The Comedy of Sincerity. Truth and Pretence at the Level of Interaction

Manuel DELGADO RUIZ

Department of Social Anthropology, Universitat de Barcelona (UB). Barcelona, Catalonia
ORCID: 0000-0002-1208-8850

manueldelgadoruiz@gmail.com

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: PhD in Anthropology from the Universitat de Barcelona. Chair of Social Anthropology at the UB. Director of GRECS, Social Exclusion and Control Research Group. Member of the Observatory of Anthropology of Urban Conflict. His research interests include religious anthropology and urban anthropology. His latest books are *El espacio público como ideología* (2011) and *Ciudadanismo* (2016).

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

This paper presents some of the implications of the theatrical metaphor throughout which Erving Goffman analyses face-to-face social relations. This perspective considers the staging of the individual in each situation in which they take part as an ensemble of strategies set aside for controlling the self-image they are trying to project, in order to make their performance plausible. The article stresses that the goal of this dramatisation of the self is to restrain the inconsistencies, uncertainties and ambiguities that would cast doubts on the observance of the rules that make each one acceptable before others. The text aims to point out that, within this theoretical framework, sincerity, understood as a way of communication that guarantees the truthfulness of the information transmitted during a social encounter, is unfeasible, since what the interlocutors seek is never to express any hypothetical subjective truth but, above all, to continue to be foreseeable, to confirm a self-definition that the others will accept. Within this framework, in social life there are no actors but only characters.

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Social Life as Theatre

In *Charade,* the film directed by Stanley Donen (1963), there is a scene where Audrey Hepburn tries to work out which of the various identities she knows about the character played by Cary Grant is the real one. "How can you tell if someone is lying or not?" she asks him, thoughtfully. "You can't," responds the man who will later turn out to be a secret agent. "There must be some way," she says, confidently. Then he tells her: "There's an old riddle about two tribes of Indians — the Whitefeet always tell the truth and the Blackfeet always lie. So one day you meet an Indian, you ask him if he's a truthful Whitefoot or a lying Blackfoot? He tells you he's a truthful Whitefoot, but which one is he?" After a few seconds thinking about it she responds, resolutely: "Why couldn't you look at his feet?" He replies, smiling: "Because he's wearing moccasins." "Oh. Well, then he's a truthful Whitefoot, of course." "Why not a lying Blackfoot?" She falls silent. She looks at him and asks: "Which one are you?" "Whitefoot, of course," he says softly, while looking directly into her eyes. Obviously, whether the protagonist was a sincere man or a liar, the answer would be no different. The reflection that follows develops this question — that of the role of presumed truths in human relations — given the perspectives that address the extent to which everyday life is orderly and possible as a dynamic of strategies made of pretence and counterfeiting; that is, as the result of a dramatic organisation of social relations. The intention is to explore theories that, through the social sciences, may be useful in raising awareness of the theatrical dimension of social links in general, which makes them, at all times, "natural" forms of the performing arts. The theoretical premise, following Erving Goffman, is that all human beings living in society, whether or not they are engaged in theatre, are "theatrical" (García Landa, 2012).

Sincerity is a virtue or value that in our society we identify as a form of communication in which participants in a conversational meeting guarantee the veracity of the information they transmit about their feelings and ideas. From this point of view, sincere people are those who show themselves

as what they really are, and say what they really consider to be true. In a given type of relationship, it is understood that sincerity is a conventional non-negotiable requirement, so the flow of information circulating between structurally-linked individuals must be trustworthy. It is the presumption of trustworthy quality that takes for granted a coherent continuity between the expressive exterior and the immanence of an intellectual and emotional interior. Hence, we give credit to one another in assessing as worthy of faith the words and gestures that these others address to us as extroversions of their personal truth. However, what is the perspective on human sincerity as a truthful quality of the personal information we receive from the people with whom we communicate, of those approaches that have been dedicated to thoroughly understanding human relationships in the short term, precisely those in which frankness would be a fundamental requirement in order to guarantee mutual trust?

In this regard, an exploration of how microsociology, symbolic interactionism, the ethnography of communication and other situational theories have addressed the issue of sincerity as a premise of communication between — and of supposed — human authenticities is pertinent. Let's take, for example, and as we mentioned, the case of the most prominent theorist in this field, Erving Goffman, whose theatrical metaphor proposal is still considered valid today (Héctor and Costán, 2019; Dewar et al., 2019; Mazzone, 2020). Inspired by Simmel's conception when he describes society as a network of interconnections, Erving Goffman chooses as his central object of study the most mechanical and usual forms of sociality, the "dust" raised by social activity, a subject that concerns the interest in the construction or production of society, derived from his faithfulness to Radcliffe-Brown's structural functionalism. For Goffman (1983; trans. 1991), situated interaction, as a reciprocal determination of actions and of actors or actants, can be considered as a phenomenon in itself and can therefore be observed, described and analysed. It is true that it does not exist in reality as an autonomous entity, but it can be isolated for analytical purposes, treated as an order of events like any other, a system in itself; that is, as a positive entity that justifies scientific work.

The fundamental principle of interactional approaches — including, most notably, Goffman's — states that relationships between individuals always constitute power relations based on simulacrum. The contingencies of social interaction makes us constantly behave like impostors, counterfeiters, conspicuous practitioners of covert observation, clue trackers, or, as Paolo Fabbri (1998; trans. 2001) pointed out, double agents. What Goffman (1987; orig. 1967) calls face-to-face interaction then becomes a matter in itself, an autonomous system, a true social organisation endowed with its own self-regulatory mechanisms, devoted to preserving a social order precariously built and preserved in each of the situations in which it takes shape and to which each individual must adapt. It is, in a way, a sociology of circumstances, of the eventualities of everyday life, organised as relatively independent regions of meaning and structuring.

However, exactly because the social order is always precarious, it forces its interveners to permanently abandon all kinds of imposture in order to avoid the always imminent disaster of disaggregation. This is what makes us become a kind of professional player, doomed to an almost convulsive practice of bluff. Indeed, whenever we are in the presence of someone, we exhibit behaviours, actions and regulated challenges, often without being aware of them. Understanding, recognising and applying their logic is what we call "knowing how to behave." In contrast, not having a clear perspective on what to do in each situation or context implies the possibility of being sanctioned with discredit and with the obligation to perform the corresponding rites of reparation, in the form of clarifications and apologies.

The aim of those who interact is, therefore, to be relevant; that is, to understand and abide by the principles that enable us to be accepted by those we meet and whose expectations cannot be disappointed. We are referring, then, to how people who are together and aspire to form a society, however ephemeral it may be, must be predictable and mutually intelligible, with permanent evidence — and as unequivocal as possible — of how far they abide by the principles that maintain the order of each meeting or situation. So it is essential to establish or recognise the endogenous order that regulates from within each of the social sequences in which we are involved at all times. One of the founders of the Chicago School, William H. Thomas, described this initial and basic task of starting or joining each social meeting as a "definition of the situation".

Defining the situation involves answering the question about what is happening; in other words, setting the boundaries of appropriate behaviour, the framework that distinguishes the episode that begins and its contents from other content, identifying participants and their respective roles. It means cooperatively identifying a certain prior structure of expectations and values considered relevant and appropriate. Or, to put it another way, defining the situation means stipulating the meaning and structure of each meeting, acting as if there is an agreement on the conventions to be followed, an operational consensus or agreement on what each of those present understands of what is real; that is, what is really happening. Violating one of the rules of interaction postulated for each defined situation not only jeopardises the status of the offender but can threaten the viability and even the reality itself of the situation, unless appropriate repairs are carried out in the form of rectification or apology. These changes make us redefine the situation.

Once everyone's role in staging sociability has been established, all sorts of verbal and somatic adjustments — that is, gestural-based and other forms of non-verbal communication — occur that show that the participants have internalised, and are able to reproduce, the basic conventional knowledge to execute the interaction, to the point that the contribution of those who interact with each other is largely based on their ability to make other members of the group predictable. Put another way, intercommunication is the system by which human beings establish a predictable vital continuity; that is, they apply pragmatic procedures of attribution of intentions to others, based on a premise of coherence that cannot be contradicted. Far from being

a centrally-oriented process of change, most interactions are concerned with maintaining a certain balance, moving away from possible reasons for tension, and are riddled with ritualisations that express the obedience of those present to the established rules. The synthesis of the behaviours imposed by the ordinary activities of cooperation, the self-regulation of the concerted environments, the coordination of the initiatives, are the elements on which the effective fluidity of all sociability depends. Moreover, the system, insofar as it is a system — that is, a regularised and regularising entity — operates by inhibiting the parameters of change, which does not mean that it does not recognise them.

Erving Goffman and Microsociology

Thus, in each social situation, a duel must be held in which each actor will try to project and sustain a relevant image of himself or herself and in which each one will spend all the time checking, in each movement, the meaning of the action of others. The rules of the social game are that all players adhere to the role that belongs to them, know how to be in their place, and are in a position to maintain, confirm and defend it from threats that may affect it. The idea of strategy is thus fundamental here. It is understood that when several actors are in a situation of collusion of their mutual interests, each must play a game that has, or may have, decisive consequences for the other actors involved, and this game is chosen based on what each imagines the other imagines about what is happening.

This perspective works, then, in the complete interdependence of results in this dynamic of mutual knowledge. It is in relation to this that Goffman (1956: 13) speaks to us of the front as the part of the performance that works regularly in a general and fixed way, in order to define the situation with respect to those observing or participating in it. We also have the setting, the stage, the scenery, as well as the supply of sign equipment that the performers can use. The stimuli that make up the personal front can be divided into appearance and manners. Appearance informs about the social status of the performer or the temporary ritual state of the individual, while manners are the stimuli that work when warning us about the role that the performer expects to have in the interaction: arrogance, humility, kindness, aggression, etc.

When interfering in a given situation, performers may believe in their own actions, that what they perform is reality. Needless to say, the audience can be convinced of the same thing: that whoever acts is telling the truth and showing their true personality. This is when we can say that an individual is sincere. Then, as Goffman writes (Goffman, 1956: 10), "only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have any doubts about the 'realness' of what is presented." In some cases, performers may not be fooling themselves with their own routine. This is the case of the cynic. The fact is that sometimes the sincere person cannot be sincere, and then it becomes what Goffman again presents to us as "cynical performers whose audiences will not allow them to be" (Goffman, 1956: 10). The performers tend to create the effect that the

appearance they give to their performance reflects their essential being, their true personality, to the extent that it is assumed that each interaction can only be performed as authentic. That is why performers will try to make the audience perceive their performance as special and unrepeatable, which is usually achieved by emphasising the supposedly spontaneous aspects of the situation.

Goffman extensively comments on what is indefensible about the dichotomy between actual performance, which appears or seeks to appear to be sincere, and false performance. Between truth and falsehood there is a much smaller difference than intended, he will tell us. "Scripts even in the hands of unpracticed players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing" (Goffman, 1956: 31, footnote). Hence the importance for Goffman of theatrical metaphor. Accordingly, individuals monitor and control their expressions so that they are at all times congruent with the expectations corresponding to the role they play. Much of Goffman's work is, in fact, a treatise on how individuals guide and try to control the ideas that others form of them, the "impression management" (Goffman, 1956: 49). All individuals, in accordance with this presupposition, place within reach of others, emit, so to speak, intentionally, information about themselves which they will try to ensure at all times is advantageous to their interests. The requirement that it be credible to others is fundamental, as it is necessary for these others to get the idea that they themselves have created their opinion of the person they are speaking to. Needless to say, people relate to each other in a process of accumulating the best they have, in which they invalidate much of the diverse — and often contradictory — facts that make up their lives and thus create a manageable order that is as safe as possible from the constant threats of incongruity, indeterminacy and ambiguity.

The microsociological perspective values how the social order perceives itself with extreme vulnerability. Its maintenance implies, as a last resort, good faith and loyalty of the members of the community. To this end, the members of the social group must willingly subscribe to the rules considered legitimate, acquire the concern for their own presentation and respect for their person and for other people, so that the structure that keeps us dependent on each other — and that we never fail to perceive as fragile and in danger — is not altered. In order to avoid this, we all contribute to showing ourselves as what we understand we should be and that we occupy the place we are assigned by each of the dramatic tableaux that make up social life. To do this, human behaviour is always divided into a front region and a back region of the stage. In the front region or foreground, the actual performance takes place. In the back region, to which the audience does not have access, performers can relax and perform activities that, if transcended, would destroy their reputation or at least hinder their ability to control the situations in which they are involved. In each performance, the character must maintain, above all, what Goffman (1956: 146) calls loyalty, discipline, and dramaturgical circumspection; in other words, the art of knowing one's role and knowing how to improvise in the face of any unforeseen circumstances. In these cases, the goal is never to be true but, above all, to be plausible. Everyone

tries to play with themselves, to be present without ever ceasing to be, in some way, hidden.

In terms of how this control is exercised, it is seen in special ritual activities: reparative exchanges — excuses, justifications and explanations — through which the possible transgressor of one of the patterns of conduct that would make it acceptable can redirect others' assessment of their violation. Through apologies, the relationship with the violated rule is shown to be different from what the actual behaviour implies; a behaviour that has called into question the validity of the shared rules. By apologising, transgressors hint that their offence does not reflect what they are and continue to be, and that the person revealed by their offensive acts is unauthorised, which, to some extent, is as if they had not been themselves. They ask, therefore, that they and their actions be regarded as different from their outwardly manifested meaning. It is the ritual activity that allows the actors to control their performance of their expressive behaviours by others, as well as to keep the definitions attributed to them within the limits that their self-love can accept. The repair activity is accepted by the others, who assume that the offender is close enough to the group to want to continue playing the game. Otherwise, there would be nothing to do.

There Are No Actors; Only Characters

Symbolic interactionism admitted, in its early stages and from Georg H. Mead's own theoretical programme, the essentialist postulate that asserts the absolute predominance of the unique over the multiple. This premise underpins the principle of sincerity as a value, which means that the contents of the information conveyed in the act of communication is, can be or must be transmitted in a perfect and not problematic way, always through the presence of a subject who receives stimuli and reacts to them, or emits them. This theory conceives the existence of a universe of permanence, populated by truly charged stable human entities. On the other hand, for Goffman, each individual who participates in the interaction seeks nothing more than to save face, look good, maintain image, end without fright what has begun and, muddle through in the best possible way.

For Goffmanian microsociology, the individual must be divided between a character, who tries to impose himself or herself in each interaction, and a performer, who has the mental and intellectual faculties necessary to stage this character effectively. But, deliberately ignoring the performer, the study of whom refers directly to sociobiology, Goffman works only with the character, the one who must be presented in the immediacy of social circumstances. This is how he defines the self as a "dramatic effect", the product derived from a performance in a situation. This does not mean that individuals do not perceive their subject as an unexploded unit, nor that of defending their biographical unit. What this means is that the analysis of the situation as a set of contingencies, as an arena of conduct much more than of expressiveness or communication, irreversibly weakens this idea of unity of the subject, while making it impossible to grasp it.

Goffman's analysis thus refrains from any ontological presumption, from any subjectivist postulate. In fact, there are no actual actors, only characters. The interactionist self is no longer an essence but a task, a process (Ogien, 1988). This is where Goffman's debt to Durkheim's theory of ritual and the sacred comes into play. For Durkheim, let us remember, ritual is a formal, conventionalised act by which an individual reflects their respect and consideration for some object of ultimate value or who it represents. The soul of a human being, Durkheim tells us (1924: 34; trans. 2006), is a portion of sacredness, a kind of individualised form of mana. This was the premise on which Erving Goffman based his theory on the rituals that guide all social interaction, for the ego of each is certainly a god, a small god if you will, but a god who, as such, claims to be constantly honoured with all kinds of sacraments, the breach of which is identical to a sacrilege. It is the rites that allow the individual to maintain their own moral attributes, such as honour, esteem, pride. On the other hand, the face work as a deliberate and conscious practice, sustains the constitution of a single subject that defends, at all costs, their permanence and durability. Rites, elements of conduct conceived as spaces socially defined by specific normative rules, establish these sacred limits that must not be exceeded, as their contravention endangers and offends, violates, the always fragile identity. It is for this reason that it is postulated at all times how attacks on the individual are punishable, because they imply evidence of the precariousness of our personal truth, of our essential Self.

Based on this theoretical framework that gives ritualisation a central role, personal interaction is conceived as a social circumstance in the course of which individuals demonstrate that they accept the rules of mutual acceptability. The relationships that individuals establish are subject to a set of adaptive transformations that allow meanings to be accommodated to a criterion that is never true but plausible. From this point of view, the question of the "true" identity of the individual, and therefore that of the possibility of sincerity, has no place. Truth is not presented here as a quality immanent to a self that ensures and guarantees the unity of the individual and the ability to communicate it to others. This unit is understood as a quality that is conferred on the individual by an audience that plays in the actuality of each situational context. The person, then, is no longer an entity that semi-conceals behind events but a variable formula for behaving appropriately.

Each expression is not, therefore, the revelation of an inner reality, the external presentation of something internal, the transmission of subjective experiences that the "sincere" person would make to their interlocutor. The interpretation of the actions of others is possible because there is a shared communicative code, a rule that enables meaning to be given to everything the individual does, but our actions require constant ratification and approval. This goal is achieved so that we do not vindicate another definition of ourselves other than that which others are willing to accept. It is because the assumptions of the individuals about themselves are appropriate to their normatively approved place in the group in which the claimed or acted identity and the attributed identity coincide. In the world of the

credible — rather than the real — the spontaneity of experience is simply inconceivable, as it appears socially organised and successfully demands that individuals establish the relationship between themselves and things of the world, in accordance with principles of acceptability that cannot be violated.

This is how Goffman leads to the final consequences of Durkheim's anti-psychologism and structural functionalism, and takes away from interactionism the fiction of the subject as an irrevocable unifying redoubt that survives the person's struggles against the structural harshness, to which they are subjected at any given time. This challenge to substantive interiority coincides with Nietzsche's critique of the logic of identity, which in Adorno and Horkheimer, as well as in Foucault, results in an unmasking of the "systematizing principle of selfhood"; that is, of the internally governed and intentionally oriented subject, the constituent and meaning-providing subject (cf. Wellmer, 1985: 76-112; trans. 1993).

And the same goes for how Wittgenstein (1951; ed. 1983) confronts the presumption that it is the subject that gives and distributes the different linguistic meanings, and does so from inner or sensitive experiences, so something means something when someone assigns it a name. In the face of this assumption that it is the subject who creates and evaluates the intentions of meaning, Wittgenstein postulates that a certain proposition has meaning not because its elements represent objects, but because it plays a role in the language-game, the avatars of which determine a little less than unlimited range of situational variability. As Román Cuartango writes (2001: 139, own translation) commenting on Wittgenstein, "there is nothing, then, about the meaning of the propositions we can find when we look inside the speakers' heads. The meanings are outside, they are there, embodied in sets of linguistic and non-linguistic activities, of institutions. This is what makes it possible for humans to even simulate and disguise, both in behaviour and in language, their true feelings, and hence also that lying is, for Wittgenstein (Ibid., § 245), "a language-game, which must be learned like any other."

What we are told does not tell us about a personal truth that is ultimately inaccessible and, to some extent, dispensable, but about the way the other person aspires to take it from us. The myth of sincerity is only the logical derivation of another myth: the one that Jacques Bouveresse (1987) called, in his book also in reference to Wittgenstein, "the myth of interiority." Communication does not keep us informed about what others are, but about what they want us to believe they are; they don't tell us what they think, but what they want us to think they think. As an eminently social act, the transmission of a truth with a reliable appearance and format is always a manoeuvre that, as part of a strategy, aspires for others to take us as what we seek to seem. It is impossible to be sure whether a person weeping in our presence is sad or not; what is clear is that their wants us to be.

Hidden Truths

Needless to say, this perception of social individuals as beings who must constantly disguise their true ideas and intentions, in order to be welcome

to interact, is especially appropriate to understand a specific type of sociability as one produced in urbanised contexts in contemporary societies, in which each one moves at all times between what Chicago School theorists called "moral areas", specific areas of social bond, completely disconnected from each other, if not incompatible or antagonistic. The distrust and the need to preserve what we "really" are from the shipwreck that would be involved by excessive exposure to strangers makes public beings clandestine or semi-clandestine characters for whom "sincerity" will always be a risk. Any over-expressiveness or any poorly controlled spontaneity could reveal to others who we really are, what we think, what we feel, what our past is, what we want, what we plan. We sense the extent to which this would be fatal and discredit us. And it forces us to become individuals with labile profiles, with attributes adaptable "to the occasion", devoted to all kinds of games of camouflage and mimetic strategies, which always insincerely negotiate the terms of their being together.

It is as if all social life were a colossal masked ball, certainly, but in which no mask were completely finished before its public display. Masks, in fact, are made by their users according to the requirements of each specific situation, based on a practical logic that combines approaches and keeps a distance from others. Rather than performing a pre-written script, what the protagonists of each social meeting do is play, and do so in a way that is not very different from how a boy or a girl would; that is, by organising impersonal situations based on external action, governed by rules — that is, in which spontaneity plays a minimal role — but where there is a strong component of unpredictability and chance. The game is precisely the example that G. H. Mead (1934: 181-192; trans. 1990) put forward to explain the notion of the generalised other; that is, this abstraction that allows each subject to put themselves in the place of others at the same time as they distance themselves from them, without ceasing, however, to put themselves in the perspective of all these others.

We have reached the central core of worldliness, this characteristic way of living in a society inaugurated by urban modernity. Worldliness is this universalisable moral law that is based on the prudence that recommends that we abstract our own identity when defining ourselves and act as beings of relationships. This is what makes the worldly a being clinging to his line of flight, someone who, as Blanchot (1971; trans. 1976) wrote, suffers the terror of identification, a chronic and widespread impostor, a sociable being given that he is able to constantly disguise himself, exile from himself, always in a critical situation, about to be discovered, an adherent of almost religious worship because of the relationship itself, addicted to a situational morality, at all times indeterminate, based on bracketing oneself, living in a universe made entirely of thresholds and margins, of intervals, and always practising something halfway between haughty reserve and pure concealment (cf. Joseph 2003).

Outside and even contrary to what everyone assumes is their own fundamental truth, in everyday life in the public sphere there are endlessly intertwined beings who demand to be taken into account or ignored, not

depending on who they really are or believe they are, but what they look like or hope they look like. Beings who are masks and who aspire to be considered only based on what they do and what happens to them. This constant negotiation between appearances makes public life actors a kind of relative exhibitionists, whose goal is to keep up with the situations they go through at all times. Their goal is not to know, nor to understand, but to be appropriate, to assert that they are competent, to know their role, to convince others of the relevance of their gestures, their responses and their initiatives. First and foremost, their ability to adapt to each medium or to try to modify it, using the manipulation of impressions, cunning, half-truths and, of course, lies and concealments is assessed. Protecting this information — who we are, what we know, what we think, what we feel — is what allows us, or rather, makes us spend our time saying nothing about this or that, diverting conversations, and agreeing with Harvey Sacks (1973) when he reminded us that we are all obliged to lie, because lying ends up being an essential and unavoidable element in any form of coexistence, one of the elements that determine the very viability of living together.

All of this implies that human relationships are made of an administration of information about ourselves that makes full sincerity inadvisable. It is impossible to say everything. A part will always remain opaque and be held back. This is what makes the contest of secrecy as a social strategy, an integral part of all social relations, indispensable, especially because it is well known that these relationships would be broken or would surely be affected if what was hidden became known. Here is the central theme of the well-known essay by Georg Simmel (1908; ed. 1988) in which he warned about the structuring virtue of secrecy, especially in societies endowed with a high level of complexity, in which the delimitation of different social circles and their internal organisation makes the protective action of mutual concealment indispensable.

The secret, even the lie and obviously insincerity, become indispensable resources in order to offer a coherent vision of ourselves, a vision that will never correspond to a subjective truth due to a disconnected and fragmentary definition. We can only earn credit to the extent that we are in a position to show ourselves in part, concealing information about ourselves that may be inconvenient or inconsistent with the image we want or need to project about our personality or our status. This mutually ignored and undisclosed part of who or what we are — what Simmel calls our spiritual private property — is what causes the intrinsically ambiguous condition of personal relationships, made up of varying ingredients of communication and reserve, of truth and error, of light and dark. Therefore, the use of secrecy is a technique without which it would be impossible to adapt to each social environment.

It seems difficult to argue that our connection with others works largely as a hermeneutic activity, in the sense that it is aimed at knowing, or at least sensing, the part of information that our interlocutors hide from us, the information they do not tell us when they talk to us. This desire to reveal what others know, have, do, have done, think, feel, want and hide from us, may be a consequence of our conviction that this information that is hidden

from us can be strategic with a view to understanding the final meaning and intentions that guide the relationship of the people with whom we interact. Thus, we are dealing with what is not said, with what is too important to be communicated to us from the first moment, with what we must make a concerted effort to understand, with what compels us to constantly question our interlocutors.

It is as if we are all predictors of others, fortune tellers of what they do not declare or would not declare, interpreters of the clues offered to us by the unfathomability of the people with whom we relate in a more or less lasting way, and about which we know they will never be completely sincere. This is what makes each and every one of us constant schemers, conspirators who seek to obtain data from others that these others do not give us, elements to access these nuclei of knowledge that allow us to exercise greater control over them. It is everything that we know that the people in front of us at each moment would never confess, because no one puts all their cards on the table at the same time or completely. The most common inquisitive practices, of which everyday life is full, are well-understood examples of this tendency that we all surely experience to know about others more than they tell us or make known to us. And it is no less true that the situation is also reversed. Aware as we are of this inclination to intrude, we protect ourselves by making sure that others do not become aware of those aspects of our personal life that might be considered intolerable. The consequence is a constant tension between the need for transparency and intelligibility and the no less energetic hiding of facets that, if known, might make us objectionable.

We could stop and think about what would happen if everyone always had to be honest, if we could never lie, or cover up, or embarrass others with our excuses, concealments or alibis. Imagine for a second a world where everything we know, think, plan and desire is immediately and reciprocally accessible, where our thoughts and intentions emerged, that we could not pretend, a world of completely and permanently frank beings. In fact, this imaginary eventuality — a completely translucent world — would be a nightmare, because all social relations would collapse. Our interactions unfold in incessant pendulum movements between the visible and the invisible, we constantly cross and in both directions the membrane that separates the interior from the exterior, we show the structuring virtue of the dialectic between secret and revelation, between confidence and mistrust, between certainty and uncertainty, between knowing and not knowing, with all the intermediate scales involved, suspecting, glimpsing, and with all the characters, scenarios and *attrezzo* of the great drama of hidden or half-hidden truths.

Thus we all show only a small part of ourselves. It should not be forgotten that the modern concept of intimacy refers to this principle of encapsulation within oneself where everyone keeps the secret of who they really are in their entirety, this totality of which others cannot, and must not, know more than a part. Consequently, we all, to some extent, make common use of discretion, half-truths, even deceit, in order to maintain certain confidential information, which we try only to disclose in a selective way to those who it

is in our interests should know, or we can allow to know in whole or in part. Insincerity exists because there are others, and others surely would not admit to what we really feel or think at every moment and in their presence.

This is what comes from our own fragmentary nature, from characters forced to a chronic imposture, who always play different roles that make us thematise ourselves — that is, to reduce ourselves to a partial and biased image of ourselves — at every opportunity and depending on that opportunity, behind this goal, which is the only thing that matters to us, and which is no other than to be recognised as conciliators for and with others. There is a part of us that refuses to socialise, that is not called upon to form part of each of the interactions in which we are involved, insofar as we break down our personality and show only a few traits that, always organised in a coherent and clear manner, allow us to show ourselves as a fiction, a chimera, what we are and never will be in reality: a single and actual thing.

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