an action in the proper sense of the word that consists of outward manifestations of gesture or word that constitute an invitation to others to participate with me in this lack of solidarity.

There is, in fact, in the first place, a displacement of the subject's attention that moves from the value being offered for his or her acceptance either toward the "external," purely factual circumstances in which the value appears or toward something completely alien to the circumstance itself. A [20] case in which this displacement is more clearly visible is that of the extemporaneous comment that interrupts a ceremony or a performance to call attention to some physical characteristic of those taking part in it. The displacement of attention already begins to appear on the background of an expressed negation of the corresponding value, but it is not yet negation itself. This does not prevent the pure displacement of attention from being essential to this phenomenon. *Relajo*, in reality, always implies the characteristic of "digression": it is always a certain "deviation from something." It is not an originary and direct act but rather one that is derived and reflexive. It requires an occasion, which is to say, the appearance of a value that offers itself to the subject's freedom and from which a dissent can begin. In this way, the displacement of attention is like the axis around which the entire moral meaning of *relajo* revolves: it is the basis of all the meanings that constitute this behavior.

However, the displacement of attention does not imply an "effort of attention" in the common sense of those words. It is only a change in the intentional object of consciousness and not a deliberate act in which the subject will "concentrate" on a new object. The ray of attention is likewise displaced when, with a distracted gaze, I look at things around me without "paying attention" to any particular thing: the perceptive consciousness slides from one [thing] to another without any mediation whatsoever by the voluntary purpose of exploring any of them "attentively." In this way, attention here simply means the directing of intentionality toward an object and not "attention effort" in a psychological sense.

Second, an intimate act of negation is a constituent component of *relajo*. This is not a direct negation of the *value* but rather of the essential link that unites the subject to the value. It is an act of lack of solidarity⁵ with the value and with the community that realizes the value. In this act, the subject is defined as a nonparticipant in the venture tending toward the incorporation or realization of the value. The subject rejects the behavior that would allow the unfurling of the value within reality.

It is evident that this type of negation implies an ambiguous appreciation of the value. In other words, the subject—in operating within his or her own situation in relation to the value—does not leave the value totally [21] untouched. The negation of the value can be a negation of the value as such, the negation [of the idea that] the proposed value is actually valuable, the negation of the proposed value as inferior or not pertinent relative to a superior value, and finally, it could also happen that the value simply ends up in parentheses.⁶ In this case, the value ends up out of play, neutralized in the indifference of a subject that is limited to evading the commitment in such a way that one cannot speak of an appreciation of the value as such. In any case, what is essential is not the implicit appreciation of the attitude of *relajo*, which could manifest itself in some other way. What is essential is the intimate decision to not make a commitment regarding the demand that flows from the present value.

Finally, constitutive of the essence of *relajo* is the ability to manifest itself in actions of the most varied nature. These can range from the most imperceptible facial expression to the formulation of perfectly coherent and rational positions [regarding the value]. In the middle of this range there are bodily attitudes, words, shouts, noises, and so on, that imply a call to others to adopt the negation of the proposed value. This characteristic constitutes an action per se, an external act that leaves a mark on the surrounding world, in contrast with the “intimate” nature of the two previous ones.

However, it is necessary to underscore the concrete and unified character of *relajo*. From the demands imposed by the process of description—which must go step by step—one should not infer that *first* there is displacement of attention, *then* the subject deliberately decides to abstain from commitment when faced with the value, and *finally*, as a last chronological step, the subject comes to express his or her decision externally.

Gestural or verbal externalization *is* at the same time a displacement of attention and *is* also the intimate decision to not participate in behavior that will support the value, in the way that the qualities of a

thing *are* the thing itself to perception. The acts that tend to provoke the transformation of a serious situation into *relajo*⁷ necessarily imply that adoption of a position [regarding the value] and that lack of attention. Also, this does not mean that when reflecting on this phenomenon we discover in another subject an interiority that is concealed to us [22] and evident to him or her and that we will suspect that lack of attention and disassociation from commitment as individual acts that are “lodged” in that subject’s psyche. The external acts themselves, because they are meaningful, point back in retrospect, in an essential manner, to those “internal” movements. In other words, the displacement of attention and the self-positioning engaged in by the subject are not reflexive or deliberate actions, but simply unities of sense that emerge parallel to the corresponding acts of behavior and that make themselves visible on the subjects’ intentional horizon.⁸

In acts of *relajo*, the value appears to the subject of *relajo* as a “value to be put out of play by the action itself.” *Relajo* is an action in the world and not an introspection in which the subject takes as an object his or her own states or decisions.

The characteristic of “action,” essential to *relajo*, points back in turn to another essential element: *relajo* can only present itself in a horizon of community.

The acts that contribute to constituting *relajo* are acts that presuppose an immediate communicative intention. If *relajo* is an attitude toward a value, it is also, in parallel fashion, an attitude that indirectly alludes to “others” [23].

It is true that all human activity takes place in this horizon of community. The artist that works in the solitude of her workshop, isolated from any form of company, when facing the material transformed with her work, is referenced in a mediating manner to all the possible viewers of that work. Even the solitary person who endures or searches for solitude in isolation is engaging in nothing other than a deficient mode of “being with others,” which is a constitutive dimension of the human condition. But in “*relajo*,” this reference to others appears in an immediate manner, so direct, almost as in a conversation or in a greeting. *Relajo* is an invocation to others present. Concurrent with the negative intentionality toward the value, there emerges a “lateral” intentionality toward others, which is as necessary as the former to constitute the essence of the phenomenon of *relajo*.

Relajo in solitude is unthinkable, or, I should say, unimaginable. Following the guiding thread of the expression “*echar relajo*” [literally,

“to throw *relajo*],⁹ it can be said that in solitude, there is “nowhere” to “throw” it. The existential space in which *relajo* is created [literally “thrown”] is limited by the community of those present. There is a double intentionality in *relajo*: It is constituted both by my lack of solidarity [with a value] and by my intent to involve others in this lack of solidarity, which creates a common environment of detachment before the value.

The invocation to others is not, we insist, something accidental, but rather an essential constituent of *relajo* that is concomitant with all the other characteristics. The subject of *relajo* does not first do the “intimate” actions previously described to attempt afterwards to catalyze his or her own attitude in other people by means of gestures or words. To the contrary: gesticulation, attitudes, and words *are* at the same time both those internal movements and this invitation. With his or her own action, the active subject creates a certain void around the person or situation imbued with the value, and thus, he or she prevents the value from fully acquiring substance in reality. That being said, the void is not created only in the pure subjectivity of whoever promotes it; it is not a localized void, but rather it extends throughout an environment: the intersubjectivity of those present.

Thus, it is equally unimaginable for *relajo* to emerge between two people. Within a dialogue, the negation of one of the subjects in relation to the other can very well exist in a thousand different forms such as contradiction, lack of attention, lack of comprehension, or misunderstanding. But this negation will never be able to assume the form of *relajo*, precisely because in this case, that dimension of depth, that quasispace in which *relajo* [24] can proliferate like parasitic vegetation, is lacking. In the case of a dialogue, the nonsolidarity of one of the speakers with the other could lead to a weakening of the communication relationship and, at the extreme, to the suspension of the dialogue itself, but not to *relajo*.

To the previous characteristics it is necessary to add that of reiteration, which is derived from the very sense of the behavior of *relajo* and which refers directly to the active nature of this phenomenon. *Relajo* is a reiterated action. A single joke that, for example, interrupts the speech delivered by a speaker is not enough to transform the interruption into *relajo*. The suspensive interruption of seriousness must be repeated indefinitely whether or not the agent [of *relajo*] achieves his or her purpose. It is necessary for the interrupting gesture or word to repeat continuously until the dizzying thrill of complicity in negation takes over the

group which is the most paradoxical of all communities: the community of noncommunicators, as a negative backdrop that makes the activity of the value's agent impossible or useless.

Nevertheless, in order for there to be "a *relajo*" it is not necessary for this contagion to actually take place. For the behavior [called *relajo*] to be outlined in its essential characteristics, it is enough for an individual to exhibit the repeated action that signifies an ambiguous negation of a value through a lack of solidarity [with it]. The characteristic of repetition, on the other hand, highlights its essential character when examined in light of the relationship between pure value and the behaviors tending toward its realization.

Indeed, the value always presents itself as something to be realized [made real]. It offers itself to my freedom, calling on my support in order to enter into existence. A single act is not enough to eliminate or to sufficiently reduce this invocation. When an act goes from my negation to the required behavior, the value's call appears again. A new act of suspension [of seriousness] can show once again the possibility of neglecting the value, but immediately after, the value's demand will reappear, and so on, until my negation is supported by other negations that establish a continuity of negations with no gaps. In this way, others' solidarity with my lack of solidarity [with the value] creates an atmosphere in which the realization of the value is definitely thwarted [25].

The relationship of the value, in its pure ideality, to reality also makes understandable the noisy character of certain forms of *relajo*, although noise is not essential to it. Silence is the most adequate environment for the manifestation of certain values, and perhaps to the extent that the value is of a higher level, silence is, in parallel fashion, an indispensable condition for its appearance. Such is the case, for example, of the careful search for a truth in meditation, not to say of the higher forms of the emergence of the sacred. "The sound and the fury" are perhaps the way par excellence of thinking a world that is absolutely not valuable.

In the noisy *relajo* that invades the field of emergence of the value, there is something akin to a flood that drowns the value itself and muddies the atmosphere in which it would reveal itself. Like a barrier, noise interferes between the value and the consciousnesses of those called to support it; it obstructs the pathways of behaviors directed toward this end and makes it impossible.

Gibberish floods the human quasispace through which the value was to insert itself into reality and expels it from this realm; it leaves

it “outside,” in its neglected pure ideality. Once [this process] is initiated, it is necessary to prevent—by any means necessary—the return of silence, in which the value could once again shine like the sun after a rain storm, appealing to our generosity.

The essential characteristic of repetition and the accidental one of the increasing noise, that raising of voices and disordering of gestures that so often accompany it, become understandable in light of the essence itself of *relajo* that we have tried to specify so far.

To summarize, *relajo* can be defined as the suspension of seriousness toward a value proposed to a group of people. This suspension is performed by an individual who is trying to make others commit to it by means of repeated acts with which he or she expresses his or her own rejection of the behavior required by the value. With this, the behavior regulated by the corresponding value is substituted with an atmosphere of disorder in which the realization of the value is impossible. By extension, *relajo* is a term also applied to the real situation provoked by the intentionality that has been described: “achieved” *relajo*, the state of things produced by an individual that has achieved his or her purpose of making the incorporation of the value [26] impossible by means of those acts that, without further clarification, we have called a “suspension of seriousness.”

I must insist one last time on what has already been pointed out previously: This is not a deliberate attitude or an action that is deliberate, voluntary, or reflexive. The proposed definition [of *relajo*] is derived, simply, from the immediate meaning of the events such as they occur in a spontaneous action, before any reflection. The promoting of the described situation is not necessarily the result of deliberation, but even in the case of mediation by a reflexive act, and of the behavior being deliberate, this behavior will also have the specified meaning, and at the very instant of being put into action, the reflexive attitude will have been abandoned entirely.¹⁰

RELajo, MOCKERY, SARCASM, AND TEASING

We have said that *relajo* is the sense of a behavior. That said, a behavior is composed of acts that have a meaning, which points toward an end, although this end may not be proposed by an act of deliberation. The purpose or sense of *relajo* manifests itself in an action; it is concurrent

with the acts that constitute it. Having expounded upon the sense of *relajo*, the nature of the acts that carry that meaning must still be clarified. To do so, let us first note some characteristics of actions in general.

In the first place, following Jean-Paul Sartre, we distinguish between a merely mental action, such as the action of doubting, meditating, or making a hypothesis, and actions that modify the structure of the world, such as “playing the piano,” “sawing wood,” or “driving an automobile.” Both types of actions have a [27] characteristic in common: that of being transcendent to consciousness. They actually distinguish themselves from the consciousness that points toward them. Both reveal themselves to reflection as intentional; that is to say, through them, consciousness is directed toward ends that transcend the action itself. The purpose is the peculiar form adopted by the intentionality of active consciousness. It is a type of intraworldly intentionality that precisely allows one to distinguish between action in the actual sense of the word and lived experience. If I suddenly run into an unexpected situation, I try to overcome my surprise by speculating about the causes that have made the situation appear. In this case, my conjecture is not an action but rather a lived experience; there is only the spontaneous consciousness of the conjecture imprinted on my consciousness of the world. But if I try to solve a detective-like problem, for example, my conjecture is then an action; it is then a case of the “endeavor” of speculating.

The actions that imply a modification of my surrounding world always have the character of action per se, the character of an endeavor. But in any case, action is always intentional; that is to say, action is always directed toward an end.

Relajo is not merely a lived experience, but it isn't a pure mental action either. It possesses the double transcendence of action as such. It is immediately visible that, even given this, it isn't action toward things, as in the case of the previous examples; this notwithstanding, it is also—with an equal amount of evidence—action in the world, since it is the provoking of a “state of things” among people. It is the modification of a situation and even the creation of a situation. It is the arranging of the surrounding world in a certain order. My intentionality prolongs itself in the world and makes it change its appearance by means of the active body.

The expressive function of the body, assumed in the intentionality of *relajo*, allows the action that constitutes *relajo* to be pure mimicry. The most perfect example of this active function of bodily expressiveness is

the total suspension of seriousness manifested in some of the mannerisms of Mario Moreno.¹¹ There is no situation, no matter how serious, that is not completely defused by the demolishing expressiveness of this great mime. The action that constitutes *relajo* can thus be a series of merely “Cantinflas-like” characteristics, so to speak. [28]

But the action that constitutes *relajo* can consist of uttering a word, or even less; a noise or an unarticulated scream can suffice. During a screening of a film version of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, in the scene in which Cassius falls pierced by his own sword, the expectant silence in the movie theater was broken by a long groan that invincibly provoked laughter among the audience. It is true that the performance did not collapse into a case of *relajo*, but had such joking expressions from the viewers continued, between the mocking attitude of some and the indignation of others, disorder and confusion could have proliferated, putting an end to the aesthetic situation.

The prolonged groan was not, evidently, produced in its author by the suggestive power of the events unfolding on the screen. It was, no doubt, an intentional act directed toward the dissolution of the aesthetic complex “drama performed before an audience.”

Finally, the action [that constitutes *relajo*] can consist of isolated words, but words that are geared also toward the neutralization of the value, or toward mockery or jokes that are openly directed against the person, or persons, or situation that embodies *relajo*.

Mockery, as such, is an action that tends to subtract or to deny the value of a person or situation, but that, when considered in isolation, does not yet constitute *relajo*. Not even a series of repeated acts of mocking is enough to make *relajo* emerge. It is possible for repeated mocking to occur between two speakers, one of whom systematically makes fun of the other, without the situation having to be branded *relajo* because of this. Mockery, and its frequent instrument—the joke—maintain an instrumental relationship with *relajo*. They can be dominated by the specific intentionality of the latter: to suspend seriousness in a community. Within this intentionality, the joke and mocking appear as moments articulated according to that intention. In that case, *relajo* is the transcendent unity of sense toward which acts of mockery—be they oral mocking manifested in jokes or mocking consisting purely of bodily gestures—are directed.

Mockery, on the other hand, cannot manifest itself in isolation; it is always subject to intentionalities that go beyond its own specific

intentionality of subtracting value from people or situations. Nevertheless, these intentionalities, which transcend mockery, can vary substantially. For example, mockery—with an instrumental sense—can be found in irony, a topic with which we will deal [29] at a certain length later on.

There is a form of mockery that cannot be assumed instrumentally within *relajo*: sarcasm. Sarcasm is offensive and bitter mocking. The corrosive intent of sarcasm is directed totally toward a specific person, and its devaluing purpose is subordinated to the purpose of offending. *Relajo* creates a void regarding the value; sarcasm eats away at a person. Sarcasm creates a stigmatizing relationship: it points like a sword to the heart of a person in a strictly interindividual relationship, with no need for witnesses and, so to speak, in a low voice. *Relajo* is environmental, collective, and occasionally noisy. *Relajo* may provoke laughter; sarcasm can provoke an atmosphere of uncomfortable expectation that is full of threats of violence, like an insult or like a slap in the face. Sarcasm paralyzes; *relajo* is an invitation to chaotic movement; their respective intentionalities cancel each other out. The two cannot cross paths, nor can one be assumed inside the other in an instrumental relationship or in any other type of subordination.

On the other hand, sarcasm is an individual act, like mockery. A single sarcastic remark is already full and total sarcasm, while *relajo* does not exist without the repetition of the acts that constitute it.

Sarcasm is closer to teasing than to *relajo*, granted that teasing is less caustic, more playful, and less tense than sarcasm. The relationship with others in teasing is inter-subjective, as in sarcasm, although incidentally it can occur before a group. The individual that “teases” another presents him or herself as value; deep down there exists in this individual a will to show his or her “superiority” relative to the other individual in a game of wit that is essential to this form of mockery; in teasing, mockery likewise manifests itself as a means of showing someone’s nonvalue, but in this case it is subordinated to the intention of showing the supposed superiority of the agent.

Teasing [*choteo*] is not distinguished from *relajo* in that, as the latter, it is repeated action, but the intentionalities of teasing and *relajo* are radically different. Teasing demands the stability and the preservation of the relationship between the subject and his or her interlocutor, since only in this way can the presumed superiority of one over the other manifest itself, such that *relajo* always [30] ends up totally neutralizing the people or situations that are its object, and it ends up directed

exclusively to itself, to the maintaining of an atmosphere of disorder and detachment. In teasing, the agent is interested in holding the attention of a possible spectator on its object; teasing lacks the intentionality of deviation that we have signaled as an essential moment of *relajo*. On the other hand, the individual who teases presents him- or herself as, and turns into, a focus of attention, as the one who can, as one who surpasses the other in wit, one who totally transcends the other. Thus the teaser draws a bipolar and linear field of communication in contrast to the three-dimensional nature of the quasisspace inherent to *relajo*.

The fact that teasing can occur—and often does—before a group of spectators does not alter this structure in the least. The spectator of teasing is simply that: a spectator; he or she is passive and limited to witnessing the events. Incidentally, in the case of teasing, the spectator can come to play the role of the chorus but never the role of the actor, since the individual who does the teasing is precisely interested in keeping the spectator in the role of a mere witness of his or her own activity. In contrast, the agent of *relajo* is “humble,” tending to disappear and to hide behind the environment he or she has created, and this individual’s action is an inciter of the others’ action. The agent of *relajo* wants everyone to be an actor. The one who teases jumps into the arena like a cock ready for a fight, and this makes him or her a bit fearsome and a bit ridiculous because of the intention of receiving recognition and because of the vacuity of this ingenious game.

Let us note, finally, that teasing requires a certain skill; its mockery is necessarily ingenious. The one who teases needs to know exactly whom to tease, why, and how to do it, since he or she especially takes advantage of double entendres and plays on words, making them function within a specific situation. In order to do this, the one who teases needs to have full consciousness of the elements and the articulation of the situation, as well as of the ambiguity and the multiplicity of meaningful nuances of words. In contrast, *relajo* does not *necessarily* require these elements. It is also possible to have a coarse, obtuse, and simply noisy form of *relajo* that achieves its goal with no instruments other than noise and screams devoid of any meaning [31].

VALUE AND *RELAJO*

A central point remains to be examined: the way in which value manifests itself in *relajo*, in other words, the way in which value manifests

itself to make it possible to face it in the attitude of *relajo*. Indeed, so far we have looked at things by adopting the point of view of the subject who promotes *relajo*, but we have left the object of *relajo* somewhat in the shadows: that is, the value and the forms of its manifestation—and which could be opportunities for the emergence of *relajo*—and the acts by means of which value is put out of play.

As a general principle of this investigation, at least in this first descriptive part, it must be established that all the descriptions presented refer to the spontaneous attitude of active consciousness, to the world of lived experience in general, without allowing for the incorporation of any reference to a theory of values as such. We are not interested here in what might be the ontological status of value. We do not care here whether values are ideal entities similar to numbers or concepts, or whether they are merely a specific form of the life of consciousness.

What matters is to find out the way in which a value manifests itself in spontaneous consciousness, independently from its ontological or metaphysical quality and independently of the relationships that might be established a priori among values themselves, among them, hierarchy, subordination, relationship of polarity, or foundation. In this sense, it interests us little to know whether values are entities that float beyond being or if they are endowed with a *sui generis* being that precisely would be “to have value.” Neither do we need to consider the problem of whether values are something akin to entities in an other-world in the way of Plato’s ideas. Such problems can only emerge with regard to philosophical reflection directed toward such entities, be they conceived of as things in and of themselves or as unities of sense that constitute a specific region of reality, as in the case of Max Scheler’s and of Nicholai Hartmann’s work. Before such 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.

What interests us is to clarify the way in which value gives itself in daily life, before any [32] speculation about its essence, its hierarchy, or its polarity.

Let us say, for the moment, that all human life is steeped in value. Wherever we turn our gaze, value gives sense and depth to reality. Lived values are not those essences that are presented in philosophy manuals, like pearls of meaning organized hierarchically beyond being. Value underscores and organizes the things in the world. The coolness of the

water I drink on a hot day is a value. The gracefulness of the woman that one crosses paths with in the street is a value. The softness and the good design of the armchair in which I sit down to rest are values. The intelligence of this friend or the good humor of that one is a value.

Value is a quality of the world, and even 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.”

My valued action, when it exists, starts out by tracing itself on the backdrop of the conditions of my situation. There is an appeal by things themselves to my action, for the world to finish perfecting itself and to reach a certain fullness; whether it is accessible or unattainable is of little importance. In the most modest of the realities that surround me, there is also—like a small void—the outline of value as a demand, as something that things themselves are lacking, as something requested by them. 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 in the very heart of the world that surrounds me.

But 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. My personality in the world is like a precipitate remaining after me in my perpetual yearning to fill that void.

There is not a single act in the life of human beings that does not owe its first warning signs to the demand of value. We all run dizzily after ourselves, directed always by those indications that foreshadow and allude to the fullness of our own being. Value attracts us like a whirlwind [33] in the center of which our own self appears, illuminated by value’s aura. All of our acts are ordered toward the realization of some value.

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.

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. I have not succeeded in adopting value into myself in a permanent and secure way; the value continues being a guide for my self-constitution. I will never be able to stabilize and ensure my valued being, because my being can never finish conflating itself with value, which continues to be, according to Kant's ideas, simply a direction and a limit of my transcendence.

My punctuality is but the ideal unity of all my actions geared toward it, and it will only acquire body and solidity when, after my death—that is to say, once every possibility of my being late has been cancelled—some generous soul points out the magnificent fact that I was never late anywhere. But before the unfortunate event of my passing occurs, I will have to laboriously take hold of my own reality, to make it transcend, always newly, toward the ideal limit of absolute punctuality that I have chosen as my possibility, a limit that, likewise, I can abandon at any moment. My punctuality depends on and is a creation of my freedom, since my freedom draws the outline of my person in the world. It is a possibility of my transcendence (and my transcendence toward the world is precisely my freedom). Thus, value always hangs on freedom; it emerges precisely because of it, or I should say, freedom is a perpetual surging toward value. Because of this, value is rooted in the very structure of existence; it is an essential component of that structure; in that sense, it is consubstantial to human beings.

We have already said that *relajo* is a suspension of [34] 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?

Later, we are to approach the problems that freedom presents as a condition that makes *relajo* possible. Let's point out, simply, that there exists the possibility that freedom can be the source of behaviors geared toward freedom itself as a formal value and not toward concrete or material values. On the other hand, let's note briefly that *relajo*, as a deviation from values, could very well be a formula for self-annihilation, just as the previously described behavior is understandable as self-creation or self-constitution. *Relajo*, a conduct of dissidence, can be the expression of a will for self-destruction.

In any case, what is now important is not to give an interpretation of that behavior, but rather to continue with the description. It is necessary to find a way for value to manifest itself such that it makes *relajo* possible. The path to finding this way is very clear. Value doesn't manifest itself only in that practical, immediate dimension in which I live it as the liminal and ultimate meaning of my own actions. We have already said that value can also appear as a dimension of something real, and in that case it presents itself to us in the present. Thus, I don't live it as a meaning that pulls my own being from the future but rather as a thing that presents itself to me head on in a special type of perception. Value thus appears linked to a receptacle that can be a person or a thing.

In the previously described example of "punctuality," I don't "face up to" the value; I don't even face up to myself as a repository of the value, but rather I go after a "myself" that *is* valuable and that I never attain, that always runs ahead of me like a prow of a ship that cleaves the future. This is surely not the only way in which value manifests itself, nor is practical behavior my only way of being [35] in the world. Value is not only a horizon that absorbs me toward my possibilities in the future. There is also a multitude of cases in which value presents itself to me head on, in which it is not merely the distant and wavering outline of my being, but rather it acquires the stable massiveness of things. This is what happens in the previously enumerated examples: the flavor of a fruit, the coolness of water, or the kindness of a friend.

Let's note, incidentally that the passage from one of manifestation of value to another can seem at first glance as a progression on the order of firmness, and, in a certain sense, this is so. But [this happens] correlative in that the relationship of a value to the subject that faces it, the "reification" of the value, is parallel to its fragilization. Paradoxically, the more personified value appears to be, the more incorporated and endowed with a firm and stable being, the less power it exerts over the subject that perceives it. The value to be realized by me immediately, in my practical life, exerts an infinitely greater power over me than the beauty-quality of a woman's face, the flavor of wine, or any other "thing-value" which I may run into in the world. This first case is the form par excellence of the manifestation of value, no matter how rarely we may take note of it. This direct and nonpositional form of manifestation of a value presents it to us as an essential component of the structure of existence. It gives [the value] to us from inside, like a presence that is out of reach and that, nevertheless, permeates the totality of existence.

Relajo is not possible in these two forms of manifestation of value. The negative response of *relajo* is not possible in any of these styles of manifestation. In [the case of] value incorporated within the total interiority of a personal project, such a response [*relajo*] is impossible because there is no room for any “response” whatsoever. The subject finds him- or herself wholeheartedly embarked on the venture of making the value real. He or she can abandon such a venture out of disappointment or tiredness. But just as the task of realizing the value had been assumed into pure interiority, the project is abandoned in this very same interiority and in the silence of pure subjectivity.

Neither can the negative response of *relajo* occur in the case of the “quality-value” nor the “thing-value,” among other reasons because this form of manifestation does not constitute any call whatsoever from freedom. The coolness of water or a man’s intelligence can go unnoticed; they can even be negated, but this negation or this lack of attention [36] cannot assume the form of *relajo* because such values do not need any freedom as a support. The coolness of water, or the delicate flavor of a fruit has no other base of support than the water or the fruit. They are constitutive elements of the things themselves, just as color or consistency finds its support in the irrefutable corporeality of matter. In the first case, value, which fully permeates freedom, manifests itself as a supreme dynamism and power. It is identified with the very emergence of freedom. In the second case, value appears as an inert good, independently of my freedom. In neither of the two cases can value be the object of a prereflexive and active negation as in the case of *relajo*. This negation is not possible, in the first case, because I find myself fully committed to the endeavor of the realization of value. In the second case, I can negate the value, but this negation does not reach the value because the reality of value does not depend on my adoption of it.

In order for *relajo* to take place, it is necessary for value to manifest itself in such a way that it partakes in both styles of manifestation. On the one hand, it is necessary for the value to appear as an object in the midst of the world, but at the same time as something requiring my acceptance and my action for it in order for it to attain its fullness. Such is the case when the value appears under the charge of a repository and at the same time within a communal context in such a way that the gathering of the community is indispensable for the realization of value.

The most obvious example of this possibility is in performances. For example, the gracefulness of a male dancer is something almost

tangible, but at the same time it requires the attention of an audience to be able to unfurl itself in the fullness of its possibilities. It requires the attention of one or two people who anticipate the graceful movements as something expected, necessary, and “logical,” and which nevertheless surprises [them] as an absolute creation, as an absolutely unpredictable novelty. Gracefulness, undoubtedly, rests on the dance technique—learned laboriously by the performer—but also on recognition by the spectator. In a certain sense, it is a collective endeavor directed from within by a tacit agreement between performer and audience. It emerges, precarious and vulnerable, like a burgeoning that lays root in the field of harmony among dancers, musicians, and spectators, and it survives as something definitive, perfect, and stimulating in the [37] memory of all these groups. This gracefulness cannot attain the stability and solidity of the “thing-value.” Its evanescent reality has required the support of multiple generousities, and it rests on this support. Just as the value pursued in the self-constitution of existence, the value never comes to attain definitive being; but in contrast to it, [this gracefulness] can almost be touched in a perception that partakes in the evidence of things and of the transparency of the purely meaningful, of the etherealness of consciousness and of freedom.

Approximately the same thing occurs in the university lecture, in the ceremony, in orderly and creative conversation, and in the fiesta.¹² In the case of the university lecture, we find the same structure serving as a support for the truth-value. The same occurs in the religious ceremony with certain spiritual values, [and] with civic values in the academic ceremony or in the purely civil or political ceremony. In the intelligent and lively discussion among a group of people, one also finds this polarity between performance and audience. A person talks, and others listen with their attention directed toward the truth of the topic being discussed.

In all these cases, the situation is one of a contest of freedoms dedicated to the task of supporting a value whose repository can be a person—as in the cases of the Socratic conversation and of the university lecture, or an institution, as happens in a ceremony or finally in a situation, as in the case of a fiesta.

In the fiesta, the situation cannot necessarily be divided into the polarity between performer and spectators, although sometimes an analogous polarization may emerge, as in certain peasant festivals centered on collective dance under the observation of a director. In any case, in the fiesta, value is attained by means of the situation and not by means

of a person or institution. Here, the repository of the value is the situation itself, a situation that has a stable structure—although it may not be as immediately discernible as in the case of a ceremony.

At the fiesta, the value to be attained is joy. [The fiesta's] sense is to make joy real, the joy to communicate precisely in joy and in rejoicing. The fiesta is perhaps one of the privileged forms of communication. That said, in order for there to really be joy at the fiesta, it is necessary for the [38] participants to maintain a behavior regulated by that vital value [joy]. It is necessary that no one adopt a behavior that will turn him or her into an *aguafiestas*, a killjoy. In this sense, the fiesta is something of a ceremony, [but] in which regulation is less rigid, less precise, and less meaningful. But granted that in the fiesta, regulation is freer and spontaneity finds a wider margin and a greater freedom, it is no less true that it is, as in the ceremony, subject to certain rules, the violation of which implies a failure of the fiesta as such.

A ceremony is a more rigid and stable set of collective behavior in which the reality of an institution is expressed. The life and the sense of a university, for example, are expressed in the ceremonies for initiating and closing the academic term and in those ceremonies for the conferring of degrees. In these ceremonies, solemnity appears as an expression of the rank of the spiritual values toward which university life is directed and of the "superior" level that institution occupies in the community. All the gestures and expressions of the people who participate in a similar ceremony are totally incorporated into being, in the way of "quality-values." That said, the gesture of the one who occupies the central place in a ceremony can be expressive of anything one may want, but it is also a call to recognition by me. It invites me to observe the behavior adequate for the circumstances. And "the circumstances" are nothing other than the insistence on making visible, through certain conventional means, the high rank that the university holds in the community and the elevated hierarchy of the values believed to be fostered in this institution. Having said that, I can refuse to engage in the behavior expected of me, and I can provoke a *relajo* in the previously described way, thus making it impossible for those values and situations to fully attain body in the ceremony. Likewise, I can spoil a fiesta, a university lecture, or a conversation by preventing the manifestation of value and dismantling the situation that would allow it.

In general, and not to extend these reflections too much, we can say that *relajo* is possible only when value appears embodied in a repository

or agent that can be a person, an institution, or a situation, and at the same [39] time, the value calls on my support in order for it to acquire full reality.

On the one hand, the value must be almost a “thing-value” that is locatable in the present world, and on the other, a pure solicitation to my freedom, a guide for my self-constitution.

The value pursued in the creation of one’s own “self,” implies the performance of a behavior that is regulated, directed, and organized. The behaviors we have previously described—directed by the pursuit of a certain “punctual *being*”—mean that the actions of the individual that performs them are predictable and outline a comprehensible future based on the realization of a value-filled self.

Relajo is a self-destructive movement. It is an attitude that is exactly the opposite of the normal, spontaneous attitude of human beings faced with values when those values act upon consciousness like a guide for self-constitution.

The *relajo* individual performs a profoundly irrational move that consists of turning one’s face against the future to realize a simple act of negation of the immediate past. The future is thus stripped of its power of attraction. Each instant of the immediate future is lived as a mere possibility of negation of the present.

In certain individuals, this structure of time acquires a stable character that turns these people into veritable incarnations of *relajo*. Their mere presence is a foreshadowing of the dissolution of any possible seriousness. Their mere appearance unleashes a light breeze of smiles and the atmosphere is transformed into a condescending expectation of a shower of jokes that will dissolve the seriousness of all topics, reducing them, literally, to nothing. In the colloquial language of Mexico City, this type of individual is designated with a horrible yet adequate word: this individual is a “relajiento.”¹³

A “relajiento” is, literally, an individual without a future. The “relajiento” lives perpetually turned toward that very close past from which the present has just emerged, to laughingly negate its content. He or she refuses to take anything seriously, to commit to anything; that is to say, a “relajiento” refuses to guarantee any of his or her own behavior in the future.

The “relajiento” assumes no responsibility for anything; he or she doesn’t risk doing anything; he or she is simply a good-humored witness of the banality of life. Thus, there is nothing strange in the fact that this

individual lacks [40] a future. Relajiento individuals destroy it themselves by considering their own projects as an object of mockery, and this symbolic destruction is projected onto objective time, transforming the relajiento into an individual lacking a future.

The temporal structure of this attitude can adequately be described as an indefinite sum of moments connected to each other by relations of negation. It is an endless rosary of negated moments.

This temporal fragmentation and its stigmatizing intentionality toward the moment of *retention* make the “relajiento” an individual of reduced seriousness, an individual who “does not guarantee” anything, but they also turn this individual into an excellent companion, in general, who is much more generous than what his or her sometimes fearsome wit would perhaps suggest.

For certain, the “relajiento” “has no future,” but this means that he or she could hardly threaten anybody else’s future. The relajiento is a good instant comrade who dissipates the seriousness of life and makes us laugh heartily. He or she is, undoubtedly, good company. With a “relajiento” time goes by.

Since the form itself of the relajiento’s interiority is to “make time go by for someone,” the time does indeed go by, and we all thank this person for it. Really, the function that the relajiento assumes—to expel each instant toward the past, thus distracting us from being attentive to the future, [which is] the place of worry—is worthy of being appreciated.

The relajiento does not bring about preoccupation but rather unoccupation. He or she is an unoccupied person perpetually bent on the task of being unoccupied, of emptying one’s consciousness of all seriousness and of all commitment.

The relajiento may not be lacking in talent and is almost always very intelligent, but this individual’s function of dissipating seriousness doesn’t make anyone inclined to trust him or her too much. Because of this, although the relajiento might have been able to “come a long way,” he or she hasn’t made it anywhere. The relajiento’s way of moving in hops traces no defined trajectory in the world. A relajiento is at the same spot he or she was many years ago. A jovial and bitter person, the relajiento can be understood as having a life which is a series of accidents that coagulate together to endow him or her with a friendly and amorphous personality. However, the relajiento is not totally a failure since he or she does not believe in victory. Thus, he or she is “human,” and everyone, sometimes rightly, suspects that a good heart is hiding behind

that smiling and carefree mask. The *relajiento's* lack of ambition foreshadows the generosity and the genuine humility of individuals capable of laughing at themselves.

[41] *Relajiento* individuals laugh at themselves because their continuous neutralization of value operates from the very center of their interiority, and the first object of their demolishing attitude is their own self. This also explains their deep melancholy that is only revealed in secret confidences as if it were a hidden sin that is hard to confess, since this makes one serious and thus vulnerable even to one's own attitude. This fragile seriousness can only be entrusted into the hands of a friend, of somebody who has proven to be generous and endowed with enough flexibility of spirit to guarantee that he or she will not annihilate this seriousness with mockery.

This also explains the possible nihilism disguised as good humor, into which the *relajiento* falls without wanting to, dragged by the mechanicality of his or her negation. Accustomed to the movement of deviation and of a neutralizing indifference toward values, *relajiento* individuals end up losing sight of the fact that such deviation and indifference have their origins in their freedom and that these are but personal options contingent among other possible ones. *Relajiento* individuals end up believing that the negation has its origin in the things themselves and in the things' incomplete and negligible character. *Relajiento* individuals lose the guide of affirmation and become blind to value. This process can reach deep layers of the *relajiento's* personality; the process can lean toward an acute sense of failure as something inevitable and determined from without, and can thus open *relajiento* individuals to the possibility of resentment and to all forms of suicide.

It is evident that if value is a guide for self-construction, the systematic negation of a value is a movement of self-destruction, at least at the level of the 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 [of behavior]. Based on this fragmentation, we understand the figure of the *relajiento* as an individual without projects, one who has fallen into the present instant (ab-ject), and who, precisely because of this, is incapable of giving unity to more or less long periods of objective temporality. That is why we say that the *relajiento* has no future [and] lacks a time to come.

This individual's negative attitude presents a double pathway: on the one hand, it is self-destruction, and on the other, it is a fragmentary temporality, a flicker of presents without direction and without form, of negations of the immediate past [42].

RELAJO AND LAUGHTER

We have spoken about *relajo*, teasing, sarcasm, and mockery. On the horizon of such issues we cannot avoid perceiving a close or distant relationship of *relajo* with another topic: that of laughter and the comic.

All of us know that *relajo* has some elements of the comic. Whoever has experienced any of the previously described situations knows of the presence of a sometimes uncontrollable laughter that goes off when a serious situation is suddenly suspended with the intervention of a joke or of mockery. In the general majority of cases, *relajo* manifests itself accompanied by hilarity. Whoever provokes *relajo*, laughs; whoever participates in it laughs, and incidentally, whoever is its victim laughs.

In order to complete our description of *relajo*, we must account for the presence of laughter in the issue at hand. Unfortunately, in order to clarify this, we have no other choice but to make a very brief incursion into the slippery and difficult territory of the meaning of laughter and of the comic. I say *unfortunately* because dealing with the issue implies an indispensable discussion of a much explored and equally confusing topic. To this day, a truly satisfactory examination of this slippery issue does not exist.

The most serious philosophers have dealt with the subject of laughter and the comic, and in any of the works devoted to this, one finds impressive lists of illustrious names associated with it: Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Descartes, Pascal, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Spencer, Renouvier, Bergson, [and] Freud have all said something about laughter, without the need to consider any of their theories definitive. On the other hand, the bibliography on the subject is incredibly extensive. Some researcher has noted the existence of more than ninety theories about laughter, and the sum of books and articles devoted specifically to this subject exceeds two hundred.

The difficulties are raised a notch when one takes a look at things themselves, because laughter does not always present itself with a univocal meaning. One can laugh with joy, and one can guffaw at something

comical. There is laughter provoked by a joke and laughter provoked by a real comic situation. There is pathological laughter, “hysterical laughter,” and the “physiological laughter” provoked by physical stimuli such as [43] laughing gas or “tickling.” There is the smile, which isn’t only [a type of] incipient laughter. There is no continuity between the smile and the guffaw. A smile is not a weak guffaw, nor is a guffaw, obviously, the culmination of a smile. There is naïve laughter and malevolent laughter, the “little nervous laugh” and the serene smile, the pious smile, the courteous smile, the ironic smile, and so on.

On the other hand, almost all the thinkers who have said something on this issue have been content with explaining it, trying to determine the essence of the comic and have left up in the air the question of the relationship between laughter and the comic. In general, they take for granted that the comic provokes laughter in the same way that heat causes objects to expand, which could be false. They take for granted that the comic is a *cause* of laughter, no less. This implies a presupposition regarding the relationship between consciousness and its object, a given which is far from justified. The comic does not necessarily induce laughter. The synthesis of the comic and hilarity is not a causal synthesis; it is a free synthesis, since between the comic and hilarity, there is a relationship of a consciousness to an object. Proof of this is that not everyone laughs in the same way or at the same forms of the comic. A joke or a comic situation that can make a person crack up can leave another unmoved. There are “strata” of the comic that can be understood by means of the degree of education or the nuances of the esteem in which social classes, professional groups, and nationalities are held. All of us know the meaning of the expression “German joke” [*chiste alemán*],¹⁴ and we have witnessed scenes in which this expression contrasts the irritation of one person with the uncontainable laughter of another.

Laughter, then, is not an automatic reaction or causal effect of the comic. It cannot be, because laughter is a particular form of consciousness, exactly like an emotion or like an intellection, and it cannot escape the universal law of consciousness, which is intentionality. To say that laughter is an effect of the comic is just as absurd as saying that study is an effect of science or that rage is an effect of evil or of some other *cause*. Laughter, like any emotion or like the acts of intellection, is a form of direction of consciousness toward an object. It would seem, rather, that laughter is a way of *designating* the comic. More than designating, perhaps we should say “intending” [44], “pointing to,” or “alluding,” since

the peculiar form of intentionality that is laughter is not exhausted in a mere designative function. Let's say, then, that laughter is the peculiar form in which consciousness is directed toward the comic. With regard to this intentional relationship, one can set up any theory about its origin and its significance. It can be said, for instance, that laughter is a collective or individual defense reaction to some threat, as does Bergson, for whom laughter is a form of defense of the social group against the intervention of the mechanical in the creative current of life. Laughter would then be a kind of revulsive agent against the stratification and the automatization of the life current, a way for the vital impulse (that Bergson supposes is the metaphysical foundation of human society) to violently expel from it all the moments tending toward mechanical repetition [and] toward automatic rigidity. The comic would be precisely that intervention of the mechanical into the living, and laughter would be like a punishment against the agent of that intervention executed by the social group that is defending itself from the danger embodied in it. Laughter can also be explained as liberation of energy accumulated in the simmering cauldron of the unconscious, *à la* Freud, whose theory on the relationship between jokes hinging on equivocation and the unconscious is very widely known.

In both cases, it becomes obvious that laughter and the comic are only pretexts to show the workings of a metaphysical doctrine. And no doubt both doctrines "work" well, on the condition that one does not pay too much attention to laughter itself and to the comic. After studying [these two theories] carefully, we will have learned a lot about the "vital élan" and about the social function of laughter, about libido and the unconscious, but we will not have clarified too much that very same issue about which we were supposedly going to be instructed, that is to say, about what *is* laughter, about its essence, the description of which ends up concealed in the name of an "explanation" geared toward the confirmation of a previous theory (that is also alien to things themselves). [In Bergson's and Freud's theories] there is no penetration into the phenomenon that one is attempting to clarify; this phenomenon ends up obscured rather than illuminated.

This lack of attention to things themselves is more visible¹⁵ in older theories, which on the other hand, have the virtue of not ignoring the bodily character of our phenomenon; granted that they also fall into assertions that at the current level [45] of psychological research—opened up by phenomenology—seem frankly comical.

Such is the case of Kant. Kant is right in asserting that laughter is an emotion, thus ridding himself of the tendency in his time to consider laughter an issue of the understanding. “Laughter,” he tells us, “is an emotion born of the sudden annihilation of an intense wait.” But when trying to explain the pleasurable character of such an emotion, he affirms that it is derived from “the alternating tensing and relaxing of the elastic parts of the intestines.”

This notwithstanding, Kant, in treating laughter as a part of his theory of pleasure, doesn’t neglect to note the double nature—both spiritual and bodily—of this phenomenon, and he explains it ultimately as a bodily pleasure obtained by means of certain manipulations of concepts; that is why he classifies the joke as a “game of thoughts” alongside the “game of chance” [gambling] (with which he does not deal because he does not consider it a “beautiful game”) and alongside music, which he considers another drawing room game: a “game of sounds.”

As a final analysis, perhaps the most penetrating theory about laughter comes from Alfred Stern.¹⁶ Stern says that “laughter is a value judgment, a negative value judgment concerning a degradation of values.” With this formula, Stern opens up a path full of suggestions and possibilities for a theory of laughter, although it is very far from providing a definitive solution to our problem.

For instance, it is evident that laughter is not a judgment. It is not a value judgment nor a judgment of any other nature, neither affirmative nor negative. Perhaps Kant was closer to the solution when he asserted that laughter is a pleasurable emotion. However, Stern has hit upon an important point in affirming that one can discern a degradation of values as the ultimate sense of the laughable. His correctness is limited to postulating a theory that can give the ultimate reason for the comic, but there is still the need to clarify why the comic *provokes* precisely this style of intentionality called laughter; and one must also clarify the sense of the markedly bodily character of this type of intentionality [46].

Stern says “the comic is any incident and any action that displaces our attention from a value to a nonvalue or from an intrinsic value to an instrumental value. The two cases are equivalent to a degradation of values that *provokes* the instinctive negative value judgment that is laughter.”

As one can see, Stern considers the problem of the relationship between the comic and laughter resolved in taking for granted that the comic—understood as a degradation of values—*provokes* laughter; on

the other hand, he frees himself from the study of laughing as a special type of intentionality by declaring it as a judgment.¹⁷

We have all noticed the mysterious disappearance of the *vis comica* of a joke or of a situation that has made us laugh until our jaws hurt.¹⁸ If laughter didn't have a certain ability to beget the comic, it could never happen that the comic could cease to be comic; on the other hand, if this creative capacity of consciousness were absolute, there would be no rule for the comic, nor would there be any possibility of sharing laughter. At this point is where the ambiguous character of the relationship between consciousness and the world presents itself with greater evidence. Everything happens as if laughter were partly created by the comic (in whatever manner one may conceive of the comic) and at the same time the comic was created—or rather, sustained—by laughter. My laughing is a continuous recreation of the comic. It does not matter that upon reflection my laughter appears simply as an automatic reaction to the joke or the situation. If we add to this the verisimilitude that the essence of the comic involves the degradation of values discussed by Stern, laughter could be interpreted as the consciousness of this degradation, a consciousness that does not limit itself to being a reaction to the degradation but at the same time is an interpretation of it that implies a special form of relationship of consciousness [47] to the totality of the world.

Indeed it seems that in any possible comic situation and in any joke one can discern a degradation of values. Both Bergson's theory and those of the absurd (being perhaps the theories that have most closely approached the exact determination of the essence of the comic) can be subsumed into the idea of a degradation of values. A "logic" of jokes that would examine the totality of the structures of the comic would surely allow us to emphasize as its fundamental sense the degradation of values of which Stern speaks. Then laughter could be interpreted as a peculiar emotion, in other words, as the pleasurable emotion of the harmless character of that degradation, as the sense of being safe [from the degradation], of being free, out of its reach.

Indeed, value degradation is something threatening. The *fact* of the degradation of a value opens up the horizon of a possible universal degradation of values and even of the absolute extinction of the value. Perhaps laughter can be interpreted as a form of consciousness that, while alluding to that degradation, at the same time would affirm the "local," limited character of the degradation itself, thus causing the pleasurable feeling of being safe, for both the consciousness of the one who laughs

as well as for the totality of the world of the valuable; laughter, thus, would be like the emotion of freedom facing possible degradation and like the pleasurable feeling of the “ultimate” stability of the world of the threatened value. This last point would render comprehensible, on the one hand, the pleasurable character of laughter, and on the other, the tendency of laughter to remain within existence, to prolong itself, to re-create itself while at the same time sustaining its object before the gaze of consciousness, that is to say: the unitary concept of the comic. Laughter would then be a form of consciousness that, faced with the degradation of the value and precisely *because* of this degradation, would try to secure for itself its [own] freedom with respect to such degradation and, at the same time, to ensure the invulnerable character of the world of value in general. The intentional structure of laughter would be that of a “yes . . . but” expressed with a bodily violence whose ultimate sense would be that of enjoying with one’s own body the stability of the world of the value. It would be a lived experience analogous—although inverse—to that of enraged individuals who “feel,” in the cenesthesia of their rage, in the contraction of their bowels, the hatefulness [48] of their enemy or of the offense. Enraged individuals, in effect, *sink into* their rage; they let it flow like a current of bodily sensations that manifest the hatefulness of what provoked the rage; they *let themselves be led* by the rage precisely to make the abominable [aspects] of the motive more embodied and more tangible—which serves at the same time as a legitimization of the violence of their emotion. The same thing happens with suffering: emotional individuals who suffer hang on to their suffering; they re-create it; they incite it in order to make it more real, to lose themselves in it and, in a certain way, to achieve a paradoxical liberation, by handing themselves over, without measure, to emotion. This is nothing other than the sense of the liberating and pacifying power of tears and of other such violent expressions of pain. In the same way, laughter wants to condense itself infinitely; it wants to turn into “laughter-in-itself,” [into] an infinitely dense pleasure of the infinite certainty of the rational and of the value faced with the threat of the absurd and the possible degradation of values.

A sample of the explanatory effectiveness of Stern’s hypothesis would be the simple example of the solemn man who slips and falls. The king of creation suddenly becomes a part of creation, subject, like a mere stone, to the laws of gravity. Here is an evident degradation of the value of free personality, attained by the regularity to which the most

humble and negligible realities are subject. Not everyone laughs at such an incident, surely. A person who is aware of the axiological hierarchy, or who has a strong sensitivity for the human condition, will experience, rather, a sense of embarrassment and an accentuation of consciousness regarding his or her own vulnerability. But a person who is not bothered by such considerations probably will laugh willingly, feeling safe from such contingencies [and] affirmed by the soothing conviction that, deep down, nothing serious has happened. His or her laughter will be, for that person, a bodily perceptible guarantee that nothing has happened to him or her and that the little incident doesn't profoundly alter the stability of things. The laughter of the one who suffers the accident can never have the same transparency and the spontaneity of that of the spectators. The victim cannot avoid feeling "hit." In his eyes, the degradation of his own value will be accompanied by a feeling of vulnerability; in this case, the characteristic of liberation [49]—which I consider essential to laughter—cannot take place and will prevent the manifestation of laughter. If, perhaps with some laborious effort, the victim is able to laugh, his laughter will be simulated, wanted, like a reflexive affirmation of his freedom, and the bodily pleasure of such a freedom will prove difficult.

The examples could be multiplied by analyzing the most complicated jokes and those with the most delicate comic structure. There will always be a backdrop of degradation of values that, although not absolutely adequate as an "explanation" for laughter, does have the advantage of universality and of the ability to encompass all the theories formulated about it.

From all that has been said previously, one can clearly surmise the sense of laughter in the case of *relajo*. Since *relajo* is a refusal to support a value, the value in question ends up degraded, in a certain way, since its striving for full incorporation ends up unfulfilled. The actor is its victim; he ceases to be an interesting character, [only] to turn into, for example, a small, pot-bellied, or stuttering man. The solemn official who embodies a respectable institution is reduced to the role of the man who cannot control a situation. The anniversary party turns into a pandemonium in which those attending attack each other with all kinds of projectiles. The performance, the ceremony, or the party turns into "*relajo*."

Nevertheless, comedy is not essential to *relajo*; it doesn't always accompany *relajo*, and this is due to essential reasons. Whoever has seen a group of "relajientos" in action knows that the laughter provoked by this action is always precarious. On occasion, there appear

indeterminate possibilities of unpredictability and of fear that prevent frank laughter.

Indeed, *relajo* is, in a certain sense, an imaginary destruction of a value that, in general, only reaches the level of a mere degradation of the value. But from the imaginary destruction and the degradation, one can go to real destruction or to the loss of the value, even if this loss and destruction do not necessarily affect the value that has now been put out of play.

That being said, a *loss* of the value is not comic, but rather it involves pain. The higher the lost value, the more serious the pain, until this correspondence culminates in that annihilation of superior values called tragedy; and tragedy does not make one laugh but rather cry. Certainly, the movement [50] from imaginary destruction to real destruction is not necessary. Nevertheless, it is very often possible, and the mere possibility creates an atmosphere of anxiety that, more than provoking laughter, prevents it. The occasional cases of destruction of bullfighting rings or sports parks that have sometimes been reported in our newspapers serve as evidence of this possibility to go from “enthusiastic clapping” to the jubilant setting of galleries and rows of seats on fire. Municipal authorities in Mexico City have on some occasions seen themselves forced to forbid performances or meetings—innocuous in and of themselves—that often culminate in acts of destruction; these acts cannot be understood by dubbing them with names that constitute only a moral condemnation (which is probably justified) but that don’t make intelligible the event itself, much less so the means of preventing it.

II. MORAL SENSE OF *RELAJO*

With the rigor allowed by the informative purpose of this essay, we have attempted a phenomenological description of *relajo*. Such a description implies a double demand. In the first place, that the description be precisely that: a description, in other words, the abandonment of an explanatory attitude that would attempt to understand it [the phenomenon] from an external point of view. Second, it is indispensable for whoever undertakes the task of describing to adopt the point of view of the subject and perform the described act in order to bring to light meanings that are inherent to it. In the previous descriptions, we have placed ourselves in that “internal” position relative to the issue that we

are studying, and we have adopted an exclusively descriptive attitude, that is to say, a totally neutral attitude with respect to all attempts at explanation (of “external” understanding) that would have been able to come into our heads.

That being said, it is evident that the possibilities of intelligibility of our issue are not exhausted by the information brought to light by mere description. There are still many things left to find out. We do know, more or less, *what* *relajo* is, but we don't really know anything yet about its moral significance or about its origins, or about its function in the totality of events, norms, uses, habits, and social demands that form the spiritual environment of our country [Mexico] [51].

Certainly, something of all of this has been suggested throughout our exposition, but only in a provisional sense and more like a negative aid which has been useful to determine what *relajo* is not. Thus, we have seen how it is not merely a case of mockery, how it is not irony, or satire, or teasing; we have seen how laughter is not an essential component to it. But we have not seen positively what the relationship of *relajo* is with all these things and with others of greater importance.

In order to do this, we must abandon the “internal” point of view that we had adopted, and we must position ourselves at a vantage point that will allow us to understand *relajo* in relation to other facts of moral life. Seen from a higher and thus more universal point, the essence of *relajo* will become clearer to us and will acquire a deeper sense.

By abandoning the descriptive attitude and initiating an interpretation [of the phenomenon], we could say that we abandon the territory of the certain to enter that of the probable. Let us shift from the key of “is” to the key of “perhaps”¹⁹ to continue our reflections. Nevertheless, recognizing the importance of such a shift, we will try not to ever lose sight of the information brought to light by the process of description, a process that, on the other hand, we will not abandon completely, so that we may give the greatest possible solidity to the probabilities we are going to explore.

FREEDOM

The concept from which we will take the necessary support for clarifying the moral sense of *relajo* is that of freedom. The concept of freedom will allow us to understand, from the roots up, this complex bundle

of behaviors seemingly regulated by the idea of nonregulation, of disorder.

Indeed, if we reflect on our exposition so far, we see that *relajo* manifests itself as a behavior of “deviation.” The response to the constrictions imposed by the value is a “no.” The response to a demand by the value is an escape. *Relajo*, then, appears as a form of liberation. On the other hand, freedom also appears on the horizon of *relajo* as a condition of its possibility, as occurs—except for certain differentiating nuances—with any behavior or human action. Attribution presupposes the idea of the freedom of human beings, to whom we can attribute responsibility for their actions [52] because we live “always already” in the atmosphere of freedom.

No doubt, it is evident that the operation of attributing or imputing also occurs when we speak of natural phenomena, as when we say that a hurricane decimated the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico or that the atomic bomb leveled Nagasaki. But this is only a way of speaking. Within nature, there is no action per se, and when we say that yellow fever killed so-and-so, not only do we “want to say” something different than when we say that Mr. Such-and-such killed Mr. So-and-so or that alcohol killed Mr. So-and-so. In each case, we perform a radically different operation of adjudication.²⁰

These observations allow us contemplate vaguely the idea that *relajo* is a possibility of freedom: that freedom has something to do with all this. But seeing clearly the nature and the form of the internal relationship between both terms [*relajo* and *freedom*] will only be able to be accomplished after some reflections on freedom.

It is necessary to make explicit, even in the most succinct manner, some of the ways in which freedom offers itself immediately to our experience, and to avoid—to whatever degree possible—letting ourselves be influenced by philosophical theories, even if they might be the clearest and the most profound ones, that have emerged on [the subject of freedom]. Once again, the intention is to attempt a description that will make it easier for us to intuit the relationships between freedom and *relajo*, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the latter rather than presenting a summary of theories on freedom.

In general, freedom is lived in many ways, which [53] means that it also manifests itself in many ways. One can grant a greater importance to one or another of the expressions or forms in which freedom intervenes in social and individual life. To decide, for example, that

foundational and radical freedom is how we understand “political freedom” does not invalidate the fact of the multiplicity of its other forms of expression that can be found in a pictorial style, in a bodily gesture, or in a habit, for example.

Because freedom is so inextricably intertwined with all aspects of human existence, discerning it with clarity is not an easy task. We cannot see freedom how we see a thing and—when trying to grasp its reality—we only obtain some anxiety-producing evidence that it is impossible for freedom to be represented. There is nothing so difficult to represent as freedom, perhaps because it is inherent to action rather than thought and [because] it evades reflection all the more obstinately, the bigger the effort to grasp it is.

When we raise our hand to point it out, freedom has already disappeared, and all that remains present for us is a sentence or a thing; this does not prevent us from continually having an obscure yet firm consciousness of being free. This omnipresent and at the same time omniabsent character of freedom opens up the possibility of theories that aspire to rid the world of freedom’s so often bothersome presence.

But if freedom cannot be grasped in a formula like any other concept, this simply means that it is not a concept or that it is not merely a concept but rather something that occurs, in some way, in human experience. What we can do is pinpoint the experience or experiences in which freedom shows itself with greater exactitude.

In general terms, it can be said that the most universal experience among those that founded 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*. 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, almost getting ahead on their own, 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 [54] 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; indeed, 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.

But if each of the extremes cannot exclude the other, and therefore we cannot ever legitimately consider the human being as mere body or as pure spirit—granted that the immediate experience of freedom as a capacity for origin doesn't cancel the contrary evidence that reveals our rootedness in facticity and in the realm of absolute determination—it is no less true that this experience of freedom exhibits a certain “radial” structure of the person that allows us to speak of centrifugal and centripetal movements and, paradoxically, prevents us from considering the person as a *real* point in a straight-linear causal process.

When we understand a human action by means of the hereditary, social, economic, and educational, and so on history of its agent, 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. 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 relative to each other. Between the lines of force that we drew from the circumstances and the action that we want to understand there is always a hiatus: it is like the external and negative side that freedom shows to our attempt to offer an external and causal explanation. 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, unless we strip this individual of his or her human quality, something which is, in principle, impossible.

Freedom, as a *capacity of origin* is not, however, something absolute that can manifest itself in a pure state, as evidenced by the efforts of certain aesthetic doctrines to perform a “gratuitous act,” efforts that are inevitably doomed [55] to failure because freedom in its pure state is an abstract, imaginary entity. Freedom, when it emerges, makes its own motivations and purposes. An action without a motive or without a purpose is an unthinkable and unrealizable action. To affirm its possibility is to play with empty concepts and to accept the naïve notion that freedom is an absence of motivation. But if it [freedom] cannot be found in a pure state, neither can it be negated without immediately falling into a contradiction with universal experience.

Moving our example forward, the virtualities of freedom—in which its meaning for the personal structure of human nature and for what

certain literature has come to call “human dignity” are rooted—will become clearer.

A person who has committed a criminal act can have a legitimate interest in getting his or her lawyers to present him or her before the judge as an irresponsible being, in other words, someone who cannot be positioned at the origin of his or her own actions; as a result of chance intertwinements of natural conditions or of others’ actions [or] in the way of a mushroom emerging from the putrid floor of a badly organized society. It is possible that, by this means, this person gets exonerated. All this can very well be done, and nobody has anything to object to [in] it. Such things happen daily in all the criminal courts in the world. But this person can vindicate full responsibility for his or her actions. This person can reconquer the responsibility that the defense lawyers had the intention of taking off his or her shoulders by transforming him or her into an excrescence of the circumstances. [In reconquering responsibility], this person can thus recover the famous human dignity. To the extent that this person becomes responsible, he or she becomes free, and, to the extent that this person becomes free, he or she affirms him- or herself as a human being. The person assumes the way of being of a human being and moves away from the way of being of things. Only “someone” and never “something” can be responsible and free.

This example, then, makes visible the internal connection that exists between the notions of freedom and of responsibility. This connection is founded, precisely, on an “interiority” that cannot be suppressed; it [interiority] makes the human being an entity with a “radial” structure—an entity that cannot be inserted into the chains of linear processes that are, perhaps, the form par excellence of nature’s intelligibility.

Each individual is a spiritual vortex who [56] polarizes all his or her outline toward his or her center. If we call the imaginary space delineated by this vortex “subjectivity,” and if we call the property it has of being a source of actions capable of modifying its shape “freedom,” we can characterize freedom as a passage or transfer, a passing from interiority to exteriority, no matter how difficult it may be to establish exact limits between both terms. My freedom is actualized in this passage. It can be said that freedom *is* that passage, which can also be conceived of as a movement from the exterior to the interior in a process of internalization. In internalization, we also find an activity of subjectivity, a centrifugal motion analogous to the realization of an action toward the outside. A well-known process of this type is the acquisition of class

consciousness, in which a worker internalizes, in other words, makes actively his or her own, a situation that before was entirely meant to be endured and external [to the person] and that, when internalized implies a certain liberation. The same thing happens in the case of an illness, a physical insufficiency, or any experience of failure. To the degree that I learn to take into account such eventualities, that is to say, to the extent that I make them *mine* with full clarity, I free myself from them. They only confuse me and torment me if I resist integrating them into my behavior just as they are, if I refuse to take them into account. Then I suffer them passively as something external, not inherent to my personality that, however, determines my personality from “the outside.”

Freedom appears from a different perspective when we understand it as a condition of the possibility of normativity in general, when we confirm that the existence of any imperative implies the existence of freedom. All imperatives presuppose and recognize freedom, since an imperative—be it legal or moral—can only be directed toward a being that does not perform a fatally predetermined behavior and of which it is presumed that he or she can engage in behavior dissonant with the imperative itself, that he or she cannot fulfill the imperative.

By means of the fact of the law, the need for freedom is revealed to us; this need appears as what makes possible the existence of law. To say it using Kant’s terminology, law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom; freedom is the *ratio essendi* of law.

But freedom as seen through the law offers us only [57] an external image of itself. Certainly, when we direct our gaze toward the world of imperatives, we take charge of freedom, but we see it, so to speak, in a mirror. We see it projected outside ourselves on the screen of the objective spiritual world, without attaining it in its metaphysical significance, consequently, the scant influence of speculations of a purely judicial nature surrounding freedom and the vulnerability of the apologies of freedom that seek to derive it merely from law.

Freedom as a virtuality of the world of culture acquires, however, a formidable significance when we consider it as political freedom. From this point of view, freedom vindicates for itself all the privileges of its phenomenological, judicial, and metaphysical significance, and it manifests itself as a truly active sense of human existence on all its levels: as a foundation for what is human as such, as a motor of history, as an aspiration of personal life and of the life of the community. Political freedom is, at the same time, external and internal; it is a condition and an end

of action. In its political meaning, freedom acquires the character of the End *par excellence*.

Political freedom can adequately be described as the situation of a human community in which the development of each individual as a person to the maximum of his or her possibilities is not obstructed either by other individuals or by intermediary entities located between the individual and the State, such as the family, [social] classes, professional or faith-based associations, and so on; it is the situation in which this maximum development of the person not only is not obstructed but guaranteed and protected by the institutions through which sovereignty is expressed.

Aristotle believed that the State was the most perfect of all communities because it is a form of association that allowed one to attain superior values unattainable at the level of family or of clan life. Superior values, inherent to the intellectual or moral life of the individual, could only become possible, according to Aristotle, in the context of human relationships, a context which, seen as a whole and externally, we call the State. His idea of the State was subordinated to what the Greeks called the “good life”; this “good life,” in turn, was conceived of by Aristotle as the realization of the superior values of justice [58], wisdom, and so on, that presuppose a harmonious and perfect development of the person and the source of which can be none other than freedom.

This notion of political freedom as a condition for human personal fulfillment can be found—with more or less important differentiating nuances—at the bottom of almost all the political doctrines that have governed the history of the Western world, including Marxism, in spite of its current manifestations that would induce one to think more of a sacrifice of freedom and of the person for the benefit of the State, adopted as an end (subordinated to the total liberation of human beings in a classless society but, in any case, as an end that is independent and external to the individual person).

From this perspective, universal history can be thought of as a progressive realization of political freedom operated by the different human communities by means of successive removals of the obstacles—both internal and external to society—that oppose the total process of deliberation, be it through violence or by a continuous and progressive effort. Thus it can be said that the history of a people, and even of humanity, is the history of a freedom (in a metaphysical sense, as ultimate origin of actions attributable to human beings and as a condition of a possibility

of action) that marches toward its liberation (toward the total elimination of the societal and natural barriers that prevent the full realization of the virtualities of the person and of the group).

In the eighth proposition of his *Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, Kant asserts that “one can consider the history of the human species as a whole as the realization of a hidden plan by Nature to produce a perfect political constitution on the inside and, at the service of this end, equally perfect on the outside; this is the only state of things in which Nature can *completely develop all the dispositions it has placed on humanity.*”

That said, this complete development of human dispositions (even if planned by “Nature”) is subject to human initiative, and, because of this, it turns out to be a creation of freedom understood as autonomy of the will. It is the realization of a liberation that presupposes a freedom capable of adopting it as an end. The third “proposition” [59] of this same work, which already conceives of the totality of history as *feat of freedom*—in spite of the fact that its author is thinking of the horizon of the eighteenth-century idea of Nature—states thus: “Nature has wanted humans to bring out eternally from themselves all that transcends the mechanical operation of their animal existence and that does not partake of any other joy or perfection that is not one which they themselves have created for themselves, independently from instinct, by means of their own reason.”

Political freedom, however, even extending the radius of its meaning to the point of being able to be constituted as a fulcrum of a possible philosophy of universal history, presupposes all the other notions of freedom, not only as a condition of its own possibility but also, even, as a motor of its advent and of its actualization within reality. But this [point] is precisely its privilege and its importance: it allows us to accept that freedom is not only an attribute of individual subjectivity but also a task and an objective direction of the march of history to which the volume of sacrifice and the effort that humans have made or suffered in its name lend a great seriousness.²¹

Freedom in a political sense—in spite of or precisely because of its seriousness—cannot be the fulcrum that we seek in order to understand the sense of *relajo*, which [60] is our only purpose here, although perhaps it would not be entirely irrelevant in order to understand the true relationship between *relajo* and revolution, or, in general, between *relajo* and politics, a relationship so deeply misunderstood by those who

would wish to discover superior values in all manifestations of Latin-American life, even in the most abject ones. It was important to us, however, to point out that freedom can be the end of an action and not just a condition for its possibility or a metaphysical characteristic essential to human existence.

Political freedom is the form par excellence of freedom as the end of an action. Researching the implications of this privilege can, nonetheless, give way to a deep conceptualization, both of the sense of what is human and that of universal history, but it is not the only form in which freedom offers itself to us as an end. There are many other possibilities of the end-freedom that appear in an immediate way in the innumerable experiences of *liberation*.

The notion of *liberation* reveals another possible form of manifestation of freedom, to which the idea of obstacle is inherent and which we will attempt to clarify next.

Humans are beings of such nature that, even if by their corporality they participate in the way of being of things, they are capable of transcending them. A human is not just one more thing *alongside* other things, but one which can give things to him- or herself as an *object*, which can confront him or her, and in so doing, move beyond all of them. Humans are capable of setting goals that can go beyond their own situation and the present state of the world, taken as a whole. By virtue of the form of his or her being itself, a human, each human, is beyond him- or herself and his or her physical boundaries, beyond his or her body and situation. 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, thus giving him or her meaning through a project of him- or herself.

This structure of the being of humans is a condition for the appearance of something akin to an obstacle and of a possible liberation. Only because I project myself as a philosopher or a humanist, because I can be—in any way whatsoever—beyond my present ignorance, the absence of the teaching of Greek, of Latin, or of world literature in our secondary education system can appear to me as an obstacle, but also, by virtue of this transcendence [of mine], I can free myself from my [61] ignorance by studying them on my own. It is a cliché that prison walls are only a prison for those who are capable of pursuing their ends and completing their projects beyond those walls, and they are not a prison,

perhaps, for the homeless person who only within those walls can find sustenance and rest.

Experiences of liberation certainly do not exhaust the content of the notion of freedom, but rather they constitute, perhaps, the most immediate and most frequent form of experiencing freedom. Hegel would say that they are not the “truth” but rather the “phenomenon” of freedom. Freedom would then be experienced for the first time with the arrival of the first consciousness of an obstacle, and [freedom] would be realized for the first time by overcoming it.

That said, since transcendence is an essential characteristic of the being of humans, the sense of human existence would be postulated as a sequence of successive liberations; and the course of personal existence could be conceived of as the history of a freedom that marches toward its liberation and, therefore, toward its humanization.

In any case, what is important to us is that when an obstacle is overcome “a characteristic spatiality” opens up, according to the beautiful expression coined by Romano Guardini. There is a form of manifestation of freedom that consists of living the overcoming of an obstacle and that carries with it the obscure consciousness that a space is opening up in front of us. There is a way to live freedom that implies a liberation, and this experience is founded upon the essential structure of human existence.

In order for this experience to be possible, it is not necessary for the obstacle to be external to the person; also a physical insufficiency or sufficiency, a passion, a resentment, a prejudice, can be kinds of obstacles that confine me within nonfreedom.

It is evident that resentment, just as a prejudice, operates as an obstacle that forbids access to a whole sector of reality or of values. A physical insufficiency, such as ugliness or short stature, can come to be an insurmountable obstacle to a normal communal life for some individuals. But the same thing occurs in the opposite case: there are those who cannot transcend their own intelligence, their good taste, or their social status, and who spend their lives showing these, imposing these on others. One can live in [62] perpetual reference—literally stuck—to one’s own nose, as a permanent exhibit of a beautiful profile. Passion makes the miserly person powerless to go beyond the elemental significance of money as a source of security and power, without ever being able to reach full satisfaction. The miserly person takes pleasure in making a spectacle of

giving it [money] to him or herself, as an infinitely firm incarnation of that security, power, etc. The overcoming of such attitudes is, evidently, liberation.

The intuition of freedom, which shines through from the depths of such experiences of liberation, brings us closer to the notion of freedom that we are searching for as a basis to understand the moral sense of *relajo*.

Indeed, freedom in general can be actualized in two clearly discernible ways. It can consist of an external liberation that implies the removal, destruction, or overcoming of an obstacle that is really present in the world, as occurs in the case of an individual who comes out of prison or in the case of a political change or a revolution. Freedom is here an end and a result of an action actually performed on things or situations. But it can also consist of a pure movement of interiority. It can consist simply of a change of attitude. There are possibilities of freedom that have no need of actual transcendence of consciousness, possibilities, that do not require the creation of a new real order of the world but that are free variations of attitude within pure interiority.

When I free myself from a prejudice, in other words, when I learn to direct a clean gaze toward things and people—no longer paying attention to the steamed up glass of a stock phrase or of a preconceived notion that I received without knowing when or how I did—apparently, nothing has happened. I have changed my attitude, but everything remains the same. No doubt, there has been a change, but *only* in my interior. *Only* my subjectivity has been altered.

One could think that such a change of attitude is a false liberation and that such changes don't affect in any way the progression of things, that the variations of subjectivity are a value when considering reality and that good intentions ought to continue contributing to a worsening of hell as a fair punishment for their ineffectiveness.

But, leaving aside the eventual ineffectiveness of good [63] intentions, it is a fact of experience that a change of attitude in pure interiority can have and indeed actually does have the effectiveness to change the way the world appears to the person who adopts the new attitude; and the way the world appears is not a negligible factor in lucid and effective action. Things vary quite a lot if we look at history through the glass of progress or of decadence. The action of an individual or a human community will be different in one case or another, and how the world appears will prove decisive for the individual's or community's

action, and thus decisive for the appearance the world may acquire after this action.

Certainly, nothing changes in the world with my change of attitude but I myself. But to the degree that I am part of the world and that I am essentially in reference to reality, my change can be the beginning of a change in the world.

But, no matter whatever may become of all this, it is important to point out here that a variation in the *appearance* of things corresponds to a certain variation in my subjectivity. Subjectivity is like the dimension of depth in the world; from subjectivity, variations in the way the world appears are constantly emerging; subjectivity is like the very possibility of these variations. It is not then a romantic depth, in the sense of a growing overcoming of distances full of mystery or as a perpetual evanescence of its origin, but rather as an always latent possibility of changing its sense. Subjectivity is the primeval origin of the different meanings that the world can have and it is, as such, an origin, free, since it does not emerge necessarily from the state of the world but rather it is—in the last instance—a source of its meaning and its state; a source, even, of that way of seeing in which the world appears shackled by pure causal determinations.

The free variations of my subjectivity, the changes of attitude in pure interiority—some of which can be characterized as liberations and that produce a concomitant change in the appearance of the world—in operating this change of appearance open up several different possibilities for my behavior. This is what interests us here. To this type of event, of attitude variations, belong those difficult-to-grasp human realities which we call irony, humor, seriousness, and spirit of seriousness. The examination of their meaning and of their reciprocal relationships²² [64] regarding the backdrop of the notion of freedom will clarify—we hope—the moral sense of *relajo*.

IRONY

Irony, like *relajo*, can be understood in light of the relationship between consciousness and value. We have said that it is a possible variation of a subjective attitude. We must also say that it is a noteworthy and not very frequent attitude that human beings can, however, adopt freely. It is not imposed by any circumstance external to consciousness. Thus, as a

given, it is characterized as an attitude of a consciousness or of a human being. But this is evidently not sufficient for a more or less complete intellection of its absence and its value. Our assertion is only an initial step, since irony as an attitude already contains a series of possibilities of behavior, in the way an attitude or bodily gesture indicates a whole series of movements and concurrent actions. In order to show clearly the essence and sense of irony, we will begin by directing our gaze toward the vague notion we all have of irony, before any theoretical reflection, and we will try to corner it using successive approaches in order to achieve a more or less clear intuition of it.

The first thing that the word “irony” suggests is a certain dissonance, a contradiction. It is ironic—we say—that a person knows what justice is and that he is not just. It is ironic that a person believes he or she is wise and does not behave wisely, that he or she purports to possess a “superior” knowledge and has an inferior behavior.

Irony seems even to dominate long-range processes, like a contradiction that suddenly emerges: it is ironic that humans have spent two centuries deepening their voices to speak of progress and of technology and that technology, like a sinister mouse, has given birth to the atomic bomb.

Irony seems to *be* [located]²³ not only in a human being, in those who internally consider themselves wise while their external behavior shows them as stupid or evil. It seems also to emerge as a sense of an entire historical development. That said, if we observe these contradictions more closely [65], we will see that they do not seem ironic simply because they are contradictory. What is ironic is not that there is contradiction or dissonance in them, no less, since nonironic contradictions can exist. A person’s failure at a long-sought-after endeavor is not necessarily ironic; no matter how much there may be a dissonance between a purpose and an achievement. In the failure of an endeavor permeates a contradiction that could be tragic, without any mix whatsoever with irony. In order for there to be irony, there is a need for something more than pure and simple contradiction. Our examples manifest a contradiction between a “self-assumption” and reality. A person assumes he or she is wise but acts with ignorance. A historical period assumes it is in possession of the key to human happiness, but in furthering its concepts, it produces an instrument of destruction that sows anxiety among humankind. This is what we call irony and it is, really, ironic. But what is ironic here? Certainly not the contradiction taken purely and simply as such but rather the contrast between the assumption of possessing

any certain value (wisdom, justice, infallible effectiveness of a means toward achieving human happiness) and the reality of what is actually achieved. On the other hand, this contrast must be made manifest in light of the value in question.

That being said, a contrast is not a real thing that can be found alongside other things. A contrast is a relationship, and relationships—no matter how objective and concrete they may be—are not real attributes of things but rather references established between them by consciousness. Irony is, then, immanent to a consciousness that judges and that notices the distance between the possible realization of a value and its supposed realization by someone with a pretense of fulfilling it. It is, so to speak, the adequate response to the “self-assuming person.”

Irony can manifest itself, on the other hand, as inherent to thought itself. It also has to do with the logical structure of thought, or I should say, of the proposition [66]. There is within irony something of a logic game: it is a dialectic. When Socrates tells Euthyphro, “You, admirable Euthyphro, are the only one of us who knows what piety is,” all of us *see* that Euthyphro knows nothing about piety. What has happened here? What has happened is that, at the very instant when Socrates says this, we know that he means to say exactly the opposite. The meaning of the proposition “You know what piety is” remains the same, but its sense has totally changed; this has happened at the very instant in which the proposition was made, because the proposition is found within an ironic context. Based on Socrates’ ironic attitude, precisely because of that attitude, the figure of Euthyphro has changed its sense, and that of a sentence has been inverted. Because of its purely designative content, Socrates’ utterance was destined to reveal Euthyphro’s knowledge, but irony made it reveal exactly the opposite: his ignorance.

This shift in sense has occurred because the utterance lives in a mobile, dialectic atmosphere. The utterance itself is alive; it is animated by an intention of Socrates, who, for his part, is moving within the living unfolding of the conversation with Euthyphro. On the one hand, Socrates’ attitude is what is ironic, but we see that it is an attitude capable of inverting the express sense of a proposition. Irony is something that can penetrate into logic and into reality; it also causes the sense of the figure of Euthyphro to change, transcending the consciousness or the psyche of Socrates. How is this possible?

Irony is the attitude Socrates holds toward Euthyphro, but he directs himself toward Euthyphro to the degree to which the latter is in relation to a value; he addresses “Euthyphro who knows about piety.” By means

of irony, Socrates shows that he doesn't limit himself only to saying it, but rather he makes it visible: he *shows* that this Euthyphro knows not one word about piety. Socrates makes us catch him red-handed in his not-knowing about piety. He undresses Euthyphro of his pretensions in such a way that we almost feel a little pity for dear Euthyphro, who is there, before our eyes, trying to cover up his nakedness with some rag of thought. Irony has suddenly transformed Euthyphro the wise into Euthyphro the ignorant.

Irony is thus an attitude, but it is also an action, an endeavor. One can speak, with fairness, of an ironic smile. There is an irony-consciousness, but there is [67] also, as in Socrates, the irony-endeavor, at the end of which it will have been made clear that Euthyphro knows nothing about piety. But irony is not only this.

There is irony-consciousness, which is an ironic attitude and which can manifest itself in a smile; there is irony-action, and also the irony inherent to an ironic proposition. Looking at things well, irony is not a logical quality of the proposition, since the proposition in its pure logical value is sufficient for itself. Irony appears when the proposition is seen in relation to its object with what is meant by it. The logical structure of the proposition, in contrast, is immanent to the proposition itself and doesn't take into account at all the relationship of the proposition to its object. That being said, a proposition is ironic when it reveals exactly the opposite of what it is affirming. Irony—the ironic proposition—is not a paradox. A paradox is a proposition that contains a countersense in spite of which it is true. In an ironic proposition, there is no internal contradiction of the proposition itself, without which the paradox is inconceivable.

The contradiction that exists in irony can be discovered by turning one's gaze to the object of the proposition. Irony is a way of denoting "backwards." Just as [in bullfighting] one can speak of putting *banderillas* on the bull "by dodging it" [*al quiebro*],²⁴ one can also speak of denoting "backwards." This way of denoting is that of the ironic proposition. The ironic is not, then, found in the proposition but rather in the relation between the proposition and that alluded to by it.

The ironic is also not in things. One speaks of the ironies of life only by analogy. Irony is found more in the way of seeing things, a way of seeing them that underscores or pays attention to contradiction. But contradiction could not be found among things as such either. Contradiction is imposed by human beings. "As such," there is no contradiction

between black and white, or between a feather and a piece of lead, or between two locomotives that collide head-on. But there is contradiction between what people say or think, or between what a person says and what that person does, because human doing is a form of speaking, and vice versa. And if there is contradiction between what a person expects and what he or she obtains, this is because all things human are imbued with “speech,” with “logos”: contradiction is something inherent to the spirit [68].

The ironic consciousness “sees” the contradictions and the vanities of existence and, by naming them, destroys them. But it destroys them by underscoring them, insisting on them by means of the artifice of naming them backwards. [The ironic consciousness] destroys them by condensing their contradictory essence until it explodes and clears open a path for us. Irony calls vanity “knowledge,” so that vanity will be such vanity that it will disappear in its own total vanity. Socrates’ words do not destroy Euthyphro, but they destroy his vanity for us, making it volatile by condensing it. They make it disappear, if not as a real psychological quality of Euthyphro, as a screen that obstructs the path toward knowledge and virtue.

However, in order for there to be irony, it is not enough to discover contradictions or to annihilate vanities. It is essential to have a will to truth. Socrates doesn’t limit himself to bothering Euthyphro or to showing his superiority over him. Socrates isn’t “teasing” Euthyphro; Socrates wants to know what piety is, and he wants to know it because he is ignorant of it, and he knows that he is. Euthyphro, in contrast, is a technician of piety; he simply doesn’t know what piety is, and Socrates needs this knowledge most urgently, not only to fill the void of his ignorance but also because he considers it indispensable for the good functioning of the city.

Socrates, the father of philosophy, also invented irony. In him, irony is not only the destruction of a vanity by means of the brilliant roundabout of calling it knowledge or virtue, but also a will to truth. Also, [it is] the sharpest, most direct, and passionate will to truth that any human being has ever had before. Plato has him say, “Nothing pleases me if it is not at the same time truth,” in a formula that expresses the motto of all genuine philosophy and of all superior humanity.

This will for truth and this rectitude, inherent to Socratic irony, are essential to *irony*, [in general] no less. If it were otherwise, irony could be confused with mocking, with sarcasm, with teasing, and even with

relajo—attitudes that are purely negative or that tend, at most, as in the case of teasing, toward an affirmation of the individual who adopts them.

Irony, thus, manifests itself, on the one hand, as something demolishing. It is a negation. But, on the other hand, it is a constructive affirmation. In a certain way, it annihilates Euthyphro, but with this, it contributes a liberation for us. It opens to our [69] gaze the path, the space that leads to the essence of the sacred and that, before, had been obstructed by Euthyphro, by his vanity and his ignorance.

Socrates' irony manifests itself as a way of freeing oneself of an obstacle that is in opposition to our knowledge: Euthyphro's authority. We can say, then, that Socrates frees us completely and opens up the path toward truth for us, through an act with which he frees himself—by means of irony—from Euthyphro's illegitimate authority—which at the same time seems illegitimate only after Socrates' irony.

In Socrates' irony, something is also at stake for us; we, who in a certain way are his contemporaries because we are interested *with him* in the truth about the sacred or of the good, of beauty, of justice, and so on. Socrates' attitude is not only an ailment of his interior; it is truly a source of perspectives of the world, and his liveliness is capable of altering those perspectives. The world blocked off by Euthyphro has turned into a world open to our questioning. Socrates' irony, by transforming the world, is in a sense the foundational act of a community: that of disciples, the community of those who seek the truth.

Neither is Socratic irony a mere game, a form of agility that he exercises like a dialectic [form of] fencing in order to show his own importance. In Socrates, irony is an act of liberation; it is distancing oneself from mere appearances in order to adequately direct the pursuit of truth. In irony, one transcends an obstacle toward the truth. This transcendence toward truth is realized in two stages.

Socrates was affirming his own ignorance. With that affirmation, he was saving himself from stock phrases and from formulas of a knowledge that had degenerated, transformed into pure appearances. But with this, Socrates was affirming his absolute relationship with truth. He was making himself infinitely responsible for it. For Socrates, truth was an absolute demand that required an absolute devotion. His irony is founded on a supreme seriousness, since seriousness is nothing other than vocation for and unconditional devotion to a value. In it, this vocation and devotion are not subject to any condition whatsoever, not

even to that of living. Socrates could employ irony precisely because he transcended himself and his concrete interests toward truth, beyond the assumptions of [70] his fellow citizens regarding virtue and knowledge, but also beyond his own life. He himself points out the absolute character of his commitment when he presents it as a demand of the Deity and he affirms, facing death, its irrevocable character.

Then, the figure of Socrates shows us the ironist as a person whose calling is truth itself. This person's ignorance is a will to truth; it is honest, good will in opposition to the Sophist, who conforms to an appearance of truth and who shows off as a master of the art of worldly success, moved deep down by a will to power, like a charlatan. Sophists are expressly preoccupied with appearances. They are careful about their solemn physical appearance; their behavior, destined for the eyes of others, is an exhibition of their own importance and of the excellence of their doctrine.

Plato shows us Protagoras strolling along an inner courtyard, accompanied by eight or ten disciples who are obligated to perform the strangest maneuvers to not end up positioned physically in front of him, so they can regain their spot behind the master every time he "with great elegance" turns around and retraces his steps. Socrates doesn't worry about things concerning him. He is a poor man; he declares in his defense before the Aeropagus that he doesn't care for being honored publicly; he affirms "not having had any authority whatsoever outside that of an advisor" and having neglected "what others care so much about: becoming wealthy, economics, generalships, leadership positions, etc."

He doesn't consider himself, nor does he want to be considered anybody's teacher, nor does he aspire—this less than anything—to be treated externally with signs of respect, like the Sophists. With the Sophist, who loudly proclaims the excellence of his own knowledge, the philosopher [Socrates] contrasts, with his irony, the silence of his vocation for truth. His gaze sees beyond appearances, and, with ironic action, he makes the distance between appearances and truth, manifest itself—the chasm that separates the contingent from the value in all its purity. But he is only capable of acting in this way because he previously made himself responsible for value. Because in reality he is deeply serious, having the genuine seriousness that does not take seriously what is not serious, the appearances that are flaunted with a pretense for recognition by people. The ironist takes the weight off appearances in order to

throw over his or her back that of genuine value. In doing this, he or she removes from the shoulders of others the weight thrown [71] on them by those who aspire to pass for representatives of value. The ironist's liberating action takes place, thus, against the backdrop of seriousness and of responsibility. It is evident that, in Socrates, the will to truth doesn't mean knowledge. He affirms an absolute commitment to truth, to which, certainly, all of us human beings are obligated, but not an "absolute knowledge." He doesn't present himself as the possessor of a totalitarian system of knowledge. He has no pretense of knowing what he himself has shown that others do not know—which is exactly what the Sophist does. Socrates doesn't affirm himself, but rather he frees his interlocutor and his listeners and frees us by opening up for us the path toward truth. He would badly have been able to undertake this liberation if he had had the intention of imposing *his* knowledge on us. In affirming his ignorance, he affirms a negation, but it happens that this negation is the same one that all human beings have inside. Irony is, in the last instance, a negativity that—because it involves an absolute commitment to value—is capable of founding a community; in other words, it 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.

Irony, then, does not exclude seriousness. Irony and seriousness appear as correlative attitudes in the *interior* of freedom and of responsibility. In this way, the meaning of irony begins to outline itself in contrast to the fundamental attitude of *relajo*. The latter [*relajo*] is a suspension, pure and simple, of seriousness, which is equivalent to irresponsibility. Irony is a liberation that founds a freedom for the value. *Relajo* is a negation that founds a pseudofreedom that is purely negative and thus infertile.

HUMOR

In the previous example, we have seen how value always transcends its contingent actualizations. An act of punctuality does not make me punctual. Value and being do not seem to ever be able to unite in a definitive manner, or, at least, there doesn't seem to be any experience or object in the area of our human experience in which this coincidence occurs fully. The sweet flavor of a fruit or the coolness of water is not "sweetness"

or [72] “coolness” as such, fully realized. Values in themselves always are beyond their possible manifestations; they are not exhausted in any of their realizations. This transcendence of a value, we have said, is what makes irony possible, [since] irony is nothing other than the form of consciousness that makes it [the transcendence of the value] obvious when someone has the assumption of constituting him- or herself as the full incarnation of some value.

We can find another attitude in certain closeness to irony; this is an attitude that, at first glance, is similar to it but that rests on very different foundations: humor. Humor can be defined, in comparison to irony, as transcendence toward freedom. In irony, there is transcendence toward the value. In humor, one simply makes evident that freedom is the transcendence of existence as a whole.

When speaking of experiences of liberation, we had somehow shown how such experiences are only possible thanks to that essential characteristic of the structure of human existence that contemporary philosophy calls transcendence. The latter, for its part, manifests itself to us as a founding freedom, as a freedom that makes liberation possible. Irony then turns out to be liberation toward a value. Humor, in contrast, is liberation toward freedom. Irony has its starting point in a concrete person, to then leave a value wide open. Humor, in contrast, leaves wide open the opening of transcendence itself. What is transcended by irony is existence itself, and what the movement of the humorist transcends is the opening of freedom.

We have already noted in our previous reflections that value and being never coincide completely. On the other hand, we have characterized value—because of its living function within human existence—as a “guide for self-constitution,” in other words, as a certain orientation or guide of human existence that can never be manifested absolutely within it. The world suffers from a peculiar form of lack of focus. The worlds of being and of value, although they are in a certain way “the same world,” never finish uniting fully in order to show us a clear and unified profile that could offer us the identification of one with the other. Things always seem to us as if we suffered from metaphysical strabismus [73]. We always see them as we see an image being projected by a badly focused projector. Constantly, with an effort, we have to correct the image we have in front of us, precisely to recognize it as an “image” of this or that idea; of this or that value; of this or that mental outline. Outlines are weak, or they pile up on each other; values unfold beyond the drawing,

and vice versa. Art offers us, on privileged occasions, an image of what a world would be like in which *being* and *value* would correspond to each other with a correspondence of identity, and not of simple inherence, as occurs in our daily lives. Art offers us a world in which what exists has all the brightness of value and in which value appears already enfolded, endowed with all the solidity of being. But art only gives us an image, that is to say, an imaginary realization of this lost unity. Religion, for its part, reaches the unity of value and being in the liminal experiences of music or in the eschatological idea of a renovated world, as in the idea of Saint Paul's "new creation" or in the otherworldly worlds of certain schools of Buddhism.

Thus, the value-being unity occurs *as if* it were already realized in art, while religion affirms a real unity of the terms, accessible in an extraordinary experience in which few human beings can participate, or in a unity to come in an indeterminate, yet imminent, future. Outside of these real or imagined exception experiences, we, regular human beings, find ourselves inevitably stuck in what—to us—is the unsurpassable blurriness and fading offered by existence.

Within this view, irony is an act that shows the insurmountable transcendence of value. Irony, we have said, directs one's gaze to the distance that separates what exists and value toward which what exists has directed itself.

Irony smiles when uttering a *no* with its gaze set on a negativity that cannot completely dominate existence.

The noncoincidence of value and being persists when the value in question is a negative value. The horizon of irony is the transcendence [74] of what exists relative to negative values. Irony frees us *toward* a positive value; humor frees us *from* a negative value, from an adversity.

The ironist lives on the horizon of the value's ideality. The humorist lives on the horizon of the negativity of existence. The ironist smiles when faced with a pretense of excellence, the humorist when faced with the powerlessness of adversity to completely dominate human existence. One and the other live in perpetual reference to that essential incompatibility between the value and being that we have pointed out. One and the other show the distance between existence and its meaning, but while the ironist is oriented toward transcendence of the value, the humorist is oriented toward freedom itself to show that the latter ends up abolished by the finiteness and the adversity of existence.

That said, given the fact of the finiteness of human existence and that of the negative tone, which so frequently predominates in it, the humorist is a person perpetually oriented in the direction of what we could call human wretchedness. The humorist discovers the contemptible motivations behind great doings or the despicable origins of great prestige. For example, the story of the man who is acclaimed for having saved another who was drowning, declares he is only interested in knowing who threw him into the water, is a humorous story. But this is only one possible direction for humor: it is the one that shows the insufficiency of the realizations of the value, not by direct reference to the value itself, not *from above* like irony—which makes obvious the value's purity and transcendence—but rather from *below*, by highlighting the presence of the despicable with and within the valuable. Humor, in this sense, appears also as a moderator of human assumptions of recognition of their own value, and it carries out—in a different direction—the same function as irony. In humor, the explicit direction of intention is not oriented toward the value itself but rather toward the circumstances of fact that cast a shadow over its realization.

But this negative critical aspect does not exhaust the possibilities of humor. If humor were to be exhausted in it, it would be merely a type of negative and bitter irony, a skeptic irony, in other words, a frustrated irony, which is almost equivalent to a nonirony. It would be purely and simply moral skepticism: cynicism. Genuine humor, in contrast [75], has an intention that is explicitly directed toward freedom. Its starting point is, in general, the negativity of existence; in particular, a case in which this negativity manifests itself strongly, in order to, from there, head toward freedom itself. Thus it shows how human beings are always beyond themselves and their circumstance, how humans can find themselves in the most adverse situations and face up to them as if they were external, alien acts that cannot get to them completely. Humor is a Stoic-style attitude that shows the fact that the interiority of human beings—their pure subjectivity—can never be reached or canceled by the situation, no matter how adverse this situation might be; humor shows that human beings can never be exhausted by their circumstance. “I am me and my circumstance,” said Ortega y Gasset. To the humorist, I am rather me before my circumstance.

This meaning of humor is made particularly visible in so-called black humor, which highlights human transcendence not only when facing

one's facticity in general but especially when faced with the painful, somber, or sinister aspects of existence. Someone has said that Mexico is the land of choice for black humor, and this is true to a certain extent. In Mexico, black humor is a common thing, and Mexicans put this attitude into practice sometimes with blood-curdling skill. Posada's drawings are a well-known testimony to this. For example, there is black humor in the story that tells of the exchange between the doctor and the man whose chest is pierced with a knife. "Does it hurt a lot?" asks the doctor. "Only when I laugh," answers the patient. There is also humor in the story about the man who leaves a party in a Mexico City neighborhood with the purpose of buying "*menudo*"²⁵ and along the way, he gets into a fight and stabbed. Upon returning, he barely is able to tell the hostess: "Please forgive me, *comadre*"²⁶ the only *menudo* I was able to get was my own"; and he falls over dead with his intestines in his hands.

Someone once told me that, on the day of her birth, his grandmother had been stricken with a cancer on one of her toes. It was necessary to amputate the toe to prevent the cancer from spreading. But the cancer reappeared. Another amputation was necessary, and this process continued [76] uninterrupted. "When I met her," my friend concluded, "my grandmother was just a bust on the piano, and, when she died, she was nothing more than a little lock of hair." This is a real masterpiece of black humor. The story is sinister, yet it shows the possibility of treating it comically, of distancing oneself from the most intolerable situations.

In all these cases, comedy is the sign of liberation. One can laugh only if one distances oneself from what one is laughing about. A person, under certain circumstances, can seem comical to others, but not to him- or herself, as we have already indicated. While the others laugh, this person may feel shame or pain. But if this person is able to back off from his or her own situation and position him- or herself in the role of spectator, this person can laugh at him- or herself. In doing this, the person externalizes his or her transcendence-freedom. This capacity for distancing oneself is humor, and, when circumstances are atrocious, we call the situation "black humor." But the individual can only perform this gesture of detachment because freedom makes it possible. Humor is, thus, the externalization of this freedom and the capability of using it in the sense described. My capacity to laugh at myself is in direct correlation to my capacity to assume the possibility opened up a priori by this "internal" freedom.

The polarity within which irony takes place is that of “facticity-value”; the polarity of humor, that of “adversity-freedom”; the regulatory and explicit presence of freedom at the heart of humor allows humor to exert a “beneficial” influence, not only on those who put it into practice but also on those who witness the appearance of the humorous; humor provokes in its witnesses a peculiar feeling of ease and liberation that everyone loves and admires; that is why a person “without a sense of humor” is hardly friendly company. A person without humor is chained to his or her own virtues and outstanding qualities, be they real or imagined, the latter most frequently being the case. The humorless individual is an untouchable, always ready to stand up for his or her value supposedly violated by the carelessness of his or her interlocutors. It is not by chance that this type of individual is called “*pesado*” [literally, “heavy”]. He or she has a certain weight, like a thing, precisely because the individual wants to give his or her value all the weight and certainty of things. This individual neglects, in him- or herself, the presence of the factor that makes him [77] or her human [and] that makes human existence vulnerable and insecure, in spite of the fact that at the same time he or she is founding his or her dignity and covering it with lightness and transparency. Incapable of recognizing and directly confronting one’s own self-transcendence, the humorless individual aspires to be filled with value, aspires to universal recognition and respect, but to *necessary* respect and recognition, analogous to the *necessary* recognition we grant to the existence of a present thing. With this, the humorless person negates his or her 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 valuable. All of us are familiar with that dense, paralyzing atmosphere provoked by the presence of the individual who is “self-satisfied,” stuck to his or her “self,” enforcer of his or her own rules; all of us have felt the relief of his or her absence.²⁷

There is another form of humor that does not consist of a direct showing of freedom, as in the case of black humor. In this [other] form of humor, freedom explodes—so to speak—before our eyes, canceling in one full swing the oppressive tension of the circumstances. Freedom emerges suddenly, like a lightning bolt, over the backdrop of an atrocious and overwhelming adversity: a man with his chest pierced with a dagger: “Only when I laugh.” Here, freedom comes forth shining. The humorist’s intention alludes directly to it.

But there is [yet] another style of humor that does not directly address freedom but rather alludes to it in an indirect fashion, beating about the bush. The backdrop of negativity, of adversity, of pain, or of human wretchedness is likewise present, and the humorous act consists of reducing the importance of that adversity. It lets us see that adversity is surely considerable and even overwhelming, but its action is not geared toward showing that, even if things are this way, human beings are free, but rather it limits itself to downplaying adversity. It operates on the index of adversity in reality, showing that its magnitude lacks a definitive meaning. It points out that the situation isn't so serious after all, or that it seems more tolerable than what a too-pathetic soul would want to make us believe.

"Thus," Kierkegaard tells us, "when an unfortunate man says, for example, 'It's all over for me; everything is lost,' the humorist could continue by saying: 'Yes. What [78] poor creatures we humans are, in the midst of this many-formed misfortune of life; all of us are condemned to suffering; if only I could see the day when my landlord would have the knocker on my door changed, I would consider myself fortunate.'" The humorist—Kierkegaard adds—does not say this to offend his unfortunate friend, but because "he has understood suffering in such a way that he considers any attempt to document it superfluous, and he expresses this by saying just anything."

That said, "understanding" suffering implies in this context, on the one hand, to take it into account, and on the other to represent it to oneself in a certain way, to put it before oneself; that is to say, to transcend it.

Humor operates here as a palliative for the pathos of adversity, and with this, it shows the humorist's freedom in an indirect fashion. The humorist knows perfectly that human existence is something *essentially* difficult and painful. The humorist's gesture of liberation does not imply despising or mocking. The humorist is not a cynic, nor does this individual attempt to be safe either from suffering or from humor. He or she simply knows that the issue is too serious to make a fuss out of it. The humorist—according to Kierkegaard, who has plumbed into the sense of irony and humor to greater depths than any other—is someone who is in the border zone between the moral and the religious. For the humorist, as for the religious individual, existence is suffering, but in contrast to the case of the religious individual, the humorist does not appeal to a transcendent entity that might contribute to a solution. On

the edge of the religious, the humorist turns around and is silent: “He understands the significance of suffering in its relation to existence; (he knows it is essential to it), but doesn’t comprehend the significance of suffering (because such a significance only becomes clear in a religious connection); he understands that suffering is a part of existence, but his understanding goes no further.” “He touches, in pain, the secret of existence, but immediately, he is once again on himself.” This turning back on oneself is accomplished by means of the joke and joking;²⁸ it is the significance of jokes within humor.

For Kierkegaard, humor has a significance of greater scope than the one we have given it. Although Kierkegaard’s doctrine could be of only incidental importance to our purpose of [79] exploring the meaning of irony and of humor, we will present a brief exposition of the function and the sense that Kierkegaard gives to irony and humor within the totality of, and in a certain way, within the development of human existence. Keeping in mind his doctrine can clarify and open up new horizons of meaning for what we have said so far about these two attitudes [irony and humor].

Kierkegaard distinguishes three levels or spheres of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Irony is the limit between the aesthetic and the ethical; humor is the border between the ethical and the religious. The aesthetic sphere is characterized by a naïveté that looks for happiness in life’s immediate goods; it is characteristic of the individual who without thinking much of it devotes him or herself to pleasure, such as Don Juan, or to the attainment of a position in the hierarchy of the values actually current in a given society. This type of existence lacks unity; it is fragmented according to the multiple points of attraction that the world has to offer. The ironist is the individual who has understood this game and looks skeptically at the possibilities of fulfillment offered by the immediate, because this individual is already related to the “infinite ethical demand”; that is to say, with the value’s unconditioned demand that demands from the individual a total detachment from the opportunities for pleasure that the world offers him or her. “Irony,” says Kierkegaard, “manifests itself when, connecting in a continuous manner the particularities of finite life to the infinite ethical demand, contradiction appears.” But one is not moral because one is an ironist. Irony still maintains a relationship with the “particularities of the finite.” One is only within ethics when—and to the extent that—one “relates within oneself to the absolute demand”; that is to say, when

one has fully assumed responsibility for value in the way that we have pointed out in Socrates' case. The ironist begins to be—or already is completely—a moral person, that is to say, a person who already views existence as a totality. The moral human being, the one who lives within the ethical sphere, relates to existence as a whole, on the one hand; on the other, this person maintains that totality of his or her existence as a unitary whole because he or she refers it all to the absolute datum of value, to the demand of duty. To the moral human being, duty is a totalizing instance that gives unity and freedom to existence.

The person of ethics, the moral person (which is not the [80] same thing as the moralist), however, can come to realize that existence implies, essentially, something inherent to finiteness: suffering. But even if this person understands the situation in all its depth, his or her life becomes tinged with certain skepticism of a superior level: humor. The moral person turns into a humorist when he or she begins to understand suffering as a necessary derivative of finiteness, as something essentially inherent to the human condition. With this, the humorist opens up to a type of superior community when he or she abandons the initial naïveté of the moral human being that pursued selfish ends and attributed a superior value to them, and he or she understands, even, that moral excellence is very far from a radical and universal solution to the enigmas of existence. “Because humor,” says Kierkegaard, “is a hidden suffering, it is also an instance of sympathy.”²⁹

Nevertheless, the humorist is not yet a person who lives in the sphere of the religious. His or her relationship with existence as a whole places this individual in reference to an absolute transcendence; the irrevocable presence of pain and of suffering as unsolvable enigmas point already to a solution at the religious level, but the humorist, even within a deep and living relationship with all these phenomena, never comes to assume them into a religious view; that is to say, as an opening to the transcendent and to the infinite. The humorist can expressly elaborate on the pain of the human situation, but he or she revokes it with a “humorous” act, with a joke. Being aware of the great charge of problematicity human existence has (an awareness without which he or she could not in any way be a humorist), the humorist verges on the limits of the religious, but, nevertheless, turns his or her back to it.

Kierkegaard comments that “the fact that humor precedes faith, in the Christian religious sense, also shows the enormous game of existence (that is to say, the great number of life possibilities) possible outside of

Christianity, and on the other hand, the detachment required to correctly embrace Christianity.”³⁰

As we can see, Kierkegaard ascribes to irony and to humor an essential significance in the deeper layers of [81] existence. He doesn't think that these attitudes are simply areas close to the comic, nor does he consider the comic itself a simple “curiosity” of life. To Kierkegaard, these are radical attitudes that show all their sense only when they are understood with the totality of existence as a starting point. Regardless of this “existential” sense of irony and of humor, [these phenomena] interest us only because of their peculiar relationship to freedom; we highlight them in this connection simply to make our vision of the moral sense of *relajo* clearer.

With his or her attitude, the humorist is prevented from falling into sentimentalism and bombast. With this, the humorist outlines in advance a style of existence that we have labeled as Stoic. This individual makes a commitment to not invoke adversity or suffering in order to give him- or herself the luxury of doing nothing. The humorist's attitude implies that human pain or his or her own suffering cannot serve as a valid excuse, that humans continue to be responsible for their lives and for all the things they do, even if they are involved in a difficult situation, [and] in spite of the fact that life drags along with it a formidable volume of difficulties and adversity. With their attitude, humorists point out the fact that we cannot cancel our responsibility, that is to say, our freedom, simply because life is hard; the humorist points out that human beings are called to, always freely, tasks that are a pressing demand, even if life is a “sea of troubles,” in the words of Hamlet—who is not a humorist but rather a pathetic man, and like all pathetic people, incapable of an action that is decisive and that imposes order on reality.

RELajo, HUMOR, AND IRONY

Thus, freedom manifests itself as a positivity both in humor and in irony. It appears as a constant of responsibility, a bit more like an immediate achievement in irony and a bit more like a presupposition in humor. But in both cases, freedom appears as a backdrop of responsibility, like the aura of seriousness and of a commitment. Freedom appears here pregnant with possibilities for action, enveloping existences that are clearly thrust in a direction. It is freedom that is actually realized in the world;

in it, freedom opens up perspectives full of sense in which [82] anybody can participate. Irony and humor are a certain opening up of pathways within the tangle of human pretenses and feelings.

Let us now see what happens to *relajo*: what is its relationship with irony and humor, two attitudes with which, on the surface, it would seem to be related by analogy.

We have seen that *relajo* is an attitude of dissidence. It is a *no* secreted by a consciousness that refuses to support the demand for the realization of a value. At first glance, *relajo* appears, thus, as an attitude whose sense is freedom, since freedom can also be conceived of as pure negation. One can think of freedom as the floating, expectant condition of a consciousness *not* determined by the causal series of physical-natural happening. Freedom can be conceived by negation. This negation which is supposedly constituent of freedom can be extended, no doubt, to the moral world, since the demand of value or of law has no compulsive efficacy over the will. One can refuse to follow the fragile indications of pure value. One can perpetually pass by the unconditional demands of morality. The ethical norm cannot even be conceived of as a natural legality exercised by the spirit on the human will.

If one accepts this negative notion of freedom as valid, if we consider that this nondependence of natural causality and ethical demand (leaving aside the radical differences that evidently separate one from the other) to be full and complete freedom, then there is no doubt that *relajo* is an act of liberation and that in exercising it one attains a certain freedom. This, evidently, is the notion of freedom that *internally* presides over the actuality of *relajo*.

But this notion of freedom is twice as illusory. On the one hand, it interprets a mere negation in positive terms: it gives positive value to something that doesn't have it and whose positivity—if it did have any (as in its being an expression of the freedom of action)—does not come from its negative character. To say it in other words: this interpretation ignores the fact that an act of loyalty to value is just as free as an act of negation of value. I am free when I refuse to follow the indications of value or of duty, but [83] I am equally free when I consent to following them, and I follow them effectively. *Relajo* is an attitude that illegitimately identifies rebelliousness with freedom, without seeing that rebelliousness involves freedom in the same way that nonrebelliousness does. One and the other refer in the same way to value: they are activities in the moral order, and therefore, they are *always already* in the realm of

freedom. The interpretation of *relajo* as a liberation toward freedom doesn't realize that its character as a free act does not come from its negation but rather from its spontaneity.

Freedom as pure negation, on the other hand, is not more than a mirage and a deception, since the "freedom from," the negative freedom, is but the negative side of a "freedom to," or the given of responsibility. In the first case, negative freedom is but an aspect of positive freedom that is indeed a genuine liberation, an opening up of the path for effective action in the realization of values. In the second, it is but the negative form of responsibility: I am responsible for my actions; therefore I am *not* absolutely subject to circumstances.

Relajo goes into a blind alley, into the illusion of negative freedom, and it attains only infecundity. It is an action geared toward obstructing action with sense. 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 confusing the pathways of action.

Irony cancels the obstacles that block the paths toward genuine value. *Relajo* mixes up paths, values, and situations; it locks us up into a noisy immanence of facticity that obscures value's authenticity and even makes its existence doubtful. With this, *relajo* closes the channels that connect the immanence of the situation and the transcendence of the value, and it promotes an atmosphere of enclosure and lack of communication.

Humor makes freedom obvious as the immovable place where human responsibility is seated. *Relajo* mimes a movement of freedom that is actually a negation of freedom in search of an escape route toward irresponsibility.

The freedom of the ironist originates in a passionate [84] assuming of responsibility for a value, the pseudofreedom of *relajo*, in a radical refusal to assume that responsibility. Irony points toward a world ordered in the sense of authenticity and of the truth of moral life. *Relajo* is a desperate attempt to prevent moral life from manifesting itself as a spirited appeal to an ennobling and a spiritualization of human life.

The action of the ironist is succeeded by a world unencumbered by the obstacles that oppose the sincere search for truth or of some other value, in which the paths of thought and action appear cleared for human endeavors. The action of the humorist is succeeded by a world

free of the temptation of pathos that proclaims that everything is useless and that humans are inevitably unfortunate beings incapable of remedying their situation. The action of *relajo* is succeeded by a world in which everything stays the same as before, but in which one more failure has occurred in the endeavor of making values come into reality.

Irony wants truth; humor wants freedom; *relajo* wants irresponsibility. The *no* that *relajo* presents in opposition to the realization of value flows into itself. *Relajo*, literally, wants a freedom for nothing; freedom to choose nothing; it promotes disorder so as not to have to do anything in a prolonged action with sense. *Relajo* has irresponsibility as an end.

If, on the other hand, we conceive freedom as a “possession of oneself within an order,” whichever order this may be, as required by the essential reference of freedom to action, then *relajo* appears as a veritable “abdication of oneself in disorder.” Indeed, the notion of “order” in human life is but the a priori condition of action. The word “order” implies an idea of finality. One says that an action is “ordered” “toward an end,” that a feeling is “ordered” toward an object or toward a person.

The idea of “order” highlights a structure of active meaning. An “order” is a state of the world in which the instrumental relationships between action and its ends are clearly visible. Human beings are all the more free the clearer the notion they have of their own function in a perspective of means and ends, the greater authority humans attain [85] over their own situation, thanks to a precise view of “their” ends within a constellation of effective means. The promotion of disorder is, then, strictly equivalent to the muddling of the channels of action, and that is precisely the result of *relajo*. But the action of *relajo* points toward an even more decisive direction. As negation of value, it attempts to suppress even the general direction of the action, since it prevents the clear expression of the ultimate significance of the means and ends themselves. Not only does it render effective action difficult or impossible, but also, with its negativity, it erases the motivation of the action itself: the value. *Relajo* kills action in its cradle. It negates the only thing that gives sense to action; it prevents the light of value light from illuminating the scaffolding of mediate means and ends that would lead to the action’s realization. *Relajo* is a paradoxical inactive call that renders the value’s call sterile. It is the sterilizing action par excellence; it is a moral saltpeter in which action with sense—or what is the same thing, responsible action—cannot grow. After *relajo*, things remain exactly the same as before. Because of this, *relajo* cannot be considered a “revolutionary”

attitude, as we will see further ahead. Its indisputable effectiveness consists of making another's action ineffective.

Relajo sabotages freedom, while irony and humor—modalities of subjective freedom—clear the paths of action. Nevertheless, the three attitudes [irony, humor, and *relajo*] have something in common. They are, in a sense, responses to a human circumstance in which a value is somehow at stake. Irony annihilates an assumption, and unjustified prestige, and opens up a path for the value. Humor cancels pathos—which is an attitude of desperation toward action. In pathos, the affirmation “There’s nothing that can be done” is implicit. Pathos wants to confirm as insurmountable a state of the world. Humor destroys this confirmation and gives back its transitory character to the situation that pathos wanted to make permanent.

But none of these attitudes denies the axiological situation as a whole. Irony preserves the sense of value and the demand to direct one's life according to this value. Humor does not deny that things are the way the pathetic person sees them, but it leaves open the possibility of overcoming them even if it is only by means of an internal attitude. The ironist and the humorist [86] maintain their unity in contradiction. The ironist is also a serious person. The humorist does not lack the pessimistic clairvoyance that pathos would like to raise to the level of the absolute. One and the other preserve and overcome some of the attitude of their opponents. They don't negate the other absolutely, but rather they transcend the other without losing sight of what is valid in [the other's] attitude. Irony and humor are negations that affirm, negations that negate themselves in an ulterior affirmation. *Relajo*, on the other hand, negates as a whole, all of the situation and its very foundation. The unity of *relajo* depends on a totalitarian negation of what is other. “The other,”³¹ according to what we have described, is a value that an individual calls on in front of all the other individuals; it is an invitation to a common action.

The *relajo* individual does not “internalize” anything of the situation. This person does not accept the invitation, and he or she leaves all the whole [of the situation] “outside.” The ironist and the humorist, in contrast, “assume”; they internalize their opponent in accepting some of the opponent's pretenses. The ironist and the humorist have within themselves some of the very thing that they oppose, whereas the *relajo* individual opposes to the other by externalizing it, by making it other.³²

Ironists assume within themselves the dialectic tension: “pretense toward the value-transcendence of the value.” Humorists assume the tension “adversity-freedom.” *Relajo* individuals simply negate the value in their interior, and with this, they free themselves from all internal tension. The unity of *relajo* is not, then, the tense and dynamic unity of two or several contrasted terms, but rather, it is only the abstract and static unity of a negation pure and simple, without ways out, without mobility, without perspectives for the future. The result is that the counterfigure of *relajo* ends up outside of it. There is a style of relation to value that is a simple and absolute affirmation, just as *relajo* is a simple and absolute negation. By this, I mean to say that the internal and unitary duality that presides over ironic tension and humorous tension does not appear in the field of *relajo*, a field presided rather by an external and binary duality. An equally abstract figure—also equally lacking an internal moral tension in the same way that the *relajo* individual lacks the moral tension found in irony and humor—stands in opposition to the *relajo* individual. Irony is a synthesis of the Sophist’s pretenses and of the philosopher’s aspiration to truth; humor is a synthesis of pathos [87] and of responsible freedom. Then, between *relajo* and its opposite, the “spirit of seriousness,” no synthesis whatsoever is possible. The ironist is, in a certain sense, a universal individual, and the same can be said of the humorist. The *relajo* individual, in contrast, is doomed to singularity, just as is his or her essential counterfigure: the spirit-of-seriousness individual.³³ *Relajo* and the spirit of seriousness are two opposites that cannot be overcome in any synthesis. The ironist is, as we have seen, a serious person who does not take seriously many things that seem serious but really aren’t; [this is] just like the humorist. Seriousness and the ability to make the comic emerge—which is the incidental degradation of some value (even of that of *relajo*) which constitutes the focus of his or her interest—can manifest themselves in unity in one same individual. In contrast, the *relajo* individual “doesn’t take anything seriously.” The seriousness that this type of individual lacks is all condensed in another type of individual, who in Mexico is called “*el apretado*.”

PHYSIOGNOMY OF THE “APRETADO”

“Apretado”³⁴ is the name given in Mexico City slang to the individual afflicted with the spirit of seriousness. Originally, the word seems to have a meaning based, especially, on social class differences. It seems

that the term was first used to designate an individual who was careful to validate his or her position within a hierarchy of social classes. “Apretado” would thus have been a synonym of “snob.”³⁵ But currently, it denotes in general a type of individual of a certain style, one of whose species is the “snob.” This style is none other than the spirit of seriousness, a first outline of which I provided a bit earlier, when we were talking about the individual lacking a “sense of humor.”

The spirit of seriousness is that attitude of consciousness which refuses to take notice of the distance between “being” and “value,” in any manner in which this could occur. In this sense, it can be an incidental determination of any individual. But in the individual that is called an “apretado” in Mexico, this attitude is a habit. The “apretado” individual considers him or herself valuable, without any considerations or reservations of any type. The external expression of this attitude, its most peripheral manifestation, is this individual’s outward appearance. “Apretado” individuals worry about their physical appearance, which is the expression of their internal being. They dress impeccably; they are elegant people, or at least they try at all costs to be so [88]. Their exterior shows the massiveness with no fissures according to which they interpret their own interiority. “Apretado” individuals are a little bit too impeccable; their self-esteem shines forth in their meticulous care for all the details of their external figure. Our colonialist naïveté says that these individuals are “very British,” and they themselves have a—often self-proclaimed—weakness for what they call “good English taste.”

But this is only external; it is a feature of their personality. “Apretado” individuals are elegant, just as they are any other value that they decide to attribute to themselves in their own interiority. For “apretado” individuals, values are not ever-unattainable guides for self-constitution, but rather actual ingredients of their own personalities. Values are not perpetually evanescent regulatory ideas, but rather properties that “apretado” individuals possess, with the calm certainty with which a rock possesses its hardness. To “apretado” individuals, “being” and “value” are carefully identified with each other at that privileged point in the world which is their own person. “Apretado” individuals carry their value in the same way they carry with them their legs or their liver: as a silent and solid cause of pleasure that they caress in their private moments.

In dubbing such an individual an “apretado,” the colloquial language has hit upon the very center of this person’s significance. “Apretado” individuals are compact masses of value; they live themselves on

the inside like a dense volume of value-filled³⁶ “being,” like a bundle of valuable “properties,” conceived according to the model of the properties of a thing. It is not by chance that “apretado” individuals are, essentially, proprietors, although they may not yet possess considerable riches. Perhaps they may not yet be more than an honest official, very intelligent, very effective, and full of qualities. But “apretado” individuals have an infinite advantage over all other individuals: they *are* all these things. No matter what they do, they are intelligent, effective official, full of qualities. If an “apretado” individual says something stupid, if he or she makes a mistake, that doesn’t prove anything, since it will be a stupidity said by a very intelligent person; it will be the mistake of a very effective official. When an “apretado” goes for a walk, an official goes for a walk; when an “apretado” eats, an official eats. An intelligent and efficient person sleeps; a person with good taste walks along the street; a person of talent calmly enjoys breakfast . . .

“Apretado” individuals live in calm possession of their “properties”: intelligence, brilliance, talent, officialness, (perhaps bank-officialness).³⁷ Their being is, likewise, naturally a *having*, a *possessing*—these individuals’ value-filled being glides magically and [89] imperceptibly toward their value-filled possessing. In a certain sense, “apretado” individuals are also their car, their house, their plots of land, their elegant furniture, their works of art. It couldn’t be any other way. Since these individuals have begun to conceive their own being according to the model of things, and since property has started out by being the way in which they relate to themselves, it seems inevitable that property become also their way of referencing the world. “Apretado” individuals are the possessors of their quality-properties as they are of their thing-properties. The general scheme according to which their relationship to other people is founded can be formulated thus: the one who possesses is; the one who does not possess is not.

Very important consequences regarding the position of “apretado” individuals within the Mexican national community are derived from all of this.

In any case, “apretado” individuals seem to be the absolute opposite pole of *relajo* individuals. One could say that the figure of the former is antinomial to that of the latter in all respects. For now, the “apretado” individual seems similar to a fullness of affirmation against the pure negation of the “relajiento” individual. The “apretado” seems to be the positive pole of a unitary correlation, at the other extreme of which

would be the negativity of *relajo*. If, as we have shown, *relajo* implies a nonfreedom, a false, negative freedom, the “apretado” individual could seem to be a bringer of freedom. This individual would be genuinely free.

But this is false: such a manner of reasoning is not more than an abstraction. Within reality, the spirit of seriousness ends up being just as negative and just as lacking in freedom as *relajo*. This will become evident as soon as we examine the way in which “apretado” individuals refer to others.

No doubt, “apretado” individuals begin by conceiving themselves as an impenetrable block of *value-filled being*, and this attitude motivates all their way of relating to the world; a value-filled being is a good, and a good is something that one possesses. But when this good is oneself, possession necessarily implies a relationship with others. Indeed, in the pure relationship with oneself, there is no way to grasp oneself immediately as value-filled. I very well can “consider” [literally, “have”]³⁸ myself intelligent, but I cannot see my intelligence as I see this table in front of me. In order to do this, I would have to adopt someone else’s point of view in relation to myself [90], like . . . I do when I see my image in a mirror. “Apretado” individuals need a mirror that will reflect their inner excellence. Since, for the “apretado” individual, values are not that unattainable transcendence that outlines the pathways of their behavior but rather are real ingredients of their being, and since that value-filled being cannot be contemplated in a reflection that only places it facing itself as a neutral presence, “apretado” individuals are condemned to make themselves present before others in order to seek recognition by them.

That being said, this recognition that “apretado” individuals seek is recognition of “their” value as being-value; they need witnesses, without which their supposed value-filled being would disappear into silence and into unreality. An “apretado” individual 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. An “apretado” individual can only see his or her character of official in the submissive respect of subordinates, even if this only serves as a way to later—when he or she is left alone—hold on to the delicious certainty that he or she is important. “Apretado” people need the admiring gazes of others in order for the sweet certainty of their elegance to rush through their veins. All the actions of “apretado” people are geared

toward this perpetual reading of the self in the other-mirror. These individuals need those testimonies to be able to sustain themselves in their beatific self-esteem. Without noticing it, given their continual orientation toward themselves, “apretado” individuals are condemned to others’ gaze, which to them is indispensable for recovering the stability of their value-filled being. “Apretado” individuals—who start out being a fullness and a self-affirmation—begin to move toward the periphery of their being; they have a need for other people, but not in order to communicate with them. They have a need for other people, not in order to constitute a “we” with them, but rather to negate them while self-affirming themselves: they only need others as spectators of their own excellence. The “apretado” individual begins by affirming him- or herself as essential, but in order to be essential, it is the other who is essential. The other is essential, so he or she can be negated and, in this way, for the “apretado” to recover his or her original essentiality. “Apretado” individuals need the other in order to not be the other; they need others precisely to be able to distinguish themselves from them. The “apretado” individual is one who distinguishes him or herself from others. This is a “distinguished person.” But this person needs to be distinguished by others. Nobody can be distinguished by him- or herself. Being distinguished cannot be anybody’s intrinsic determination. To this negation, which the others must [91] exert on this individual by “distinguishing” him or her, there corresponds a negation that the “apretado” individual performs on the others: he or she excludes them. “Apretado” individuals are “distinguished” by others; but to themselves, they are “exclusive.” “Exclusivity” is the supreme category in the world of the “apretado.” “Apretado” individuals eat at exclusive restaurants; they attend exclusive schools; they belong to exclusive circles. In this way, a type of competition of exclusivities is established: the greater the exclusivity, the greater the value, until one reaches—by elimination—a supreme degree of exclusivity that constitutes the paradise of “apretado” individuals. Their supreme aspiration is to belong to the most exclusive of exclusivities. “Apretado” individuals simply exclude others and distinguish themselves from them. What is left when we exclude “apretado” individuals is an empty and universal concept, just as the very exclusion of the “apretado” individuals is. What remains—purely and simply—is “people” [*gente*]. This structure of exclusions and distinctions is also reflected in the language of our community and has made it possible for the word “people” [*gente*] to mean a positive quality. This concept,

which designates only the human being in an empty and faceless generality, has been transformed in Mexico—thanks to the exclusive activity of “apretado” individuals—into a compliment. In Mexico, one is saying something positive about someone when one says that he or she is “people” [*gente*].³⁹ So and so is “people” or so and so is “very people” means that so and so does not consider him- or herself exceptional; he or she does not exclude other people; this is a generous person with a goodness capable of communicating with and of understanding the other, and so on. It means, all things considered, that Mr. So-and-so is not an “apretado.” This also shows us, on the other hand, the degree to which the influence of the “apretado” has penetrated into Mexico.

But distinction and exclusivity—negative categories—essentially require that which is excluded and that from which one distinguishes oneself. The one who is exclusive and distinguished has to *appear* as exclusive and distinguished, since if one doesn’t appear thus, if one does not “show oneself” in the light of the world of those who participate in the game, one would only be able to adhere to positive, substantial, real determinations in order to be. To exclusiveness and distinction considered as constitutive categories, one must also add ostentation [and] appearances in order to be able to finish the game of reflections that the “apretado” individual establishes in his or her world: a world of negations founded on a false affirmation: the greater the appearance, the greater the distinction and the exclusivity; but at the point of supreme exclusiveness [92], the supposedly embodied value has disappeared. The most exclusive person of exclusive people can be—and often is—an insignificant man or woman who doesn’t even bother to consider him- or herself excellent, one who maintains him or herself in a perpetual nonreflexive ecstasy in the world of appearances.

The belt of negations that constitutes the world of appearances gets tighter each day and ends up excluding even the value-filled being of the naïve “apretado” whose supposed value-filled substance ends up totally out of play when it comes to the hierarchical founding of the world of the “best” [individuals]. The only thing that remains standing is the form of the “apretado’s” relationship with the world: property—and at the extreme opposite—the appearance of property.

All this game of negations is based only on property. The aspiring “apretado” bows reverently before those who possess more than he or she does and despises the mass of those who do not possess. The one who possesses is, and the one who does not possess is not. Within

this horizon, the best thing that can be done in any case is to maintain appearances. The world is like that, and there is nothing more to find out. In this way, “apretado” individuals are slaves of others: slaves of the dispossessed, whom they fear but whom they need in order to be “apretado” and distinguished; slaves of the possessors, whom they fear and they flatter; slaves of appearances to which they subjugate their entire lives; slaves of their apparent virtues and of their maxims, which they consider threatened by negation since “apretado” individuals are immersed in a world of negations. They are continually obligated to stand up for these virtues and maxims, since casting doubt on them is equivalent to casting doubt on themselves. They are slaves of property, doomed to pursue it or to simulate it in order to be valuable, or—to say the same thing—in order to be. “Apretado” individuals are the living denial of freedom. They also do have an idea of freedom, but it is a negative idea, a small idea. Their idea of freedom is limited to the belief that the State has no right to violate private property.

The very same movement through which “apretado” individuals attempt to embody value condemns them to transform this fullness of value into mere appearances. The very same movement with which “apretado” individuals attempt to be a block of affirmation entangles them in a dialectical game in which negation installs itself as a constitutive force of their being. The very same act with which the “apretado” individuals establish themselves in the world as value-filled beings implies [93] a negation of the freedom of others, who are then condemned to be nonvalue filled, and also a negation of their own selves, since if the “apretado” individual’s value is an attribute of his or her being, the foundation of this value is not a free and contingent choice but rather a necessary attribute, like extent is a necessary attribute of things. Freedom then ends up “outside,” conceived of negatively as independence, as nonobstruction by others of the field of the “apretado” individual’s activities, and above all as nonintervention by the State in the “apretado’s” property [issues]. In this sense, the “apretado” individual loves freedom, but when he or she hears this very same word on the lips of the nonpossessors, his or her capacity for love becomes irresistibly attracted to another magic word: “order.” Deep down, “apretado” individuals love order more than freedom. Order is that stable situation of society that allows these individuals to play the exclusivity game and to give themselves the pleasure of embodying value. The objective expression of that order is Law. Law allows “apretado” individuals to comfortably

be all of what they are: an efficient official, a prosperous proprietor, an exemplary human being.

Relajo individuals, in contrast, detest order, and they destroy it whenever they can. Nevertheless, both *relajo* individuals and “apretado” individuals conceive of freedom as independence and as negation, which does not prevent these two—as moral styles—from being on opposite poles. “Apretado” individuals not only “have” a negative notion of freedom, but they also embody—with their attitude—an actual negation of the freedom of *people*, of those people from whom they simply demand the recognition of their value and respect for their person. “Apretado” individuals demand not only the recognition of value by positioning themselves next to the others in the attitude of respect, but they also demand recognition of themselves as value-filled beings before others. The other must bow respectfully before the “apretado” individual, without any hope of participating with this individual in the realization of value, since the apretado individual is the value. When others refuse to be submissive, “apretado” individuals refer to them as “alzado” or “levantado,”⁴⁰ that is to say, individuals who refuse to bow down. “Apretado” individuals essentially want others to submit to them; they want them to bend. From this, we derive the fullness of meaning and the popular resonance of the expression “I break but I don’t bend,” as a response to an attitude of rebelliousness that “apretado” individuals provoke with their monopolizing pretense of being value in its fullness. This monopoly and the personal preeminence [94] to which “apretado” individuals aspire dissolve all the possibilities for the formation of a community that is genuine in its contours. The individual who considers him- or herself value-filled or fully significant radiates sterility and distance. If such an individual is an intellectual, his or her vulnerable points become veritable taboos. The slightest dissent from his or her opinions is considered by this person as serious as an insult, because his or her character as a “source” of value suffers a crisis. To dissent is to suppose that something worthy of attention exists (even if it is pure truth) apart from this person, and, thus, dissenting is to rob the “apretado” of his or her own substance because it diverts the attention of others [away from him or her]—and “apretado” individuals need such attention in order to be what they are. Dialogue is impossible with an “apretado” individual. Genuine dialogue presupposes the transcendence and the evanescence of value; but when value is there—completely made out of flesh and English cashmere—the only thing left to do is listen attentively and

assent respectfully, or dissent—but not a lot and only with the greatest possible prudence. If the “apretado” individual is a Catholic, he or she possesses Catholicism. This person is definitely, infinitely, and irrevocably Catholic, just as a stone is definitely, infinitely, and irrevocably a stone. It doesn’t matter, for example, that in their professions “apretado” individuals allow themselves to be rogues. Those are things of no importance. [These] “apretado” individuals absorbed Catholicism through their mothers’ milk. They have Catholic blood, Catholic bones, Catholic entrails—although this does not prevent them from despising priests a bit and from speaking about the fanaticism of pilgrimages to the Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe. “Apretado” individuals possess an infinite and perfect source of justification that will allow them—if not always to “be,” at least to always “be in good.”⁴¹ The “apretado” individual’s exceptional person possesses an overwhelmingly comforting protection because it also protects his or her property. The gates of hell—both of the religious and of the social one—will not prevail against him or her. There are twenty centuries (twenty centuries!) of tradition giving this individual a pat on the back and telling him or her that everything is going well. Against twenty centuries of tradition, Communism is a storm in a teacup. “We Catholics have been through a lot worse.” Catholic tradition is an extremely comfortable seat, and Francisco Franco has proven in Spain that even bayonets can end up not being entirely uncomfortable.

Both the freedom of the “apretado” individual and that of the “relajiento” are negative freedoms. That is why, in both attitudes there is a negation of community. One and the other dissolve the community—which can only be founded upon a value that is transcendental [95] to its members.

Indeed the foundation of a community, coexistence, can be thought of as the continuous self-constitution of a group in reference to a value. Value as a model or 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. “Apretado” individuals negate the transcendence of value appropriating it for them and thus turning themselves into the *foundation* of the community. But, as we have seen, “apretado” individuals come to be involved in a dialectic in which this attitude reveals itself to be exactly the opposite: the “apretado” turns out to be the foundation of the dissolution of the community by means of the double negation of distinction

and exclusion. For their part, *relajo* individuals prevent the integration of the community by preventing the manifestation of the value.

“Relajientos” and “apretados” constitute two poles of dissolution of that difficult task on which we have all embarked: the constitution of a Mexican community, of a genuine community, and not of a society divided into proprietors and the dispossessed.

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Notes

Chapter One

1. Fuentes was intimately aware of Portilla and Portilla's associates. In an interview with *La Jornada* in 1993, he claims to have been a "really good friend of Portilla's." When asked about Portilla and his associates, the members of el Grupo Hiperión, he says: "Se trataba de gente de inteligencia excepcional. Yo fui muy amigo de Jorge Portilla. Lo sigo siendo de Leopoldo Zea, de Luis Villoro. Fue mucha la gente que participó en ese movimiento. Fue un momento sumamente serio, de gran reflexión, de imaginación también, que abrazó a muchas generaciones, que incluía a españoles como De Novilla, a gente de generaciones anteriores, como Alfonso Reyes, que publicó *La x en la frente*, en la colección México y lo Mexicano; en fin, creo que fue un momento de reflexión, un paso hacia adelante, un dejar ciertas cosas atrás. A mí me parece importantísimo que Reyes haya publicado *La x en la frente* y recordado a todos a través de *A vuelta de correo* que el nacionalismo estrecho es algo que nos reduce, que nos empobrece, que nos empequeñece y que no tenemos por qué cargar complejos para hacer una literatura que, como dijo el propio Reyes, será buena por ser literatura y no por ser mexicana" (Solares 1993).
2. "Confíaba en la voluntad de los hombres si no para vencer si para no dejarse vencer."
3. The phrase "borracho, parrandero y jugador" is a line from a popular Mexican song, "El Corrido de Juan Charrasquiado," written by

Victor Cordero. Juan Charrasquiado is gunned down by a cowardly bunch, and the song tells his tale. It remembers a man loved by women, a gambler (*jugador*), a drinker (*borracho*), and a wanderer (*parrandero*) whose life, as the song itself testifies, was both tragic and heroic.

4. According to Michael, however, Portilla's failure was not as offensive as that of Leopoldo Zea, an original member of el Grupo Hiperión and the leading Latin American philosopher at the time of his death in 2004, who leaves the project of a "Mexican philosophy" behind to deal with the problem of a "Latin American" philosophy, "an even bigger stupidity, if simply for quantitative reasons" (Michael 1996, 10).
5. Portilla 1984 will be the primary text for the remainder of this investigation. It will be cited frequently throughout. Hence, I will cite it by placing the page number within square brackets [pg], to distinguish it from the rest of the secondary literature. The page numbers, in brackets, refer to the pagination of the Spanish text, which is translated in the appendix of this work.
6. Not only is there a lack of an English equivalent, but Portilla's project depends on the uniqueness of the word. So I leave it in its original. While I am not trying to consciously play with the rules of translation, my approach is similar to that of John McCumber, who "translates" Martin Heidegger's "Gestell" (in quotes) as *Gestell* (sans quotes). See (McCumber 1999).
7. José Gaos is the first translator of *Sein und Zeit*. His influence on Mexican thought is immensurable.
8. This work is a collection of lectures delivered in 1945, which has also been published as *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. It seems to have been available in Spanish as early as 1946, via a translation of Manuel Cardenal.

Chapter Two

1. For a first-person account of this group, its formation and dissolution, see Guerra 1984.
2. The intellectuals who fled Spain did not consider themselves "exiles" or "refugees"; rather they thought of themselves as "transplanted" into a different patch of their Hispanic soil, but nevertheless into a

- circumstance that they would have to reckon with. For more on the *transterrados* who took up residence in Mexico, see Oliver 1993.
3. Domínguez Michael writes: “Few episodes of our intellectual past have been forgotten as quickly as [Hyperion]” (Michael 1997, 8).
 4. Another way to explain the adoption of “Hiperión” as the group’s public image is provided by Hurtado: “If Hiperión was, according to the group myth, son of the heavens and the earth, they [the members of the philosophical group] aimed to realize a synthesis of the universal and the particular” (Hurtado 2006, xiii).
 5. “*Lo mexicano*” cannot be consistently translated as “*the Mexican*,” as one would assume, since the intention by these thinkers is to speak of a particular *manner* or *mode of being Mexican* which “the Mexican” leaves out; “the Mexican” will be reserved for “*el mexicano*,” which actually refers to concrete Mexican individuals. I mentioned above that the theme of Hyperion’s project was grounded on a philosophical understanding of “*lo mexicano*.” Literally translated, “*lo mexicano*” means “that which is Mexican,” or, even, *Mexicanness*. Thus, Portilla, Zea, and Uranga ask: *What is Mexicanness?* This is a question which guides their studies into history, values, and ontology. But can we even ask such a question *philosophically* without seeming relativistic or unnecessarily provincial? Indeed, a respected chronicler of Mexican philosophy, Abelardo Villegas, asks rhetorically: “Is a philosophy of *lo mexicano* possible?” (Villegas 1979). In other words, can philosophy genuinely engage the theme of *lo mexicano*—or “that which is Mexican”—at all? It is a rhetorical question because for Villegas philosophy must treat of universal concerns so that when philosophers ask about a particular *sort of living*, such as Mexican, they are not asking a genuinely philosophical question. So, no, a philosophy of *lo mexicano* is not possible—nor its attempt advisable, according to Villegas. But it was with the “philosophical question” of *lo mexicano* that Hyperion was concerned. So were they, then, *not* doing philosophy? As early as 1952, Emilio Uranga considered this objection as grounded on the stubbornness of the colonial influence. In section 9 of *Being and Time*, Uranga read the following: “That Being which is an *issue* for this entity in its very Being, is in each case mine. Thus Dasein is never to be taken ontologically as an instance or a special case of some genus of entities as things that are present-at-hand . . . Because Dasein has *in each case mineness* [*Jemeinigkeit*], one must always use the *personal* pronoun

when one addresses it: 'I am,' 'you are.'" Uranga interpreted this as a way around the European bias. The *being* to be interrogated *could only be* Mexican! That is, if the question is the question of existence or the ontological question of being, the being of the Mexican (a Dasein which is "mine") must be that which is interrogated *because* of its proximity to the questioning. This meant that *lo mexicano* served as a stand-in for humanness. In fact, *lo mexicano* was a metaphor in the language of the Mexican experience for all human experience. It had to be; *lo mexicano*, or "that which is Mexican," was the most proximal being. Uranga writes in *Análisis del ser del mexicano* that to begin the phenomenological interrogation with "man in general" presupposed an intuition which was unattainable in principle, one constituted in part by a European bias toward *its own* "substantial" conception of man (see Uranga 1952; also Sánchez 2008). Ultimately, the focus on *lo mexicano* is meant as a way to access the realm of the universal through the particular, but as "belonging" to Mexicans, it is the only way. Mexican reality, properly understood, ought to reveal structures of human existence which are not just events of a Mexican experience, but which are events of experience in general. What is more important, however, is that these universal aspirations mean that Mexican reality must give up its secrets in the process of its testimony—secrets which should give way to praxis and liberation.

6. As Hurtado tells us, this group was not merely a group of intellectuals with similar interests, but "an investigative team" intent on "bringing about profound transformations" in Mexico and in Mexicans (Hurtado 2006, xi).
7. English translations of Zea's work abound. The secondary work is also vast. For a well-written analysis of his thought see Sáenz 1999. In *The Making of the Mexican Mind*, Romanell attends a great deal to Zea and his philosophical contributions. Hiperion, on the other hand, he says, is in its youth as a movement (this was 1952), so he skips it (See Romanell 1952, 184).
8. An example of this view is J. L. Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. He begins chapter 15 with the sentence, "There are no objective values," and he proceeds to show how all values are subjective. (Mackie 1991).
9. We can say that "relajo" is a "metaphor" for the activity Portilla describes, which makes proper translation even harder. As Derrida

reminds us, “Metaphor [is] a provisional loss of meaning” (Derrida 1982, 270).

10. *Choteo*, like *relajo*, is impossible to properly translate. I am doing it here, since my aim is not to offer a sustained analysis. “Raillery” comes close in that it preserves the essential characteristics of *choteo* without *adding* new significations. I will alternate between the English and the Spanish.
11. For a short yet informative article on Cantinflas’ life and work, see the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Latin American and Caribbean Cultures* (Balderston et.al. 2000, 274ff).

Chapter Three

1. As Merleau-Ponty pointed out, “For Sartre, there are no causes which can truly act upon consciousness. Consciousness is total, absolute freedom” (Merleau-Ponty 1998, 501).
2. As Reyes puts it: “In our own time [*relajo*] is something kids do, a matter of college pranks. These days, chaos [*desmadre*] has its time, its place . . . its music” (Reyes 2003).

Chapter Four

1. What I am calling the “particular-universal structure” of Mexican philosophy can be seen most clearly in Portilla’s predecessor, the philosopher Samuel Ramos. Ramos was the first, in his 1934 *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, to subject Mexican culture and the Mexican character to philosophical scrutiny. It is an understatement to say that Ramos set the agenda for what was to come, first with Zea and then with Paz, Emilio Uranga, and Portilla. In Ramos, the particular character complexes of Mexicans are raised to the level of universality, where they are inserted into a vision of humanity and set as examples of what is lacking and what is required for human, and not just Mexican, overcoming. Observing that “Mexicans up to now have not cared about getting to the bottom of culture . . . [but] instead . . . have been dazzled by its brilliant outward effects” (Ramos 1982, 95; Gracia and Millán-Zaibert 2004, 285), Ramos adds, “We must have the courage to be ourselves and the humility

to accept the life that fate bestowed upon us without being ashamed of its poverty” (Ramos 1982, 91; Gracia and Millán-Zaibert 2004, 282). This last statement is a statement carrying universal weight, but is one picked out of the rubble of his particular deconstructions. “By Mexican culture,” he concludes, “we mean universal culture made over into *our own*” (Ramos 1982, 95; Gracia and Millán-Zaibert 2004, 285).

2. By history, I mean the history of philosophy, which resists recognizing its other. As Zea puts it: “The history of philosophy [. . .] is also the history of Western culture . . . However, that history never offered the possibility that someone might ask whether or not he or she had a right to Logos [Verbo, Logos o Palabra], even if that same inquisitiveness already signals the use of this right” (Zea 1952, 10).
3. According to Zirión Quijano’s *Historia de la fenomenología en México*, the history of phenomenology in Mexico is “the history of *Husserlian* phenomenology in Mexico” (Zirión 2004, 22).
4. Amy Oliver, who has been at the forefront in the effort to introduce Mexican philosophy into the US academy, argues against the view that these “other” philosophies are somehow lacking in seriousness. “If serious philosophy is not a skill or a method,” she writes, “but an attempt to embody vital truths that make life intelligible and provide a way to orient everyday living, then serious philosophy is done in Mexico” (Oliver 1993, 218).
5. Husserl explains this method in his *Encyclopedia Article*: “This *eidós* must manifest itself throughout all the potential forms of mental being in particular cases, must be present in all the synthetic combinations and self-enclosed wholes, if it is to be at all ‘thinkable,’ that is, intuitively phantasized or objectified” (Husserl 1971, 80).
6. The claim here is that Portilla’s philosophical tendencies are in line with those of the European phenomenologists who dictated the manner in which phenomenology would be practiced worldwide. It is true that Portilla belongs to a rich history of philosophy in Mexico, one which finds its most significant moments with the antipositivists of the early part of the twentieth century. These early thinkers would dictate an “authentic” direction for Mexican philosophy, one that moved away from positivism’s “depreciation of traditional Mexican culture and institutions in favor of an attempt to copy, at least symbolically, the organizations and ideologies of more ‘advanced’ Western nations” (Weinstein 1976, 1). The authentic direction mapped

out in particular by Antonio Caso and José Vasconcelos was thus one aimed toward the rediscovery of the Mexican's role in the cosmos (see Hurtado 2010). While Portilla's project is ultimately one aimed toward a similar goal, the cultural crisis which is the subject of his essay is one never before subjected to philosophical scrutiny. For this reason he considers the philosophical methodologies of his predecessors inadequate, or, at least, not up to the task. As he says in the first pages of the essay, no one, or *no philosophers*, would consider what he does here "serious philosophy." Hence, he undertakes his deconstruction as if from a presuppositionless starting point.

Chapter Five

1. Of course, "colonialism" is not a *place* to which one can *go back*. It is a persistent condition of subjugation and dependence which imposes itself in various forms, not all of them material or economic. In Mexico, material and economic colonialism is traced back to the devastating arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century. After the wars of independence in the nineteenth century, colonialism persists as a form of power and hegemony which infiltrates all aspects of Mexican life. This infiltration is what interests me, since values which regulate obedience, propriety, and civil conduct, for instance, represent the colonialism one can *go back* to.
2. These philosophers did not problematize their notion of "Mexicans," which means that Mexicans were assumed to be largely homogenous. José Gaos pointed out this difficulty in his critiques of the project (Gaos 1954).

Chapter Six

1. By "axiological imperialism," I mean the manner in which value schemes can be presented as absolute by those in positions of power. Axiological imperialism follows, and is sometimes motivating, the political and cultural conquest or oppression of peoples throughout the world.
2. "Historical reason" is opposed to "instrumental reason." Historical reason privileges the value of the past for the sake of self-knowledge

and internal/external liberation. If Portilla were to criticize instrumental reason on the basis of historical reason, *relajo* would be seen as a move against the seduction of the technological life-world which instrumental reason has created. It would seem, instead, as a nostalgic withdrawal to a space lacking in commitments and impervious to the demands of *what matters to us now* (our “modern” values).

3. Portilla himself is indecisive on this issue. On page 20 he calls *relajo* “reflexive,” on page 22 he says that “it is not an introspection,” and on 39 he says that *relajo* is not “spontaneous.” We would have to conclude from this that *relajo*, as a disruptive act, involves a reflection which does not involve *thinking* about the disruption itself (as one would do in introspection) but only about disrupting. *Relajientos* are not very effective consequentialists, it seems—another reason why they are an offense to instrumental reason.
4. One could, possibly, take Portilla’s characterization of *relajo* in an entirely different direction and argue that to bring about the “state” of *relajo* is akin to brining about that state of nothingness and indecision which Sextus Empiricus spoke about in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. There, Sextus Empiricus tells us: “Skepticism . . . places in antithesis, in any manner whatever, appearances and judgments, and thus—because of the equality of objects and arguments opposed—to come first of all to a suspension of judgment and then to mental tranquility” (Empiricus 1964, 32). However, Pyrrhonian skepticism is completely rational. It has an end: tranquility. *Relajo* does not have this end in mind. Tranquility of some sort might be achieved, but only accidentally, and surprisingly.

Translation

1. The first edition of this work was published by Ediciones ERA in 1966. The following text is a translation based on the 1984 Biblioteca Joven edition, *Fenomenología del relajo y otros ensayos*. México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica. Numbers in square brackets [page numbers] refer to the 1984 edition. I thank the Fondo de Cultura Económica for permission to publish the translation of Portilla’s essay in its entirety.—Translator’s note.
2. In the original text, the expression is “la situación del hombre,” “the

situation of man.” Keeping in mind that Portilla wrote at a time when the terms “hombre” (man) and “hombres” (men) could also denote human beings and humanity in general and were not limited to the designation of male humans, gender-inclusive language has been employed in the present translation. English terms such as “human being,” “human,” “humankind,” “individual,” “person,” and “people” have been used in place of the Spanish equivalents for “man” and “men” when these do not necessarily denote males—Translator’s note.

3. In the original, “el recogimiento del trabajo.” The noun *recogimiento* has strong religious connotations and usually refers to the act of withdrawing or isolating oneself from social contact (sometimes to or within a monastery or convent) to concentrate one’s thoughts on inner spiritual activities such as meditation.—Translator’s note.
4. In the original, “el prójimo” (used and translated as “one’s neighbor” in religious contexts).—Translator’s note.
5. In the original “una desolidarización,” literally an act or action of dissolidarity.—Translator’s note.
6. By an action that Husserl calls “phenomenological reduction.” Author’s footnotes will be numbered.
7. In the original, “el relajamiento de una situación seria.” The *-miento* suffix attached to a verb root transforms the verb into an abstract noun and roughly corresponds to the English suffix “(en)ing,” as in the word “awakening” (the act of waking). The word “relajamiento,” which exists in Spanish and normally means “a relaxing,” is being used here by Portilla in a new sense as part of a creative play on words which would translate as “a *relajo*-ing,” or transformation of a situation into *relajo*.—Translator’s note.
8. In the language of E. Husserl, the “noema” of *relajo* is a value, even if the value is merely a noematic nucleus; the full noema is the theme: “negated value,” “value put in parenthesis,” “neutralized value,” “value to be degraded in the name of another value,” etc. The noematic nucleus (the value pure and simple) remains always invariable with its essential constituent of appealing to my freedom, but the aura of negation that unites with the nucleus to constitute the full noema points back retrospectively to the noesis: “negation of the value,” “comparative degrading of the value,” etc. as a mere noetic correlate and not as a *psychological act*. The displacement of attention and the self-positioning in lack of solidarity are, then,

essential characteristics that can be read in the intentional horizon of *relajo* as such and not as “real,” individual, localizable, and datable psychological movements of the individual that provokes *relajo*. This is to say, the “intimate” nature of *relajo* alludes rather to an activity (noesis) rather than to a psychological “interiority.” On the other hand, a psychological interiority lends itself to introspective reflection, to the degree that the operation that allows us to grasp the described phenomena is a phenomenological reflection.

9. “*Echar relajo*” is an idiomatic expression that means “to create *relajo*.” *Echar* is a verb with multiple meanings, used in a wide variety of idiomatic expressions in Spanish. Some of the meanings of *echar* include, “to throw” (*echar la pelota*: “to throw the ball”) to expel, to fire, or to let out (*echar de la escuela*: “to expel from school”), to put or pour in (*echar sal*: “to put salt in”), to emit or to give off (*echar chispas*: “to give off sparks”), and to tell (*echar mentiras*: “to tell lies”). Portilla’s play on words hinges on the idiomatic expression “ *echar relajo*” and the most basic meaning of the verb *echar*, “to throw.”—Translator’s note.
10. The positional consciousness of a “seriousness to be suspended” with respect to a value is not a positional consciousness of “my decision” to suspend seriousness, no matter how much a nonpositional consciousness of my activity may be inherent to that prereflexive positional consciousness. In *relajo*, the individual is in the world, dislocating a situation articulated by the realization of a value, and not deliberating with him- or herself or contemplating his or her future behavior or emotional moods.

It is not hidden to me that these assertions bring up the problem of the possibility of a prereflexive consciousness and that of an involuntary action that, not because of this, is unconscious or lacking in purpose. Such an issue, no matter how important it may be in and of itself, cannot be dealt with in detail within the limits of this essay without excessively diverting it from its main purpose.

11. Mario Moreno, known as “Cantinflas” (1911–1993) was a widely famous Mexican comic film actor whose films combined comedy with social commentary. He is best known for slapstick humor highly dependent on gestures and body movements and for his use of a discourse full of nonsense to achieve comic effects.—Translator’s note.

12. The term “fiesta” (“party”) has been left in the original Spanish in most instances in the translation, in part because of the uniquely Mexican cultural overtones the term has, which the English term “party” does not quite capture.—Translator’s note.
13. In the original, “un relajiento.” The word “*relajiento*” literally means “full of *relajo*,” since the *-iento* (feminine form *-ienta*) suffix in Spanish primarily means “full of” and corresponds roughly to the English suffix *-y* attached to nouns to transform them into adjectives meaning “full of (a particular thing),” as in the words “greasy” (full of grease) or “hungry” (full of hunger). However, unlike in English, the Spanish suffix *-iento* meaning “full of” generally carries a pejorative nuance and is used as an adjective maker attached to nouns that denote things with at least some negative semantic characteristics or connotations. For example, the *-iento* suffix can be found attached to nouns such as *mugre* (grime, dirt), *grasa* (grease), *polvo* (dust), *pulgas* (fleas), *sangre* (blood), and *hambre* (hunger) to produce the adjectives *mugriento* (grimy or dirty), *grasiento* (greasy), *polvoriento* (dusty), *pulguiento* (flea-ridden or full of fleas), *sangriento* (bloody), and *hambriento* (hungry), respectively. The attachment of the suffix *-iento* on the noun *relajo* produces the adjective *relajiento*, a word with a decidedly pejorative ring. Since many adjectives in Spanish can be used as nouns by preceding them with an article, the expression “un relajiento” means “one who is full of *relajo*.”—Translator’s note.
14. The concept of the “German joke” or “chiste alemán” denotes a type of joke that makes fun of cultural or linguistic stereotypes associated with a particular nationality or the sounds of a particular foreign language. A similar—although not entirely analogous—concept for English speakers might be so-called “Polish jokes.”—Translator’s note.
15. The original text says “vivable” (livable) instead of “visible” (visible). This is a quite obvious typographical error in the original edition, since “vivable” does not make sense in the context of the sentence while “visible” does.—Translator’s note.
16. *Philosophie du Rire et des Pleurs* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1949).
17. It isn’t clear that the comic provokes laughter. William James asserts that the comic is created by laughter. At the bottom of such an

opposition of opinions lies the philosophical problem of the opposition between realism and idealism. The problem of the primacy of the object or of the subject in the theory of knowledge extends to all fields of reality and reveals its difficulty very conspicuously in this little issue of laughter, in which one can clearly see the difficulty of reducing the origins of the phenomenon [laughter] to either of the two terms at stake.

18. In the original, “a mandibula batiente” (literally, “with beating jaw”).—Translator’s note.
19. In the original, “la clave del ‘es’ a la clave del ‘tal vez’” (literally the key of the “is” to the key of the “perhaps”).—Translator’s note.
20. Freedom, as a given of human action as a priori condition of attribution can be negated by a theory that explains human beings using nature or another nonhuman or nonpersonal entity as a starting point. But theories, no matter how coherent or ingenious they are, cannot erase the conditions of possibility from human behavior. Theories are always secondary with respect to those conditions, and they themselves presuppose them as conditions of their own possibility, since it is always possible for human beings to negate or to affirm anything by means of any theory. What can be achieved with some of these [theories] is that some individuals decide to adopt any behavior without assuming the responsibility that the behavior implies, [rather] transferring their responsibility to history, to destiny, to their blood, to their boss, to passion, or to any other thing. The results can be unfortunate. By following this path, a type of degraded or “dehumanized” human being can emerge, although this in no way means a nonhuman being.
21. It is evident that what these days is called “economic freedom” is nothing other than a particular form of political freedom. To the degree that the instrument of domination that inhibits the evolution of the person until his or her fulfillment is the system of production and not simply the polity or the exclusion of one [social] caste by another, the reform of the system of production becomes the means of a *liberation that is economic in its content but political in its form*. Undoubtedly, a person abandoned on the periphery of the community in an individualistic society lacks the necessary means for full development and therefore is and “feels” “less free” than one who has access to such means, since this individual has a limited field of choice. *Political freedom means, then, on the one hand, a greater number of possibilities for self-realization and, on*

the other, easy access to the means necessary to it. In the case of the marginal individual, possibilities and the means of attaining them are considerably limited, but this does not strip this individual of the subjective freedom that allows him or her to be a revolutionary; *to be a revolutionary* is not an economic determination but rather a political one, although it may be conditioned by economics.

22. In the original, “relajaciones” (“relaxations”). The word “relajaciones” is a synonym of “relajamientos” in its usual sense to mean “relaxings.” However, considering the context of the passage and Portilla’s previous play on words with the noun “relajamiento” to mean the “transformation of a situation into *relajo*,” it is unlikely that this is another pun to mean “transformations into *relajo*.” The context points more convincingly to the possibility of a typographical error for “relaciones” (relationships). Indeed, in the section that follows the passage, Portilla deals with the relationships of irony, humor, seriousness, and the spirit of seriousness to freedom.—Translator’s note.
23. In the original, Portilla uses the verb “estar,” one of two main verbs in Spanish meaning “to be.” “Estar” usually denotes being in a location or in a state or condition. It is not used to denote being as existence. By using this verb, rather than “existir,” “to exist,” Portilla may be emphasizing the “location” or “place” of irony within human beings or history rather than the existence of irony.—Translator’s note.
24. The expression “poner banderillas *al quiebro*” refers to a maneuver in bullfighting in which the bullfighter—when applying the *banderillas* (sharp-pointed metal rods decorated with crinkled crepe paper) to the bull’s neck—runs up to the bull and then shifts his body sideways at the waist, dodging the charging animal.—Translator’s note.
25. “Menudo”: a typical Mexican soup made with beef stomach and tripe.
26. Comadre: technically, the godmother of one’s child.
27. This is a possible typographical error. The original says “resentido el alivio” (“felt pain in, resented the relief”) rather than “sentido el alivio,” “felt the relief.” The idea of feeling relief with the absence of the self-satisfied individual makes more logical sense given the context of the passage.—Translator’s note.
28. In the original, “el chiste y la broma”; both “chiste” and “broma” correspond to the English noun “joke.” However, there is a nuance of difference between the two terms. A *chiste* usually denotes the

- kind of joke that one tells. It follows some type of formula and has a punch line. A *broma* can be a practical joke that one plays on someone, or it can be an act of joking. The translation attempts to capture the nuances of the original by distinguishing between the joke (which is told to someone) and joking (which can include practical jokes played on someone).—Translator’s note.
29. These references and the previous ones regarding Kierkegaard can be found in the edition of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Princeton University Press, 441ff.
 30. *Ibid*, 259.
 31. In the original, “lo otro,” with the neuter pronoun “lo” instead of the definite article “el.” Portilla here is not referring to the concept of “the other” as a person who is other. “Lo otro,” in this context, denotes “that which is other,” as opposed to “el otro” “the person who is the other.”
 32. The expression in the original is “ajeno,” meaning “belonging to another,” “alien,” or “foreign” (not belonging inside something).—Translator’s note.
 33. In the original “el hombre del espíritu de seriedad,” literally “the man of the spirit of seriousness.”—Translator’s note.
 34. “El apretado,” literally, “the tight one.”
 35. Portilla uses the English term “snob” in the original text. The English term exists in Spanish as a loan word.—Translator’s note.
 36. The Spanish term here is “valioso,” usually translated as “valuable.” Although the term can and does mean the same thing as the English “valuable,” it has been rendered as “value-filled” in this translation because this expression captures the nuance of the Spanish “-oso (feminine -osa)” suffix, a suffix that corresponds roughly to the English -ous and means “full of” something. The English word “valuable,” in contrast, has the -able suffix, which means “able to be ____-ed,” as in “lovable” (able to be loved). Thus, “valuable” conveys the idea of “able to be valued, or worthy of being valued,” whereas the Spanish “valioso” conveys the idea of being filled with value. Portilla seems very aware of this linguistic nuance, since he asserts that “apretado” individuals consider themselves “filled” with value.—Translator’s note.
 37. Here, Portilla plays once again with suffixes and exhibits his sense of humor. He creates new abstract nouns by adding the -(e)dad suffix,

which is roughly equivalent in this context to the English suffix “-ness.” The original text says “funcionariado” (literally official-ness, the property of being a *funcionario*, or bureaucratic official) and *bancariado* (literally “of a bank-ness,” derived from the adjective “bancario,” meaning “of or pertaining to banks.” One of his sample “apretado” individuals, then, seems to be a “funcionario bancario (bank official), who is filled with “bank-official-ness.”—Translator’s note.

38. Here, Portilla plays with the form and meaning of an idiomatic expression in Spanish that hinges on the verb “tener” (to “have” or to “possess”). The expression “tener por” or “tenerse por” followed usually by an adjective, means “to consider someone” or “to consider oneself,” respectively, as having a certain quality. Literally, one “has oneself (as) _____”; “tenerse por inteligente” is literally “to have oneself as intelligent.”—Translator’s note.
39. The feminine collective noun “gente,” meaning “people” (as in a group of more than one person), is plural in meaning but grammatically singular in form. However, “gente” can be used adjectivally, especially in certain idiomatic expressions, to describe a singular person. A single person can be described as being “*buena gente*” (nice, friendly), “*mala gente*” (mean, unfriendly), “gente de bien” (doing good or having goodwill), or “gente bien” (upper class, wealthy). When Portilla says that a particular individual is “people,” or “very people,” he is using “gente” as an adjective to describe the individual, not as a predicate noun equivalent to “person.” He is not affirming the individual’s personhood or asserting that the individual is “a person.”—Translator’s note.
40. “Alzado” or “levantado,” literally “raised”; the closest English equivalent might be “uppity” when applied to servants.—Translator’s note.
41. In the original, “ser [el bien],” “to be [the good]” and “estar en el bien,” “to be in the good.” Portilla here plays with the grammatical distinction between the two verbs meaning “to be” in Spanish, *ser* and *estar*. “Ser” is usually used to denote being associated with characteristics seen as part of the “essence” of a person or thing. It also denotes existential being and is always used with predicate nouns, when “to be” means “to equal”; hence “ser el bien” would mean “to be or to equal the good.” In contrast, “estar” is primarily used

to denote being in a particular state or condition—which may be temporary or permanent—or in a particular location. Thus, “estar en el bien” might convey the notion of “to be within the location of the good” or “to be in the state of the good.”—Translator’s note.

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