Leopoldo Zea (b. 1912)

Leopoldo Zea was born in Mexico City, where he studied with Antonio Caso, Samuel Ramos, and later with the Spanish exile José Gaos. He is currently a professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico. In 2000 he was awarded the Belisario Domínguez medal from the Mexican government. He has also received honorary degrees from the Universidad de Santiago (Chile), the Universidad de la Habana (Cuba), and the National University of Athens (Greece), as well as recognition from the Venezuelan government for his contributions to Latin American thought.

These awards come at the end of a life devoted to the cultivation of intellectual life in Mexico and beyond. Zea was the organizer of the philosophical group Hiperión, which had as its aim the establishment of a philosophy based on the examination of the Mexican man and his characteristics. Among the thinkers who took part in this group and who followed Zea’s direction are Emilio Uranda, Ricardo Guerra, Joaquín McGregor, Jorge Portilla, Luis Villoro, and Fausto Vega.

The first of Zea’s important works was *El positivismo en Mexico* (1943), which was his master’s thesis. In the next year, his doctoral thesis, *Apogeo y decadencia del positivismo en México* (1944), appeared. He wrote this under the supervision of the Spanish *transsterrado*, José Gaos. Through Gaos, the work of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset had a strong influence on the development of Zea’s views. One of Ortega’s most important insights was that in order to understand ourselves, we must understand our circumstance. Zea developed this view while studying the history of Mexican philosophy and reflecting upon the specific historical circumstances from which it emerged.

Among Zea’s most important books are *En torno a una filosofia Amer*
His thought focuses upon a very particular conception of philosophy. Philosophy for him is not a system of abstract and theoretical propositions, but the product of “men of flesh and bones struggling in their own circumstances.” Every philosophy, according to Zea, emerges from specific historical situations; this is why one must reflect upon such circumstances in order to understand reality.

Zea was one of the first Latin American thinkers explicitly concerned with the search for the identity of Latin American thought. The first of the two articles by him included here is one of the earliest he published on the subject of the search for identity. It was groundbreaking. His position, based on a culturalist point of view, categorically affirms the existence of a Latin American philosophy. Zea argues that every form of thought emerging in Latin America is Latin American philosophy. The reason is that Latin American thought arises from specifically historical Latin American circumstances and addresses those circumstances.

The second article addresses specific moments in the history of Latin American countries; the colonization and the fight for independence from colonial powers, and the struggle to assert a cultural identity and to free the countries of Latin America from dependence upon other powers. In this article, Zea discusses a topic that is central to his thought, mestizaje. The term mestizaje points to Zea’s interest in issues related to race and culture, and Zea uses the term to open a philosophical discussion concerning the identity of a person who is of both Spanish and indigenous heritage. As issues of race have recently become more central in philosophy, Zea’s contributions are more relevant than ever.
The Actual Function of Philosophy in Latin America

Some years ago, a young Mexican teacher published a book that caused much sensation. This young teacher was Samuel Ramos and the book was *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*. This book was the first attempt at interpreting Mexican culture. In it Mexican culture became the subject of philosophical interpretation. Philosophy came down from the world of ideal entities to a world of concrete entities like Mexico, a symbol of men who live and die in their cities and farms. This daring attempt was derogatorily termed *literature*. Philosophy could not be anything other than a clever game of words taken from an alien culture. These words of course lacked meaning: the meaning they had for that alien culture.

Years later another teacher, this time the Argentinian Francisco Romero, emphasized Ibero-America’s need to begin thinking about its own issues, and the need to delve into the history of its culture in order to take from it the issues needed for the development of a new type of philosophical concern. This time, however, Romero’s call was based on a series of cultural phenomena that he identified in an essay entitled “Sobre la filosofía en Iberoamerica.” In this article he showed how the interest in philosophical issues in Latin America was increasing on a daily basis. The public at large now follows and asks with interest for works of a philosophical character and nature. This has resulted in numerous publications—books, journals, newspaper articles, etc.—and also in the creation of institutes and centers for philosophical studies where philosophy is

This interest in philosophy stands in sharp contrast with periods when such an activity was confined to a few misunderstood men. Their activity did not transcend literary or academic circles. Today, we have reached the level that Romero calls "the period of philosophical normalcy," that is, a period in which the practice of philosophy is seen as a function of culture just as is the case with any other activity of a cultural nature. The philosopher ceases to be an eccentric whom nobody cares to understand and becomes a member of his country's culture. There is what one may call a "philosophical environment," that is, a public opinion that judges philosophical production, thus forcing it to address the issues that concern those who are part of this so-called public opinion.

Now, there is one particular issue that concerns not only a few men in our continent, but the Latin American man in general. This issue concerns the possibility or impossibility of Latin American culture, and, as an aspect of the same issue, the possibility or impossibility of Latin American philosophy. Latin American philosophy can exist if there is a Latin American culture from which this philosophy may take its issues. The existence of Latin American philosophy depends on whether or not there is Latin American culture. However, the formulation and attempt to solve this problem, apart from the affirmative or negative character of the answer, are already Latin American philosophy, since they are an attempt to answer affirmatively or negatively a Latin American question. Hence, the works of Ramos, Romero, and others on this issue, whatever their conclusions, are already Latin American philosophy.

The issue involved in the possibility of Latin American culture is one demanded by our time and the historical circumstances in which we find ourselves. The Latin American man had not thought much about this issue before because it did not worry him. A Latin American culture, a culture proper to the Latin American man, was considered to be an irrelevant issue; Latin America lived comfortably under the shadow of European culture. However, the latter culture has been shaken (or is in crisis) today, and it seems to have disappeared from the entire European continent. The Latin American man who had lived so comfortably found that the culture that supported him fails him, that he has no future, and that the ideas in which he believed have become useless artifacts, without sense, lacking value even for their own authors. The man who had lived with so much confidence under a tree he had not planted now finds himself in the open when the planter cuts down the tree and throws it into the fire as useless. The man now has to plant his own cultural tree, create his own ideas. But a culture does not emerge miraculously; the seed of that culture must be taken from somewhere, it must belong to someone. Now—and this is the issue that concerns the Latin American man—where is he going to find that seed? That is, what ideas is he going to develop? To what ideas is he
going to give his faith? Will he continue to believe and develop the ideas inherited from Europe? Or is there a group of ideas and issues to be developed that are proper to the Latin American circumstance? Or rather, will he have to invent those ideas? In a word, the problem of the existence, or lack of existence, of ideas that are proper to America, as well as the problem of the acceptance or rejection of ideas belonging to European culture that is now in crisis, comes to the fore. Specifically, the problem of the relationship between Latin America and European culture, and the problem of the possibility for a genuinely Latin American ideology.

In light of what has been said it is clear that one of the primary issues involved in Latin American philosophy concerns the relations between Latin America and European culture. Now, the first thing that needs to be asked has to do with the type of relations that Latin America has with that culture. There are some who have compared this relationship to that between Asia and European culture. It is said that Latin America, just as Asia, has assimilated only technology from Europe. But if this is so, what would belong to Latin American culture? For the Asian man, what he has adopted from European culture is regarded as something superimposed that he has had to assimilate owing to the change in his own circumstance caused in turn by European intervention. However, what he has adopted from European culture is not properly the culture, that is, a lifestyle, a worldview, but only its instruments, its technology. Asians know that they have inherited an age-old culture that has been transmitted from generation to generation; they know that they have their own culture. Their view of the world is practically the opposite of the European. From Europeans they have only adopted their technology, and only because they have been forced to do so by the intervention of Europeans and their technology in a circumstance that is properly Asian. Our present day shows what Asians can do with their own worldview while using European technology. Asians have little concern for the future of European culture, and they will try to destroy it if they feel that it gets in their way or continues to intervene in what they regard as their own culture. Now, can we Latin Americans think in a similar way about European culture? To think so is to believe that we have our own culture, but that this culture has not perhaps reached full expression yet because Europe has prevented it. In light of this, one could think that this is a good time to achieve cultural liberation. If that were the case, the crisis of European culture would not concern us. More than a problem, such a crisis would be a solution. But this is not the case: we are deeply concerned about the crisis of European culture; we experience it as our own crisis.
This is due to the fact that our relationship with European culture as Latin Americans is different from that of the Asians. We do not feel, as Asians do, the heirs of our own autochthonous culture. There was, yes, an indigenous culture—Aztec, Maya, Inca, etc.—but this culture does not represent, for us contemporary Latin Americans, the same thing that ancient Oriental culture represents for contemporary Asians. While Asians continue to view the world as their ancestors did, we Latin Americans do not view the world as the Aztecs or the Mayans did. If we did, we would have the same devotion for pre-Columbian temples and divinities that an Oriental has for his very ancient gods and temples. A Mayan temple is as alien and meaningless to us as a Hindu temple.

What belongs to us, what is properly Latin American, is not to be found in pre-Columbian culture. Is it to be found in European culture? Now, something strange happens to us in relation to European culture: we use it but we do not consider it ours; we feel imitators of it. Our way of thinking, our worldview, is similar to the European. European culture has a meaning for us that we do not find in pre-Columbian culture. Still, we do not feel it to be our own. We feel as bastards who profit from goods to which they have no right. We feel as if we were wearing someone else's clothes: they are too big for our size. We assimilate their ideas but cannot live up to them. We feel that we should realize the ideals of European culture, but we also feel incapable of carrying out the task: we are content with admiring them and thinking that they are not made for us. This is the knot of our problem: we do not feel heirs of an autochthonous culture, because that culture has no meaning for us; and that which has meaning for us, like the European, does not feel as our own. There is something that makes us lean toward European culture while at the same time resists becoming part of that culture. Our view of the world is European but we perceive the achievements of that culture as alien. And when we try to realize its ideals in Latin America we feel as imitators.

What is properly ours, what is Latin American, makes us lean toward Europe and at the same time resists being Europe. Latin America leans toward Europe as a son to his father, but at the same time it resists becoming like his own father. This resistance is noticeable in that, despite leaning toward European culture, Latin America still feels like an imitator when it seeks to achieve what that culture does. It does not feel that it is realizing what is proper to it but only what Europe alone can achieve. That is why we feel inhibited by and inferior to Europeans. The malaise resides in that we perceive what is Latin American, that is, what is ours, as something inferior. The Latin American man's resistance to being like a European is felt as an incapacity. We think as Europeans, but we do not feel that this is enough; we also want to achieve the same things that Europe achieves. The malaise is that we want to adjust the Latin Amer-
ican circumstance to a conception of the world inherited from Europe, rather than adjusting that conception of the world to the Latin American circumstance. Hence the divorce between ideas and reality. We need the ideas of European culture, but when we bring them into our circumstance we find them to be too big because we do not dare to fit them to this circumstance. We find them big and are afraid to cut them down; we prefer to endure the ridicule of wearing an oversize suit. Indeed, until recently the Latin American man wanted to forget what he is for the sake of becoming another European. This is similar to the case of a son who wants to forget being a son in order to be his own father: the result has to be a gross imitation. This is what the Latin American man feels: that he has tried to imitate rather than to realize his own personality.

Alfonso Reyes portrays the Latin American man’s resistance to being Latin American with great humor. The Latin American man felt “in addition to the misfortune of being human and modern, the very specific misfortune of being Latin American; that is, having been born and having roots in a land that was not the center of civilization, but rather a branch of it.”¹ To be a Latin American was until very recently a great misfortune, because this did not allow us to be European. Today it is just the opposite: the inability to become European, in spite of our great efforts, allows us to have a personality; it allows us to learn, in this moment of crisis for European culture, that there is something of our own that can give us support. What this something is should be one of the issues that a Latin American philosophy must investigate.

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Latin America is the daughter of European culture; it is the product of one of its major crises. The discovery of America² was not a matter of chance, but rather the product of necessity. Europe needed America: in every European mind there was the idea of America, the idea of a promised land. A land where the European man could place his ideas, since he could no longer continue to place them in the highest places. He could no longer place them in the heavens. Owing to the emergence of a new physics, the heavens were no longer the home of ideals but rather became something unlimited, a mechanical and therefore dead infinity. The idea of an ideal world came down from heaven and landed in America. Hence the European man came out in search of the land and he found it.

The European needed to rid himself of a worldview of which he was tired. He needed to get rid of his past and begin a new life. He needed to build a new history, one that would be well planned and calculated, without excess or wanting. What the European was afraid of openly
proposing in his own land, he took for granted in this land called America. America became the pretext for criticizing Europe. What he wanted Europe to be became imaginarily fulfilled in America. Fantastic cities and governments that corresponded to the ideals of the modern man were imagined in America. America was presented as the idea of what Europe should be. America became Europe's utopia. It became the ideal world that the old Western world was to follow to rebuild itself. In a word, America was the ideal creation of Europe.

America was born to history as a land of projects, as a land of the future, but of projects and a future that were not its own. Such projects and such future were Europe's. The European man who put his feet in this America—becoming part of the Latin American circumstance and giving rise to the Latin American man—has been unable to see what is properly American. He has only seen what Europe wanted America to be. When he did not find what European imagination had placed in the American continent, he was disappointed, and this produced the uprooting of the Latin American man from his own circumstance. The Latin American man feels European by origin, but he feels inferior to the European man by reason of his circumstance. He feels inadequate because he regards himself as superior to his circumstance, but inferior to the culture he comes from. He feels contempt for things Latin American, and resentment toward Europe.

Rather than attempting to achieve what is proper to Latin America, the Latin American man labors to achieve the European utopia and thus stumbles, as it could be expected, into a Latin American reality that resists being anything other than what it is: Latin America. This gives rise to the feeling of inferiority about which we already have spoken. The Latin American man considers his reality to be inferior to what he believes to be his destiny. In Anglo-Saxon America this feeling expresses itself in the desire to achieve what Europe has achieved in order to satisfy its own needs. North America has strived to become a second Europe, a magnified copy of it. Original creation does not matter, what matters is to achieve the European models in a big way and with the greatest perfection. Everything is reduced to numbers: so many dollars or so many meters. In the end, the only thing that is sought with this is to hide a feeling of inferiority. The North American tries to show that he is as capable as the European. And the way to show it is by doing the same things that Europeans have done, on a bigger scale and with greater technical perfection. But this only demonstrates technical, not cultural ability, because cultural ability is demonstrated in the solution one gives to the problems of man's existence, and not in the technical imitation of solutions that other men found for their own problems.

The Latin American man, however, feels inferior not only to the European, but also to the North American man. Not only does he no longer try
to hide his feeling of inferiority, but he also exhibits it through self-denigration. The only thing that he has tried to do so far is to live comfortably under the shadow of ideas he knows are not his own. To him, ideas do not matter as much as the way to benefit from them. That is why our politics have turned into bureaucracy. Politics is no longer an end but an instrument to get a job in the bureaucracy. Banners and ideals do not matter anymore; what matters is how these banners and ideals can help us get the job we want. Hence the miraculous and quick change of banners; whence also that we always plan and project but we never achieve definitive results. We are continually experimenting and projecting with always-changing ideologies. There is no single national plan because there is no sense of nation. And there is no sense of nation for the same reason that there is no sense of what is Latin American. He who feels inferior as Latin American also feels inferior as a national, that is, as a member of one of the Latin American nations. This is not to say that the fanatic nationalist who talks about a Mexican, Argentinian, Chilean, or any other Latin American nation's culture, to the exclusion of anything that smacks of foreign, has any better sense of what a nation is. No, in the end he would only try to eliminate what makes him feel inferior. This is the case of those who say that this is the appropriate time to eliminate everything European from our culture.

This position is wrong because, whether we want it or not, we are the children of European culture. From Europe we have received our cultural framework, what could be called our structure: language, religion, customs; in a word, our conception of life and world is European. To become disengaged from it would be to become disengaged from the heart of our personality. We can no more deny that culture than we can deny our parents. And just as we have a personality that makes us distinct from our parents without having to deny them, we should also be able to have a cultural personality without having to deny the culture of which we are children. To be aware of our true relations with European culture eliminates our sense of inferiority and gives us instead a sense of responsibility. This is the feeling that animates the Latin American man today. He feels that he has "come of age," and, as any other man who reaches maturity, he acknowledges that he has a past that he does not need to deny, just as no one is ashamed of having had a childhood. The Latin American man knows himself to be the heir of Western culture and now demands a place in it. The place that he demands is that of collaborator. As a son of that culture he no longer wants to live off it but to work for it. Alfonso Reyes, speaking on behalf of a Latin America that feels responsible, demanded from Europe "the right of universal citizenship that we have already conquered," because already "we have come of age." Latin America is at a point in its history when it must realize its cultural mission. To determine this mission constitutes another issue that what we have called Latin American philosophy has to develop.
Once we know our cultural relations with Europe, another task for this possible Latin American philosophy would be to continue to develop the philosophical issues of that culture, but most especially the issues that European philosophy regards as universal. That is, issues whose level of abstraction allows them to be valid at any time and at any place. Among such issues are those of being, knowledge, space, time, God, life, death, etc. A Latin American philosophy can collaborate with Western culture by attempting to resolve the problems posed by the issues that European philosophy has not been able to resolve, or to which it has failed to find a satisfactory solution. Now, it could be said—particularly by those who are interested in building up a philosophy with a Latin American character—that this cannot be of interest to a philosophy concerned with what is properly Latin American. This is not true, however, because both the issues that we have called universal and the issues that are peculiar to the Latin American circumstance are very closely linked. When we discuss the former we need also to discuss the latter. The abstract issues will have to be seen from the Latin American man’s own circumstance. Each man will see in such issues what is closest to his own circumstance. He will look at these issues from the standpoint of his own interests, and those interests will be determined by his way of life, his abilities and inabilities, in a word, by his own circumstance. In the case of Latin America, his contribution to the philosophy of such issues will be permeated by the Latin American circumstance. Hence, when we address abstract issues, we shall formulate them as issues of our own. Even though being, God, etc., are issues appropriate for every man, the solution to them will be given from a Latin American standpoint. We may not say what these issues mean for every man, but we can say what they mean for us Latin Americans. Being, God, death, etc., would be what these abstractions mean for us.

It should not be forgotten that all European philosophy has worked on these issues on the assumption that their solutions would be universal. However, the product has been an aggregate of philosophies very different from each other. Despite their universalistic goals, the product has been a Greek philosophy, a Christian philosophy, a French philosophy, a British philosophy, and a German philosophy. Likewise, independently of our attempts to realize a Latin American philosophy and despite our efforts to provide universal solutions, our solutions will bear the mark of our own circumstance.

Another type of issue to be addressed by our possible Latin American philosophy is related to our own circumstance. That is, our possible philosophy must try to resolve the problems posed by our circumstance. This
point of view is as legitimate and valid a philosophical issue as the one we have just discussed. As Latin Americans we have a series of problems that arise only in the context of our circumstance and that therefore only we can resolve. The posing of such problems does in no way diminish the philosophical character of our philosophy, because philosophy attempts to solve the problems that man encounters during his existence. Hence the problems encountered by the Latin American man are the problems of the circumstance in which he lives.

Among such issues is that of our history. History is part of man’s circumstance: it gives him a configuration and a profile, thus making him capable of some endeavors and incapable of others. Hence we must take our history into account, because it is there that we can find the source of our abilities and inabilities. We cannot continue to ignore our past and our experiences, because without knowing them we cannot claim to be mature. Maturity, age, is experience. He who ignores his history lacks experience, and he who lacks experience cannot be a mature, responsible man.

With respect to the history of our philosophy, one might think that nothing could be found in it other than bad copies of European philosophical systems. In effect, that is what one will find if one is looking for Latin American philosophical systems that have the same value as European ones. But this is a shortsighted attempt: we must approach the history of our philosophy from a different standpoint. This standpoint is provided by our denials, our inability to do much besides bad copies of European models. It is pertinent to ask the reason why we do not have our own philosophy: perhaps the very answer will be a Latin American philosophy. This may show us a way of thinking that is our own and that perhaps has not needed to express itself through the formulae used by European philosophy.

It is also pertinent to ask why our philosophy is a bad copy of European philosophy. Because being a bad copy may very well be part of our Latin American philosophy. To be a bad copy does not necessarily mean to be bad, but simply different. Perhaps our feeling of inferiority has made us consider bad anything that is our own just because it is not like, or equal, to its model. To acknowledge that we cannot create the same European philosophical systems is not to acknowledge that we are inferior to the authors of those philosophies, but simply that we are different. On the basis of this assumption we will not view our philosophers’ production as an aggregate of bad copies of European philosophy, but as Latin American interpretations of that philosophy. The Latin American element will be present in spite of our philosophers’ attempts at objectivity. It will be present despite our thinkers’ attempt to depersonalize it.
Philosophy in its universal character has been concerned with one of the problems that has agitated men the most at all times: the problem of the relations between man and society. This problem has been posed as political, asking about the forms of organization of these relations, that is, the organization of human interaction. Since the institution in charge of such relations is the State, philosophy has asked by whom it should be established and who should govern. The State must take care to maintain the balance between individual and society; it must take care to avoid both anarchy and totalitarianism. Now, in order to achieve this balance a moral justification is necessary. Philosophy attempts to offer such a justification. Hence, every metaphysical abstraction ultimately leads to ethics and politics. Every metaphysical idea provides the foundation for a concrete fact, the justification for any proposed type of political organization.

There is a multitude of philosophical examples in which metaphysical abstractions have provided the basis for a political construct. One example is found in Plato’s philosophy, whose theory of ideas provides the basis and the justification for *The Republic*. In Saint Augustine’s *The City of God* we find another example: the Christian community, the Church, is supported by a metaphysical being that in this case is God. The *Utopias* of the Renaissance constitute yet other examples where rationalism justifies the forms of government that have given birth to our present democracy. One thinker has said that the French Revolution finds its justification in Descartes’s *Discourse on Method*. The Marxist revision of Hegel’s dialectics has given way to such forms of government as communism. Even totalitarianism has sought metaphysical justification in the ideas of Nietzsche, Sorel, and Pareto. Many other examples from the history of philosophy can be cited where metaphysical abstraction provides the basis for social and political practices.

What we have just discussed underlines how theory and practice must go together. It is necessary that man’s material acts be justified by ideas, because this is what makes him different from animals. But our times are characterized by a schism between ideas and reality. European culture is in crisis because of this schism. Man is now lacking a moral theory to justify his acts and hence has been unable to resolve the problems of human interaction. All that he has achieved is the fall into the extremes of anarchy and totalitarianism.

The various crises of Western culture have been produced by a lack of ideas to justify human acts, man’s existence. When some ideas have no longer justified this existence, it has been necessary to search for other sets of ideas. The history of Western culture is the history of the crises that
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man has endured when the harmony that should exist between ideas and reality has been broken. Western culture has gone from crisis to crisis, finding salvation sometimes in ideas, sometimes in God, other times in reason, up to the present time when it no longer has ideas, God, or reason. Culture is now asking for new foundations of support. But this is, from our point of view, practically impossible. However, this point of view belongs to men who are in a situation of crisis, and this could not be otherwise, since we would not be in a situation of crisis if the problem seemed to us to have an easy solution. The fact that we are in a crisis, and that we do not have the much-wanted solution, still does not mean that the solution does not exist. Men who like us have been in situations of crisis before have had a similar pessimism; however, a solution has always been found. We do not know which values will replace those that we see sinking, but what we do know for certain is that such values will emerge, and it is our task as Latin Americans to contribute to this process.

From this we can infer yet another goal for a possible Latin American philosophy. The Western culture of which we are children and heirs needs new values on which to rest. These new values will have to be derived from new human experiences, that is, from the experiences that result from men being in the new circumstances of today. Because of its particular situation, Latin America can contribute to culture with the novelty of untapped experiences. That is why it is necessary that it tell its truth to the world. But it must be a truth without pretensions, a sincere truth. Latin America should not pretend to be the director of Western culture; what it must aspire to do is to produce culture purely and simply. And that can be accomplished by attempting to resolve the problems that are posed to the Latin American man by his own Latin American perspective.

Latin America and Europe will find themselves in a similar situation after the crisis. Both will have to resolve the same problem: what will be the new way of life that they will have to adopt to deal with the new circumstances? Both will have to continue ahead with the interrupted task of universal culture. But the difference is that Latin America will no longer be under the shadow of Europe's accomplishments, because there is neither a shadow nor a place of support at this point. On the contrary, Latin America finds itself at a vantage point in time—which may not last long—but that must be used to initiate the task that belongs to it as an adult member of Western culture.

A Latin American philosophy must begin the task of searching for the values that will provide the basis for a future type of culture. And this task will be carried out with the purpose of safekeeping the human essence: that which makes a man a man. Now, man is essentially an individual who is at the same time engaged in interaction with others, and hence it is necessary to maintain a balance between these two components of his essence. This is the balance that has been upset to the point of leading
man to extremes: individualism to the point of anarchy, and social existence to the point of massification. Hence it is imperative to find values that make social interaction possible without detriment to individuality.

This task, which is universal and not simply Latin American, will be the supreme goal of our possible philosophy. This philosophy of ours cannot be limited to purely Latin American problems, that is, the problems of Latin America's circumstance. It must be concerned with the larger circumstance called humanity, of which we are also a part. It is not enough to attempt to reach a Latin American truth, but we must also attempt to reach a truth that is valid for all men, even if this truth may not in fact be accomplished. What is Latin American cannot be regarded as an end in itself, but as a boundary of a larger goal. Hence the reason why every attempt to make a Latin American philosophy, guided by the sole purpose of being Latin American, is destined to fail. One must attempt to do purely and simply philosophy, because what is Latin American will arise by itself. Simply by being Latin American, philosophers will create a Latin American philosophy in spite of their own efforts at depersonalization. Any attempt to the contrary will be anything but philosophy.

When we attempt to resolve the problems of man in any spatiotemporal situation whatever, we will necessarily have to start with ourselves because we are men; we will have to start with our own circumstances, our limitations, and our being Latin Americans, just as the Greeks started with their own circumstance called Greece. But, just like them, we cannot limit ourselves to stay in our own circumstances. If we do that it will be in spite of ourselves, and we will produce Latin American philosophy, just as the Greeks produced Greek philosophy in spite of themselves.

It is only on the basis of these assumptions that we will accomplish our mission within universal culture, and collaborate with it fully aware of our abilities, and be aware also of our capacities as members of the cultural community called humanity, as well as of our limits as children of a circumstance that is our own and to which we owe our personality: Latin America.

NOTES

2. Zea consistently uses "America" and "Americanos" to refer to Latin America and its inhabitants. I use "Latin America" and "Latin Americans" respectively to render these terms throughout the [essay], except in the present case, because here Zea is referring to the period of discovery, when there was no distinction between Anglo-Saxon and Latin America.—TRANS.
3. Reyes, "Notas."
Identity: A Latin American Philosophical Problem

Philosophy, in the Strict Sense, and Ideology: In the history of philosophy, strictly speaking, there seems to be no room for problems about identity, as raised by Latin American philosophy—more so when they also fall within areas that seem not to be strictly philosophical, like the political and the social. Apparently, philosophy raises only problems considered universal, and because they are universal and abstract, they are beyond what is everyday to man, his world, and his society. Philosophy is concerned with problems that are general, universal, and because they are universal, about the motley world of the concretely human. The philosophy of values, fashionable in the recent past, is rooted in the phenomenological method. As such, it exemplifies the detachment of the ideal from the real, of what is considered strictly philosophical from what is considered ideological, and thus alien to a genuine philosophy. Above the ever-changing human world are the values that give it meaning, realized or not, for they are situated in an abode unaffected by the ordinary. Equally philosophical are the tools of knowledge that allow man to perceive his reality and change it, yet at the same time, construe change as alien to a philosophizing whose goal is only knowledge in the strict sense.

Within this philosophizing, problems like the ones Latin American philosophy raises about its identity seem to be only parochial, that is, regional, and because of that, limited to a relative point of view proper to a concrete man, and thus, alien to what is truly universal. The demand for a specific identity seems to be something limited in relation to what is considered the questioning par excellence, a questioning about the whole. This question about Being was what philosophy was asking from its

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begins in Greece, so we are told, about Being in general, not this or that concrete being. It was a questioning about the whole.

But, the whole of what?—paradoxically, the whole of what the concrete man, the philosopher, pretended to encompass with his question; a whole, whether one likes it or not, limited by the concrete capacity of vision of the one who asks. Aware of this limitation, the Greeks used to say that only God has eyes that see all, ears that hear all, and a reason that knows all. From then on, philosophers, though never attaining it, desired to be godlike, “the useless desire to be God,” as Jean Paul Sartre used to say not long ago. In the past few years, philosophy has stressed the limitations of philosophizing construed strictly. Historicism, perspectivism, pragmatism, existentialism, and others, turning inward, have reflected on the limitations of philosophical contributions, philosophy’s circumstantiality and, concomitantly, the plurality of its expressions. Many other interpretations, diverse in what they construe as strict, are only expressions of the new conception of universality.

In this new conception of philosophy, great and trivial expressions of a multifaceted philosophizing parade against a background that resembles a gigantic mosaic in which its myriad pieces have to be fitted. In an essay, *The Dream*, about Raphael’s “The Academy,” Wilhelm Dilthey showed the oppositional philosophical world that tears apart whoever persists in opting for this or that philosophical figure in the painting. Nowadays, many distinguished philosophers, like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Karl-Otto Apel, attest to a philosophical plurality and its unavoidable assumptions, and try to reconcile philosophy in a strict sense with ideological philosophizing. Apel, recalling his youth, tells us that he had to face even then the problem of the relation between theory and praxis: Do honest thinkers and radicals have to arrive at the conclusion, he asked, of the necessity of changing an impotent and illusory community of philosophers for the real community, truly united in the political compromise? But doesn’t this imply an abandoning of theoretical discourse? At stake here is not a choice but a reconstruction of problems that are inescapably linked among themselves because they have an origin in man. The philosopher does not have to give up being a philosopher to face the many problems of a reality different from theory. Without ceasing to be a philosopher he can philosophically, rationally, confront man’s daily problems and seek possible solutions. Philosophy does not have to choose between a strict knowledge of reality and one that allows actions to change that reality. For that reason, contemporary European philosophy has seen in philosophical labor the tool of knowledge capable of reconciling theory and practice, formal knowledge and knowledge for action. Philosophy is considered an attitude proper to man, and tries to solve many of the problems that ail him, problems proper to his reality, including those of the community to
which he belongs and the many men that originate it. This has been the way of philosophy throughout its long history. Philosophy has not emerged in enclaves of prosperity and freedom but in situations of social inequality. Lack of freedom presents problems that philosophers had been obliged to face in order to solve them. It has been so since Plato, through Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and up to the present.

2. The Question of Being: The first question that philosophy raised in the remote days of classical Greece referred to the problem of Being. What is Being? Being in general? This question was asked by the only concrete entity capable of answering it—man—man as philosopher. Concrete man, of flesh and bone, faces an ever-changing reality that drags and destroys the limited expression of Being, that is man—man who refuses to be annihilated, “nihilized,” annulled by a changing nature or manipulated by his peers. Because of this, the philosopher undertakes a search for the principles that rule the natural order, and through these principles, the ones that rule the social order. Whoever has knowledge of the order of the cosmos also has knowledge of the order of the polis. Thus Plato’s words about the necessity of philosophers being kings or kings philosophers, or Aristotle’s saying that it was just for the wiser to rule over the less wise.

The question of Being in general, of its principles of order, is an ontological question asked by the concrete entity that is the questioner, man, in relation to himself. The concrete entity that is man, tries to take a position, define himself within nature and in relation to his peers. This man refuses to be the blind expression of nature or an instrument of others. He wants to manipulate nature, not be its simple expression. But he also resists being manipulated, as part of nature, by his peers. He is not a part of nature that is to be manipulated. Man tries to manipulate other men, not recognizing in them fellow men but useful or useless objects.

Such is the problem, an ancient problem for man and his philosophy, raised as crucial by Latin American philosophy—the question of the concrete Being of men occupying a vast region of Earth and subjected to the manipulations of others. They are the victims of a gigantic cover-up over identity begun on October 12, 1492, whose importance and consequences must be studied. A study of the Latin Americans who form part of this region will unveil an identity that defines them as equal to the rest of mankind. The British philosopher of history, Arnold Toynbee, spoke of this cover-up of identity when he referred to the expansion of the so-called Western over the rest of the world, and stumbled with other entities that could not be regarded as fellow men but as a part of nature that had to be used. “When we Westerners speak of ‘Natives;’” wrote Toynbee, “we implicitly take the cultural color out of our perception of them. We see them as trees walking, or as wild animals infesting the country in which we happen to come across them. In fact, we see them as part of the local
flora and fauna and not as men of like passions with ourselves; and seeing them thus as something suprahuman, we feel entitled to treat them as though they did not possess ordinary human rights. According to this vision, it is the “native” who, starting from his own and concrete experience, has to prove his own humanity before this judge. The Indian, the native, as any native in any region of the earth beyond the centers of culture and civilization par excellence, is outside what is considered the only expression of humanity. Native will be called in America anyone who is born there, the Indian as much as the creole or the mestizo.

3. Bargaining and Assertion of Identity: The problem of the identity of the men of this region, with a special emphasis on that America which will be called Latin, was raised by its conquistadores and colonizers. Christopher Columbus, who, by sailing westward, expected to arrive more quickly in the distant lands of the Great Khan, began to wonder about these strange and docile entities, manlike but very different from the warlike Mongols of which Marco Polo spoke and from the ferocious inhabitants of Cipango. They were good people, naked and cowardly, and also easily deceived, and thus, easy to dominate, the opposite of the ferocious subjects of the powerful lord of the Chinese and the Tartars with whom he had hoped to meet. “These people,” Columbus writes, “are very gentle and fearful, naked, as I have said, without weapons or laws. These lands are very fertile.” There are fertile lands and much gold, but in the hands of people for whom it lacked the value it had for the Europeans. On his First Voyage, Columbus already had realized that these people were very different from the ones he was searching for and with whom he had expected to negotiate in the name of his lords, the Catholic Kings of Spain—people, he gathered, easy to conquer and own, who did not seem to be the subjects of the Great Khan, and thus, awaited other lords. Hence, Columbus’s negotiating mission was transformed into the first mission of conquest for Spain and the Europe that was afterward to follow and challenge the new dominions. Columbus went on taking possession of lands, riches, and men in the name of his lords. At the end of the First Voyage, he advised his lords not to allow any strangers into those lands already under dominion, except for Catholic ones, for, as he believed, this was, in the end, the royal purpose of the voyage—to increase and glorify the Christian religion. Incorporated into Christianity would be men, peoples, and lands left out because of the devil, as the first missionaries who came to these strange lands proposed. These were people of good understanding and could, for that reason, become good Christians, but they had to be subdued first. These were kinds of people inferior to their discoverers, people over whose supposed humanity there were doubts. That was the position, almost from the beginning of the conquest, concerning the identity of the men found in this region—the humanity or bestiality of the
Indians, as shown in the polemics between Sepúlveda and Las Casas. This identity the men of the “New World” was to be put on trial and judged by the jury of its conquerors. So it was to be the dominators who ultimately decided this supposed humanity.

To this haggling over humanity were subjected not only the Indians, but anyone born in this land, making their own and concrete identity the main concern of the men of the region. On this identity, on this knowledge of what one is, hinged all claims against the metropolis for any treatment other than that of manipulation to which they were subjected—a preoccupation that was important to the Americas under Saxon domination, but in an America under Iberian domination, reached even greater dimensions. This dimension was the result of the degree of mestizaje that colonization reached in the so-called Latin America. As a consequence, not only was one inferior by virtue of being born into the region, but even more, because of a mixture of races of a purported inferior quality, one was inferior culturally and racially; a depreciation, not only cultural as represented by Spain’s dominance, but also natural as represented by the idea of a civilization that spoke of superior and inferior races. The racial mestizaje that did not bother the Iberian conquerors and colonizers was to disturb greatly the creators of the new empires of America, Asia, and Africa. Christianity blessed the unity of men and cultures regardless of race, more a function of their ability to be Christian. But modern civilization stressed racial purity, the having or lacking of particular habits and customs proper to a specific type of racial and cultural humanity. This was the concern that deeply worried the men of Latin America upon breaking with the old dominator and preparing to participate in the world order created by European civilization. The question of Being, of being concretely, of the men of this region will be more dramatic. Who am I? What is my identity?

4. The Question of Identity: The concern over the identity of men and peoples of the region was palpable in two thinkers and men of action from an America that was breaking with Iberian colonialism: the Venezuelan Simón Bolívar and the Argentinian Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. The first raised it at the outset of the struggle against Iberian colonialism; the second asked himself about the future of an American region that had just attained its freedom from the colonialism imposed by Iberia. Who are we? asks the Liberator, Simón Bolívar: “... we are not Europeans, we are not Indians, but a species in between the aborigines and the Spaniards. Americans by birth and Europeans by right, we find ourselves in the difficult position of challenging the natives for title of possession, and of upholding the country that saw us born against the opposition of the invaders. Thus, our case is all the more extraordinary and complicated.” Further on he adds: “We must bear in mind that our own country is not Europe nor the
America of the North, it is more a composite of Africa and America, an emanation from Europe, since even Spain stops being European because of its African blood, its institutions, and its character. It is impossible to identify correctly to what human family we belong. Most of the Indians have been annihilated, Europeans have mixed with Americans and Africans, and the result has mixed with Indians and Europeans. Born all of the same mother, our fathers, different in origin and blood, are aliens and all show it in their skins. This dissimilarity implies an obligation of the greatest transcendence.” Years later, Domingo F. Sarmiento was to ask himself, “What are we? Europeans? So many copper faces contradict us! Indigenous? The disdainful smiles of our blond ladies perhaps answer us. Mestizos? No one wants to be that and there are thousands that would not want to be called American or Argentinian. Nation? A nation without a blending of accumulated materials, without agreements or bases?”

Paradoxically, the conflicting and opposing expression of the identity that Latin Americans find, is to be considered the denial of any possible and authentic identity—a conflict that Sarmiento and his generation formulated in the disjunction “Civilization or Barbarism.” For them, civilization is everything that one has to be but is not; barbarism everything one is but does not want to be. The disjunction between what one is and what one wants to be, the terrible and useless desire of the men of this region to be something else, is an identity conflict that lasted throughout the nineteenth century. Let us be Europe, let us be like France, England, or the United States! Let us be the United States of South America! Let us be the Yankees of South America! demanded both the Mexican Justo Sierra and the Argentinian Juan Bautista Alberdi. Out of this conflict arose, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the civilizing and positivist project that became widespread in an America that had broken the Iberian yoke. This conflict was to be resolved more or less harshly with either brainwashing, and the adoption of philosophies that supposedly caused the greatness of western Europe and the United States, or through the extraordinary blood-washing of an immigration policy adopted by the southern part of the continent, where the density of Indian population did not reach the volume of the altiplanos. There must be a break with the colonial past; a break with the fruit of that colonization; a repeal of the racial crossbreeding with inferior forms and of cultures already outside the history expressed by Iberia.

5. Assertion of Identity: At the end of the nineteenth century, an event shook the conscience of the men who began to call themselves Latin Americans: the 1898 war between the United States and Spain. This was to show Iberoamericans the impossibility of being something other than what they were—the impossibility of making of this region another United States or another Europe. The triumph of the United States over Spain
began the expansion of a new empire over the old empires, like the Spanish. The United States began its move to fill the “power vacuum” that old European empires had left—a project that extended the one begun with the war against Mexico, in 1847, and the presence in Central America, in 1856, of the American pirate William Walker. A new colonialism threatened the identity of the region. One cannot be anything but what one is, and the problem of identity was reformulated with greater strength. The Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó wrote his *Ariel*, assuming Latinity as an expression of the identity of the region. The United States, says Rodó, is “carrying out among ourselves a kind of moral conquest. Admiration for its greatness and its strength is a feeling that is making great strides in the spirit of our leaders . . . and we can pass through a transition from admiring to imitating them.” And imitation leads, in turn, to dependency, but a dependency freely accepted now. “It is, thus,” he continues, “how the vision of a de-Latinized America, by its own free will, without the inconvenience of a conquest, and regenerated later on in the image and likeness of the Northern archetype, appears in the dreams of many sincere people interested in our future.” This new subordination must be avoided and our own and ineluctable identity must be regained. “We have our *nordomanía*. It is necessary to draw the boundaries that reason and the sentiments clearly show.” With Rodó, there is the voice of the Cuban José Martí, who died fighting against Spanish colonialism, yet warned Latin Americans of a new colonialism. A particular identity of which Bolívar had already spoken must be assumed—an identity that must be strengthened, possessed, and not rejected. Made out of Latinity (which has nothing to do with the project of Napoleon III), it is the expression of the search for identity. Through this Latinity, we will regain Spain, not the imperial Spain, but the Spain that with its blood and culture has made this a mestizo America, and because of this, a Spain open to all of man’s expressions. America is Latin because of mestizaje, as mestizo was the Latinity with which Rome united the peoples who, like Spain, emerged from her. This America made possible the identity of that particular type of human being with which Bolívar would answer his questions about the region’s identity—a particular type of human being, open to every expression of man, a humanity open and plural. Of this conception of the human being, Bolívar would say, “In the march of the centuries, only one nation will be found covering the universe.” Like Bolívar, Andrés Bello struggled to join what should not be separated; there are also the Colombian José María Torres Caicedo and the Chilean Francisco Bilbao, who already spoke of a Latin as opposed to the Saxon America that had wrestled from Mexico half of its territory, and sent the pirate William Walker to dominate Central America.

With the twentieth century, the region’s intelligentsia, who had
adopted the adjective "Latin," raised the question of their own identity. A constellation of intellectuals, among whom shine the Mexicans José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, and Antonio Caso; the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña; the Peruvian Manuel González Prada; the Argentinian Manual Ugarte; and the Venezuelan César Zumeta, made their own the concern over the Latin American identity question that stemmed from Bolívar, Bello, Bilbao, Torres Caicedo, Rodó, and Martí. That concern, already raised during the nineteenth century over the existence and possibility of a Latin American literature and culture, is reformulated and given other answers. The response comes from an intelligentsia that assumed with assuredness its own peculiar identity as the source of a horizontal relation of identity and not of a vertical one of dependency. No more are there greater or lesser men; there are concrete men, and because they are concrete, they are different among themselves. Equals, precisely because they are different, that is, particular, concrete; but not so different and particular as to make some more or less men than others. And no longer is there any doubt about the identity of the men of the region that has adopted the adjective "Latin." This is the region proper to a group of men that are different from other men and regions, but without this difference lessening their concrete humanity. Affirmed of the man of region is the unarguable identity, which was doubted from the moment they entered into the history of its discoverers, conquerors, and colonizers. Affirmed is the identity, over and again, fraudulently hidden by the discoverers, conquerors, and colonizers, an identity that is raised as the central concern of a Latin American philosophy. This is the same concern we already found in the history of philosophy, a questioning about Being in general in order to assert one's own and concrete Being; the same metaphysical question about God in order to save one's own weak existence in Him; the question about reason made by a few men, for whom God is no longer on the horizon; the anguishing question of present-day man to assert an identity alienated by his own creations.

6. History of Ideas, Philosophy of History, and Ontology: The concern of Latin American thought over the identity of the region and its men crystallized in the twentieth century as a strictly philosophical concern, a concern that Euro-western philosophy was clarifying from a broader and more plural conception of reality. Latin American philosophy, moved by this concern, was to raise the problems of identity in a series of steps. The first was expressed in what has been called the history of ideas, a history that would allow the delimitation between the supposed imitation of other philosophies and the ways in which these would be received by or adapted to that reality object of its adoption. Of extraordinary importance in this first step was the presence of some distinguished Spanish philosophers who had come to Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America, as a con-
sequence of the Spanish Civil War, begun in 1936. One of these men was José Gaos, who was to call himself *transsterrado*, and who would stimulate this study among his many students.

What would these studies show? Hegel, in his *Philosophy of History*, said that America had been up to then but “echo and shadow” of Europe and its culture. America, especially Spanish America, had originated nothing but bad copies of the emulated culture. In philosophy, one could speak only of Thomism, Enlightenment, Positivism, and relativism in Latin America. The presence of these currents was odd and barely represented “bad copies,” caricatures, false formulations of the adopted models. The history of ideas—that is, the history of how, why, and for what purposes these philosophies had been adapted and the ways in which this adoption had been represented—showed something different from what had been asserted. Even though it was not their intention, those who adopted these philosophies transformed them according to the reality and problems for which they had been adopted. They were barbarized; that is, they were made to say something that was not the intention of their creators. The Latin American, upon adopting specific philosophizings and philosophies to face the problems raised by his reality, gave to what was adopted a different meaning from the one it had for its creators. Even in imitation, there was creation and re-creation. The philosophizing adopted took thus another sense which, compared to the models, resulted in “bad copies of the originals” but were originals with respect to the problems that they tried to solve, thus resulting in different philosophical utterances than those of the adopted models. In this adoption, adaptation, and utterances, a peculiar mode of expression would be evident in those who had used philosophies alien to their experiences.

This history of ideas would show an interpretation of history different from that philosophy of history so masterfully expressed by Hegel. José Gaos, on reviewing one of the studies that had been made about the history of Latin American ideas, would speak of its peculiar interpretation of history. The secular position of the region’s dependency and its consciousness raising, would originate a conception of history which, far from seeking the assimilation or assumption of history—the Hegelian *Aufhebung*—juxtaposes over and again its experiences. Spain tried to juxtapose its own Christian culture over the indigenous one it had stumbled on and considered demoniacal. Liberalism and positivism, in turn, tried to erase the imposed colonial past, superimposing on what was inherited the fruits of another culture alien to their experiences, and from then on continued to juxtapose expressions of cultures alien to their own. This fact is revealed by the history of ideas of the region. All of this is manifest in the peculiar philosophy of Latin American history, different from the philosophy of history of Europe and of the world called Western: juxtaposing
instead of assimilating, trying to be something else in the most useless way. "The effort to break with the past and rebuild according to an alien present," Gaos said, "cannot be believed precisely because it is an effort no less utopian than any other. Because if the rebuilding according to an alien present seems possible, the ridding of one's own past, instead, isn't." This is what the history of ideas of the region showed, and in doing so, it also showed the need for another philosophizing proper to the history of the region, of Latin America. "Rather than getting rid of the past," Gaos said, "one should try an Aufhebung with it... and rather than rebuild according to an alien present, rebuild according to a past and present more like ours and with an eye to a future more like ours." Assimilate our history and experience, no matter how negative they might seem, and departing from this assimilation or assumption, project our own unique future.

From this expression we would pass on to a third and final one of this philosophizing, the one referring strictly to the concrete identity of the being who asks about himself, about his own and peculiar identity. This question about Being is an ontological stage, like that of philosophy in a strict sense at its inception. It is about a being which, in fact, is the one that asks and can answer, man—not man the abstract but man the concrete, of flesh and bone, with his own particular problems, yet not particular that they do not cease being proper to man. Through these particular problems, and precisely because they are particular, other men can be acknowledged as peers, an acknowledgment and respect for what is acknowledged in a search for a horizontal relation of solidarity of peers among peers and not the vertical one of dependency which had originated that unique problem of philosophy in Latin America.

NOTES

2. Columbus, Letters, First Voyage.
3. Simón Bolívar, "Cartas de Jamaica."
4. Ibid.