A revised existentialist look at the Americans

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English Abstract

Typically, existentialist analyses of “America” have been limited to North America (more specifically, the United States). I argue that developing an adequate framework for existentially analyzing America requires a turn to Mexican existentialism. In Emilio Uranga’s and Jorge Portilla’s writings, we discover new conceptual tools for understanding Americanness as such. These thinkers help us imagine an account of American being that does not restrict itself to the United States by using the concepts of existentialism to describe the crises their neighbors to the north as well as they themselves face. American existence as such has been historically characterized by a convergence (oftentimes clash) of disparate races, ethnicities, languages, cultures, religions, and identities. As history unfolded, this convergence led to various existential crises across the Americas. Whereas the US American way of life is marred by a blustering, naïve, and purposeless misuse of freedom that disregards the other, the existential crisis the Mexican lives is characterized by “accidentality” and “zozobra.” Despite these important differences, all existentialists, and the Mexican existentialists of the Hyperion Group especially, remind us that there is a common way to overcome the various existential crises plaguing the Americas, and that is to exercise freedom in a purposeful, communally conscious manner.

Keywords: Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla, Hyperion Group, Existentialism, American

Resumen en español

Por lo general, los análisis existencialistas sobre "América" se han limitado a América del Norte (más específicamente, a los Estados Unidos). Sostengo que desarrollar un marco adecuado para analizar existencialmente a América requiere un giro hacia el existencialismo mexicano. En las filosofías de Emilio Uranga y Jorge Portilla, descubrimos nuevas herramientas conceptuales para comprender la americanidad en sí misma. Estos pensadores nos ayudan a imaginar un relato de la existencia americana que no se restringe a los Estados Unidos, utilizando los conceptos del existencialismo para describir las crisis que enfrentan sus vecinos del norte, así como ellos mismos. Históricamente, la existencia americana ha sido caracterizada por una convergencia de (más a menudo un choque entre) diversas razas, etnias, idiomas, culturas, religiones e identidades. A medida que la historia se desarrollaba, esta convergencia condujo a diversas crisis existenciales en toda América. Mientras que el modo de vida estadounidense se caracteriza por una libertad ingenua, inútil e ignorante, la crisis existencial que vive el mexicano se caracteriza por la "accidentalidad" y la "zozobra". A pesar de estas diferencias, todos los existencialistas – especialmente los existencialistas mexicanos del Grupo Hiperión – nos recuerdan que

podemos superar las crisis existenciales de las Américas si ejercemos nuestra libertad de manera intencional y comunitaria.

Resumo em português

Normalmente, as análises existencialistas sobre "América" têm sido limitadas à América do Norte (mais especificamente, aos Estados Unidos). Argumento que desenvolver um quadro adequado para a análise existencial de América requer uma virada para o existencialismo mexicano. Nos escritos de Emilio Uranga e Jorge Portilla, descobrimos novas ferramentas conceituais para compreender a americanidade em si. Esses pensadores nos ajudam a imaginar um relato da existência americana que não se restringe aos Estados Unidos, utilizando os conceitos do existencialismo para descrever as crises que seus vizinhos ao norte, bem como eles mesmos, enfrentam. A existência americana em si tem sido historicamente caracterizada por uma convergência (muitas vezes conflito) de raças, etnias, idiomas, culturas, religiões e identidades díspares. À medida que a história se desenrolava, essa convergência levou a diversas crises existenciais em toda a América. Enquanto o modo de vida americano está marcado por um uso buliçoso, ingênuo e sem propósito da liberdade que ignora o outro, a crise existencial que o mexicano vive é caracterizada pela "acidentalidade" e pela "zozobra". Apesar dessas diferenças importantes, todos os existencialistas, e especialmente os existencialistas mexicanos do Grupo Hyperion, nos lembram que há uma maneira comum de superar as diversas crises existenciais que assolam as Américas, e essa é exercer a liberdade de maneira intencional e consciente em comunidade.

Introduction

In 1947, Simone De Beauvoir published an article titled “An Existentialist Look at the Americans”, which applies the conceptual tools laid out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to the task of analyzing the existential condition of Americans in the United States at the time. In this essay, I argue that the philosophy of the Hyperion Group, as exemplified by the work of Emilio Uranga and Jorge Portilla, offers us a rich conceptual framework for an expanded existentialist analysis of America (in the broader sense of the Americas) that supplements De Beauvoir’s analysis and goes beyond the United States.[1]

I set the stage for a revised existentialist look at “the Americans” by laying out just a few central themes of existentialism as introduced in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Section 2). I then go on to display how these themes are expressed in Simone De Beauvoir’s short article on American life (Section 3). De Beauvoir argues that an unbridled, sometimes violent, and often purposeless use of freedom is characteristic of the “American” existential condition, but only gives us a glimpse into what it means to be a *North* American in the United States. In Section 4, I turn to the philosophy of a few

members of the Hyperion Group, which adopts the tools of existentialism to explain the spiritual crisis the United States is undergoing (4.1) and the unique character of Mexican existence (4.2). The Hyperions show us that being *Latin* American is characterized by "accidentality", an accompanying feeling of "zozobra" (roughly, "restlessness"), and cognizance of existing within a community. In Section 5, I conclude by raising an objection to existentialism that might derail my project here – namely, that the existentialist's account of the source of the normativity of values is, at best, either underdetermined or unoriginal – and then consider how an existential analysis of Americanness that synthesizes the elements discussed below serves to successfully address this objection. Prior to all of this, I make a few brief remarks about my methodology in this paper (Section 1).

1. A note about methodology

Before commencing with my investigation of what Americanness, in its most expansive sense, could be, I would like to clarify my intentions when placing European and Latin American philosophers side by side. A reader may suspect that my intention is to show that the members of the Hyperion Group are simply applying the tools that European existentialists have furnished to their circumstances. This could not be further from the truth. In fact, part of what I aspire to show is that Uranga, Portilla, and their compatriots actually improve existentialism as it is presented by De Beauvoir, anchoring it in the concrete particularity of their own sociohistorical and political situation in Mexico.

In other words, in their analyses of Mexican life, the Hyperions use the tools of existentialism without assimilating to or being dominated by the European existentialist movement. The way in which these Mexican philosophers interact with their European counterparts is more akin to what Gregory Pappas calls "*contrapunteo*" ["counterpoint"]: a phenomenon that occurs in music when two voices are harmonically interdependent but independent in rhythm and contour (Pappas 2021, 3). The philosophy of the Hyperion Group and that of the European existentialists interact with each other harmoniously, but one does not overcome or erase the other. Instead, from our perspective, they should be seen as mutually enhancing; the tools of the European existentialist serve the Hyperion in diagnosing the Mexican condition, while the picture of Mexicanness developed by the Hyperion address oversights on the part of the European.[2]

On top of clarifying my intended manner of comparing the figures and ideas discussed below, I want to specify the structure of the investigation to come. Americanness is not something that can be deduced from combining a major premise and a minor premise, nor is it a concept that can be reached by means of empirical induction. Below, I do not demonstrate my conception of the American with an indirect proof, nor do I construct my account on the back of social scientific generalizations. These methods are no doubt useful in other contexts. However, I simply hope to provide

a sketch or blueprint for developing a full-fledged account of American existence. I have confidence that future philosophers will continue to carry and hand down the torch of understanding American existence in its most all-encompassing sense, bringing their own perspectives and methods to bear on what is likely to be a never-ending inquiry. The open-endedness of this embarkment should not deter us, for it is this very process of constructing, negotiating, and refurbishing our self-conception that gives life meaning.

2. A brief introduction to existentialism

Existentialism can be characterized by a broad array of ideas held by a diverse set of thinkers, but there are two themes that I take to be of primary importance for contextualizing an existential analysis of Americanness: the rejection of objective absolute values and the promotion of freedom as the source of value and meaning in one's life.[3] Simone De Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* provides us with a suitable introduction to both.

Unlike many of their philosophical predecessors, the existentialist rejects the notion that there are unconditioned, mind-independent values or truths.[4] De Beauvoir states that the existentialist's rejection of unconditioned values and truths leads critics to argue that it "is a philosophy of the absurd and of despair" (1976, 10). Lacking objective, unconditioned truths and values, humans are doomed to an ambiguous world in which they pursue ideals that they cannot possibly make real in the world. The existentialist leaves us stranded in the universe. We are hopelessly alone.

However, De Beauvoir argues that we should not only dispense with unconditioned truths and values, but that this rejection signals the profundity of our freedom; "It is human existence which makes values spring up in the world on the basis of which it will be able to judge its future enterprises" (1976, 15). The human ability to create value and meaning oneself lies at the heart of the existentialist's philosophical program. Human beings are radically free to set ends for themselves. The ends they choose to set for themselves launch a project in pursuit of that end, and the projects a human being freely introduce value and meaning into the world.

Furthermore, identifying the individual human being as a radically free source of value does not entail either a naïve relativism or an all-out solipsism. Against those who would accuse the existentialist of vying for relativism, De Beauvoir reassures us that "far from God's absence authorizing all license, the contrary is the case, because man is abandoned on the earth, because his acts are definitive, absolute engagements. He bears the responsibility for a world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself" (1976, 15-16). That human freedom comes with the ability to create values and meaning actually endows the human being with a grave responsibility; they must ensure that they pursue the richest, most meaningful projects possible in a way that maximizes their own freedom and leaves room for the freedom of others: "the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals" (1976, 156). The freedom

to create value and meaning in pursuit of one's projects, should not compel or incentivize an individual to trample others for the sake of their own freedom. Rather, free humans exist alongside other free humans. Our ends and projects need to take this into account, for if they do not, we risk oppressing others and upending our own freedom.

So, De Beauvoir's introduction to existentialism should lead us to associate at least two major ideas with the movement. One, the existentialist rejects the existence of unconditioned, subject-transcendent values and truths. Second, and in contrast to the first negative claim, the existentialist identifies the individual human's freedom as the "the source from which all significance and all values spring" (1976, 24). In lieu of "foreign absolutes" to determine what one should do and to fix the truth for them, the human being may wallow in their ambiguity. The task of existentialism is to rescue the human being from a passive nihilism by reminding them that they have the power to set goals for themselves, construct projects in pursuit of their goals, and breathe meaning into their world as their concrete projects come into fruition.

3. De Beauvoir's existentialist look at "the Americans"

De Beauvoir applies these principles to her analysis of American existence in the United States in her "Existentialist Look at the Americans".[5] She argues that a praiseworthy aspect of American existence is that it champions the role of freedom as a source of concrete, value-creating action.

> Now, for an Existentialist, it is in the nature of human existence to assert itself against the inertia of the given by dominating things, by invading them, by incorporating their structures into the world of man. What is called the American dynamism assuredly meets this requirement. (2004, 308)

On the one hand, "American dynamism," as De Beauvoir calls it, bears a positive connotation. It is the unique way in which the American actively discloses their own being, "incorporating their structures into the world of man." The American is someone who not only thinks of freedom as a concrete activity that makes the world valuable and meaningful, but also measures their compatriot according to how willingly they themselves exercise their freedom:

> In the United States one is always concerned to find out what an individual does, and not what he is; one takes it for granted that he is nothing but what he has done or may do; his purely inner reality is regarded with indifference, if, indeed, any note is taken of it. A man to be respected is one who has done things that have value. (2004, 309)

The American way of life values the activity of conferring value. This is perhaps why the American is so fascinated by the mythical image of the cowboy, an individual who sets out into the vastness of nature and brings civilization into the wild. A cowboy, we may

say, will always be judged favorably by the American because they seize any opportunity to create value and meaning in a hostile environment.

On the other hand, there is a clear negative connotation to American dynamism, as is indicated by the very choice verbs De Beauvoir uses to illustrate its activity: American dynamism "invades" and "dominates." It is important to remember that the American cowboy described above – a brazen individual who imposes meaning upon a harsh, previously blank desert – is a myth. Upon exploring the west, the cowboy actually finds a world that has already been given meaning by an Other: the Native American. As such, "bringing civilization" to the wild west is actually an act of imposing what we may call cowboy values and ideals upon a number of rich, already flourishing indigenous civilizations. The cowboy exemplifies American dynamism in that they dominate and invade the world of the Native American for the sake of expressing their own freedom.

From the discussion of American dynamism above, we should conclude that an existentialist analysis of the American sketches a portrait of an individual who prizes their freedom and the meaning-making that comes along with the free pursuit of projects. But the American also invades and dominates in the name of their freedom, betraying a kind of solipsism, or at least a careless disregard for others, in the name of freedom.

In addition to this brave but brutish commitment to act, De Beauvoir observes that the modern American is unsure about what they should value and why. She states that the "young American generally lacks a sense of personal accomplishment. He does not want to do great things because he is not aware that there are great things to be done. His ambition is restricted to making money" (2004, 312). We may take this to indicate that the American is vibrant and full of life, but is unsure about how to channel their vivacious will; their "independence remains wholly abstract for it does not know on what to bestow itself" (ibid). De Beauvoir suggests that the freedom of the American remains abstract not only because they prize the wrong goals and therefore launch the wrong projects, but also because, unlike the pioneers, they are unaware of what ends they should value. This leads most Americans to feel a "great inner emptiness", as they are brimming with freedom but lack a worthy project for channeling it (2004, 312).

We see this pattern repeat itself in the thought process of the average college student in the United States. Often what is prized above all else is a major that will lead to high-salaried employment: the student "does not perceive any other objective criterion of value besides money" (2004, 312). Amongst a sea of possibilities, the average college student chooses to orient themselves toward what is most profitable. Inevitably, many adults find that their economic independence is a shallow freedom. The American mid-life crisis is a mania induced by the realization that one has fixed their gaze on ends that produce temporary, superficial pleasures at the expense of creating a life poor in lasting value and meaning. In the end, we might say that the American, on De Beauvoir's account, wants to will their freedom, but does not know to what end or why. This leads to clumsy, sometimes violent, exercises of freedom.

While De Beauvoir dedicates a great deal of her essay to a *descriptive* account of American life, it is worth mentioning that she offers something in the way of a *prescription*. She writes,

> The future of America lies in the consciousness of its youth, suddenly become aware of what the Spanish philosopher Unamuno called "the tragic sense of life," and the responsibilities incumbent on a great country. If the immense reality that is America is addressed to serving man's mind and freedom as well as his body it may well become a civilization comparable to Athens and to Rome. If not, it will remain a fact among other facts, in a world it will not have helped to justify. (2004, 314)

Consciousness of the "tragic sense of life", we may speculate, could shake the American free from the illusion that any and all exercise of freedom is good. Feeling the weight of responsibility, setting the end of serving the bodies and minds of fellow men, and regarding the other with dignity could all contribute to a proper reorientation of American dynamism. This prescriptive suggestion – among others – is more concretely adumbrated in the existential analyses of philosophers composing the famed Hyperion Group, who set their sights on Latin America as well as the United States.

4. A few themes in the Mexican existentialism of the Hyperion Group

In mid-20th century Mexico, around the time of the upsurge of European existentialism, there emerges a parallel and complementary philosophical movement across the Atlantic. "El grupo Hiperión" [the Hyperion Group"] adapts the tools of existentialism to the project of determining what it means to be Mexican. Here, I focus on some of the existentialist themes in the works of Emilio Uranga and Jorge Portilla as a means of introducing the core tenets of the tradition before reflecting upon the ways in which the philosophy of the Hyperions should lead us to revise and expand our idea of Americanness.[6] These thinkers deploy the tools of existentialism to look outward – as we see in the case of Jorge Portilla's "The Spiritual Crisis of the United States". The look outward is necessary, as the specter of the United States looms over the rest of the Americas, and determining the spiritual crises plaguing the United States serves the purpose of motivating the need for Americans outside the United States to self-determine. After all, if the United States is just as – if not more – detained by existential crises than any of its other American counterparts, there is no reason to look up to it as a determining force in the story of Americanness.[7] Having painted the United States as a country facing its own problems, the Hyperions look inward, attaining a better grasp on what it means to be Mexican. This turn inward reveals a fruitful means for an expanded and richer existential analysis of Americanness that does not limit itself to North America, but also incorporates insights from Latin America.

4.1. *The Hyperions looking outward*

Like Simone De Beauvoir, Jorge Portilla attempts to characterize the US American way of life from the point of view of an outsider looking in. Portilla aims to describe a crisis that plagues the "foundation of what in the US they have come to call *The American Way of Life*" (2020, 176). It is important to frontload that Portilla explicitly intends *not* to give a prescription for solving this crisis: "It remains alien to our purpose to point solutions or ways out of the crisis" (2020, 189). However, by analyzing the crisis eating away at the American way of life, we come away with a few nuggets regarding how the US American differs from the Mexican and how the Mexican should go about formulating their attitude toward their neighbor to the north.

Before fleshing out these morals Portilla offers us, consider his diagnosis of the issues with the US American way of life. The US American way of life is founded on what he calls an "innocence":

> When I say that innocence, that is, the absolute unfamiliarity of evil, is the *foundation* of the *American Way of Life*, I mean that the idea of innocence *serves* to make sense of almost every particular nuance of that way of life, as I hope to show later.
> This does not mean, of course, that every US American, taken individually, will take himself as innocent of blame, let alone that this *objective belief* is accepted as true, so to speak, and found everywhere in the innumerable forms and interpretations of life and man that characterize US American culture.
> I take here the word *innocence* in its more general sense of unfamiliarity with evil; he is innocent who is not defiled by evil in general or by sin in particular. An innocent world will thus be that world in which evil has not penetrated, where evil has not corrupted the root of life itself. (2020, 177-8)

Just as De Beauvoir suggests that a misuse of freedom is at the foundation of all the issues the US American faces, Portilla asserts that innocence explains the existential crisis the US American undergoes. American culture illustrates this innocence by portraying the typical American as an individual that is naïve with regard to the existence of evil, believing the world to be a place in which "evil has not penetrated" or "corrupted the root of life itself." This naivete leads to a cumbersome impulse to quantify all: "The US American seems to take quantity as the abstract and pure form of his own excellence, as an aseptic symbol of superiority, blessed with a certain scientific air" (2020, 178). In a world without evil, quantities are mindlessly correlated with goodness; the better is whatever is greater in quantity. In addition to founding this fetish for quantification, innocence grounds a "peculiar feeling of purity [*incontamincaión*], of unfamiliarity with the somber facts of existence, facts which are supposed to be absent from US American life" (2020, 181). We may think of this purity as something akin to forgetting the tragic sense of life De Beauvoir references at the end of her essay on "the Americans." Combine the quantification fetish and feeling of purity with a blind optimism that everything will work out, and Portilla claims we have a full picture of the crisis:

> The spiritual crisis of the United States is primarily manifested in the fact of a particular maladjustment between North America and the rest of the world, including between its allies and its enemies. The root of such maladjustment can be found in that fundamental underlying feeling of innocence, seen as typical of the US American way of life but as strange to every other country the world over. The crisis is expressed, in turn, in the way in which the United States is aware of this maladjustment and in its willingness to defend that vague set of goods that constitute the "American way of life." This shows that the United States has to some extent lost the claim to absolute justification that is at the origin of its history; thus, we have characterized that confluence of elements as representing the crisis of US American innocence. (2020, 189)

In response to the crisis in the United States, Portilla encourages the Mexican to consider the differences between them and their neighbor's way of life by turning their reflective gaze inward. The differences between the US American and the Mexican condition are palpable, to Portilla: "The US American characteristics of innocence, substantiality, and optimism have been noticeable from a consciousness of characteristics contrary to guilt, accidentality, insufficiency, and, in general, the sense of finitude that seem to inform the specific manifestations of our own [Mexican] world" (2020, 190). This contrast – which is spelled out in greater detail by Portilla's compatriot, Emilio Uranga – leads Portilla to call for the following course of action: "What does this contrast mean, and, in view of that meaning, what should be the proper attitude of Mexicans toward the US American world? These are questions whose solution will be proposed after the clarification of the meaning of our history" (2020, 190). It is up to the Mexican to acknowledge the crisis in the North, to recognize the flaws endemic to US American life, and to scrutinize their own history and identity as a means of determining themselves. Fittingly, this task is undertaken by other Hyperions.

4.2. *The Hyperions looking inward*

Emilio Uranga, who is also a member of the Hyperion Group along with Portilla, adopts concepts and methods from existentialism to look inward and reflect on what it means to be Mexican. In his "Essay on an Ontology of the Mexican", Uranga argues that a fundamental characteristic of Mexican being is its "accidentality." Manuel Vargas characterizes "accidentality" as the historical "collision between two kinds of substances —Spanish and Indigenous" that resultantly produces "a people who experience themselves and their form of life as an unstable, uncertain amalgam of norms, values, and meanings that do not cohere well in the actual conditions of Mexico and its history" (Vargas 2020). While Vargas is correct to emphasize uncertainty with respect to the source of norms, values, and meaning when characterizing accidentality, it is worth remembering that Uranga is an existentialist. This is to say that freedom is likely on his mind when discussing accidentality. Being an accident is not just being uncertain about one's values and norms, but is a radical loss or forgetting of one's free capacity to set and pursue ends, to launch projects. As Uranga would put it, "Accidentality is insufficient before substance" (2017b, 174) precisely because what is substantial is still aware of

the absolute value of its freedom. The accident cannot envision "the abyss of [its] existential possibilities" (2017b, 176) before it. Thus, we should think of the accidentality described by Uranga as an impermanent loss of, perhaps better a forgetting of one's, freedom in the existentialist sense.

In close connection to their accidentality, the Mexican feels a certain unease labelled "zozobra". Uranga describes zozobra as follows:

> Zozobra is the state in which we find ourselves when the world hides its fragility or destructibility; zozobra is the state in which we are not sure if, at any moment, a catastrophe will overwhelm us or if we will be secured in the safety of asylum. In zozobra we remain in suspense, in oscillation […]. We must always know what we can count on, but the belief that we can never know what we can count on constitutes restlessness or zozobra." (2017b, 173)

Vargas interprets Uranga's doctrine of zozobra to indicate something like a teetering between the impulse to accept a "problematic framework of meanings, norms, and values" and "the urge to abandon that framework" (Vargas 2020). While this may aptly characterize a specific expression of zozobra, I take this feeling to be something even more vague and pervasive, a feeling that is perhaps akin to what De Beauvoir called the ambiguity of human existence. We should think of zozobra as the feeling of one's groundlessness – that is, the feeling that accompanies our recognition that there is no readymade meaning or mind-independent values out there in the world, waiting to be grasped by us. This is why inferiority represents just one potential response to this state of zozobra: "inferiority marks the project that involves being saved by others, of transferring onto others the task of justifying our existence, of unburdening us of zozobra, of allowing others to decide for us" (2017b, 174). A (not *the*) response to the feeling of zozobra is to let an Other determine us. Of course, there is another, more optimistic way to respond to zozobra, and that involves embracing the traditional existentialist solution of creating a valuable and meaningful world by means of relentlessly free activity. Putting the themes of accidentality and zozobra together, it seems as though Uranga is saying that the Mexican must adopt a more assertive attitude toward their accidentality, restore their sense of freedom, and develop a fresh attitude towards zozobra when he writes, "one must "scratch" and reopen a scar that has inconveniently healed so as to allow the wound to once again exist in the space of its own possibilities" (2017b, 177).

On top of the notions of accidentality and zozobra introduced by Uranga, we may consider Jorge Portilla's notion that community as co-existence constitutive of Latin American identity. Portilla comments on Uranga's existentialist analysis of the Mexican favorably (2017a, 185-6), but urges us to keep in mind that zozobra, accidentality, and existence in general only emerge within a network of existents. "The being of man", he writes, "is not just a "being there" or existence, but a "being-with-others" or a coexistence, and this ontological structure is what makes possible the use of the word us" (2017a, 190). Because existence is coexistence, picking our ends and projects

requires us to remember that we are free individuals existing alongside other free individuals. Disambiguating existence requires us to reject the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism and negotiate a compromise between the two in our values. Only then will we bring about a perfect community, one that balances the "I" and the "you" in a true "us", one that embraces values that neither prize one individual above all others nor forget the irreducible value of each and every individual.

While it is difficult to imagine what those values and projects are, it is worth keeping this ambition in mind as we fashion the best possible society in symphony. Indeed, in his *Fenomenología del relajo*, Portilla insists that coexistence, the foundation of a community, is the "continuous self-construction of a group in reference to a value" (Sánchez 2012, 198). Individuals who seek value, meaning, and truth cognizant of the fact that they are members of a group only enhance the process of making a valuable world manifest. In contrast, "relajientos" and "apretados" see themselves, as individuals, as more important than the community, thus fracturing the community. He ends this work with by highlighting the need for "the constitution of a Mexican community, of a genuine community, and not of a society divided into proprietors and the dispossessed" (Sánchez 2012, 199).

5. Towards a revised existentialist look at the Americans

Before sketching the vision of Americanness these thinkers have afforded us, I must acknowledge and respond to a particular critique of existentialism that spells trouble for any project that depends upon its theories of freedom and value. A skeptic may insist that the existentialist's picture lacks a coherent story about the source of the normativity of values.[8] The existentialist wants us to believe that there are no foreign absolutes, and that freedom commences the process of constructing meaning and value in accordance with end-directed projects. But when it comes to determining which ends are worthy of pursuit and which are not, the existentialist is at a loss for words. Moreover, if the existentialist is not at a loss for words and does provide a story, it is difficult to distinguish their preferred view from a rational morality which determines the good in accordance with a universal principle or a consequentialism that equates the good with whatever will produce the best outcome. In short, the critique is that the existentialist's story about the source of the normativity of values is either underdetermined or unoriginal. And considering this, it makes little sense to build an analysis of "Americanness" on the back of existentialism.

In response to this critique, I believe that the members of the Hyperion Group discussed above shine a light on the path to recuperating the existentialist project because they provide a comparatively concrete account of the source of the normativity of our values and ends. When determining which ends are valuable and why, the Hyperion shows us that we must look to and negotiate with the members of the community. Determining which ends are best and which projects are worthy is, for lack of a better phrase, a democratic, community-facing process. For thinkers like Portilla,

the relevant community is the Mexican one. The value of ends will be set by the relevant community, which means that the Mexican community will have a particular answer to the question of which ends are valuable and why; the Cuban community will choose ends suited to it; and so on and so forth. This account accommodates various levels of granularity, as well, meaning that smaller communities – e.g., a community of Latin American philosophers pursuing the project of identifying what Americanness is – can formulate their own answers to the question of what ends matter and why and so can larger communities – e.g., an entire nation of Americans. It also teaches us that one's story about the source of normativity is intimately connected with questions of personal identity. Which ends one adopts and why they adopt those ends is dependent upon the communities with which they identify.

My chief purpose here is to answer the question, What ends should the American *qua* American pursue and why? Of course, before answering that question, it is necessary that we—at least roughly—delimit the boundaries of the American community. On my view, the American community is not quite as expansive as José Vasconcelos's *raza cósmica* but not quite as contained – albeit closer to – what José Martí called *la patria*. The fault lines of this community have been determined by a shared history and theory of freedom that reflects that history.

What the history of the Americas has shown is that Americanness is, at its origins and as a matter of historical fact, amorphous, and that this characteristic amorphousness has created a variety of maladjustments toward freedom. America's amorphousness resides in the fact that it is not inextricably tied to any one language, race, ethnicity, creed, religion, or identity category. America's amorphousness is a symptom of the clash, convergence, contact, and conquest between alien cultures that define its history. This amorphousness has led to various forms of disorientation. Without a clear, well-defined sense of their identity, the American may feel ambiguous, lost at sea, in the grips of an all-pervasive zozobra. Moreover, this amorphousness may elicit inadequate responses to the American states of disorientation. One inadequate response to is succumb to one's accidentality, allowing another to determine your future for you. Another inadequate response is to prize one's own private freedom to do whatever they please above all else, neglecting and even trampling other free beings as a result of this disregard. Despite the different character of the responses here, what we see is that the values and ends of the American have been determined in dialogue with this ambiguous starting point, and the prevailing defective response has been to retreat into oneself (a radically individualistic freedom) and withdraw from the community (a felt impotence brought about by a loss of freedom).

However, these are all cautionary tales. The existentialist prescription for the American begins with a reminder that freedom is fundamentally teleological – or end-directed – and the value of freedom resides in the aims and projects towards which we deploy our freedom. A proper use of freedom requires us to attentively select the right ends. This should not be an unfamiliar point to anyone familiar with Latin American thought immediately preceding the genesis of the Hyperion Group. José Martí's *Nuestra*

América envisions a future for America that is born out of striving towards that desirable state [*a aquel estado apetecible*] in which each individual knows and directs themselves [*cada hombre se conoce y ejerce*] and delights in nature's abundance. Progress towards this desirable state is ensured by the governor [*el buen gobernante*] who, unlike the outsider, has intimate knowledge of America and Americans.[9] Self-determination is also an end-directed pursuit for the post-positivist Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, who, in his early philosophy, envisions humanity gradually advancing towards a fated "third period" [*al tercer período de su destino*], in which free will truly becomes free [*la voluntad se hace libre*] because it has finally taken up the right ends – i.e., those associated with love, joy and beauty rather than force and imperatives of reason (1925, 27-8). Martí and Vasconcelos show us that genuine self-determination, throughout the history of Latin American thought leading up to the mid-20th century, presupposes choosing the right ends. On this score, the Hyperions agree, adding to this end-directed conception of freedom by mulling over the concrete circumstances that now determine the ends Americans ought to adopt.

Perhaps more importantly, the existential analyses above show us that our freedom must not be a cudgel, it must not be purposeless and guided by naivete, and it must not express the ends of an insular, solipsistic, individual will. The cessation of restlessness and the commencement of free activity requires us to not only embrace our own ability to set purposes for ourselves and launch projects in pursuit of them, but to remember that our freedom takes place within a network of freedoms. We do not simply exist. We coexist. European and Mexican existentialism combine to teach us that the American project involves a calling to overcome our historically induced accidentality and restlessness by pursuing carefully selected, communally conscious ends. In other words, the best path for overcoming the disorientation induced by the amorphousness characteristic of Americanness is to turn to the community when deliberating about which ends we ought to pursue and why. Being a real American requires one to live with an outward-looking conception of freedom, one which does not invade, dominate, and conquer, but takes earnest engagement with the other to be freedom-enhancing.[10]

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Notes

[1] The Hyperion Group was a group of public intellectuals active in mid-20th-century Mexico consisting of figures such as Leopoldo Zea (1912–2006), Jorge Portilla (1918–1963), Ricardo Guerra (1928–2007), Emilio Uranga (1921–1988), Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974), and Luis Villoro (1922–2014). The group is perhaps best known for its ambitions to demarcate and explore a f*ilosofía de lo mexicano* [philosophy of Mexicanness]. Several important contributions to this effort include Uranga's 1952 *Análisis del ser del mexicano* and Portilla's 1966 *Fenomenología del relajo*. For an overview of this group's mission and its place in the history of Mexican thought, see Hurtado and Sanchez 2016.

[2] We might also liken the relationship between the Mexicans and the Europeans in this context to the ideal relationship between subject and other envisioned by Luis Villoro in his "Sahagún or the limits of the discovery of the other." The relationship points to the insight that "truth and meaning are not discovered from a privileged point of view" (1989, 16). Rather, different paradigms for explaining the same object or phenomenon can be of equal use or significance. Understanding does not require the domination or subsumption of the Other.

[3] Crowell 2020 contains a more detailed discussion of these two and other central themes in existentialist thought.

[4] This in turn also means that the existentialist rejects a realist ethics and epistemology. According to the former, we may consider the good to be a value that transcends the inclinations or opinion of any individual subject and moral action a matter of an individual's conforming with that subject-transcendent standard. Likewise, a realist epistemology may consider truth to be something that exists out in the world. Apprehending the truth means seeking it out, discovering it, and making our opinions correspond to it.

[5] It is worth noting that de Beauvoir's existentialist look at the Americans may strike some as unworkably abstract, as too focused on just one particular instantiation of US American life at the expense of countless others. What I mean by this is that one might look at her characterization of the American as well as the kinds of people whom she surveyed to arrive at this account of Americanness and feel that De Beauvoir has abstracted away from the concrete lived situations of large swathes of Americans that don't fit the description she provides. De Beauvoir is passing off an account of white middle class US American life as an analysis of the American as such.

I concede that De Beauvoir's existentialist analysis may suffer from this kind of myopia. Indeed, I take this to be another reason why De Beauvoir's analysis can only constitute a launchpad for a full existential analysis of Americanness. For just one example of an account of Americanness that centers a large demographic which De Beauvoir seems to entirely ignore, Alain Locke's lecture "The Negro in the Americas" (in Carter 2016) is particularly insightful.

[6] For a much more thorough and expansive discussion existentialist themes in the philosophy of the Hyperion Group, see Sánchez 2016.

[7] In "The Actual Function of Philosophy in Latin American", Leopoldo Zea makes a similar point, comparing Europe as the presumptive determining force to Latin

America. In light of Europe's ongoing "crises", the task of the American is to figure out whether they can construct a "genuinely Latin American ideology" (2004, 359).

[8] A special thanks to Terry Macmullan and Goyo Pappas for pushing me to consider this objection.

[9] See Martí 1891.

[10] I am very thankful to audiences at the University of California, San Diego's FiloMex Lab as well as the 50th annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy for their invaluable questions and comments. I am especially indebted to Sergio Gallegos, Terry MacMullan, Goyo Pappas, Clinton Tolley, Dwayne Tunstall, and Manuel Vargas for their incisive feedback. I would also like to thank the editors at the Inter-American Journal of Philosophy for their efforts organizing this issue and for their valuable editorial suggestions.

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