Leopoldo Zea

Identity: A Latin American Philosophical Problem
Focuses primarily on the universal – essence & being are principle questions

Is distinguished from the particular, regional or ideological

Traditionally seen to emphasize the theoretical over the practical

“The question about Being was what philosophy was asking from its beginnings in Greece, so we are told, about Being in general, not this or that concrete being. It was a questioning about the whole.” (p.370)
The difficulty with focusing on the universal/the whole of humanity is that it must always “be limited by the concrete capacity of vision of the one who asks.” (p.370)

Frustration at achieving the truly objective and universal viewpoint leads the philosopher to have in Jean Paul Sartre’s words, “the useless desire to be God.” (ibid.)

On Understanding the Universal From the Subjective Viewpoint
Philosophy must be “capable of reconciling theory and practice, formal knowledge and knowledge for action.” (p.371)

Philosophers must be problem solvers – must respond to problems that are relevant to the philosopher and to her/his community.

So...How Should the Question of Identity be Raised?
As an ontological question:

- It asks about the essential nature of humans and what distinguishes them from nature and the natural world.
- It is linked to the understanding of natural order and how it relates to social order.
- It involves defining oneself in relation to and in tension with nature and other humans.
- It expresses a resistance to manipulation both by nature and by other humans.

The Question of “Being”
Since 1492 this question for Latin Americans ...

must account for their identity as “victims of a gigantic cover-up” (p.372)

has been a story of manipulation & misidentification with the natural world

The Question of “Being” in Latin America
Arnold Toynbee wrote, “...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.” (p.372)

The Question of “Being” in Latin America
From Columbus’ description of the Indians as “gentle and fearful, naked…without weapons or laws.” (p.373)

To an extension of this identity as inferior – “easy to conquer and own” to all who were born in Latin America. (ibid.)

The resulting mestizaje were judged as “not only was one inferior by virtue of being born in the same region, but even more, because of a mixture of races of a purported inferior quality, one was inferior culturally and racially….“ (ibid.)

Identity as assigned by Spain
Simón Bolívar wrote, “…we are not Europeans, we are not Indians, but a species in between the aborigines and the Spaniards….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.” (p.374)

Latin American Identity Gets Even More Complicated
Domingo Sarmineto asks, “…What are we? Europeans? So many copper faces contradict us! Indigenous? The disdainful smiles of our blond ladies perhaps answers 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?.” (p.374)

Miguel Cabrera, “From Spanish man and Mestiza woman, Castiza”, Museum of the Americas, Madrid © Ministerio de Cultura

Latin American Identity Gets Even More Complicated
Referring to Sarmiento and his generation, Zea writes, “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.” (p.375)
José Enrique Rodó: “The United States 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....It is thus, 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.” (pp.375-6)

Recuerdo de Montevideo. Serie n. 1. José Enrique Rodó, La Biblioteca Nacional de España
For Hegel, philosophy in the Americas began as largely imitative and essentially a “bad copy” of European ideas.

Philosophy then moved from imitation to adaptation, the ideas are modified to help solve the specific problems found in Latin America.

The resulting adaptation becomes itself, a new utterance – a creation which is transformed and distinctive from the original source but “it can only satisfy the peculiar interests of its time.” (p.390)

Hegelian Philosophy of History
“Hegel's criticism of Enlightenment empiricism, influenced by the work of Emmanuel Kant, led him to propose that human history is the result of a dialectical process by which Spirit (Geist in German) struggles to attain self-consciousness.

Hegel presents the dialectic as a three-part structure consisting of a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis. In human history, when the status quo (the thesis) is challenged by a new historical development or force (the antithesis), a new form of life emerges out of the synthesis of the two prior stages.

The synthesis involves another of Hegel's famous concepts—Aufhebung, which often gets translated as "sublation." In German, Aufhebung means both "to cancel out" and "to preserve." In Hegel's synthesis, the old orders of human existence are not destroyed, but neither are they continued in their prior forms. They are aufgehoben, sublated, transformed into something else.”

José Gaos found that, contrary to Hegel’s expectations, the history of ideas in Latin America had not been a process of assimilation but rather a process of superimposition and an attempt to erase the past.

He recommended, “…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.” (p.378)
“Assimilate our history and experience, no matter how negative they might seem and departing from this assimilation or assumption, project our own unique future.” (p.378)
“From this expression, we would pass on to a third and final one...referring strictly to the concrete identity of the being who asks about himself, about his own and peculiar identity.” (p.378)
“This question about Being is... 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.”

(p.379)