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(eds.)

# G.W. Leibniz:

*Razón, verdad y diálogo*

NOVA



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LEIBNIZ / LATINA



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## Leibniz on the Metaphysical Certainty of Innate Ideas

**Abstract.** In Leibniz's *New Essays* stands out, within many important topics, his doctrine of innate ideas, which supposes the division between sense knowledge and innate knowledge and implies the distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact. That doctrine is particularly relevant for Leibniz's philosophy but entails implicitly the epistemological difference between belief, on one side, and certainty, on the other. In this paper I outline, according to my interpretation, how Leibniz explains that humans can have certainty about innate ideas. This topic is important because if Leibniz demonstrates the possibility of having certainty of those ideas, then it is feasible to believe in its existence. However, if his explanation is unsatisfactory then his metaphysical doctrine would be seriously weakened and, at the same time, both skepticism and Locke's empiricist doctrine would be reinforced.

**Keywords:** Innate ideas; Certainty; Knowledge; Metaphysics; Mathematics

### I. Introduction

My aim in this paper is to outline how Leibniz explains our access and knowledge to the innate ideas, more specifically how he argues that human beings (as limited beings) have 'certainty' about them, assuming –as a condition– that certainty is an epistemic property of beliefs superior or higher than knowledge.

This topic is important because for Leibniz innate ideas imply many things, among them God, human knowledge as superior to animal knowledge, unity of principles, etc. For that reason, he rejected Locke's criticism about innate ideas because by doing so the English philosopher pulled up the old foundations of knowledge and certainty.<sup>1</sup> Locke himself recognized that in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*: "I don't know how

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<sup>1</sup> Jolley exposes that the other opponent in Leibniz's war in favor of innate ideas was Malebranche. "When Leibniz champions the doctrine of innate ideas, he is in effect fighting a war on two fronts. On the one hand of course (at least in his later writings), he is attacking Locke's view that the mind at birth is a tabula rasa; on the other hand, he is combatting the theory of ideas espoused by Malebranche." (2013, 105)

much I will be blamed for doubting that there are any innate principles—blamed by men who will be apt to say that I am pulling up the old foundations of knowledge and certainty. But I think that what I am saying squares with the truth, and that it will therefore replace those old foundations by newer and more secure ones”. (Locke, *Essay*, I, iv, 23) For Leibniz, a knowledge constructed in a Lockean way, that is, on purely empirical and sensory bases, was proper of the beasts and not of humans because the former guide themselves entirely by instances while the latter “are capable of demonstrative knowledge”. (NE, 1996, Pref, 50) For the same reason, such knowledge would lack any guarantee of certainty since for Leibniz “sense-experience does not provide absolutely certain truths, free from all risk of illusion”. (NE, 1996, IV, vii, 9) Therefore, as a reaction to Locke and the empiricist philosophers like him Leibniz posed the existence of innate ideas, whose certainty is guaranteed by God, and the possibility of knowing them and to have certainty about them. This latter point is what is important for us, because if Leibniz can demonstrate that we can have certainty about those ideas then it is more feasible to believe that innate ideas exist, and by doing so his proposal would be reinforced. However, if his explanation is unsatisfactory then not only skeptic position and Locke’s empiricist stance about the inexistence of innate ideas would be better than his own, but even worse Leibniz’s metaphysical doctrine (including monad theory) would be weakened.

## II. Leibniz and Innate ideas

When someone reads Leibniz’s *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1704) [hereinafter NE], especially the Preface, book I and II, realize that that work is not only a reply to Locke’s *Essay* (1689) but rather an introduction to Leibniz’s “new system”. There are several important topics in his NE, nevertheless, within the many important things stands out Leibniz’s doctrine of innate ideas, already mentioned in his *Discourse of Metaphysics* (1686) when he postulated his Platonic–Cartesian thesis that God has endowed our minds with a stock of innate ideas<sup>2</sup>:

For our soul expresses God and the universe, and all the essences as well as all the existences. This is in accord with my principle, for nothing enters naturally into our minds from without, and it is a bad habit we have of thinking as if our soul received certain ‘species’ as messengers and as if it had doors and windows. We have all these forms in our own minds, and even from eternity, for at every moment the mind expresses all its future thought and already thinks confusedly of everything of which it will ever think distinctly. Nothing can be taught us the idea of which is not already in our minds, as the matter out of which our thought is formed. (DM 2020, §26)

Coming back to the *New Essays*, in the Preface Leibniz argued in favor of innate ideas. By doing so he maintained a division between two kinds of truths: ‘necessary truths’ and ‘contingent truths’, which he also terms “truths of reason” and “truths of fact” respectively, the latter one related to an empiricist position (Locke) whereas the former ones came from an

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<sup>2</sup> Despite Leibniz accepts, following Malebranche and Augustine, God as the ‘region of ideas’ (G VII, 305; PPL, 488), this does not mean that he regards ideas as irreducibly abstract entities. For him there are no entities named by abstract nouns. In connection with this, Mates has showed the nominalistic tendencies in Leibniz’s philosophy. (1986, 170 ff)

ancient tradition and were particularly relevant for Leibniz. In relation to this, at the beginning of the Preface he asserted:

There is the question whether the soul in itself is completely blank [...] or whether the soul inherently contains the sources of various notions and doctrines, which external objects merely rouse up on suitable occasions, as I believe and as do Plato and even the Schoolmen and all those who understand in this sense the passage in St Paul where he says that God's law is written in our hearts (*Romans*, 2: 15). The Stoics call these sources Prolepses, that is fundamental assumptions or things taken for granted in advance. Mathematicians call them common notions or *koinai ennoiai*. Modern philosophers give them other fine names and Julius Scaliger, in particular, used to call them 'seeds of eternity' and also '*zopyra*' - meaning living fires or flashes of light hidden inside us but made visible by the stimulation of the senses, as sparks can be struck from a steel. And we have reason to believe that these flashes reveal something divine and eternal: this appears especially in the case of necessary truths. That raises another question, namely whether all truths depend on experience, that is on induction and instances, or if some of them have some other foundation. [...] From this it appears that necessary truths, such as we find in pure mathematics and particularly in arithmetic and geometry, must have principles whose proof does not depend on instances nor, consequently, on the testimony of the senses, even though without the senses it would never occur to us to think of them. [...] Logic also abounds in such truths, and so do metaphysics and ethics, together with their respective products, natural theology and natural jurisprudence; and so the proof of them can only come from inner principles, which are described as innate. It would indeed be wrong to think that we can easily read these eternal laws of reason in the soul, as the Praetor's edict can be read on his notice-board, without effort or inquiry; but it is enough that they can be discovered within us by dint of attention: the senses give the occasion, and the results of experiments also serve to corroborate reason, somewhat as checks in arithmetic help us to avoid errors of calculation in long chains of reasoning. (NE, Preface, 48-50)

Firstly, the quote above proves that innate ideas, deeply related to truths of reason, are very important for theological and epistemological issues but also play an important role in Leibniz's metaphysical proposal. Secondly, it seems that Leibniz takes for grant two things: i) tradition gives some kind of warrant or even evidence of the truth of these ideas, and ii) principles of necessary truths are latent in our mind. This latter is one of the differences with Locke as in his opinion the English philosopher failed to recognize that the principles of necessary truths are latent in our mind. For instance, in NE he (Theophilus) asserts:

You must admit, though, that the inclination we have to recognize the idea of God is part of our human nature. Even if the first teaching of it were attributed to revelation, still men's receptiveness to this doctrine comes from the nature of their souls. But we shall decide later that the teaching from outside merely brings to life what was already in us. (NE, I.i.4, 76)

In the quotes above Leibniz asserts that it is necessary “effort” to know that truths. If this is so, is not easy nor immediate to access them by understanding and thus not everyone can reach them. Therefore, how can someone be sure that these kinds of truths are innate and not learned? We can read several passages in *New Essays* where Leibniz suggests the same idea, namely, that innate ideas are in us and that we need only effort to find them out. In NE he writes:

PHIL. But suppose that ‘truths can be imprinted on the understanding without being perceived’ by it: I do not see how they can differ, so far as their origin is concerned, from ones which the understanding is merely capable of coming to know.

THEO. The mind is capable not merely of knowing them, but also of finding them within itself. If all it had was the mere capacity to receive those items of knowledge - a passive power to do so, as indeterminate as the power of wax to receive shapes or of a blank page to receive words- it would not be the source of necessary truths, as I have just shown that it is. For it cannot be denied that the senses are inadequate to show their necessity, and that therefore the mind has a disposition (as much active as passive) to draw them from its own depths; though the senses are necessary to give the mind the opportunity and the attention for this, and to direct it towards certain necessary truths rather than others. (NE, I.i.5, 79-80)

Some lines below Leibniz reinforces the same idea:

PHIL. But if the words ‘to be in the understanding’ have any positive content, do they not signify to be perceived and comprehended by the understanding?

THEO. They signify something quite different to us. It suffices that what is ‘in the understanding’ can be found there, and that the sources or fundamental proofs of the truths we are discussing are only ‘in the understanding’. The senses can hint at, justify and confirm these truths, but can never demonstrate their infallible and perpetual certainty. (Ibid., 80).

It is evident from the above quotes that Leibniz assures that the mind has the disposition or tendency to extract certain ideas or principles which it unconsciously employs or potentially contains. Innate ideas are then internal ideas, dispositions, potentialities, or immanent active forces in the mind of every human being (NE, Preface, 52; see I.iii.20, 106-07) that depend on “that Supreme and Universal Mind who cannot fail to exist and whose understanding is indeed the domain of eternal truths”. (NE, IV.xi.14, 448) In other words, “God guarantees the certainty of necessary and innate truths. Therefore, to demonstrate that any truth is logically derived from first principles is not only a proof of its innate origin but also of its truth”, says Lorenzo. (1985, 82)

Innate ideas, related to necessary truths –those whose opposite is impossible since they imply a contradiction– are governed by the principle of contradiction according to which what is false is that which contains contradiction and true that which is opposed to false. These truths, given the ease and infallibility of their verification, arouse in man a metaphysical certainty: their truth, once demonstrated, is unquestionable. This latter assumption of being an unquestionable truth which stems from an innate idea is very important. For the same reason

one might expect that Leibniz proves how humans get these ideas; however, what is really important for us is to know how humans can have certainty about its truth.

From my point of view, this issue is relevant because in terms of epistemic certainty is not enough to asseverate that these ideas are innate, the point is to demonstrate it. In this sense, either appealing to tradition, God's will, or effort, do not prove the innateness of any idea but, on the contrary, give rise to more doubts and uncertainties about their existence. The point then is to demonstrate how is that humans, and not only one single person, can have certainty about their beliefs and, specifically, about their belief in the existence of innate ideas. In order to give certainty of these innate ideas, presupposing that they are truly innate and not simply a postulate which supposes their innatism, Leibniz should firstly clarify the difference between belief and knowledge and, secondly, which is what matters here, he should spell out how can someone reaches certainty and demonstration about the supposed innate ideas. In other words, he must make clear to us how we can reach the metaphysical certainty with respect to innate ideas<sup>3</sup>.

### III. On Certainty

Throughout the history of philosophy, many philosophers have held that knowledge requires certainty and that certain knowledge is possible. To this respect, in early modern philosophy stands out two great philosophers, Descartes, who is a very special case<sup>4</sup>, and Leibniz.

Regarding certainty, we know that there are different degrees or kinds of certainty, like moral, epistemic, or psychological one (which is certainly that of Locke). Here, although I am not interested in discussing the concept of certainty in detail, and for the same reason when I talk about it I am simply thinking in a proposition that can be said to be certain, like that of Leibniz of having innate ideas, I am going [p. 120] to focus on the so call epistemic certainty. In this regard, commentators like Stanley (2008) or Klein (2010) explain that the term certainty has two senses, subjective or relative and epistemic or absolute. As for the first sense, subjective certainty means for Stanley that “one is certain of a proposition if and only if one has the highest degree of confidence in its truth” (35), whereas relative certainty, which fits to some extent to Stanley' subjective certainty, refers for Klein that “one proposition is more certain than another, implying that the second one, though less certain, is still certain” (273). For us however is more important the second sense, namely, that of the epistemic or absolute certainty. As for Stanley, epistemic certainty implies that “one is certain of a proposition  $p$  if and only if one knows that  $p$  (or is in a position to know that  $p$ ) on the basis of evidence that gives one the highest degree of justification for one's belief that  $p$ .” (Idem) In this same line of thought, for Klein absolute certainty means that a proposition is absolutely certain “just in case there is no other proposition more warranted than it”, or in other words that “a belief,  $p$ , is certain only if there is no belief which is more warranted than  $p$ .” (Idem)

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<sup>3</sup> One definition of metaphysical certainty is the following, “ $p$  is a metaphysical certainty for  $S$  = df (1) believing  $p$  is more reasonable for  $S$  from the standard epistemic perspective than doubting or denying  $p$ , and (2) it could never be more reasonable for  $S$  to believe some proposition  $q$ , than it is at present for  $S$  to believe  $p$ , ( $p$ , 39)” (Curley, 1993, 12)

<sup>4</sup> I especially highlight *Meditations* and *The Principles of Philosophy*. See “Third Mediation”, “Fifth Meditation”, “Author Replies to the Second Set of Objections”, and Part IV of “The Principles of Philosophy”, respectively.

After knowing these two senses, the key question now is what makes a belief or proposition unquestionably certain. Klein explains to us that some philosophers have suggested that the role that a belief plays within our set of actual beliefs makes a belief certain. For instance, Wittgenstein suggested in *On Certainty* that a belief is certain just in case it can be appealed to in order to justify other beliefs but stands in no need of justification itself (1969). Thus, the question of the existence of beliefs that are certain can be answered by merely inspecting our practices to determine whether there are any beliefs that play the specified role. However, the issue here is not whether there are beliefs which play such a role, but whether there are any beliefs which should play that role. Now, keeping this in mind and coming back to Leibniz one might ask if innate ideas are accompanied by demonstrative reasons or not, or if they are purely belief, or even worse if they are simply a matter of faith. These doubts are reasonable because for Leibniz the evidence of knowledge, since it does not lie in the senses, is based on its innate character; hence innateness is also a criterion of certainty. That is why for him an innate truth is, plain and simple, undoubtedly true.

However, it seems that when Leibniz uses the term *certainty* he is thinking something different than what Wittgenstein understood as certainty. In Leibniz's case, to say that a belief is certain is to say that we have a guarantee of its truth. It seems then that he is following the Cartesian characterization of the concept of absolute certainty. This approach is basically –in Klein's words– that a proposition  $p$  is certain for  $S$  just in case  $S$  is warranted in believing that  $p$ , and there are absolutely no grounds whatsoever for doubting it (2010, 274). I do believe Leibniz would agree with this characterization, and by doing so he would accept that an *objective* guarantee is needed in order to capture an absolute certainty. The way to do so, to capture such objectivity, would be by requiring that there be no *true* proposition such that if it is added to  $S$ 's beliefs, the result is a reduction in the warrant for  $p$ . In other words, that being  $p$  true “there is a set of true propositions in  $S$ 's belief set which warrant  $p$  and which are themselves objectively immune to doubt” (Idem). In short, for having an absolutely certain belief it is necessary that that belief is indubitable and guaranteed both subjectively and objectively.

The issue with Leibniz is, in relation to metaphysical certainty, to know what the guarantee is. In particular, what is the inward guarantee that gives certainty of the truth of innate ideas.

#### IV. Leibniz and Metaphysical certainty

As correctly argues Lorenzo, Leibniz needs to recur to a foundation superior in rank to the mere certainty of a limited human mind. Since there is no foundation superior to the ontological, he chooses an ontological foundation; and since it must be a foundation of certainty, and there is no certainty superior to that of the divine understanding, he chooses the divine understanding as the ontological foundation of the certainty of indemonstrable first principles. (1985, 84) I completely agree with this statement although I believe that we can complete it by referring us to Weckend, who holds that in Leibniz's work the notion of certainty has different connotations and “its meaning and scope differ according to context” (2017, 203). Undoubtedly this could be true, since Leibniz himself says in NE that “it must be acknowledged, though, [...] that none of this certainty is of the highest degree”. (Bertolio, 2013, 173. Cf. NE IV.ii.14, 375) In any event, if Weckend's assertion is true then there are in Leibniz different types of certainty and

different degrees as well. This has relation to what Casanova argues about the differences between God's understanding and human beings one. By saying that the structure of absolute understanding and limited understanding is radically different because the former is infinitely perfect, timeless, instantaneous, and non-discursive and the latter is finite, limited, fallible, and discursive, which gives rise to "two radically distinct and irreducible realms of truth, namely, the realm of necessary truth and the realm of contingent truth" (2005, 41-42), she assumes that depending on the kind of understanding, or we might say context, will be the kind of truth and so the kind of certainty.

Weckend and Casanova's assertions give us an answer, but not entirely satisfactory because what we want to find out is what kind of certainty have humans about innate ideas. In NE Leibniz says something interesting in this respect: "So there will be two sorts of knowledge, just as there are two sorts of proof: one results in certainty and the other leads only to probability" (IV.ii.14, 374). It follows that whilst some areas of human knowledge are amenable to demonstrative proofs other areas depend on induction and remain largely probabilistic.

For humans, the greatest confidence is to be found in deductive truths and propositions that stay within their own logical boundaries and can be evaluated *a priori*. These propositions have logical and geometrical certainty, but unfortunately innate ideas are not mathematical or geometrical ones and their truth is of a different type. Thus, will be possible that the truth and certainty of innate ideas rely on inductive reasoning? This would be difficult to accept due to this kind of reasoning and its truth gives probabilistic proofs that are used until a mechanism is found that explains the underlying reasons and the connections behind the phenomena. In other words, this reasoning helps to increase the levels of accuracy. But innate ideas are not of this kind since their truth cannot rely on empirical, *a posteriori*, or probabilistic proofs but in *a priori* one (or at least mainly). And this is so by the fact that they are innate, that is, they are in us by being written in our hearts, as Leibniz refers. The problem is then the same, how do humans achieve the highest certainty about them?

### 1. A Possible Solution of the Puzzle: The Mathematical Model

In *On the nature of truth, contingency, and indifference, as well as on freedom and predetermination* Leibniz holds that "God can reveal even to creatures the demonstrations of universal propositions." (PW, 1998, 99) This quote give to us a clue because if God can help creatures by revealing information, he can do it by different means. And by doing so, considering that the truth of innate ideas does not rely on probabilistic or *a posteriori* proofs but neither cannot be determined on purely aprioristic grounds (for this reason humans need effort to reach them), it is possible to hold that combining empirical data with the *a priori* disposition or tendency humans can reach certainty about the truth of their innate ideas.

This possibility is confirmed in NE IV, where Leibniz points out that he contemplates a third kind of compounded proposition: even though general propositions of reason are necessary there are also "mixed propositions which derive from premises some of which come from facts and observations while others are necessary propositions" (IV.xi.14, 446). This has an impact on the certainty we may have regarding innate ideas, for it is inferred from the quote that the generic distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact, and the strict separation between propositions of reason and empirical propositions of fact, is not so radical as one might

think, and that is particularly useful when is applied to the necessity of certainty regarding innate ideas<sup>5</sup>.

On one side, mixed propositions are important because, for instance, common-sense certainty starts with our trust in perceptual information, as the fact that external bodies exist. We would not survive if in earnest we thought “that there are men in the world when we do not see any”. (NE IV.ix.10, 444.) In our everyday judgments we habitually assign degrees of certainty to our anticipations and predictions of the future, our “observations of regularities amongst sensible things themselves, even when the reasons are not apparent”. (Idem) On the other side, the mixed propositions also imply propositions of reason, that is, truths of reason, which are related to mathematics and how they work. Mathematics is the model even when innate ideas do not have a mathematical core because it is the best discipline to look for systematizing and ordering them by doing them more intelligible. It seems then that the only way to have certainty about innate ideas is to convert them into mixed propositions, that is, on one hand keeping its condition of inward dispositions but, on the other hand, to reduce them to mathematical principles or propositions which give them rigor and accuracy by its logical form. Therefore, the so-called “mixed propositions”, which combine *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements, are the clue to achieve certainty. Otherwise, according to Leibniz, “every proof that carries only moral certainty [may eventually] be destroyed by stronger contrary proofs”. (PPL, 1969, 260. See also A I 2, 225)

The aforementioned approach is particularly relevant if we take into account that humans draw links and discover relations between things they regularly observe. When they judge an occurrence to be a necessary consequence of preceding events this is not something they observe as part of the data (NE IV.ix.14, 446), but they do so because they understood the prevailing law. In the same way, to get certainty of innate ideas we must consider both mixed propositions and mathematics as a model, since by discovering and reducing empirically observed principles, and even those innate, to some mathematical and/or logical principle we can establish relations and thereby to have truly certainty, without any room for doubt, about those innate ideas.

Finally, another reason to support the importance of mathematics to get certainty regarding innate ideas is paradoxically Locke himself, who believed in mathematical certainty but for reasons other than those of Leibniz. For the author of the *Essay* as well as for Leibniz there is undoubtedly certainty in mathematics; however for him, and here differs from Leibniz, that certainty is not because mathematics is established on a divine origin but because its ideas are clear and distinct by virtue of the fact they are their own archetypes, for they do not try to be a copy of any concrete thing or existence.

## V. Conclusions

Leibniz uses the concept of certainty “to span the full range of knowledge from divine omniscience to reliable common-sense knowledge, and that we are right in thinking that its meaning adapts and stretches from strictly modal to the merely provisional”. (Weckend, 2017, 205) If this approach is correct then we may never reach a certainty where there is no doubt

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<sup>5</sup> This line also sheds light to this respect: “the linking of phenomena which warrants the truths of fact [...] is itself verified by means of truths of reason, just as optical appearances are explained by geometry”. (NE IV.ii.14, 375)

whatsoever; however, concludes Weckend again, “there usually is a degree of certainty available in most fields of inquiry”. (2017, 222) Taking into account these words and considering that Leibniz wanted to overcome superstition and skepticism, I reckon that for epistemological scaffolding to be solid enough to give plain certainty (a demonstrative one) of the truth of innate ideas, it is necessary a mix of *a priori* and *a posteriori* propositions with the aim of reducing explanations, even inward intuitions, to mathematical and logical propositions. This is probably the only way to avoid the permanent provisional accounts of knowledge and certainty of innate ideas.

In any event, even if my intuition is correct we need to keep working in order to set clearly the different degrees of certainty in Leibniz, and particularly with regards to crucial notions like that of innate ideas.

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Leibniz mantuvo siempre una actitud dialógica y abierta en su oficio como filósofo, jurista, científico, matemático, político e historiador, y propulsó, además, la creación de academias científicas que ponían las condiciones de posibilidad para extender ese diálogo a través del espacio y del tiempo.

En los tiempos de la posverdad, de crisis de la razón moderna, de ideologías sordas, del abrumador ruido de las redes sociales, se vuelve imperante fortalecer el valor de la razón y su carácter dialógico. Nunca descarta a ningún autor de modo taxativo y en bloque, sino que siempre está dispuesto a buscar y encontrar el grano entre la paja. Con ello se inserta en una tradición de pensamiento que alcanza hasta nuestros días, y en la que se pone el diálogo al servicio de la razón y la razón al servicio del diálogo. Ambos nos permiten aproximarnos a la amplia diversidad de temáticas que abarca su obra filosófica y científica.

A través de los trabajos aquí reunidos se busca no sólo abordar y profundizar en diversos aspectos de su obra filosófica y científica, sino también ofrecer los medios para entablar un diálogo franco con el pensamiento de Leibniz, que es siempre complejo y laberíntico. Con esto último en mente, se han dispuesto los textos en cuatro secciones temáticas: *Diálogo y controversias*; *Interpretando a Leibniz: ontología y epistemología*; *Recepción del pensamiento de Leibniz*; y *Leibniz y la praxis filosófica*. La totalidad de los trabajos aquí reunidos fueron presentados en el marco del «IV Congreso Iberoamericano Leibniz», organizado durante el verano de 2021 en México por la Red Iberoamericana Leibniz, en colaboración con la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), la Facultad de Estudios Superiores Acatlán de la UNAM, la Universidad Panamericana (UP), la Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP), y el Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM). Se da así un paso más en un esforzado camino de diálogo cuya próxima estación será Buenos Aires en 2024.



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editorial

