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The Philosophy of Accidentality

Manuel R. Vargas

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The Philosophy of Accidentality*

ABSTRACT: *In mid-twentieth-century Mexican philosophy, there was a peculiar nationalist existentialist project focused on the cultural conditions of agency. This article revisits some of those ideas, including the idea that there is an important but underappreciated experience of one's relationship to norms and social meanings. This experience—something called accidentality—casts new light on various forms of social subordination and socially scaffolded agency, including cultural alienation, biculturality, and double consciousness.*

KEYWORDS: Emilio Uranga, existentialism, agency, accidentality, double consciousness

> *We must always know what we can count on, but the belief that we can never know what we can count on constitutes restlessness, or zozobra.*
> —Emilio Uranga, 'Essay on the Ontology of the Mexican'

Introduction

Consider two different experiences of moving to a new place. In one, things are different but good. You adapt to the local conditions of life. Things make sense relatively quickly. You connect with people, you engage in shared activities, and you form relationships you value. Although there are the inevitable adjustments and surprises, by and large your life takes on a shape you accept and maybe even like.

In an alternative scenario, those happy alignments do not come to be. Maybe the local conditions of life seem alien. The habits of daily life never come to feel natural. Relationships seem structured around activities and values you do not quite share, or maybe even values you repudiate. How people relate is, for lack of a better word, *off*.

* This article is the sixth in a special series of commissioned articles on non-Western philosophies. The fifth article article 'Soup, Harmony, and Disagreement', by David B. Wong, appeared in Volume 6, Issue 2, pp. 139–155.

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A precise characterization of these misalignments can be elusive. In relatively mild cases, the misalignment is localized to features of a job, or a group, or some particular practice. More encompassing cases of misalignment leave one feeling more radically at unease with wider or more comprehensive swaths of one's milieu. In these more extreme instances, we might characterize the situation as producing a sense that one is 'ungrounded', perhaps normatively unmoored, in that it is unclear how one is to proceed, what the significance of one's choices will be, and what results will follow if one acts on the old principles in the new context.

A paradigmatic case of this more encompassing unease is sometimes expressed by children of immigrants. They sometimes experience a feeling of disconnect with both the culture of their parents and with the majority culture in which they find themselves. *Ni de aquí ni de allá*—from neither here nor there—is how it is said in Spanish, although the thought has at least as many expressions as there are languages. These stories of ungrounded lives, or ungrounded *parts* of lives, are familiar themes in immigrant narratives and the memoirs of members of marginalized social groups.

This is not just an immigrant story or the story of their children. Similar stories have sometimes been told by people with social identities that did not mesh with the valorized identities of a community and by people who feel pulled to reject the valuational structures in which they were raised. These stories can convey a sense of profound unease or ungroundedness of a special sort that I characterize as *accidentality*.

My aspiration in this essay is to chart some dimensions of accidentality and to gesture at some ways in which it figures in the lives of many people. Many of the ideas in this account draw from a now mostly forgotten—or if remembered, then repudiated—mid-twentieth-century version of existentialism in Mexico. The central idea in what follows is that we can usefully explain what is going on in these cases of ungroundedness by appreciating some important roles that social patterns of meaningfulness and value play (or fail to play) in an individual life.

Culture and Contingency

I start with a discussion about culture and cultures. My interest is in what we might call *normative culture*, the part of culture that includes packages of social meanings, values, and practical norms that, in the ordinary case, tend to be relied upon to address various challenges in a form of life. We need tools, skills, and knowledge for navigation in complex, communal life. Normative culture provides an accumulated body of these navigational resources—linked patterns of meaning, symbols, practical norms, practical values, and the like, which can include things like rituals and frequently tacit decision procedures. On the present way of characterizing it, though, normative culture is a linked set of practical (as opposed to theoretical) norms, social meanings, and values that tend to travel together, often in mutually reinforcing ways.

The foregoing picture of practical culture is also compatible with the idea that cultural packages admit of some underdetermination about practical norms, social meanings, and values; that cultures can overlap and diverge; and that within a

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given culture normative conflict can come in degrees. It is also compatible with holding that a way for a normative culture to succeed is for it to provide its bearers with tools for moving successfully through social life, for it to provide answers to practical questions about what is worth doing, how it is to be done, and what follows when the wrong things are done. Nothing in what follows relies on this further thought, though.

The present way of thinking about an entangled package of practical norms, meanings, and values, is not meant to be tendentious. It is compatible with a range of traditional and oftentimes more expansive ways of thinking about culture. Characterizations of culture have been famously diverse in content and aim. (See Kwame Anthony Appiah [2018: 189–99] for an overview.) On one capacious notion, culture is 'any kind of information that is acquired from other members of one's species through social learning that is capable of affecting an individual's behaviors' (Heine 2016: 5). For comparison, culture has been characterized as the 'man-made part of the environment' (Herskovits 1948: 17); 'the total shared, learned behavior of a society or a subgroup' (Mead 1953: 22); 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols' (Geertz 1973: 89); 'information capable of affecting individuals' behavior that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission' (Richerson and Boyd 2008: 5); and 'the large body of practices, techniques, heuristics, tools, motivations, values, and beliefs that we all acquire while growing up' (Henrich 2016: 3). Given our more restricted concern for normative culture, to speak of different cultures—or better, practical cultures—is to speak of different communities that internally share a substantial overlapping cluster of practical norms, values, and social meanings.

Whatever one's more general account of culture, the point that matters for present purposes is just this: in a given time and place, the social world tends to present us with packages of practical norms, values, and social meanings that shape our sense of the world and ourselves, our valuations of the options that are before us, and our expectations about what kinds of social responses our choices are likely to produce.

The significance of a particular package of normative culture is most readily visible in cases where differences from one's own local practices stand out. For example, in the European Middle Ages, the practice of charging interest—usury, as it was called—was viewed negatively. The negative valence of charging interest was bound up in a web of cultural meanings—a commitment to the precepts of Christianity, anti-Semitism, and historically contingent rules about who could own property. The wrongfulness of charging interest was a contingent valuational feature, enmeshed in wider patterns of meaning that we tend not to share here and now. A more culturally proximal case might be recent shifts in how we think about addiction. The rise of the disease model, and the subsequent undercutting of the conviction that addiction is a culpable failure of volition, has altered many people's sense of the wrongfulness of addiction. The issue remains unsettled in popular attitudes.

Social identities, both in the nature of the category and the kinds of explicit and connotational meanings of those categories, is also a matter of local packages of

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norms. Being a Protestant means one thing in sixteenth-century Spain. It means something different in twenty-first-century Southern California. Even for categories ostensibly connected to relatively stable biological features of humans, the import of those identities is culturally loaded. As the slogan goes, *gender is the social meaning of sex*; the social significance—the meaning of gender, and the number of genders—has admitted of variation across time and place.

In noting the contingency of given configurations of normative culture, we need not be committed to more sweeping claims that all meanings are contingent in these ways, or that values and moral truths are always relative to a time and a place. (Litigating disputes about historicism and relativism is a task for another day.) For my purposes it is enough to recognize that many of our social identities, the significance of our behavioral dispositions, and the import of particular actions and practices is invariably experienced by individuals as saturated with a local meaning that is historically contingent.

Substance and Accident

For reasons that will become clear to the reader, in the discussion that follows, I do something that is otherwise ill-advised: I use relatively familiar technical philosophical vocabulary in a nonstandard, potentially obscure way.

Let *substances* be agents who experience themselves as having a relatively stable and unified package (or packages) of commitments about norms, values, and meanings. Characteristically, substances take their configuration of normative culture for granted. The particular commitments that constitute their normative culture tend to do an adequate or better job of guiding deliberations about what to do, identifying meaningful courses of action, and in general, helping people navigate practical challenges within their forms of life.

Let *accidents* be agents who are not substances. They do not experience themselves as having relatively stable or unified packages of commitments about norms, values, and meanings. The packages of normative culture that are seemingly available—perhaps culturally afforded in some circumscribed way—are not experienced by these agents as providing satisfying guidance on what to do, about what is valuable, and how one should think of the significance of one's choices.

(It is an interesting question, although one I do not pursue here, how to characterize precisely the agent's sense of difficulty and what availability of normative alternatives might come to. On the one hand, one could think features of contemporary life, including the fragmentation of narratives about what is valuable, might induce accidentality more readily than traditional forms of life. On the other hand, it may seem that ready access to information—books, the internet, travel—can make accidentality more avoidable by providing more compelling normative packages. Something to keep in mind, in either case, is that many norms, social meanings, and values require social cooperation. A culture that aspires to generate honor by dueling will do badly with a population of one.)

To put some of these ideas together: Recall the phenomenon noted at the outset, regarding the unease one can have with various practices, organizations, or roles one

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encounters in life. Relatively local misalignments between one's sense of being and the values and meanings of some practice do not constitute accidentality. Local, limited, or relatively narrow misalignments do not ordinarily threaten one's sense that one's overall package of norms, values, and meanings help one navigate the practical and normative challenges one faces.

In contrast, cases of ungroundedness—those more profound instances of alienation from available packages of normative culture—*do* constitute accidentality. That is, someone is an accident—in the sense at hand—if the culturally available packages of meaning and value (including the packages one has internalized) fail to provide ready and adequate answers to questions of meaning and value in some widespread and seemingly pervasive sense relative to one's own life.

On this picture, accidentality is not about whether one occupies a position of social marginality. One might be a member of a marginalized community but still a substance (that is, being able to take for granted in one's deliberations a stable network of norms, values, and meaning-making commitments). One might also be a member of a dominant social group and be an accident. Accidentality is about the absence of a stable, taken-for-granted relationship to normative culture.

The Psychology of Accidentality

Accidentality is a kind of relationship between an agent and normative culture. It is a state of an agent who pervasively experiences the available patterns of norms, values, and cultural meanings as unable to be taken for granted, as inapt for practical reasoning. If accidentality is a recognizable phenomenon, and it is characteristic of an identifiable kind of relationship of agents to norms and meanings, might it have a characteristic profile in affect and dispositions for action?

Here is one reason for thinking it could: If one is not relatively secure in some system of value and meaning, at least in a sufficiently wide range of contexts, then who one is, one's sense of one's self and the value of one's actions, is chronically threatened. One still has to make decisions about what to do, one may still have some sense of self, but the basis of these things is suspect. For an accident, the integrity of one's judgments about value is pervasively vulnerable to internal doubt and external condemnation.

The pervasiveness of an individual's sense of ungroundedness matters. Again, minimal or relatively isolated discomfort about some set of practices is very different from ungroundedness of the sort at stake here. The accident's more global sense of skepticism about the truth of systems of local meanings and values may be prone to inducing the thought that it is all contingent, that it is all potentially meaningless and without value.

So, we might think, ungroundedness produces a kind of internal fragility about one's sense of self and one's normative assessments that plausibly may give rise to a characteristic psychological syndrome. Consider the position of someone unhappy with the operative gender norms in her culture but also unsure about what an adequate alternative would look like. (This is therefore different from a case where one is clear and confident about one's gender identity, despite society's

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failure to recognize that identity or failure to provide ready ways for enacting it.) For the sort of person under consideration, to participate in various social practices implicated in the objectionable gender norms may strike her as repellent. Norms of dating and marriage may seem polluted by those problematic features of the operative gender norms. Nevertheless, to opt out of those gendered practices entirely would also be costly. She would have to forego various goods that are enabled by participation in those practices. For example, to opt out of dating and marriage practices might be to opt out of otherwise good access to companionship, financial security, certain valuable shared experiences, and so on.

Our gender-norm objector could, of course, take a principled and public stance against the existing gender norms, and their enactment in practices of dating and marriage. This stance would raise its own troubles. It would seem to signal a set of commitments to a different set of values, values about which she may also be wary. She may think to herself that she does not want to be seen as strident or ideological, especially about a matter about which she is not entirely sure. She faces an unhappy dilemma: for *any* action or *any* position, either she will face criticism from without, or she will run the risk of acting in a way that does not accord with her values—values that may, as yet, be partial, unformed, provisional, or in ongoing negotiation.

She might sit around imagining that the world regards her actions in different ways, or that she could create an entirely new practice not complicit in the difficulties of existing gender norms. Unless she is also motivated, these may remain mere fantasy. Even were she to act on those fantasies, it might commit her to acting on and advocating values about which she remains unsure.

There is a lot to say about this sort of case, but I want to focus on three psychological elements in the case as it has been described: (1) a reluctance to engage in action in the world that might be meaning-bearing in a way one rejects, what we might characterize as *unwillingness*; (2) a standing concern with avoiding having one's social standing impugned—that is, a concern for preserving one's sense of *dignity*; and (3) a disposition for turning inward—a kind of *introversion*—in the face of unhappiness about unappealing actional possibilities. In what follows, I say a bit more about each element.

On the present picture, people experience the world as structured by a system of meanings, norms, and values. For the accident, however, the available packages of meanings, norms, values are not compelling ways to understand the world. Indeed, the ungrounded person may find the world structured in these ways as repellent. Action that participates in, or that is complicit in these patterns of meaning may even strike the ungrounded person as disgusting precisely because it suggests a commitment to those frameworks of meaning about which one is skeptical (Uranga [1951] 2017: 168). The result is a disposition of *unwillingness* or aversion to action. The unwilling agent remains unmoved, preferring inactivity rather than taking up actions that are immediately bound up in systems of meaning and value that one does not accept.

On the present proposal, accidents tend to be preoccupied with preserving their sense of dignity. The gender norms case suggests one reason why. When an accident encounters an obstacle—a place where the world puts up an impediment

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to the attainment of her goals (say, of achieving a less problematic relation to gender norms), the accident is likely to be gripped by some unwillingness to engage. She may still condemn, of course. At least while in a position of normative uncertainty, she is unlikely to redouble her efforts at combating the effects of the gender norms. She will not get engaged (perhaps in the literal sense, especially) in the fight for a different set of gender norms. Instead, the pressure on her is not to expose her vulnerability and uncertainty about what is normatively authoritative. The accident has reason to avoid getting dirty. So the impulse to withdraw from engagement is perhaps especially prone to a bit of self-serving self-deception: unwillingness is recast as a commitment to preserving one's dignity, one's unimpugned social standing. The accident's preoccupation with dignity may come to manifest a dual concern for, on the one hand, a kind of conventional rectitude, and on the other, a kind of detachment from advocating for a real, concrete set of alternative commitments.

It is worth acknowledging that although this account has framed the accident's moral rectitude in terms of a preoccupation with dignity, there are other values around which one's moral rectitude might be organized. We might expect some culturally specific loading for what value organizes one's moral rectitude, whether it is in terms of dignity, honor, or generosity (Uranga [1951] 2017: 170). Honor might be a particularly common value in a range of cultures (Sommers 2018: 1–44). In a given instance, it might also be the case that there is no single value around which one's rectitude is fixated. So the value or values around which the accident's rectitude may be organized might sometimes be other than dignity, even if dignity is perhaps the most common present configuration.

The third aspect of the characteristic psychological syndrome of accidentality is a turn inward, something we can think of as an impulse to *introversion* and introspection. If one is averse to meaningful action in the world, and one is uncertain about whether any norms, values, and meanings are genuinely authoritative, one will seek to avoid attention or notice. I have already shown that this position tends to create a pressure to avoid external engagements. Any impulse to activity need not be entirely eradicated. On the present proposal, it is just turned inward. So the person in a position of accidentality tends toward rumination, perhaps sentimentality, and as was suggested above, considerable reflection on alternatives that might have been.

As noted above, accidents are plausibly prone to awareness of what we might think of as the existential condition. That is, there is an awareness that systems of meaning and value have an enormous amount of contingency built into them. Indeed, the old skeptical worry about whether *all* systems of meanings and value are at root fictions obscuring the meaningless nature of existence may be especially prone to emerging in those suffering from accidentality. (Perhaps accidents are epistemically privileged about this?) The turn to introversion and rumination may contribute to this sense of normativity being fictional. Preoccupation with constructing fantasy worlds, and reimagining one's actions within them, may provide the accident with a new sense of the possible values of one's acts and omissions. It may also serve to emphasize that the particular values and meanings of one's acts may all be fictional.

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On this permutation of accidentality, the person thinks that what she *is* is a being that is *essentially* normatively ungrounded. *No* available norms, meanings, and values provide a satisfying ground for thinking about herself and the meaning of her actions. Melancholy may set in.

To sum up, accidents are agents who experience themselves as normatively unmoored. They are disposed to have a distinctive psychological profile, characterized by unwillingness, a concern for a sense of dignity, and introversion. That profile is a product of an unresolved effort to embrace and deploy satisfying systems of meaning and value, and that existential situation tends to give these folks what we might think of as a melancholic demeanor. Strictly speaking, this picture is neutral about how, all things considered, we ought to think about a range of questions concerning value. Perhaps some antirealists about value could go on to hold that accidentality is the price one pays for an accurate understanding of the nature of values.

Emilio Uranga

The preceding two sections are a partial reconstruction of Emilio Uranga's account of accidentality, first proposed in 'Essay on the Ontology of the Mexican' (originally published in 1951) and subsequently revisited and extended in his *Análisis del ser del mexicano* [Analysis of Mexican Being], published in 1952. My account draws from 'Essay on the Ontology of the Mexican' although the *Análisis del ser del mexicano* introduces some notable differences that, for present purposes, I mostly relegate to parenthetical remarks.

Uranga was trained in the phenomenological tradition, a student of José Gaos (Heidegger's first translator), and he was part of a group of philosophers that took seriously the idea that philosophy was to proceed by first reflecting on one's social context and that philosophical contributions were to be found in a detailed understanding of a particular, concrete, historical circumstance. The fact of Uranga's Mexicanness requires highlighting, but not just to gesture at where in the history of philosophy we might locate the origin of these ideas, and not to exoticize the ideas. It requires mention because these ideas were explicitly developed in the service of an effort to characterize Mexicanness. These ideas developed in the cause of a broadly existentialist, historicist, nationalist philosophical movement that was known as *la filosofía de lo mexicano*, or the philosophy of Mexicanness. According to its proponents, the nature of Mexicanness, and in particular, Mexican being, was taken as a philosophical subject matter, as a spur to philosophical reflection, and as the best hope for a world-historically significant contribution to philosophy from Mexico.

The project was undertaken roughly thirty years after the end of the Mexican revolution and the formation of the modern Mexican state. It was pursued by a number of Mexican philosophers in the wake of an intense national project to construct or discover a national identity. By the 1950s, there was a lurking sense among the Mexican intellectual class that the payoffs of all those nationalist cultural and political efforts were uncertain. Modern, postrevolutionary Mexico, and the nature of Mexicanness were felt to be something, but what that something

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was—the essence of Mexicanness—required reflection and articulation. A group of philosophers in Mexico City set out to do just that (see Hurtado 2007: 108–23; Sánchez 2016: 15–42).

According to the proponents of this project, what it was to be Mexican, to partake of Mexican being, was always indexed to a time and place (Sánchez 2018), although individuals had different views about how wide and narrow the scope of that time and place were. It is this contextualized notion of Mexicanness that provoked a good deal of fighting about whether this was a worthy philosophical project. That fight took the form of a debate about putatively universalist and historicist philosophy, and this disagreement in some way, shape, or form gripped large swaths of twentieth-century Latin American philosophy. (I am inclined to think that the focus of many disputes about historicism and universalism were ill-placed. No one denies the possibility of contextual, intersubjective, or conventional truths. The social significance of the issue was a fight over what kinds of truths, what kinds of questions and answers, deserved the honorific of *philosophy*, and what that meant for the various research programs throughout twentieth-century Latin American philosophy.)

There was already a tradition of 'psychological profiles' that purported to offer characterizations of widespread dispositions characteristic of the Mexican people. Indeed, this sort of psychological, cultural, and social profile of a nation or people was not an uncommon genre in Latin American writing at the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth (Stabb 1967: 12–33). What was different about the Mexican existentialists, of whom Uranga tended to be regarded as one of the most original and promising of that group, was that they took the purported prevalence of a Mexican psychological profile to be indicative of a particular mode of being—a distinctive configuration of historically situated experiences, meanings, and values.

My account of accidentality and the associated psychological syndrome left out some important elements that distinguish Uranga's picture. Those elements are worth highlighting because they raise interesting questions of their own about the extent to which a more general project can be extracted from Uranga's particular commitments.

According to Uranga, the Mexican circumstance—the forms of life, the system of meanings, the conceptual framework of people in those historical and national circumstances—is particularly distinctive. It is a historical accident in a very literal sense. It is the result of a collision between two kinds of substances—Spanish and Indigenous. But the ensuing society never generated its own distinctive substantiality. Instead, it produced a people who experience themselves and their form of life as an unstable, uncertain amalgam of norms, values, and meanings that do not cohere well in the actual conditions of Mexico and its history.

For Uranga, this situation of ungroundedness was experienced by (at least mid-twentieth century) Mexicans as a kind of constitutive or ontological *insufficiency* or *inadequacy* in their form of being, in the way they inhabit the world, and the way that their norms, values, and systems of meanings structure that world. To be sure, Uranga's account does not speak directly about many of the identity categories that had been historically important in Mexico—for

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example, the indigenous, the mestiza/o, and so on. Nor does he recognize the diversity internal to these identity categories. His analysis seems to accept a picture of the Mexican Revolution as having revealed, created, or made possible a new kind of historical being that was the Mexican of his analysis. Partial or limit cases, including those might reject the social and political order that made possible the sort of being that was his interest, is mostly passed over in silence, apart from some brief remarks on indigenism and Europeanism.

As Uranga saw it, ungroundedness tends to seek its erasure, i.e., it tries to resolve itself into something else because, at bottom, accidentality involves some awareness of the looming threat of nothingness, of nonbeing. The melancholy life of the accident is lived in a condition he calls *zozobra*. Zozobra is a kind of oscillation between being and nonbeing, what we might think of as a state teetering between, on one side, the impulse to accept a problematic framework of meanings, norms, and values and, on the other side, the urge to abandon that framework in light of its inadequacy at providing answers the person experiences as ready, reliable, and unreflectively apt.

The most common reaction to accidentality, Uranga claims, is something he calls *subordination*. Subordination is an appeal to someone else's substantiality as a normative ground. Their package of norms, values, and meanings are treated as justifying one's own being. This can happen directly and indirectly. The direct form involves an embrace of a proximal substantiality—oftentimes a dominant cultural framework. The immigrant who aspires not only to assimilate, but to assimilate in the most jingoist way possible, may be an example. The indirect form of subordination does not attempt to wear another's substantiality as one's own, but instead seeks approval by those who enjoy substantiality. One can aspire to be a 'nice girl' or 'the bright, articulate, and clean' minority. Whether direct or indirect, the net effect is the same: the typical response to accidentality reinscribes the normative inadequacy of one's accidentality, doubling down on the subordination of oneself to another's substance.

(It is worth noting that normativity is a difficult problem for Uranga. In the later *Analysis of Mexican Being* ([1952] 2013), Uranga holds that human agency is a relational thing, but the normativity that arises from the intersubjectivity of agents is elusive. Absent a fit between culture and circumstances, agents in zozobra cannot readily avoid recognizing the elusiveness of a compelling ground for normativity. How this compares to other existentialist notions—ennui, nausea, angst, anxiety, alienation, and so on, are interesting questions I do not try to pursue here. Also worth noting here is that the role of poetry plays an interesting and complicated role in the *Analysis*, and on one reading, its function is insight and expression of the present constitution of being. Might art have more resources than present-directed insight? Might it build community, afford shared experiences, or shape a possible ideal? Uranga never says.)

In the specifically Mexican context that was Uranga's interest, subordination paradigmatically took the forms of *malinchismo*—a glorification of the European, and especially Spanish culture—and *indigenismo*—indigenism, or a valorization of (an historic and Mexica, as opposed to an actual and typically not Mexica) indigenous culture above all else.

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Beyond subordination, two options suggest themselves: value creation and nihilism. The value creation idea is as follows. One could attempt to resolve one's accidentality not by grounding it in someone else's substantiality. Instead, one could seek to construct a new substantiality, a 'new tablet of values', as Nietzsche would have put it (1995, Prologue § 9). Uranga says little about this possibility, except to highlight a deep problem for it. He writes that 'Individuals who have projected a world, and who have realized it, eventually turn their gaze toward the foundations or grounds of those constructions, and upon finding them in the imagination are thrown into an incurable uneasiness, into an inevitable restlessness of finding the human edifice built on contemptible grounds' ([1951] 2017: 172). To construct a new substantiality does not erase the crisis for the person who creates that substantiality. A socially effective fantasy of normative realism is unlikely to persuade the person who engineers the fantasy.

The second possibility is a (perhaps attenuated) nihilism. One could respond to the possibility of accidentality with abandonment of the aspiration for guiding one's life by noncontingent, nonsubjective, absolute grounds for value and action. Uranga says very little about this, at least in any direct way. At the same time, it is not hard to imagine that this is the looming possibility that animates the rest of the enterprise. The project of characterizing accidentality might be read as an account of what it is to live with the ongoing possibility of nihilism.

'Essay on an Ontology of the Mexican' concludes with only the slightest of answers to how one might respond to the fact of accidentality. He briefly gestures at the possibility of a life that accepts accidentality, a 'neutral state of being', but the idea is underdeveloped ([1951] 2017: 173). He gestures at the possibility of living within zozobra in a manner that involves something like the constant re-opening of a scab, of living with the uncertainty of pervasive contingency. Rather than aspiring to the stable, permanent repair of one's normative wound, one might get by with temporary knittings of a functional (if irregular and impermanent) normative whole. The metaphor is meant to be uncomfortable. And, true to the spirit of the enterprise, Uranga gestures at this 'solution' but makes no commitment to it. He only notes that providing an account of how one ought to respond to accidentality is a matter for morality, and thus outside of his ontology of Mexicanness ([1951] 2017: 177).

Here, we would be remiss if we failed to note an important twist that is present in the 'Essay on an Ontology of the Mexican' but most clearly emerges in the later *Analysis*: Uranga thinks that the accidentality of Mexicanness is not a problem to be solved, but something to be embraced and even valorized. The historical conditions that produce Mexicanness also produce a human type that is especially proximal to the actual nature of human beings more generally, or perhaps a kind of human experience that is especially well suited to reveal the actual nature of the human being. *All* humans are accidents, Uranga seems to want to say; most simply find a way to deflect awareness or attention to it by immersion into some form of substantiality. In the Mexican, the contingencies of history have created a type for whom the illusion is harder to sustain.

Perhaps the most promising interpretation reads Uranga as hinting at the possibility that splits the difference between nihilism and value creation of the sort

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one finds in substantiality. He notes that a concern for dignity grounds a kind of freedom, because the disconnection from the moral fray urged by dignity opens up a potential space for freedom and value-origination. He thinks that this possibility has been left inert by accidents precisely because of the correlative pathology of the accident's disposition of unwillingness. Read this way, Uranga's aspiration is not to replace accidentality with a new substantiality. Instead, he aspires to live with an ongoing acceptance of accidentality.

If this is something like a kind of living with nihilism, it cannot be total in its rejection of norms and normative force. There is a cautious normativity in his recommendation that the Mexican should seek to live in zozobra. In the later *Analysis*, Uranga suggests that cynicism may be one way to live in zozobra ([1952] 2013: 75–78). It is an intriguing suggestion that exceeds the remarks he offers in the 'Essay on an Ontology of the Mexican'. It is unclear whether this is put forward as a solution or a strategy for living (in a truthful way) under zozobra. Perhaps cynicism is one way forward. This approach does suggest a way to try to vindicate the normative ambitions that underpin his analysis of Mexican being, as he claims that, 'what brings us to these types of studies is the project of performing moral, social, and religious transformations with that being' ([1952] 2013, 34; my translation). Even so, it remains frustratingly elusive what the grounds could be for any recommendation that we persist in zozobra.

There is another puzzle here about how we are to understand Uranga and how we wish to make use of Uranga. Uranga is writing within a phenomenological tradition according to which accidentality is a kind of experience of relationship to meaning and value. This makes it difficult to see how anyone can be a substance if everyone qua human being must experience accidentality. However, if one is not wedded to a phenomenological framework, it may be more tempting to think that accidentality is about one's relationship to value (perceived or otherwise), and that certain cultural conditions make one more and less aware of that relationship. Whether and how this alternative reading of Uranga might be sustained is a matter we will return to in the next section.

Deeper into Accidentality

Let us now consider whether the reconstruction I offered at the outset might cast light on a range of cases beyond those that figure in Uranga's account. I will briefly consider four cases: double-consciousness, subversive substitution, transplanted substantiality, and biculturality.

Among the most important philosophical accounts of the difficulty of navigating a social world structured by norms, values, and meanings that one rejects, is W. E. B. Du Bois's 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*. A crucial idea in that account is *double consciousness*. Here is what he says about it:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two

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> thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.
>
> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. ([1903] 2017: 7)

The parallels with Urangan accidentality are striking. On one way of reading Du Bois's idea, blacks in the United States face a difficult project of reconciling two conflicting frameworks of meaning and value, without abandoning either, and without either being fully adequate to that person's cultural and historical circumstances. The worry is that the conflict cannot be resolved, and if so, then the souls of black folk seem vulnerable to a condition of accidentality structurally similar to the one examined by Uranga.

A different reading of double consciousness suggests another possibility. On this alternative reading, the essential feature of double consciousness is that one must always view one's actions under a dual lens of cultural significance. Even when a person feels no temptation to integrate the values, norms, and meanings of the dominant cultural framework, that person must nevertheless be conscious of the significance of her actions relative to the dominant practical cultural framework. The same act might have one significance under the cultural package one accepts, and another under the dominant cultural package. Moreover, oftentimes one might have little or no control over the wider social meaning of one's acts (Bierria 2014: 130–32).

On this picture, the doubly conscious person need not experience estrangement from all or any framework of meaning and values, as one must in the case of Urangan accidentality. The doubly conscious person might well be a substance, but she need not be. Still, there seems a greater potential for accidentality in people who, of practical necessity, operate with this form of double consciousness. Doubly conscious people may be especially likely to be aware of a certain amount of contingency about their condition. In particular, they may be especially aware of how vulnerable they are to being unable to live out the norms and values that they take as satisfying. Whether or not they are accidents, doubly conscious people are plausibly often proximal to accidentality.

A case that may manifest double-consciousness, but that has its own distinctive profile is something we might categorize as *subversive substitution*. A story helps to bring out the shape of this sort of case. A friend and neighbor of mine—call him Jerry—was born in Korea but raised from an early age in the United States by his Korean father. He related that as a kid growing up in Southern California, he strongly identified with US black culture. He has a ready explanation for why: it was the best available alternative to his particular situation. Traditional Korean life was not an option for him in Southern California at that time. Relatedly, there was not enough social scaffolding for him to grow up in a more broadly hybridized Korean-American cultural context. Nor did he feel like he could fully inhabit mainstream US culture, both because he was racialized as non-white and because too much of his home life was structured by distinct norms and social

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meanings. What was available, though, in music, media, and proximal community, was US black culture. It was something he identified with not as a kind of cultural tourism, or as an identity to be strategically exploited, and not as a form of subordination in the Urangan sense of deferral to the dominant identity group. Instead, for him it was about its being sufficiently rich to sustain a network of values, symbols, and social meanings that could be enacted and shared, without simply subordinating himself to the substantiality of the dominant US American culture. (I use *US American* to acknowledge that there is some dispute about the propriety of US citizens claiming the continental moniker *Americans*.) It was a sense of identification that manifested a subversion of, or a resistance to two different forms of substantiality, Korean and US American, although perhaps not without its own complicated relationship to the substantiality of US black culture.

This case suggests an alternative strategy to the dueling temptations of assimilation and nihilism. In it, the effort is animated by something like a liberatory strategy of recruiting existing counternormative packages. It is not Uranga's subordination precisely because it is not an effort to seek approval from various proximal forms of substantiality that enjoy cultural dominance. However, for it to succeed, the alternative cultural framework has to be culturally available, and sufficiently rich in social opportunities to tide one over. Its enactment or performance may require some uptake or reception by others. Even if it is not a permanent solution, the function of this sort of subversion is to resist the omnipresent alienation one can feel with respect to a dominant culture, against which one feels socially subordinate in some relevant way.

Finally, I return to some of the cases described at the outset: immigrants and their descendants. Some immigrant populations experience themselves as having a subordinate social identity. Of course, not all foreign nationals experience themselves as alien, as other, as having a subordinate identity in a cultural milieu. Whether these experiences obtain is, presumably, partly a function of whether those identities are externally marked or identified in those ways. What is of interest here is an interesting difference that can emerge between immigrants and their descendants in how they experience their practical agency.

Consider that some immigrants do not experience themselves as socially subordinate in their new home, even when they are aware of the fact that they may be marked as having subordinate social identities. The now-present cultural milieu may not afford them all the familiar ways of living out the norms, values, and meanings that they bring with them from the old country, but this need not affect their selves in a way that produces Urangan fragility, or a sense of normative ungroundedness.

Substantiality can survive transplantation. Immigrants can bring with them an ongoing, taken-for granted, package of norms, values, and presumptions about social meaning. The local context does not always overturn that sense. The new cultural milieu can provide distinct, diminished but adequate, or even better affordances for enacting and expressing those norms, values, and social meanings. When this happens, the immigrant's sense of normative confidence may remain intact.

An adult immigrant to the United States—call him Rogelio—once told me that he never felt like a minority here, despite his apparent membership in a US minority

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group. His explanation was that where he came from, he was a member of the majority group, so how could he feel like a minority? Taking him at his word, he lacked a sense of being socially and culturally subordinate. On the present account, we might say Rogelio's prior sense of identity, and the new local cultural circumstances, jointly afforded him adequate opportunities for living out the package of norms, values, and meanings he brought with him. His substantiality survived transplantation. For him, the persistence of a nonsubordinate identity may have been facilitated by the presence of a sufficiently robust community of people who shared an overlapping cultural framework. His sense of nonsubordinate identity was not disabused by experiences in the United States. Had either of those things been different, so might have his experience of his identity in the United States.

Even when substantiality survives transplantation, the immigrant may experience an increased sense of the contingency of one's relationship to her operative norms, values, and social meanings. Moving to a culturally distinct context just is the kind of thing that casts in relief the possibility of different arrangements of practical norms, values, and social meanings. Correspondingly, it raises the specter of a distinct social identity, a distinct fit between one's sense of self and the possibilities afforded by the social world. In at least some cases, though, it does not necessarily threaten the immigrant's sense of her default normative presumptions.

The situation tends to be somewhat different for the children of immigrants—and their proximal descendants—at least when they are readily marked out as members of some or another subordinate identity group. Under these conditions, it is harder to enjoy the presumption of substantiality, a sense of a relatively stable and unified package of norms, values, and meanings that reliably guide action in one's social world. Why? At home, the package is structured by the legacy of the old country; at school, in public, and much of the media, the affordances are structured by a different set of presumptions. A sense of normative ungroundedness is harder to avoid if one is forming one's social identity under these conditions, and that ungroundedness can come to be experienced as an *essential* feature of oneself. In contrast, her immigrant parents may experience any ungroundedness as fleeting, as a contingent thing that can come and go. For some immigrant children, though, Urangan accidentality may be more live for them than it ever will be for their parents.

Other accidental or near-accidental configurations are possible. Consider various forms of bi- or polyculturality, where this is to be understood as the condition of persons who have a sense of comfort with multiple packages of practical norms, values, and social meanings. In this context, one is Armenian; in that context one is Californian; over there one is a ruthless capitalist; over here, a dedicated Christian. This situation is loosely similar to double consciousness. In this case, one identifies with all the various normative packages, or with a life that smoothly shifts between these packages. The worry here, of course, is that the result is a kind of fragmentation of self.

Philosophers have tended to valorize cross-situationally stable, normatively unified agents, and the Kantian and Aristotelian traditions have tended to defend this sort of view in different ways (for example, Korsgaard 2009: xi–xii, 18–27).

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(For dissent, see Doris 2002: 28–61; 2015: 157–58. See also Anzaldúa 2012: 99–113; Lugones 2003: 77–102; Alcoff 2006: 195–204, 264–84, for explorations and developments of the idea that there are distinctive psychic costs and opportunities for identities developed under conditions of cultural differences, social subordination, and the experience of cultural fragmentation.) Nevertheless, if one can withstand the psychic or rational demands of maintaining cultural silos in one's practical life, the pathologies—if that is what they are—of Urangan accidentality may not emerge. To be sure—oscillation between normative frameworks, or a living under an amalgam of distinctive normative packages can produce the requisite sense of normative unmooring characteristic of accidentality. The point here is that the mere fact that an agent experiences life as structured by discrete, even incompatible normative packages may not always produce the sense that there is no adequate normative basis for practical life.

This is one place where an analytic reconstruction of Uranga might come apart from the historical and phenomenological Uranga. If we think of accidentality as turning on the absence of a coherent and stable package of norms, or the absence of being rightly related to such norms, then we might want to insist that an agent with sufficiently unstable, unintegrated, and inconsistent normative commitments is an accident, even if that person does not experience life as normatively unmoored. Something like this sort of view makes it easier to see how accidentality just is the human condition, such that everyone is really an accident. In contrast, it seems the historical Uranga has to treat instances of bi- and polyculturality as cases of substantiality (or multiple substantiality, perhaps) whenever they were not accompanied by a sense of dissatisfaction or zozobra.

To take stock: The examples I have been considering—double consciousness, subversive substitution, transplanted substantiality, and biculturality—are less a taxonomy than a catalog of some of the phenomena that Uranga's framework can help illuminate. There are presumably other cases out there—including cases where people persist in the face of forms of cultural extinction—where Urangan tools might help illuminate the subtle relationship between lived experience, practical norms, and cultural situatedness.

It is not entirely clear whether we do better to think of the cases discussed in this section as *akin* to accidentality, or instead, as distinct *species* of accidentality. (I suspect we have to allow for the possibility that subversion may sometimes slide into subordination, or alternatively, into substantiality. I am going to put this possibility aside, though.) I am mostly inclined to think of these as species of accidentality, in part because the cases considered above—at least in paradigmatic forms—are marked by two interrelated features: (1) their bearers having a vivid sense of the contingency of their relationship to normative culture(s); and (2) in their practical reasoning, these agents do *not* take for granted a cross-situationally stable package of norms, values, and social meanings.

Thus, on the present proposal, Urangan accidentality—with its characteristic psychological syndrome—is only one species of accidentality. Psychological fragility might characterize a particular form of accidentality—perhaps it is essential to Urangan accidentality—but other forms of accidentality, with distinct moods and actional dispositions, can have divergent profiles.

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Lingering Theoretical Estrangements?

The foregoing has mostly proceeded on the presumption that we can usefully extract a more general picture of accidentality from the distinctive particulars of Uranga's own account. Whether that project succeeds or fails is a matter of whether the account accurately describes its target phenomena, and the fruitfulness of that description. In that light, fidelity to Uranga's particulars is beside the point. However, the account is also intended as a reconstruction of ideas in Uranga. So it is worth considering whether, as an interpretation of key ideas in Uranga's account, things go wrong when notions like *accidentality* are disentangled from the project of developing an ontology of Mexicanness.

There is, of course, some sense in which a more general project of a philosophy of accidentality is at odds with some of the particulars of Uranga's account. For example, the particular psychological picture Uranga offers is intended not as a picture of accidentality in any and every historical circumstance. Instead, it is a characterization of the psychology that accompanies accidentality as he found it in the particular historical and cultural configuration of mid-twentieth-century Mexico. Accidentality elsewhere might differ in some of its particulars. For Uranga, a preoccupation with dignity is something specific to the distinctively Mexican psychological profile. He thought that different national contexts produce different characteristic virtues used to shield the accident from a commitment to action and a wider valuational framework ([1951] 2017: 169–70).

Among Uranga scholars, there is little disagreement that Uranga's project belonged to a distinctive moment in a cultural history, part of a shared project that took Mexicanness as a problem worthy of study, one that proceeded from a commitment to philosophical historicism, and one that took many of its key terms and philosophical inspirations from the work of Heidegger and Sartre (Hurtado 1994: 280–81; Villegas 1960: 181–87; Sánchez 2016: 22, 9598). However, within philosophical circles in Mexico, there has been an important political and interpersonal dimension to the subsequent reception and evaluation of Uranga and his work (Valero Pie 2014:155–56; Cuéllar Moreno 2018: 15–17). The present reconstruction has largely elided these elements, treating them as peripheral, at best.

The elision may seem less than fully innocent. Uranga has, until very recently, been abandoned by philosophers in Mexico. At the same time, it is not, shall we say, an accident that philosophers in Mexico were preoccupied with these questions, as opposed to philosophers in, say, England or the United States. Even a superficial familiarity with the history of the region suggests that centuries of colonialism, its aftermath, and the still-recent memory of the Mexican Revolution meant that there were widespread doubts within Mexico about whether various imported political, economic, and valuational systems (such as Catholicism, liberalism, and positivism) were genuinely responsive to the real-world conditions in Mexico. If philosophy was going to pull its weight, it needed to be responsive to, and perhaps originating in, features of what was distinctive in Mexico.

Today, though, the wider project of a philosophy of Mexicanness tends to be viewed as a philosophical dead-end. Not long after the project of a philosophy of

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Mexicanness was undertaken, philosophers began to raise serious doubts about whether there was anything philosophically interesting or puzzling about Mexicanness, whether the picture was committed to an implausible nationalist essentialism (Revueltas [1958] 2017: 216–21; Hurtado 1994: 283–88); and whether the metaphilosophical presumptions of the project were tenable (Villegas 1960: 211–28). So, to extract a stand-alone philosophy of accidentality may seem like a double mistake: it both separates out a project from its essential historical contexts, and it does so in a way that obscures the reason why the project was abandoned.

Yet, Uranga acknowledged that the core features of his account need not be limited to Mexicans and Mexicanness. As he put in the *Analysis*, 'any other character allows for the same operation, but my character is ready to hand, so it would be absurd to appeal to something alien' ([1952] 2013: 56; my translation). So, while it is true that the extraction and generalization of a philosophy of accidentality from Uranga's wider project involves distortion, it is also faithful to a possibility he foresaw, but did not pursue. It is also faithful to a possibility his critics have thus far missed.

The theoretical insights produced by pursuing a broader picture of accidentality are worth the departures from Uranga's own concerns. We need not think, as Uranga did, that Mexicans are the 'most human of humans'. The question of who is the *most* human—in the sense of being best positioned to recognize the contingency of the normative, and of our systems of social meaning—is mostly idle. Perhaps it is a question that admits of an answer, but that answer would not tell us much. Whether Mexicans, Moldovans, or Mesopotamians might prove to be the most proximal to whatever one thinks is the truth about the normative foundations of socially enabled agency, one payoff of Uranga is that he provides us with tools for understanding features of culturally scaffolded agency that have otherwise been mostly invisible to philosophers. That so interesting and fecund a research program grew out of an effort at a regional ontology may suggest that we still have things to learn from a *filosofía de lo mexicano*, and potentially, other regional efforts at a philosophy of culture.

MANUEL VARGAS
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO
mrvargas@ucsd.edu

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