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SERIOUS SUBJECTS: ON VALUES, TIME, AND DEATH

Abstract

*In this paper, we consider a phenomenology of seriousness after the Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla. Thought about as an intentional relation between a subject and values (or rules), seriousness is represented in subjective behavior as commitment, loyalty, and adherence to values (or rules). We consider the displacement of that commitment via disruptions that invert values. Following Portilla, we refer to these displacements as *relajo*. We also consider the relationship between seriousness and freedom and seriousness and liberation. With Portilla, we reflect on the example of punctuality. For the serious subject, punctuality is a significant value, and its realization (being punctual) demands the greatest commitment. Of course, can one ever be punctual? Our reflections on punctuality lead us to the idea that death is the absolute fulfillment of a serious commitment to punctuality, as being absolutely on time is to be incapable of being late, an incapacity that only death can make possible.*

1. *The What of Seriousness*

Asking about the “what” of seriousness, is asking into the essence of seriousness. Looking for its commonalities among its various social or everyday instantiations, seriousness appears as a virtue characterizing someone with a calm, steady, and sober character; a virtue whose vices are any behaviors that betray calm, steadiness, and sobriety. Thus, in our everyday interactions, seriousness refers to subjects, particularly, to a subject’s demeanor. (We might say that “the matter is serious,” referring then to a situation that is urgent or requires attention, but the seriousness of that matter will ultimately refer us back to a subject that will, must, or should take it serious. The matter, on its own, cannot be serious.)

The subject who is a serious subject is regarded as such because she is consistently calm, steady, sober, even-keeled. Her dedication to her task or tasks is immune to interruptions; she is focused and undeterred. Seriousness can also be attributed to a subject who does not reveal himself emotionality, so that despite the calamity, he maintains composure, dealing with the event in his own way, from within. Thus we say that he is “always serious” when he is unemotional. However, there are also cases in which we attribute seriousness to a subject who is overly emotional, someone whose seriousness reflects an obsessive inner commitment: “he put his fist through the wall because he takes the game too seriously.” We can point to the political aspect of seriousness, which attributes seriousness to political agents that align social behavior to ideology, that fit their beliefs to an overriding political consciousness. There are also

those who we can say are “serious” because they think before they act. They are the last to be suspected of a crime, as they are sure to have carefully considered the consequences and opted for a more “rational” course of action. In such cases, seriousness is used interchangeably with sobriety and devotion and rationality. Thus we like to think that Martin Luther was serious, that Jesus Christ was serious, that the Prophet Mohammed was serious; we ascribe seriousness to Plato, Kant, and Hegel. What all of these instances of the serious subject reveal is that to be serious is to be committed, undeterred, loyal, rational, and focused on either something in particular or on commitment, loyalty, focus, rationality, or seriousness itself. Phenomenologically, then, we can say that seriousness is a somewhat relative intentional relation between a subject and aspects of his or her world that are valuable, worthwhile, or meaningful either on a personal level or in the context of his or her cultural, social, or historical situation.

Given this phenomenological conception, seriousness is a desirable virtue. As such, it has taken on a functional role in an ideology that requires and demands commitment, loyalty, etc., viz., modernity’s progressive ideology. Thus, some have questioned seriousness’ ideological scaffolding. Søren Kierkegaard, for instance, although proposing via his pseudonym “Anti-Climacus” that “what edifies is seriousness,” argues that seriousness is “frivolity and pretense” when it refers to that subjective demeanor that dogmatically, and disinterestedly, commits itself to fulfilling the demands of the accepted discourse (Kierkegaard 1989, p. 36). Seriousness is frivolity, that is, when one does not consider *why* what demands to be taken seriously is thought to be meaningful or valuable. Thus, seriousness is desirable when it reflects that one has *reasons* to commit oneself to the valuable or the worthwhile.

Philosophy itself is thought to be a serious activity because it operates firmly within the realm of reasons. It further holds that rationality and seriousness are intimately related, so that to be rational is to be serious and to be serious is to be rational. As such, those philosophers who have problematized rationality have tended also to problematize seriousness. Exemplary amongst these is Nietzsche, who writes in the *Gay Science*:

“Taking Things Seriously. The intellect is with most people an awkward, obscure and creaking machine, which is difficult to set in motion: they call it ‘taking a thing seriously’ when they work with this machine and want to think well oh, how burdensome must good thinking be to them! That delightful animal, man, seems to lose his good humour whenever he thinks well; he becomes ‘serious!’ And ‘where there is laughing and gaiety, thinking cannot be worth anything’: so speaks the prejudice of this serious animal against all ‘Joyful Wisdom.’ Well, then! Let us show that it is prejudice!” (Nietzsche 2009, § 327).

Here, Nietzsche associates seriousness with a *process* of *thinking well*. The serious man is he who is able to motivate his awkward and obscure thinking machine (his rational mind) to produce what that machine is meant to produce, namely, good (logical) thoughts. The process of thinking well, however, has a price: one loses one’s sense of humor – one’s *joie de vivre* – in the process of manipulating the thinking machine to produce serious thoughts. In other words, the serious animal lives in the belief that humor, play, distraction, or joy, are detrimental to the correct functioning of his mind. Moreover, that a thinking that is not pure, or a result of the proper working of that

mind, is a “thinking [that] cannot be worth anything” – a thinking without value (inherently, or as object).

In the Western tradition, philosophy is the highest expression of a properly functioning machine. The value of philosophy lies in that it is the product of correct thinking; its value lies in its seriousness. Thus, for Nietzsche, philosophy is the love of wisdom as *seriousness*, and not wisdom as joy. As such, his call to expose this prejudice poses a challenge to the Western tradition, to Western culture and those prejudices or values it has engendered with a mark of distinction, i.e., rationality.

2. *Seriousness and Suspension*

On Nietzsche’s analysis, seriousness thus represents those rules that dictate the process of thinking well, which as such ultimately serves as a criterion that helps distinguish those that think well from those that do not. Philosophy itself makes a distinction between the rational and the irrational, the latter comprised of those that value passion and play over reason and commitment. Those who, on this criterion, appear irrational or non-serious are then looked at with suspicion, as if by not taking things seriously they defy the rules of the *good life*. In Mexico, for instance, those who defy the principles of correct thinking, and thus of the good life, are known as “*relajientos*,” and the act through which they express this defiance is called “*relajo*.” It was the little-known Mexican phenomenologist Jorge Portilla that offered the first focused analysis of seriousness and its anti-thesis, *relajo* (and *relajientos*)¹.

In *La fenomenología del relajo*, published posthumously in 1966, Portilla associates seriousness with commitment, especially with a commitment to values, and specifically with a commitment to fulfill the demands that values place on our liberty. In Portilla’s phenomenological analysis, values are understood as the noematic content through which one experiences the world, and they serve, simultaneously, as the rules that dictate *what* is being experienced and *how* it ought to be experienced. Although values saturate the world (everything has a value), our specific focus on a value also grasps the rules inherent in the value that limit our freedom, or our action, at the moment of encounter by telling us the *what* and the *how*. Thus, Portilla defines “seriousness” as an “inward movement toward *loyalty* and *commitment*” (Portilla 1984, p. 19; my emphasis).² This inward movement seeks to faithfully align the subject with all that the experience of the value requires.

Seriousness, or that inward movement of loyalty and commitment, is undermined in *relajo*. *Relajo* is the “suspension of seriousness” (Portilla 1984, pp. 18 and 25); it is the suspension, or bracketing, of the relation between the will and the value, between the will to commit and commitment itself; in *relajo* all values (and, again, the world is saturated with value) are threatened with suspension. This includes, for instance, the value of life. Consider a spectacle all-too familiar to modern-day Mexicans, the *narco-*

¹ See my *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla*, Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2012.

² Unless otherwise specified, all translations are mine. A more indepth analysis of the concept of *relajo* is included in Sánchez 2012.

execution. In Mexico, warring drug cartels often engage in brutal turf wars, and executions are an everyday affair. Acts of kidnapping and torture are likewise commonplace. A common practice amongst cartels is to communicate their bloodlust through YouTube, or social-media bound, executions. Blindfolded and tied at the hands and feet, the “victims” are showcased as “examples” of what happens to the *contras* in the turf war. The captors monologue about loyalty, justice, and respect; then these same captors hand out verdicts and carry out executions. The *contras*, innocent or not (there’s no way to tell), are beheaded or shot in the head. In these spectacles, the value of human life has been replaced with the value of the spectacle, i.e., with the value of intimidation, and, even, with the value death, as a gruesome death holds an abundance of meaning for the spectacle. In this spectacle, the dead are not human, but mere bodies sacrificed to the altar of death and violence. As such, the person is not a person, but an anonymous shape, a replaceable object in an always choreographed spectacle. If the spectator to these executions feels sympathy for the victim, the captors quickly re-direct our attention to the spectacle by announcing the crimes the accused has committed and affirming that what we are witnessing is justice at work. This displacement of attention away from the value of human life and to the value of justice is repeated and reiterated until the loss of human life loses its seriousness; until what matters to us (witnesses) is not the decapitation, but the *reasons given* for it. *Relajo* is this displacement of attention away from what matters; *relajo*, again, is this suspension of seriousness.

Fallenness into *relajo* represents an inversion of value, and ultimately an inversion of what one believes is important, of one’s commitments and one’s loyalties. While *relajo* will not necessary lead to death and violence of cartel life, the end of loyalty and commitment to value does represent, for Portilla, a *will* to death, something Portilla himself witnessed as his own generation (20th century post-Revolutionary Mexican culture), that “in the midst of perpetual laughter,” gave itself to a “slow process of self-destruction” (Portilla 1984, p. 15). As a will to death or nothingness, *relajo* is a refusal of the future. Seriousness demands that “I mortgage my future behavior” (p. 19) to the realization of what matters (value, truth, commitment) in the future.

We can see that one’s intentional relation can be dislocated or displaced when the value that structures it is suspended or distorted in some intentional way (i.e., when the intentional gaze is refocused on something else). The displacement is a suspension of my attention (to human life, or to the value of X, whatever that may be). Every situation is regulated by a value or values that make that situation what it is. *Relajo* is the suspension of that seriousness and, thus, the impossibility of the realization of the potentiality of the event-situation (whatever that may be).

The consequences of *relajo*, on a personal as well as a social level, are themselves serious. Contemporary political events in the United States have made this clear. While presidential elections have always tended to emphasize the value of one candidate’s vision for America over the other’s, today we are asked to suspend the value of that vision and focus instead on the ridiculous, on the absurd, on fear and potential catastrophe. The “serious” candidate professes a policy of optimism for America (whether or not it is a realizable vision); the *relajiento* candidate distracts from any talk of policy by putting up a spectacle of mimicry, ridicule, insults, and fear-mongering. And it works. *Relajo* is contagious, and the American people fall into it, allowing the distraction

as their attention is displaced. Portilla, already in the mid-20th century, observed this attitude of suspension, declaring that entire generations could be swept up in the fervor of value of inversion, destruction, and inattention; there can be, that is, *a collective suspension of seriousness*, whereby the values that maintain the coherence of a society or community are degraded or defaced by groups in unison. Portilla adds that this can lead to a social or communal split, into those who defend and uphold social and communal values and those who do not. The effects of this value-split can further contribute to the marginalization and oppression of those who deny values by those who do; or vice versa.

3. *Seriousness and Freedom*

To adhere to the demands of value is not to obey blindly. Values don't hypnotize us into action. In other words, we do not go along with value without a very personal decision, or as Portilla says, an internal movement of our will. Portilla suggests that we choose to do as the value demands, to fulfill it with our actions, to follow it with our life-style, and that we do this from an awareness of our own freedom. Thus, we *freely choose* to be respectful, to be American, to be "manly," to be serious, to be punctual, to be respectful of human life, etc. – or, at the very least, we freely choose to strive for these as ideals.

To make his point, Portilla appeals to the notion of punctuality, a value with special significance to contemporary humanity, for whom time and *being on time* determine the depths of our commitments. However, punctuality, like life or duty, is one of those values that I can freely choose to suspend. Portilla puts the matter thus:

"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" (Portilla 1984, p. 39).

In other words, as I become the kind of person who is always *on time*, those efforts to be on time, to be punctual, reflect an exercising of my freedom and my transcendence that reveal a free and unencumbered human being. The paradox being, of course, that I liberate myself in the act of obeying the demands of a value, viz., *being on time* or punctuality. It is here, in this obedience, where freedom, value, and seriousness converge. Seriousness is obedience, but obedience always to what matters most, to what demands fulfillment and beckons our freedom.

4. *Relajo and Liberation*

The desire to be serious, to be taken seriously, or to embody seriousness, is a desire to *embody* value. Although punctuality is a value difficult to embody, since absolute embodiment is death itself (or, put differently, to be absolutely on time is to no longer

be capable of being late, which can happen only in death), some still pursue it for the sake of *being punctual*. Portilla gives it a positive spin, telling us that this pursuit and this embodiment is an act of freedom. The problem arises when an individual *pretends* to have achieved full coincidence with the value pursued. Those individuals are not free at all, since their obedience is no longer an act of will, but to a false belief. Portilla refers to these people with the Spanish term, *apretados*, which in English can be translated as “snobs.”

Snobs are those individuals who have fully embodied the *spirit of seriousness* in regards to values, or, as I indicate above, with rules. Portilla writes:

“The spirit of seriousness is that attitude of consciousness that 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.” (Portilla 1984, p. 87).

This refusal to recognize the “distance” between what one actually is and the value one is pursuing is a refusal to accept that values are ideals that mark the boundaries of possible experience, and not realizable *in reality*. But snobs, or *apretados*, behave as though the value is realizable and, moreover, that *they are it*. More than a false belief, the snobbish type lives in a state of delusion, and their serious demeanor in relation to the values they expound gives them away.

“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 to be at all costs. 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 an – often self-proclaimed – weakness for what they call ‘good English taste.’” (Portilla 1984, pp. 87-88).

This pretention to be one with value makes the *apretado* the dialectical other of the *relajiento*. This individual represents the *relajiento*’s extreme opposite in the spectrum of *being human* in terms of mannerism, world-views, and commitments to all things serious. More significantly, the snob/*apretado* embodies values and thus lacks the freedom to deviate from them.

Seriousness as virtue thus stands somewhere in the middle of these personality types: on one hand, the individual for whom *relajo* is a real possibility; on the other, the individual for whom seriousness toward values or rules is the only possibility for being.

There are, however, two manifestations of seriousness that should be held apart: on the one hand, “the spirit of seriousness,” which gives rise to snobbery (*apretado*), and on the other, “authentic seriousness,” which constitutes a free, liberated subject. Portilla describes the difference:

“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; in [the case of] genuine seriousness, I am alone with myself before the value." (Portilla 1984, p. 19).

This distinction is not new, as one can readily find it in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1956, pp. 544ff.). Portilla describes the "spirit of seriousness," echoing Sartre, as a pretention, where the individual pretends to embody the value and *be* the value. Opposed to this, "authentic seriousness" is a manner of committing oneself to values where the commitment depends on the strength of the value and its relation to truth. The commitment of the person possessing the "spirit of seriousness" is absolute; the commitment of the person who is "authentically serious" is contingent on truth. But *relajo* suspends both kinds of seriousness. On the one hand, the pretension is itself structured around values that are being realized for the sake of seriousness itself; whoever takes up the "spirit of seriousness" is committed to *being serious*. So *relajo* suspends this commitment. On the other hand, *relajo* disrupts the presencing of value itself, making authentic seriousness impossible.

"All value, when grasped, appears surrounded by an aura of demands, endowed with a certain weight and with a 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'." (Portilla 1984, p. 18).

Portilla's considers Socratic seriousness as exemplary of authentic seriousness. It is beyond the pretense of those simply possessed by the "spirit of seriousness" or those without pretense at all (*relajientos*). In a telling passage, Portilla writes:

"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 pretenses of 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." (Portilla 1984, pp. 69-70; emphasis added).

Socrates' commitment to truth, or to the value, is *absolute*. His case is not one of possession by the spirit of seriousness. He is not a snob who "considers himself as valuable...[where] 'being' and 'value' are fully identified in that privileged perspective which he represents" (Portilla 1984, p. 88). In other words, Socrates is not pretending to "embody" truth, he seeks its discovery as an "absolute demand." Truth is not what Socrates is; it is what he *does*, that is, it is his "vocation." His seriousness is expressed in his "unconditional commitment" to the call of duty, a commitment which takes precedence even over his own existence. In his seriousness, Socrates transcends the limitations of his own life, of his "concrete interests," and of his *circumstance*. Socrates is

serious even *in the face of death*.

By saying “yes” to the call of Divinity, i.e., to duty, Socrates commits himself to the future; his “yes” commits him to the value of truth, and, inevitably, to death. Indeed, Socratic seriousness is required for world-constitution, cultural production, and, most importantly, for the realization of my future self, which participating in world-making (in affirmations of value), fulfills the ideal of subjectivity.

The virtue of Socratic seriousness is that it guards against the temptations of appearances and allows one to stay on task, to do what matters most in any given circumstance. This kind of discipline is lacking in the *relajiento* who falls victim to the *relajo*-phenomenon at the moment of its manifestation. Portilla suggests, through his critique of *relajo* and the snob, that this fallenness into appearance is the condition of modern humanity – the *relajiento* falls into the appearance of resistance and the snob falls victim to the way in which he himself appears, and we all fall in one way or another to what *does not matter*. Socratic seriousness is beyond appearance, it is an absolute commitment to value and *what matters* which does not waver, regardless of the temptation or the effort at displacement. Portilla considers Socrates as incapable of falling, since he “is deeply serious, having the genuine seriousness that does not take seriously what is not serious, [i.e.,] the appearances that are flaunted with a pretense for recognition by men” (Portilla 1984, p. 70). In this way, Socratic seriousness is a “liberating act” (Portilla 1984, p. 71).

5. *Seriousness and Time*

Returning to punctuality. Again, punctuality serves as a popular criterion (especially in our modern, civilized culture) to judge the seriousness, and thus the worth, of an individual. Plainly, when an individual is early or on time, he is considered dependable, reliable, trustworthy to some extent, and even considered honest and dignified – we say that he *takes the matter seriously*. When, on the other hand, he is late (either to a specific appointment or is always, and consistently, late), he is thought to be a slacker, lazy, unreliable (except for him being reliably late), untrustworthy, perhaps dishonest and barbaric – we say that *he doesn't take things seriously*. In cultures where *time is of the essence* (i.e., modern, capitalist cultures) those “on time” are on time because they value one of that culture’s main operative values, namely, *productivity*, while those who arrive late are those who seemingly don’t care about work, labor, and production – it is a value that they would rather actively disrupt than blindly uphold.

Although punctuality is merely a value, a rule, or an ideal, serious individuals will work toward its fulfillment in concrete life, allowing it to represent their character or define their personality. *Being punctual* becomes an ideal mode of *being human*. Rather than death dictating authentic being-in-the-world as *being-toward-death*, as Heidegger proposes,³ it is punctuality, a *being-toward-timeliness* that dictates authenticity for these individuals. Portilla writes:

³ See Heidegger 2008, pp. 277ff.

“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.” (Portilla 1984, p. 33).

Punctuality as a regulative ideal can thus structure human behavior in everyday life. We hurry, and we rush, and we allow our hurrying and our rushing to distress us and affect our daily lives, and we do so *for the sake of* punctuality; if there is a consequentialist reason for being so hurried or rushed is that we may, if we are quicker in our movements and in our strategy, achieve that manner of *being-on-time* that defines our culture and defines our best representatives. But, Portilla warns, achieving this *being-on-time*, or punctuality, does not make one punctual; we are still ourselves and not something else, which means that punctuality, timeliness, and *being-on-time* continues to flee us. Perhaps we will be on time when we no longer have time *to be*.

The serious person will nonetheless strive to *be on time*. The serious person will honor the ideal, the value, or the social rule that validates membership in civilized society. Those not on time, untimely, or the constantly *late* are not conforming to the rule, not bowing to the demand of value, or honoring the ideal. There is a thin line between the seriousness of punctuality and the barbarism of constant lateness, who, it seems on the surface, are always fleeing the responsibilities of time. But, both being-on-time and lateness function on the horizon of an absolute punctuality, namely, death. The social divisions that seriousness toward timeliness concretizes between the punctual and the late disappear when we consider the absolute impossibility of *being* late.

6. *Seriousness and Death*

Our previous considerations on timeliness point to the relationship between death and seriousness, since being punctual reflects a being serious, and being *absolutely* punctual, is, on this reading, the impossibility of being late, and impossibility represented by death itself. While Portilla does not address this issue, it is certainly suggested by the present reading. Let us explore this once again before concluding.

Arriving on time, time and time again, gives one the reputation of *being punctual*. But can one ever really *be punctual*? It seems that we simply instantiate the essence of punctuality whenever we fulfill an obligation to be on time. Portilla writes:

“Value has escaped me once again. I have not succeeded in incorporating value into myself, in constituting my being definitively, 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.” (Portilla 1984, p. 33).

Thus values, in this case, the value of punctuality, are regulative ideals that those of us that respect values (not *relajo*-subjects) aspire to fulfill. When we fulfill the demands of a

value, once or twice or a million times, we do not become that value, we cannot *conflate oneself with the value*. I cannot *be* patriotic, even if I am patriotic whenever I do patriotic things. With punctuality, I cannot embody *being absolutely on time* until punctuality constitutes “my being definitively.” When will this be?

Our reading suggests that my absolute punctuality will be realized when there no longer is the possibility that I can be late. I will *be* punctuality when I am absolutely and permanently on time.

“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 shows the magnificent fact that I was never late anywhere.” (Portilla 1984, p. 33).

In this sense, absolute seriousness is the absolute embodiment of the value of punctuality, which, in death, is fully achieved. Death, it turns out, is a serious matter, but it is not the value that may be disrupted by *relajo*. Rather, it is time, or more specifically, punctuality that stands in for the value to be sought, one that can be finally embodied in death; or better, my being and punctuality can finally be coincident in death. And death, as far as we know, is not a value subject to suspension.

7. Conclusion

Seriousness and value are related in essential ways in Portilla’s analysis. The displacement of value is contiguous with the suspension of seriousness; suspending seriousness signals the displacement of value and displacing value signals the suspension of seriousness.

Ultimately, the *point* of seriousness or, what Nietzsche calls, “thinking well” in a particular situation is to keep the situation from falling apart, from descending into chaos. Seriousness exudes control – the serious person represents the limits of chaos. When a speaker “keeps her composure” despite all external interruptions, we usually praise her for her serious demeanor. We might say that she is known to be a serious person, and so chaos was never a possibility. According to Portilla, this kind of composure would be a reflection on that commitment she has to “maintain the value [of the occasion] in existence” (Portilla 1984, p. 19). On Nietzsche’s account, however, Portilla is simply, or dogmatically, adopting a standard about how one ought to behave oneself, a standard passed down via certain inherited master narratives. Clearly, Portilla does not share Nietzsche’s antipathy toward the serious person. Which means that as far as Portilla’s worry goes, to suspend seriousness is to suspend composure, thinking well, and commitment. In this way, *relajo* is an offense to the “lovely beast” that “becomes serious.”

We can say without much exaggeration that Portilla presupposes the truth and validity of a Western ideal of what it means to be subjective. It assumes that the event of *relajo* – the suspension of seriousness, the rejection of values, the displacement of attention, the invocation to indifference – is itself a non-event when opposed to the productive, worthwhile, and life-affirming event of Socratic irony, with its constitutive seriousness, commitment, attentiveness, and possibilities of disclosure. The two types of subjectivity

constituted by *relajo*, i.e., *relajientos*, and the “spirit of seriousness,” i.e., *apretados*, respectively, are marginal subjectivities, and, hence, non-subjectivities, due to the distance they represent to the *ideal of subjectivity* which Portilla embraces, one he thinks to be the form of subjectivity capable of extracting Mexicans *out of* the “Nietzschean generation” in which they might find themselves.

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