

Is There an Ibero-American Philosophy?

Author(s): Risieri Frondizi

Source: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 9, No. 3, "Second Inter-American Congress of Philosophy" (Mar., 1949), pp. 345-355

Published by: International Phenomenological Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2104041>

Accessed: 27-12-2019 21:50 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

International Phenomenological Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

 IS THERE AN IBERO-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY?

It is now a commonplace to note the growing interest in philosophy which has arisen in Ibero-America in recent years. Anyone who might doubt this fact need only be confronted with the literary production of the last fifteen years, and be asked to compare it with the meager activity of the preceding years. These written works, which have reached an average of over one hundred annually, include excellent translations of ancient and modern classics, serious historical and critical studies, conscientious investigations into our philosophic past and several original works which reveal both the systematic seriousness and authentic philosophical vocation of their authors.

This rapid growth of interest in philosophical problems has led some Ibero-American thinkers into an exaggerated optimism which may endanger, instead of nourish, the development of philosophy. For this reason we believe it timely to pause at a high point on our road in order to view the ground travelled, the direction in which we are going, and the way still to be travelled. A dispassionate examination may free us not only of an unjustified optimism toward the present situation but **also may** prevent us from falling into a no-less-exaggerated pessimism which tries to condemn us to an analysis of a philosophy which has no bearing on present needs or to a repetition of systems that have arisen in response to needs and circumstances quite different from ours. Perhaps the best way to accomplish this estimate which we propose to make will be to write in a single question the substance of the points we have raised. Is there an Ibero-American philosophy?

We are certainly aware of the many misunderstandings to which this question may give rise. In order to avoid them as much as possible it will be prudent to make some terminological clarifications and to point out the sense and meaning of the question. The word "philosophy" has many meanings: we speak of philosophy in many senses. The ambiguity of the term is responsible for many of the disputes and problems which at bottom are merely verbal disputes. We must, in the first place, distinguish between philosophy and *Weltanschauung*. A *Weltanschauung* is a spontaneous philosophy, naive, quite the opposite of a critical philosophy which is the result of mature and conscious reflection. The question would of course have an affirmative answer if we were to refer to a philosophy in

the sense of a world-view. Every individual, every people at all times have a *Weltanschauung*. The question, therefore, refers to philosophy in the stricter sense.

We should also distinguish the philosophical activity from some other spiritual activities which accompany it, if we wish to avoid another misunderstanding. From the general principle of the unity of the human spirit and culture, men have concluded that it is impossible to differentiate philosophy from esthetic, political and social concerns. If we adopt this criterion literally, it would be impossible to distinguish well-established lines of demarcation among the various scientific disciplines. However, we speak of physics, for example, as something different from chemistry, and nobody is alarmed by this, even though we know that there are themes and questions which are not easily placed. To this general principle mentioned we must add in our case the circumstance that Ibero-Americans have not been concerned with philosophy in isolation, but in close relation with literary, political, and educational concerns. Such a nexus of concerns is just what should induce us to isolate the typically philosophical aspect of our question in order that it may appear free from other meanings which might confuse its strict sense.

If we take the term "philosophy" in its broad meaning, we would again be obliged to answer our question affirmatively. It is undeniable that the works of Sarmiento, Bello, or Martí—to mention three great examples—contain philosophical ideas. But such ideas appear as a result of literary or political concerns to which they remain subordinated. In none of them does philosophy have an independent status; none of them set forth philosophical problems motivated by philosophical interests. We are, of course, not reproaching them for this; their work fills us with satisfaction and admiration. Nor are we trying to understand the historical causes, the cultural and political circumstances that hindered the growth of a philosophy in the strict sense. We only wish to point out what seems an undeniable fact: that philosophy has been subordinated to non-philosophical interests.

This does not mean that we are trying to reduce philosophy to its narrow academic meaning or to a strictly systematic enterprise. It is far from our mind to try to restrict the term "philosophy" to a narrow activity far removed from vital concerns or to deny to problematic tasks and researches a philosophical character. We wish merely to distinguish philosophical from non-philosophical activities. A radical distinction is, of course, impossible to make; the whole thing is a matter of emphasis and of the purposes leading the activity. Any reflection would be philosophical when its theme, its scope, and its meaning develop within what we traditionally understand by philosophy, to use a very general expression, but

one which is adaptable to what we wish to signify without leading to a complicated and debatable attempt to define the essence of philosophy. In other words, there will be philosophy when we reflect in a purely philosophical context, without putting such activity to the service of political or literary or any other interests and concerns.

Once we make clear that we use the term "philosophy" in a rigorous and restricted sense, it only remains to add that the question involves the existence of a pure, original, and creative philosophy.

It will not do for us to set forth a hurried answer, or one which expresses our opinions, beliefs, and prejudices on the theme, but does not take into consideration the reality to which it refers. Fortunately, in this case we have at our disposal concrete information which we can analyze with attention and which permits us to give an answer with a certain amount of objectivity.

Although the spoken word has played an important part in Ibero-America, and in fact has, in many men, exceeded their written work, it seems undeniable that philosophical activity has also been manifested in books, essays, articles, and other written work which express faithfully the sense, depth, and limitations of the concerns and abilities of our thinkers. For this reason it seems legitimate to answer our question on the basis of an examination of the written production, so abundant and diversified in recent years.

In order to limit the problem to its essentials, we wish to put aside, in the first instance, those writings which renounce in advance any pretension to philosophic originality: literary or political essays, translations, popularizations, commentaries, criticisms, etc. The task which I have imposed upon myself since 1939 of reading all of the Ibero-American philosophic production which reaches my hands—in connection with my responsibility for the philosophic section of the *Handbook of Latin-American Studies*—allows me to affirm that only ten per cent of the body of Latin-American writing of the past ten years has any claim to philosophic originality. And I need not insist that only a small fraction of this ten per cent justifies by its content the legitimacy of this claim. Reviewing with critical eye the twenty or thirty publications which can be saved from the shipwreck of unjustified pretensions, we see how these works present merely a reconsideration of subjects and problems of European origin, without assisting in considering or developing any original contribution. And this judgment of the more recent production could be applied, even more justly, to earlier writing.

One should not judge from this that this review is based upon a pessimistic or skeptical attitude toward our cultural destiny or an exaggerated demand for originality. I am optimistic about the future development of

philosophy in Latin America, and I have examined this material with the understandable sympathy of one who shares the concerns of the authors. But I was blinded neither by the optimism nor by the sympathy. Our best contribution does not consist in the exaltation of potential or hypothetical values, but in being conscious of our limitations. Only if we know our limitations can we overcome them.

One way of pointing out the present state of philosophic affairs would be to show the evolution which has culminated in the present, and to suggest the direction of possible further development.

Five periods can be distinguished in the development from the native culture to the ultimate formation of a genuine and true philosophic consciousness.

The great native cultures which flourished in America before the discovery had, as must be supposed, their own *Weltanschauung* with little affinity to the philosophic conception of the world in Europe.

As a result of the conquest, a Christian philosophy which had already been superseded in its place of origin was imposed here. On the other hand, it did not come as a philosophy, i.e., as philosophic theory or reflection, but in the form of religious beliefs, dogmas, and principles which had to be imposed at all costs. That is why, beyond the beneficial influences which it exercised, Christian philosophy became a burden for philosophical culture that Ibero-America has been compelled to carry through the centuries.

The barrier imposed by scholasticism, explicitly or implicitly, was evaded in the early eighteenth century by the more or less clandestine introduction of modern ideas represented by Descartes, Gassendi, Locke, etc. The arrival of these ideas made possible the criticism and condemnation of scholastic thought, as happened in Mexico when the Jesuit Andrés de Guevara called scholastic inquiries "vain and useless" and called their predominance "tyrannical and unbearable." Despite such condemnation and despite the reception of the political thought of men like Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu and later of the sensationalism of Condillac and the ideology of Destutt de Tracy, philosophy was developed within closed circles and especially in cloisters and convents. The great historical mission of positivism was to remove philosophical problems from the convents to the streets, to eliminate from philosophy its esoteric character, and to give it a secular meaning, responsive to contemporary concerns. With positivism a free inquiry into philosophical problems became a reality.

This is one aspect of positivism: the polemic, destructive aspect which broke down the limitations imposed by sectarian thought. But in this same aspect which contains its merits, there also resides its major limitation.

Its contribution was polemic, not philosophical; its strength was in action, not in theory. To the theoretical limitations of Comte and Spencer, the Ibero-American positivists added the limitations peculiar to a militant doctrine, a theory that transforms itself into action, a philosophy turned politics.

Down to positivism, European thought lost its philosophical character on its arrival at our shores and put itself at the service of non-philosophical activities, especially of politics. This seems to us a crucial point, for it marked the transition from the third period to the present situation.

The present stage is not different from its predecessors because of the arrival of ideas of greater value and theoretical potentialities than positivism—such as the philosophies of Bergson, Croce, Husserl, Dilthey, Scheler, or Whitehead—but because of the nature of their influence. To the special limitations of positivist doctrine, Ibero-America added the narrowness which accrues to a theoretical system when it adheres to a program of action, when it becomes an instrument of activities alien to philosophy. In other words, all the philosophical orientations that reached Ibero-America before positivism exerted their influence on the non-philosophical aspects of our life. It is well known that positivism initiated a political revolution in Brazil and an educational revolution in Mexico but that it failed to produce a real philosopher in all of Ibero-America. We should not be surprised at this. Ibero-America then had many practical, political, economic, and educational problems so urgent that it could not afford the luxury of disinterested reflection. Alberdi expressed it very well in 1841 when he wrote that “the direction of our studies should be less speculative, less philosophy *per se*, and more applied philosophy, positive and real philosophy, philosophy applied to social, political, religious, and moral institutions of these countries. The people would be the great being whose impressions, laws of life, movement, thought and progress we must try to study and determine.” But he was mistaken when, generalizing, he prophesied that “pure abstraction, metaphysics *per se*, will never take root in America.” (*Posthumous Works* XV p. 603)

It is at this point that the overcoming of positivism takes on singular significance. It is not a question of overcoming a definite doctrine, which exposes its flanks readily to criticism, but a question of freeing philosophy from politics, education, and other activities of a practical character. In becoming independent, philosophical problems in Ibero-America are acquiring a finesse, assurance, and verve which they have lacked. Ideas are not judged in application, not evaluated in the struggle of non-philosophical problems, but in a theoretical context. Do not misunderstand us; this is not an apology for a self-enclosed philosophy, for an academic philosophy that is afraid to be contaminated with the problems of life. On the con-

trary, we believe that fundamentally philosophy is a philosophy of life, of human experience. Life and human experience, though they constitute the object of theoretical inquiry, should not set its limits or provide its norms. It is one thing to say that life constitutes the reality which philosophy studies and another very different thing to pretend that philosophy must serve immediate living interests. Concerning life there can be, and there are, rigorous theoretical inquiries; such inquiries lose their theoretical possibility if at the outset they put themselves at the service of life, if they become instruments of action.

Philosophy in Ibero-America achieved this independence a quarter-century ago. The coincidence of this liberation with the overcoming of positivism has confused several authors who have failed to distinguish the two aspects of the question and have blamed positivism for what were really the characteristics of a stage in our cultural evolution.

In achieving independence in the treatment of philosophical themes, Ibero-America has widened its horizons and in less than twenty years has acquired a first-hand acquaintance with all the currents of philosophical thought of this century. The stage of becoming informed has been completed. The main classical and contemporary thinkers have enthusiastic students in Ibero-America. At present this philosophical culture is being extended by means of translations, works of critical exposition and commentary; and by these means advanced instruction in philosophy has grown so that in the last fifteen years the number of institutions charged with giving such instruction has doubled. Philosophy has thus taken its place among the habitual activities of cultural life in Ibero-America. The personal isolation of students of philosophy has ended; the intellectual and personal affiliation of those who engage in philosophy has become an actual fact. Accordingly, there is an educated public which does not expect to be dazzled and which does not applaud brilliance and which values serious and honest effort. One gets an idea of the number of readers of philosophical works from the continual republication of works which have this quality. The translation by Manuel García Morente of the *Discourse on Method*, for example, went through seven editions in less than ten years, each edition being of several thousand copies. This fact is significant for the work has no political flavor nor literary interest; besides, there are other Spanish translations of the same work. And what is happening to this work of Descartes is not an exceptional fact; it is an index of the growing interest in philosophical questions which prevails in Ibero-America at present.

Does the formation of such a climate, which fills us with hope and enthusiasm, give us the right to affirm that there is an Ibero-American philosophy in the sense indicated at the beginning of the paper? Such a pretension certainly is unjustified. The existence of a philosophic climate

or atmosphere opens the possibility of the development of our own philosophy, but does not assure such a rise. We have transcended many levels and not a few limitations, but we are still weighed down by European conceptions. Up to the present, Ibero-American philosophy is simply the rethinking of the European problems that have reached our shores. It is certain that European philosophic currents acquire, in this soil, characteristics of our own, and perhaps in this way there will be arrived at in the future a conception purely Ibero-American, but up to now the process of digestion necessary for the rise of such a conception of our own, has not been completed.

We have discussed only four of the five stages indicated. The fifth is that of the future, the stage not yet reached. It would be a vain pretension on our part to try to describe such an anticipated stage. We shall not fall into this blunder. We wish to refer, nevertheless, to this stage, because so doing permits us to point out what is lacking in present-day thought which would enable us to speak of an Ibero-American philosophy, in the same way as we speak of a German, English, or French philosophy.

During the last few years there has been much discussion, especially in Mexico, about the characteristics which the Ibero-American philosophy will have, or should have. It has been suggested that there are concrete themes, fixed directions, predetermined characteristics. Beyond the naivete indicated in attempting prophecies of this type, the principal error of such attempts lies in the fact that attention has been concentrated on Ibero-America, with philosophy forgotten.

All these preoccupations, on the other hand, reveal the desire, express or concealed, that there should be an Ibero-American philosophy in a short time, as though philosophic thought could be produced merely by its proposal. No philosophy has arisen as the result of a deliberate proposal to realize it. Descartes did not begin to philosophize with the outlook of a Frenchman, or with the object of producing French thought; nevertheless, his philosophy is typically French. The same could be said of Hume, Kant, and the other great European philosophers. If they had proposed this, their conceptions not only would have lacked depth, but they would have been resented as the genuine expression of their people. In our case, the deliberate and impatient wish to have a philosophy of our own is the greatest impediment to the rise of such a philosophy. And if at some time there appears an original Ibero-American philosophy it will not be because its forgers have proposed to develop such a philosophy. The philosophy of a given country or epoch is a *consequence* of the idiosyncrasies of its authors and not the result of a work accomplished with the deliberate proposal of creating a philosophy original and peculiar to one country or one time.

The error in such preoccupations is that the concern for the Ibero-

American makes one forget the philosophic aspect. The philosophy of any country or time has to be, in the first place, philosophy. The effort to make it Ibero-American has removed, in our case, all the philosophic aspect from the possible undertaking. In order that an Ibero-American philosophy may arise, one has to "make" philosophy, and nothing else; the Ibero-American character will come as an addition. Deliberately trying to create an Ibero-American philosophy is as ridiculous as trying to imitate oneself. If we are truly Americans, all our activities and creations, insofar as they are authentic, will reflect our quality of Americanism. Authenticity in the attitude, is the important thing.

The desire of possessing a philosophy of our own is not only the result of a naive, adolescent desire one has to wear long pants in order to pass for a grown man, revealing in such pretension one's adolescence. It is the result, also, of a conception very widespread in Ibero-America, which was introduced through Ortega Y Gasset. Such a conception could be comprehended in the "perspectivism" of the well-known Spanish thinker, or in his affirmation, "I am myself and my circumstances" which expresses a well-defined characteristic of contemporary philosophy beginning with Dilthey. This conception has exercised a double influence in Ibero-America: beneficent on one hand, pernicious on the other. It was beneficent insofar as it cured us of the desire to imitate Europe literally. It served, besides, to establish the contact of speculation with reality, overcoming in this way the academic disquisitions and the contemplations of a supposed celestial realm. Samuel Ramos tells us of this influence in Mexico, but his observation can be extended to a majority of the countries which cultivate philosophy.

The influence we have classified as pernicious originated in the ambiguous nature of the term—and also of the concept—of "circumstance" or "situation." Which is my circumstance? I am a man of a western culture, Ibero-American, Argentinian, of the city of Buenos Aires, and I live in conditions which are proper to me as an individual. Which of these conditions shall I choose as my "circumstance"? Ortega tried to philosophize from a Spanish situation. He writes: "My natural exit to the universe opens through the gates of the Guadarrama or the Ontigola country." And then he speaks of the Logos of Manzanaris. The Ibero-Americans who followed him too literally chose their own Guadarrama and their Manzanaris, and the world had to be shrunk in order to squeeze through the opening. From the attempt to philosophize from an Ibero-American "situation" men passed on to efforts to philosophize from a Mexican, Argentinian, or Peruvian point of view. It was not noticed that not only does the character of being an Argentinian form part of my "situation," but also my condition as an Ibero-American and a westerner

forms a part of it. And there is also a "human situation" no less real and irrefutable. There was in such attempts an error of perspective. Philosophy is occupied with the "totality" of being as such. And we are ill able to contemplate this totality with a provincial viewpoint. Provincialism is the enemy of philosophy, and it seems a provincial attitude to try to develop deliberately a Mexican or Argentinian philosophy.

We are not dealing with the renunciation of such a character, but of the limitation of our range because of national prejudices. One must philosophize from the "human situation," since the Argentinian quality is as abstract as that of the human quality. If we narrow our viewpoint, we may be able to produce a philosophy very Argentinian, but little philosophic and little human. And then the very Argentinian character itself would be lost in part.

One can be a man in the abstract no more than one can be an Argentinian in the abstract. Each one of us bears upon his shoulders a series of qualities progressively diminishing—like concentric circles—and ending at the point which constitutes our individuality of flesh and blood. We are men, of western culture, of the twentieth century, Ibero-Americans, Argentinians, etc. These characteristics are not incompatible; we do not have to choose one or the other. We are able to unite these different qualities; to look at the world from the various perspectives. They all form a part of "my situation" and I ought not, nor am I able, in all strictness, to renounce them. The possible error will consist in trying to view the great through the small. And philosophy aspires to contemplate the greatest of all. Will it be necessary to repeat that we are not able to see it through the keyhole of a narrow nationalism?

We indicate the passage from the earlier stage into the present as a change in the zone of influence of European philosophic thought. During the past century people were interested in philosophy with the incentive of finding application to the social reality which they wished to modify; practical applicability, political, educational, etc., was the criterion of philosophic truth. Philosophy was changed, in this way, to an instrument at the service of non-philosophic activities or pre-occupations. At present, however, philosophic questions are in themselves interesting. Do not believe that this process can culminate in a burlesque philosophy which loses all contact with social and cultural reality and is transformed into an intellectual game, or a professional and academic activity. The intimate connection of philosophy with the living problems of the community, which in the past century limited the quality of Ibero-American philosophic meditation, had the virtue of rooting philosophic preoccupations in living reality. Latin-American philosophy has not lost this character, and we

hope it never shall. Philosophy is not a game of crossing words; philosophic problems are living problems, problems of dramatic nature, backed by the live and concrete reality which surrounds us. Without wishing to extract immediate practical consequences from philosophic doctrines, the Ibero-American thinker continues with his feet firmly grounded in the cultural, social, and human reality in which he lives. His interest in cultural philosophy, philosophic anthropology, and axiology stems from this. An ethical concern seems to nourish and give direction to all Ibero-American philosophic thinking. And an interest in man and his creations limits the object of such concerns, but elevates them by giving them a live, human goal which is characteristic of the Ibero-American philosophic attitude. It is for this reason that almost all the thinkers representative of our America tend to be "teachers of wisdom and virtue" (a title given to Alexander Korn by don Pedro Henriquez Ureña) and that these men have influenced more through their conduct and their attitude toward life than through their concrete ideas. Would that this first characteristic of Ibero-American thought—perhaps the only one which merits distinction as something unique—be conserved in the future, that the "ideal of the man of wisdom" in which conduct and doctrine are one, find in America fertile ground for its development!

RISIERI FRONDI. ZI.

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF VENEZUELA,
CARACAS, VENEZUELA.

EXTRACTO

Para evitar mal entendidos acerca del significado de la pregunta sobre la existencia de la filosofía Iberoamericana, debemos aclarar que la palabra "filosofía" tiene aquí un sentido restringido, en oposición a *Weltanschauung* por un lado, y a las demás actividades espirituales por el otro. La pregunta se refiere, por otra parte, a la existencia de una filosofía propia, original, creadora.

Puede responderse a la pregunta en base al material escrito puesto que en él se refleja directamente la naturaleza, sentido y alcance de la actividad filosófica. Si se examina lo publicado en los últimos veinte años, se advierte que sólo el diez por ciento tiene aspiraciones de originalidad; el resto está formado por traducciones, escritos de divulgación, manuales, etc. Y de ese diez por ciento tan sólo veinte o treinta obras justifican por su contenido la pretensión de originalidad. Un examen crítico de tales obras nos revela que ellas no son mas que un replanteamiento de problemas y cuestiones de raíz y sentido europeo. Lo afirmado puede aplicarse, con mayor razón, a los escritos del siglo pasado y principios del actual.

A pesar de que un examen honesto y riguroso de la cuestión nos obliga a contestar a la pregunta en forma negativa, es innegable que el rápido progreso que se advierte en la actualidad permite tener justificadas esperanzas acerca del futuro de la filosofía iberoamericana. En efecto, se ha superado la etapa en la cual las ideas filosóficas se convertían, al llegar a nuestro continente, en instrumentos al servicio de luchas políticas, empresas docentes o preocupaciones literarias. En la actualidad, en cambio, las concepciones filosóficas europeas influyen directamente en el campo de la actividad y los intereses filosóficos. Este cambio de actitud coincidió con la superación del positivismo pero es un síntoma de una etapa cultural y las limitaciones propias de esa etapa no son imputables al positivismo.

Uno de los obstáculos que aún hay que vencer para que surja una filosofía auténtica es el afán que revelan algunos pensadores iberoamericanos de tener, a corto plazo, una filosofía original y propia. Tales preocupaciones han concentrado la atención en lo iberoamericano olvidando lo filosófico. Quienes así piensan no parecen haber advertido que la filosofía de un determinado país o época es la *consecuencia* de la idiosincracia de sus autores y no el resultado de un propósito deliberado por alcanzar una concepción original.

Una estrecha interpretación del "perspectivismo" de Ortega y Gasset y de su concepción de la "circunstancia" es, en parte, responsable del afán señalado por tener una filosofía propia, de acuerdo a la "circunstancia iberoamericana."

Para que surja una "filosofía propia" hay que "hacer" filosofía, sin más; el carácter iberoamericano vendrá por añadidura, si es que nos hemos lanzado a la empresa debido a una necesidad efectiva y profundamente sentida y no por espíritu de imitación.