

BOOK PROSPECTIVE

ANTONIO CASO'S *LA EXISTENCIA COMO ECONOMÍA, COMO DESINTERÉS Y COMO CARIDAD* (1943)

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We write to announce our work-in-progress: an English translation of the second and final 1943 edition of *La existencia como economía, como desinterés y como caridad* by Antonio Caso (1883-1946) [henceforth, *Existencia*]. In what follows, we explain why it is important to introduce Caso to a wider Anglophone audience, why we chose this text for the first book-length translation, and why we are undertaking this project right now.

1. Why Caso?

Caso holds a preeminent place in the history of Mexican philosophy and culture. His peers, successors, and commentators consistently recognized him as a founder of twentieth-century Mexican philosophy given his definitive rejection of Porfirian positivism, founding role in El ateneo de la juventud, and decades-long institutional influence in post-revolutionary Mexico after creating then twice chairing the Philosophy Department at the National University of Mexico. Speaking on behalf of both the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua at Caso's funeral, José Vasconcelos called him not just "the most eloquent voice of Mexican philosophy" but also the "universal Mexican" by whom "our nationality achieves a distinguished place in contemporary thought" (1946: 307-308, our translation). At a 1947 event in homage to Caso held at the UNAM's Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, just one year before the inaugural meeting of El grupo hiperión, Emilio Uranga urged those present to cultivate a "true scholarly dedication" to Caso's work (220, our translation), and Leopoldo Zea called upon his generation "to consider Antonio Caso [our] teacher" while working "to make Mexican reality an object worthy of philosophical reflection" (108, our translation). Similar quotes could be multiplied from any of the fourteen Mexican and U.S. scholars published in *Homenaje a Antonio Caso* (1947), but we will simply echo Edgar Sheffield Brightman's lamentation that Caso was (and still is) not better known in the Anglophone world:

If his books were translated into English, or if our intellectuals had devoted more time to read them, much would have been gained for inter-cultural understanding. [...] The language barrier and the culture barrier, which are

still unreasonably high and wide, have prevented Caso's voice from reaching all the people in the English-speaking world whom it should have reached (188, our translation).

Over 75 years later, the "Philosophy in Mexico" entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy re-affirms Caso's legacy as the "leading figure of Mexican philosophy in the first decades of the 20th century" (Hurtado and Sanchez 2025). In short, Caso's philosophy constitutes essential reading for both experts and beginners in the history of Mexican Philosophy specifically and Latin American Philosophy more generally.

In addition to the widespread philosophical influence of his printed work, Caso was widely referred to quite simply as *el Maestro* [the Teacher]. By redefining philosophical pedagogy after positivism, Caso effectively shaped philosophy as a humanistic, ethical, and culturally reflective practice across Latin America, especially as Mexico emerged as an intellectual center in the first half of the twentieth century. One of Caso's most influential students, Samuel Ramos, has had multiple works translated into English (1962, 2025). And the next generation of Mexican Philosophers—which includes Uranga, Zea, Jorge Portilla, Rosa Krauze, and Rosario Castellanos—worked squarely in the philosophical space that Caso first opened.¹

We also believe that Caso's philosophical work is deeply relevant today. His diagnosis and critique of the existential issues that plagued Mexican life and culture in the first half of the twentieth century are surprisingly applicable to life in the contemporary USA and worldwide. Caso worried that the people of his time were increasingly prone to reducing existence to mere economy. That is, they viewed existence in general through the prism of the struggle for survival, material wealth, and dominance. According to such an interpretation, one has a duty to look out for themselves and their own group's survival above all else, e.g., Donald Trump's slogan of "America First!" In response to this reductionistic worldview, Caso observes that artistic productions and acts of charity are also facts, aspects of human existence that cannot be reduced to self-interested economy. While he does not go so far as to say that self-interest or economic considerations should be banished, he urges us to remember that they amount to just one aspect of human existence. Caso's clarion call to understand this aspect alongside the other aesthetic and ethical dimensions of our human existence is just as important today in the contemporary Anglophone world as it was in early 20th century Mexico.

Beyond the cultural specificity and philosophical universality of his central message, Caso's work has the built-in potential to reverberate beyond the Mexican

¹ For example, consider the third chapter of the *Analysis of Mexican Being*, where Uranga names Caso as the first Mexican philosopher to initiate a wave that rejected positivism (2021 [1952]: 133).

context because he is deeply knowledgeable about and conversant with not just other Mexican and Latin American intellectuals but also a wide variety of European and U.S.-American thinkers. Scholars interested in comparative or cross-cultural approaches to philosophy and its history will thus greatly benefit from engaging with any of Caso's texts.

2. Why the 1943 *Existencia*?

If one were going to read only a single book by Caso, the 1943 edition of *Existencia* is the clear choice. It offers an impressively broad array of original insights across the domains of ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, economics, philosophical psychology, and more. Caso's most basic aim is to reject any worldview that reduces human existence to any one perspective and to achieve a philosophical synthesis of various scientific, aesthetic, ethical, and religious perspectives on existence. The nine chapters are divided into three sections: the first detailing what it means to understand existence as economy, the second detailing what it means to understand existence as disinterest, and the third detailing what it means to understand existence as charity. As one of Caso's final publications, the 1943 *Existencia* contains his most refined and comprehensive treatment of themes first sketched in the 1910s and developed throughout all his subsequent work. To date, his 1916 essay "La existencia como economía y como caridad" is the only complete work translated into English (2017), whereas his *Obras Completas* span 12 volumes (1971-1985). Krauze's comprehensive study, *La filosofía de Antonio Caso* (1985), calls *Existencia* Caso's most personal work and shows how the 1943 edition constitutes the most complete articulation of his mature thought, a true magnum opus.

The 1943 *Existencia* also features Caso's most extensive engagement with contemporary, recent, and historical trends in Kantian philosophy, post-Kantian continental philosophical movements like vitalism, existentialism, and phenomenology, as well as U.S.-American pragmatism. For instance, his first three chapters dedicated to analyzing the reduction of existence to economy broach key ideas from Kant's Critique of Teleological Judgment; surveys of late-19th and early 20th-century philosophies of biology, physics, and mathematics; and critical appraisals of the contemporary neo-vitalist philosophy of Henri Bergson. Along the way, Caso directly engages with philosophers like Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, J.S. Mill, and William James.

The final edition of *Existencia* also adds four new chapters to the 1919 edition and features his most detailed discussion of aesthetics, which is immediately evinced in the renovated title that newly centers *desinterés* as one of the book's major perspectives on existence. Caso's theory is anti-individualist, in that aesthetic values turn us away from conceiving of existence in a merely self-

interested way, and, as such, aesthetic reflection becomes a necessary condition for the possibility of morality. It is this sustained and original treatment of aesthetics that led Samuel Ramos to celebrate his teacher as the founder of aesthetics in Mexico (Ramos 1947). As González (forthcoming) argues, the 1943 *Existencia* is the culmination of an original aesthetic theory that deserves to be more widely studied.

Caso's final new chapter is an essay on faith [*fe*], presented not as a set of beliefs so much as an existential orientation toward metaphysical transcendence: "To believe in God is not the work of pure reason but rather action joined with understanding and will" (1943: 195, translation ours). Just as Caso's penultimate chapter on hope [*esperanza*] introduces temporality and futurity as essential dimensions of human existence, faith names the fundamental trust in meaning that makes loving or charitable acts possible and intelligible.

3. Why Now?

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned reasons to study Caso beginning with the final edition of his most significant work, one might still wonder, why now? Our translation responds to the general moral and philosophical imperative to combat the "insularity of Anglophone philosophy" (Schwitzgebel et al, 2018). We see ourselves as part of a larger project to rewrite (and right) history and philosophy by addressing linguistic injustice (dominance of English over Spanish) and an asymmetry of influence (English to Spanish translations vastly outnumber Spanish to English translations), ultimately aiming to reduce Anglophone ignorance about Latin American Philosophy generally, Mexican philosophy more specifically, and Caso most specifically. We also see the surge of recent scholarship on the history of Mexican Philosophy in the Anglophone world as the fifth of a series of increasingly specific and overlapping historical and conceptual waves:

- 1) Latin American Philosophy exists in the eyes of Anglophone philosophy through anthologies, introductory textbooks, encyclopedia entries, etc. For example, Sánchez Reulet 1954, Gracia 1986, Gracia and Vargas 2018, and Sanchez 2019.
- 2) Mexican Philosophy exists in the eyes of Anglophone philosophy,² as a place with a history of philosophical production from the Aztecs prior the arrival of Europeans (De la Cueva 1966) to contemporary Mexican Americans (Sánchez and

² Carlos Sánchez (2023) adopts Guillermo Hurtado's distinction (2021) between *filosofía mexicana* (work of and about Mexican philosophy in Mexico, usually in Spanish) and "Mexican philosophy" (work of and about Mexican philosophy done by philosophers outside of Mexico, usually in English). We earmark this distinction as an occasion to recognize the contributions that scholars writing in Spanish have made to these five waves, although our focus is on Mexican Philosophy in the Anglophone world.

Sanchez 2017). Like other historically-and geographically situated philosophies, Mexican Philosophy can be used to understand our world today (Sánchez 2023).

3) Specific Mexican philosophical traditions exist in the eyes of Anglophone philosophy, e.g., not just 'Mexican Philosophy' as though all Mexican philosophy is the same but "Mexican Existentialism" (Sánchez 2025).

4) Specific Mexican philosophers exist in the eyes of Anglophone philosophy. For example, Antonio Caso (Haddox 1971) or Jorge Portilla (Sánchez and Gallegos 2020).

5) Significant works by specific Mexican philosophers are made available in unabridged English translations (e.g., Ramos 2025 [1940], Uranga 2021 [1952], and Sánchez's 2012 translation of Portilla 1966).³

Our translation of Caso's *Existencia* promises to keep this last wave rolling. We wager that translating the most important text written by the philosopher who paved the way for Mexican existentialism—the philosopher who literally wrote the book on *Existencia*—is an important step in the effort to further understand, contextualize, and popularize the history of Mexican existentialism specifically, Mexican philosophy more generally, and Latin American philosophy more broadly.

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³ A number of significant English translations from the middle of the 20th century started this wave before it mostly died out in the 1980s: Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1961), O'Gorman's *The Invention of America* (1961), Ramos's *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (1962), Leon-Portilla's *Aztec Thought and Culture* (1963), Sierra's *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People* (1966), and Zea's *Positivism in Mexico* (1974).

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