

Towards a Philosophical Entente: The Inter-American Conferences of Philosophy in the Mid-Twentieth Century

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Abstract

During the Second World War, some of the most wide-ranging and encompassing projects that aimed to bring together Latin and North American philosophers were conceived. The need to encourage better hemispheric understanding and the idea that philosophy, understood as the highest form of civilization and a response to irrationality and violence, were two of the main motivations for organizing academic meetings and promoting philosophical interchange in the 1940s. In this context, the Inter-American Congresses of Philosophy took place as an effort to set the foundation of an “American” school of thought, in the hemispheric sense of the word, an effort that remains unparalleled to this date.

This report sketches the motivations, players, and ideas involved in these conferences, some of the first large-scale projects aimed at fostering the possibility of using philosophy as a common ground for the two Americas. It will become clear that instrumental to this endeavor were certain institutions, especially the Rockefeller Foundation, and a few individuals, such as Charles Hendel, Cornelius Krusé, and William Berrien. Cultural and language barriers, different intellectual backgrounds, and the full reintegration of European philosophers in the philosophical debates will explain why those efforts did not lead to a more continuous philosophical exchange nor to an expression of a North and South American philosophy.

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No matter how specific our scope of research might be, the archives always store elements of surprise. I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in June 2018 to follow the trail of Eduardo García Máynez, a lawyer and philosopher who modernized Mexican philosophical institutions in the mid-20th century. However, during those three weeks at the RAC, I discovered one of the most significant moments in the history of philosophical cooperation between the two Americas: the Inter-American Conferences of Philosophy, first organized in the 1940s. These brief encounters were primarily designed to form an “American” school of thought, understood in the hemispheric sense of the word, and it was an effort that remains unparalleled to this date. How did the Rockefeller Foundation get involved in those efforts? Why were philosophers called upon to cultivate cultural diplomacy? What was expected from them? Which instruments did they employ for that purpose? These are but a few of the questions that I would like to address in this report.

Although intellectual collaboration was certainly not new, it was only after the Second World War that some of the most wide-ranging, ambitious, and encompassing projects to bring together Latin and North American philosophers were pursued. The need to encourage better hemispheric understanding and the idea that philosophy, understood as the highest form of civilization and a response to irrationality and violence, were two of the main motivations for organizing academic meetings and promoting philosophical exchanges in the 1940s. Philosophical histories and translations, fellowships and visits, and grants and conferences together aimed to introduce scholars to different philosophical traditions. The goal was to dispel the popular assumption that Latin America

played Ariel to North America's Caliban and to contribute to the "good neighbor" policy which was then in place. In this spirit, the First Inter-American Conference of Philosophy took place at Yale University in 1943, followed by the First Inter-American Congress of Philosophy held in Haiti a year later. The next two venues were set in New York in 1947 and Mexico City in 1950.

In the first section of this report, I will discuss the goals, players, and ideas involved in these conferences, some of the main efforts aimed at creating bonds between individuals and institutions, and at fostering the possibility of using philosophy as a common ground for the two Americas. In the second part, I will outline the attempts to pave the way towards a shared philosophical tradition and will try to show why the project of creating a sustainable community of interests largely failed at that time. My claim is that it was not successful because philosophers were quick to criticize and were uncharitable towards each other. Some philosophers found fault with their colleagues that they were hopelessly abstract, while others complained that they were not philosophical enough. Therefore, as soon as the memories of war started to fade and the threat of a new outbreak felt less imminent, the North and South American philosophers forgot their vow to form alliances and turned their gaze back to Europe.

Philosophy as a Herald of Peace

According to Brand Blanshard, professor at Swarthmore College and acting chairman at the First Inter-American Conference of Philosophy, the initiative stemmed from geopolitical turmoil and the sudden awareness of the United States' isolation on the international scene. "Our relations with South America," affirmed Blanshard in his opening remarks, "have in the past been remote and indirect. Our two cultures have been in the habit of looking backward across the sea to the Europe from which they sprang, and have cast only occasional and perfunctory glances at each other." Therefore, the time had come to look forward and into the future, by overcoming mutual ignorance, and substituting the prevailing stereotypes with a deeper knowledge of the North and Latin American minds, their dominant interests and ideas, their guiding convictions, and their

leading exponents in the various fields of culture. Philosophy seemed especially important because it was considered a common and affirmative basis for understanding. That was the case, because, in Blanshard's opinion, "reason, if it really is reason, follows the same pattern in all men"; consequently, he added, "as far as we succeed in our work as philosophers there will be no North or South American philosophy, that here as elsewhere, except for the motes and beams in our eyes, there is only that truth which is no respecter of persons or peoples."¹

The universal quality of philosophy was thus the driving force behind the attempt to hold it as a banner in times of war. It was also the reason why the Rockefeller Foundation decided to endorse and financially support the First Inter-American Conference. As stated in a review of its Humanities program from the 1940s, "long before the second World War it was obvious that the neglect in American scholarship of the major world culture areas outside of Western Europe kept poor our humanism, weakened our diplomacy, and jeopardized our effective participation in world organization." Therefore, opening US academia to Latin America was in the interest of research and global knowledge, but also a matter of national security and political strategy. Moreover, allocating funds to such an intellectual initiative seemed all the more reasonable since it represented both a contribution to the war effort and an investment in the future, once peace ruled again. In the words of the Rockefeller Foundation officers: "In the future, more than in present time, philosophy may be a common ground of intellectual exchange for all humanists and again be the general term of reference for that body of knowledge which represents the essentials of world culture."²

Two individuals were instrumental in the task of engaging the Rockefeller Foundation and preparing the Conference, as a whole. One of them was Charles W. Hendel, professor at Yale and a specialist on David Hume. As president of the American Philosophical Association (APA), he had devised a strategy for enlarging its scope of research from philosophical study and teaching within the United States and in Europe to encompass Latin American countries. As part of that plan, the APA had started sponsoring Latin American scholars in temporary positions across universities of the United States, and was willing to hold, as "a very significant feature," a Latin American Plenary Session during its Pacific

Division annual meeting.³ The second part of the initiative received so much sympathy and support from both the Rockefeller Foundation and philosophers across the United States, that the original idea was dropped in favor of organizing the First Inter-American Conference, devoted entirely to strengthening the intellectual and academic relations within the region.

A second key player in this enterprise was Cornelius Krusé, professor at Wesleyan University. Although his life and work are today mostly lost to oblivion, it is worth noting that at the time of his death, Krusé was recognized as:

a kind of personal ambassador of American philosophy to philosophers and philosophical societies in other countries; undoubtedly, affirmed Louis O. Mink in his obituary, he personally knew more philosophers in Europe and Latin American than anyone else, and he represented not any particular philosophical school or style but rather the philosophical temper in American life and education.⁴

Whether as secretary of the APA and later as its president, or as executive director of the American Council of Learned Societies, he devoted his time and energy to facilitating philosophical exchange and eliciting the active cooperation of individuals and institutions.

Along with the Rockefeller Foundation, whose officers had already been active in Latin America since the mid-1930s, especially in Mexico and Argentina, those two men were tasked with establishing contact with philosophers south of the border and inviting them to lead their respective local committees. However, war determined that, despite their efforts, the assistance ended up being limited mostly to Latin American scholars already in the United States and so, the Conference was modest in size, but not in significance. For instance, Eduardo García Máynez was the only Mexican philosopher present in New Haven. However, this initial encounter prompted a collaboration between the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the Rockefeller Foundation that would eventually lead to the transformation of the Centro de Estudios Filosóficos into today's Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, one of Mexico's most prestigious philosophical institutions. In more general terms, the Conference also highlighted

the need to normalize relations between North and South American philosophers, by engaging in a more constant dialogue and exchange.

To lay the groundwork, in 1943 on behalf of the APA, Cornelius Krusé went on a mission to Latin America, traveling to Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay to conduct a survey on centers of philosophical studies. His goal was to identify the leading ideas and exponents in the field since an exchange of books and persons seemed, in his view, the proper way of bringing about closer cultural relations.⁵ As he rightly pointed out, meetings and conferences, no matter how regularly held, could only be significant as a prelude to dedicated effort and sustained collaboration.

The First Inter-American Congress of Philosophy, celebrated in Port-au-Prince in September 1944, confirmed his skepticism about the potential benefits of such intermittent interaction. As the war seemed to be slowly drawing to an end, this gathering became a cultural as well as a political stage for the nations present in the voice of their philosophers. While the evening meetings were held before audiences of about three thousand and some of the papers were broadcasted by shortwave radio, the State Department of the United States financed the trip to Haiti of six members of the APA. In a published overview of the meeting, one of them, Cornelius Krusé, briefly outlined US participation, described a few memorable moments and praised the prevailing “*esprit de corps*” among the participants, achieved by ensuring that all sessions were plenary.⁶ In a private letter, however, he regretted its lack of seriousness and representation, but did not elaborate his reasons of grievance.⁷ His words only suggested that the Second Inter-American Congress of Philosophy, held in New York in 1947, had been more successful at overcoming both unfortunate shortcomings.

A North-South Philosophical Divide

As he started organizing the Second Inter-American Congress of Philosophy, Krusé had a very clear idea, namely, that the meeting could not be an end, but rather a means of encouraging cooperation among philosophers and

philosophical societies abroad. More specifically, his goal was to encourage universities to take full advantage of the conference and invite Latin American participants as visiting lecturers for a semester or two, so that deeper bonds could be made. As he explained to David H. Stevens of the Rockefeller Foundation, the project drew on previous experience, to the extent that, he wrote,

on my mission in Latin America [in 1943], I discovered that while Continental European philosophy and philosophers were well known throughout Latin America, in part owing to the actual visits from European philosophers, American philosophy and philosophers were almost completely unknown. It seems to me and to the Association that the interest to find out about North American philosophy on the part of Latin American philosophers, and the interest of our Association to become better acquainted with Latin American philosophical outlook, presents a unique opportunity at the present time for cultural interchange.⁸

In a world now open to the future and a new balance of power, the time seemed ripe to shift the political and cultural leadership toward the Americas. In Krusé's opinion, it was also the right time to overcome limitations and finally engage in the long overdue conversation among philosophers. Despite enduring efforts, until then he had been unable to bring any of his Latin American colleagues to the United States for longer than a few weeks. University bureaucracy had thwarted his efforts, as the potential visiting scholars had no guarantee of being able to return to their posts after a year of absence or were tied to several institutions to make a living. But to his own amazement, even more formidable were language barriers, which in many cases restrained from profitably undertaking philosophical discussions. "I am encouraging all my Latin American friends to learn English," said Krusé in a letter, hoping that in the future that obstacle would thus be removed.⁹ Because, he must have assumed, his Anglo-American colleagues would not learn Spanish.

The Second Inter-American Congress of Philosophy, held at Columbia University in December 1947, offered a renewed chance to experience what Leopoldo Zea, the rising star in Mexican philosophy, called "*compenetración*", a deep sense of empathy, first between neighbors, then with the rest of the world.¹⁰ The meeting, conceived as a means to come closer to universality, gathered some of the best

known local philosophers of their time, like José Vasconcelos and Samuel Ramos from Mexico, Francisco Romero and Aníbal Sánchez Reulet from Argentina, and Filmer S.C. Northrop and Robert L. Calhoun from the United States. In the eyes of the organizers and the press, of special interest were two talks, which discussed an original problem, rooted in the specifically continental mindset and circumstances: “Is there an American Philosophy?”, asked Ralph Barton Perry in his talk. “Is there a Spanish American Philosophy?” was the mirror question raised by Risieri Frondizi.¹¹ More significant than their individual answers were the underlying long-run implications, because, as Krusé pointed out, “when the question is raised, the real issue is not the restriction of a particular philosophy to regional uses, but rather whether we have come of age after centuries of European tutelage. Have we become philosophically mature enough to initiate ourselves a philosophical tradition?”¹²

As days went by, it became clear that the opportunity to create such philosophical tradition would not be seized. On the contrary, the Congress meeting proved that the difficulties were more profound than what Krusé had expected. Without a common enemy and a shared cause as during Second World War, the cultural gap between the North and South American philosophers began to emerge. According to Leopoldo Zea, there was a major difference in opinion that stemmed from opposite worldviews rooted in both history and temperament. To the extent that it reflected the diversity of opinion, he believed that the disagreement was not something to overcome or reconcile, but rather celebrate. In his words:

True understanding must be grounded on differences rather than similarities. [...] This became very clear between philosophers from North and South America. [...] Both North Americans and Spanish Americans seemed to be inspired by a twin spirit, the idealist and the pragmatic, but in different proportions. The former presented themselves as pragmatic idealists; the latter as idealistic pragmatists. The former felt closer to a reality in which ideals are ultimately realized; the latter engaged in a struggle against reality in order to impose their ideals.¹³

More plainly, a Rockefeller Foundation’s officer explained the visible misunderstanding between philosophers as a difference in education and school

of thought. Therefore, there was nothing fundamental about their differences. It was just a superficial disagreement of what counted as philosophy, reflected in the fact that Latin Americans were interested in developing a broad “philosophy of man,” which drew particularly on anthropology, whereas North American philosophy tended to be based in logic and science.¹⁴ However, no matter how contingent, the consequence was a dead end, because while the former considered that their English-speaking peers were overly simplistic, the latter regarded such a philosophy of man as “somewhat platitudinous.”¹⁵

To the dismay of the organizers, some of the North American participants had expressed considerable disappointment in the conference. For example, George R. Geiger, professor at Antioch College and a specialist on John Dewey, admitted that, in his opinion, “many of the Latin American papers were too elementary or too outmoded.” Even if he credited his peers from the South for having introduced Heidegger north of the Rio Grande, Richard McKeon of Columbia, on his part, concluded that the meeting had been “probably of more value to the Latin Americans than to the US Contingent.”¹⁶ More sensitive to the dissymmetry of circumstances, William Berrien, professor at Harvard and a Rockefeller Foundation consultant for the Humanities, was the only one to observe that:

both from the point of view of research and serious interpretation I doubt that scholars of the United States and Europe would be willing or able to produce a similar quantity of acceptable material, if the North American or European had to work against the odds which confront the Latin American. In terms of exchange between the Americas, perhaps the Latin American humanist can give his North American colleague a lesson in the desirability of interpreting, and not merely recording, facts.¹⁷

Despite the prodigality with which participants were greeted during their visit, the Third Inter-American Congress of Philosophy, celebrated in Mexico City in January 1950, did not change the course of affairs. With a predominance of Latin American representatives and all papers mimeographed, translated, and distributed in advance, the philosophical encounter was carefully designed to overcome the shortcomings of previous conferences. Krusé himself was dazzled by the “organizational genius” of the Mexican Committee led by Zea, and also

pleasantly surprised by the attention that the Congress gathering was given by the press, which he interpreted as a sign of “how philosophy is prized in Latin America.” In the eyes of the North Americans, no less surprising had been the great interest that many of their colleagues showed in existentialism, whose pessimistic character seemed incompatible with the Latin American mind. However, as Krusé remarked, “the sincerity of their philosophical convictions made many of us feel that existentialism deserved a new look and a fresh appraisal.”¹⁸ No further philosophical compromise nor fruitful intellectual exchange seemed to have been reached. On the contrary, according to Eduardo Nicol, a Spanish philosopher exiled in Mexico, “the Congress went by without pain nor glory. Its intellectual level was mediocre.”¹⁹ It signaled the end of the Inter-American Congresses of Philosophy.²⁰

Final Remarks

“It is very clear that the task of being a broker in inter-American relations is not an easy one, because it requires dealing with so many variables,” complained Krusé in a letter to David H. Stevens, director for the Humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation.²¹ Distance, language barriers, differences in education and worldviews, political circumstances, and human and economic resources were but a few of them, all difficult to reconcile. Therefore, despite his long-lasting efforts to bring together North and South American philosophers, who would collectively contribute to a better international understanding and to set the foundations of an American philosophical tradition, not enough progress had been made in those respects. True, during almost ten years the Inter-American Congresses of Philosophy had prompted a better acquaintance among colleagues on both sides of the border, helped build intellectual networks, and opened new channels of communication, but certainly not at the speed and depth that Krusé would have wanted. Maybe slightly disappointed by his lack of success in the region, but also aware of the changing historical circumstances around the globe, he soon decided that “it is most important to pick up the broken threads of philosophical communication in Europe.”²² The time had come for a broader

dialogue and integration, way beyond the geographical limits of North and South America.

What can we learn from that early experience? First, that the disagreements that explain the lack of inter-American dialogue today are not necessarily about the philosophical discourse or merit of the meetings. Instead, they were about the material, institutional, and historical factors that underwrote them—such as language, money, war, and geography. We should stop examining the philosophical discourse of the other as though it were a free-floating item outside of space-time, but should remain ever aware of the contingent, historical factors that color the language we use and the way we receive the other. Krusé was a flawed champion of inter-American dialogue, but at least he was self-aware enough to realize that philosophers could not speak to each other, could not express themselves fully, without the full support of the institutions and international politics that defined them. Second, a philosophical exchange that is limited to occasional meetings will never be enough to create a shared philosophical language and to agree on a set of problems and references, that could in time be considered as a common ground for understanding, and eventually become a truly Inter-American tradition. And third, it is also a lesson in intellectual humility, as it provides a reminder of how difficult it is to achieve mutual understanding.

¹ Brand Blanshard, “First Inter-American Conference: Opening Remarks by the Chairman”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (December 1943), p. 179.

² “The Humanities program of the Rockefeller Foundation. A review of the period 1942-1947”, RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 3.1, Series 911, Box 2, Folder 14.

³ Excerpt from a letter from Charles W. Hendel to David H. Stevens (16 September 1942), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.1, Series 200R, Box 209, Folder 2498.

⁴ Louis Mink, “Cornelius Krusé 1893-1978”, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (January 1979), p. 378.

⁵ Letter from Cornelius Krusé to William Berrien (16 February 1944), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.1, Series 200R, Box 209, Folder 2499.

⁶ Cornelius Krusé, “International Congress in Haiti”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (18 January 1945), pp. 29-39.

⁷ Letter from Cornelius Krusé to John Marshall (Sep. 11, 1948), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.2, Series 200R, Box 274, Folder 2627.

⁸ Letter from Cornelius Krusé to David H. Stevens (4 January 1947), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.2, Series 200R, Box 274, Folder 2627.

⁹ Letter from Cornelius Krusé to David H. Stevens (15 January 1948), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.2, Series 200R, Box 274, Folder 2627.

¹⁰ Leopoldo Zea, "Compenetración entre la cultura iberoamericana y la norteamericana", *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, no. 44 (1 February 1948), p. 7.

¹¹ According to the reviews, Ralph Barton Perry, a student of William James and professor at Harvard, identified a characteristically American philosophy, present in three specific features: individualism, democracy and pragmatism. After making the difference between philosophy and worldview, Risieri Frondizi from Buenos Aires concluded that, up until then, there was no sign of an original Spanish American philosophy, at least one that did not stem from European sources and which remained within the specific contours of philosophy. In Leopoldo Zea, "¿Existe una filosofía norteamericana?", *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, no. 46 (15 February 1948), p. 10; Leopoldo Zea, "¿Existe una filosofía iberoamericana?", *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, no. 48, (29 February 1948), p. 13.

¹² Cornelius Krusé, "What Contribution Can Philosophy Make to World Understanding?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 9, No. 3, "Second Inter-American Congress of Philosophy" (March 1949), pp. 517.

¹³ Leopoldo Zea, "Segundo Congreso Interamericano de Filosofía", *Revista Mexicana de Cultura*, no. 45 (8 February 1948), p. 7.

¹⁴ Interviews, John Marshall, Leopoldo Zea, Mexico City (6 November 1947), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.2, Series 200R, Box 274, Folder 2627.

¹⁵ Interviews, John Marshall, Leopoldo Zea, Mexico City (6 November 1947), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.2, Series 200R, Box 274, Folder 2627.

¹⁶ Interview Charles B. Fahs, Professor George R. Geiger, RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.2, Series 200R, Box 274, Folder 2627. Quentin Smith, "George R. Geiger 1903-1998", *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 72, No. 5 (May 1999), pp. 204-206.

¹⁷ William Berrien, "Report on Humanities in Mexico, Central and South America" (31 October 1944), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.2, Series 300R, Box 15, Folder 115

¹⁸ Cornelius Krusé, "The Third Inter-American Congress of Philosophy", *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 47, No. 12 (8 June 1950), pp. 364-366.

¹⁹ Letter from Eduardo Nicol to José Rolz Bennett (6 February 1950), National University Historical Archive, Fund Eduardo Nicol, Box 23, Folder 157, p. 14482.

²⁰ Havana was announced as the location for the Fourth Inter-American Congress of Philosophy, to be celebrated in 1953, but did not take place. Instead, the First Congress of the Inter-American Philosophical Society was organized in Chile in 1956.

²¹ Letter from Cornelius Krusé to David H. Stevens (15 January 1948), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.2, Series 200R, Box 274, Folder 2627.

²² Letter from Cornelius Krusé to Eduardo Nicol (17 October 1947), RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Record Group 1.1, Series 323, Box 26, Folder 217.