Latin American Philosophy as Ethnic Philosophy: Response to Susana Nuccetelli
by Jorge J.E. Gracia

English Abstract

This article responds to Susana Nuccetelli’s criticisms of my proposal to conceive Latin American philosophy as an ethnic philosophy. Her specific criticisms are three: First, my view fails to resolve the controversial cases that it is intended to resolve; second, it fails to offer a specific criterion for determining what counts as Latin American philosophy; and third, I fail to apply the general criterion of inclusion that I offer to the particular case of the Popol Vuh, leaving its status unresolved, when in fact this work satisfies it. I answer the first criticism by pointing out that my view helps to clarify the issues that affect the controversial cases by showing how different conceptions of philosophy affect the answers that are given to the question. In answer to the second criticism I note that Nuccetelli has misunderstood a general condition of ethnic philosophy I propose by taking it as a sufficient condition rather than – as I clearly propose – a necessary condition. In answer to the third, I show that, contrary to what Nuccetelli holds, neither a universalist nor an ethnic conception of Latin American philosophy establishes clearly whether the Popol Vuh is part of Latin American philosophy because, apart from the conception of philosophy used, other factors play roles in this matter. Finally, I draw three general lessons that can be learned about Latin American philosophy and its historiography from the exchange between Nuccetelli and me. The first is that the notion of ethnic philosophy can help us understand why certain works are included or excluded from the canon of different philosophies. The second is the need to take into account the changing nature of cultural products such as philosophy; it is a mistake to try to think of them as permanent, obeying laws sub speciei aeternitatis. The third is that, in the discussion of Latin American philosophy, it is helpful to keep questions of history separate from questions of historiography; for the inquiries are different and so are their objects, their methodologies, and the roles of inquirers.

Resumen en español

Este artículo responde a las críticas fechas por Susana Nuccetelli a mi propuesta de concebir filosofía latinoamericana como una filosofía étnica. Sus críticas específicas son tres: en primer lugar, mi concepción no consigue resolver los casos controversos que pretende resolver; en segundo lugar, no ofrecen un criterio especifico para determinar el que se entiende por filosofía latinoamericana, y, en tercer lugar, no aplico el criterio general de inclusión que ofereço ao caso particular del Popol Vuh, deixando sem resolver sua situação, quando, na realidade, esta obra o satisfaz. Respondo à primeira crítica indicando que minha ideia ajuda a esclarecer as questões que afetam os casos controversos mostrando a diferentes concepções da filosofia afetam as respostas que são dadas à questão. Em resposta à segunda crítica, aponto que Nuccetelli se equivocou quanto a uma condição geral da filosofia étnica, que propus, ao considerá-la como condição suficiente em vez de – conforme claramente proponho – necessária. Em resposta à terceira crítica, mostro que,
contrário ao que Nuccetelli sustenta, nem uma concepção universalista, nem uma ética, da filosofia latino-americana, estabelece claramente se o Popol Vuh faz parte da filosofia latino-americana, porquanto outros fatores estão envolvidos nessa questão, à parte a concepção de filosofia usada. Por fim, desse intercâmbio com Nuccetelli, tiro três lições gerais que podem ser aprendidas acerca da filosofia da América Latina e sua historiografia. A primeira é que a noção de filosofia étnica pode nos ajudar a entender por que certas obras são incluídas ou excluídas do cânon das diferentes filosofias. A segunda é a necessidade de considerar a natureza mutável dos produtos culturais como a filosofia; é um equívoco tentar concebê-los como permanentes, submetidos a leis sub speciei aeternitatis. A terceira é que, na discussão da filosofia Latino Americana, é útil separar as questões de história das questões de historiografia, pois as investigações são diferentes, assim como também seus objetos, suas metodologias e as funções dos investigadores.

Resumo em português
Este artigo responde às críticas feitas por Susana Nuccetelli à minha proposta de conceber a filosofia latino-americana como uma filosofia étnica. Suas críticas específicas são três: em primeiro lugar, minha concepção não consegue resolver os casos controversos que pretende resolver; em segundo lugar, não oferecem um critério específico para determinar o que se entende por filosofia latino-americana; e, em terceiro lugar, não aplico o critério geral de inclusão que ofereço ao caso particular do Popol Vuh, deixando sem resolver sua situação, quando, na realidade, esta obra o satisfaz. Respondo à primeira crítica indicando que minha ideia ajuda a esclarecer as questões que afetam os casos controversos mostrando como diferentes concepções da filosofia afetam as respostas que são dadas à questão. Em resposta à segunda crítica, aponto que Nuccetelli se equivocou quanto a uma condição geral da filosofia étnica, que propus, ao considerá-la como condição suficiente em vez de – conforme claramente proponho – necessária. Em resposta à terceira crítica, mostro que, contrário ao que Nuccetelli sustenta, nem uma concepção universalista, nem uma ética, da filosofia latino-americana, estabelece claramente se o Popol Vuh faz parte da filosofia latino-americana, porquanto outros fatores estão envolvidos nessa questão, à parte a concepção de filosofia usada. Por fim, desse intercâmbio com Nuccetelli, tiro três lições gerais que podem ser aprendidas acerca da filosofia da América Latina e sua historiografia. A primeira é que a noção de filosofia étnica pode nos ajudar a entender por que certas obras são incluídas ou excluídas do cânon das diferentes filosofias. A segunda é a necessidade de considerar a natureza mutável dos produtos culturais como a filosofia; é um equívoco tentar concebê-los como permanentes, submetidos a leis sub speciei aeternitatis. A terceira é que, na discussão da filosofia Latino Americana, é útil separar as questões de história das questões de historiografia, pois as investigações são diferentes, assim como também seus objetos, suas metodologias e as funções dos investigadores.
As I expected upon learning that Susana Nuccetelli had written a critical analysis of the position I advocate concerning Latin American philosophy in *Latinos in America* (2008), she has produced a fine piece of philosophical analysis that is both enlightening and provocative. The piece carefully characterizes my position and provides a challenging criticism of my view.¹ It is a fruitful and enjoyable reading, and I am grateful to her for taking the time to produce it.

Let me add one important clarification before I begin. Nuccetelli’s discussion centers on “Latin American philosophy,” whereas the discussion in my book is generally about “Latino philosophy.” I use the first expression to refer to philosophy from Latin America, but I use the second to refer to philosophy from both Latin America and the philosophy developed by Latinos who reside in the United States. The difference is important in various ways that I explain in *Latinos in America*, but it is not essential to the present discussion of Nuccetelli’s objections to my view. For the sake of simplicity and economy I ignore the distinction here, although I briefly return to it at the end.

As Nuccetelli indicates, the main thesis of the view I propose is that there are distinct advantages in conceiving Latin American philosophy as a kind of ethnic philosophy. Among these advantages is that many of the works whose inclusion in Latin American philosophy is controversial and which are often excluded from its canon may find a place in it.² Nuccetelli’s general concern is with the question: “Which works are to be counted as belonging to the discipline [i.e., Latin American philosophy]?” Her general criticism of my position is that my proposal to consider Latin American philosophy as ethnic “falls short” of accommodating “certain nonstandard works” because “in the end it is unclear which works are to be included or excluded by it, and how we are to decide this.”

Nuccetelli’s general criticism is cashed out in terms of three specific criticisms. First, my view fails to resolve the controversial cases that it is intended to resolve. Second, it fails to offer a specific criterion for determining what counts as Latin American philosophy. And third, I fail to apply the general criterion of inclusion that I offer to the particular case of the *Popol Vuh*, leaving its status unresolved, whereas in fact this work satisfies that criterion.

I begin my response by taking each of the three specific criticisms raised by Nuccetelli and offering my rebuttals. I then address the case of the *Popol Vuh*, and show how the conception of philosophy one adopts, together with the consideration of appropriate evidence, may yield an answer to the question of its place in relation to Latin American philosophy. Finally, I draw some general lessons that can be learned about the nature of Latin American philosophy and its historiography from my exchange with Nuccetelli. This last point ensures that the discussion is not taken just as a defense of my position; my purpose here is not merely apologetic, but, most importantly, the advancement of the topic.
Failure to Resolve the Cases for Which My Theory Is Intended

The first of Nuccetelli’s criticisms is that my view does not resolve the cases that it is intended to resolve. This is illustrated with the *Popol Vuh*, the Maya narrative of creation, because in the end I do not make a determination on whether or not it should be counted as part of Latin American philosophy. However, it is precisely this sort of case that to some extent prompted me to develop my theory.

My response to this objection is that my aim in developing the theory was not to establish the canon of Latin American philosophy, or determine whether particular works are to be included in or excluded from it. Rather, my aim was first, and more directly, to propose a conception of Latin American philosophy that would facilitate the discussion and investigation of certain works whose status is controversial; and second, indirectly, my aim was to develop a rationale for the disagreement concerning the status of various works, pointing to ways in which one can explain why they are regarded as part of the canon by some historians, not part of the canon by others, and works with an unclear status by still others. Hence I do not consider the fact that I make no claim concerning the status of the *Popol Vuh* and similar works an effective objection to my view, particularly when I explicitly give the reason why I do not.

Indeed, Nuccetelli misinterprets my aim if she thinks that my exclusive or even primary intention in offering the view of Latin American philosophy as ethnic was to resolve disputed cases or come up with a list of works that should comprise the canon of Latin American philosophy. That would be a proper task for a historian of Latin American philosophy, not for someone concerned with the theoretical issues involved in historiography as I was, a point I make explicitly. There is an important difference between the two tasks. The first involves composing a history of Latin American philosophy and therefore entails establishing which works are part of its canon and which are not. This would include, for example, determining whether to include the *Popol Vuh*. This task is fundamentally historical. The second task is to raise and resolve the theoretical difficulties that arise when one considers the task of composing a history of Latin American philosophy. One of these is precisely to develop an understanding of Latin American philosophy. This task does not belong to history, but is rather the province of historiography when this is understood as a discipline concerned with the theoretical analysis of the problems posed by the composition of history.

Failure to Offer a Specific Criterion of Inclusion

This leads me to Nuccetelli’s second criticism of my view, namely that I do not offer a specific criterion of inclusion in Latin American philosophy; according to her this is something “I owe.” Indeed, she adds that the general criterion of inclusion I offer is too broad insofar as it counts as Latin American philosophy any work produced by the Latino ethnos, opening the doors to works that are not philosophy.

My answer to the first part of Nuccetelli’s second criticism is that if what I have
just stated in the previous section is taken seriously, namely that my task was not to compose a history of Latin American philosophy or determine its canon, then it should not be surprising that I offer no specific criterion of inclusion in it. That is something for historians themselves to specify, although I could point out the kinds of issues involved in trying to do this. And this is precisely what I do. I point out that one should avoid trying to come up with a set of properties that fits all Latin American philosophy and can be used as a criterion of inclusion, as many historians have attempted and failed.

The consideration of this failure should lead to a better grasp of what is necessary for writing a history of Latin American philosophy. In my view, the key to doing so is an understanding of Latin American philosophy ethnically. As an ethnic product, Latin American philosophy is, like ethne, a changing reality, dependent on context and history. This is as far as the philosophical task of the theoretical historiographer goes. To go beyond this would involve engaging in a different enterprise, the sort of thing that historians, whether of philosophy, culture, or society, do. It is for them to determine what counts as Latin American philosophy if it is understood, as I propose, in ethnic terms. This explains my reluctance to offer specific criteria of inclusion, for qua historiographer, rather than qua historian, it is none of my business to offer such criteria. Indeed, I state explicitly that I do not find this task philosophically interesting, and the reason is that the task is not, properly speaking, philosophical, but rather historical.

My answer to the second part of Nuccetelli’s second criticism, that the general criterion of inclusion I offer is too broad insofar as it counts as part of Latin American philosophy any work produced by the Latino ethos, is based on a misunderstanding of my claim. I do not hold that a work belongs to an ethnic philosophy just because the work is the product of the ethos. Rather, I hold that it does because it is judged to satisfy certain criteria of belonging to the philosophy of the ethos. Indeed, nowhere in the book do I say anything that would suggest the first claim.

Nuccetelli’s mistake is that she believes that I regard "being a work of an ethos" as a sufficient condition of the work belonging to the philosophy of the ethos. Thus she argues that if the Popol Vuh is a work of the Latino ethos, it should be part of the philosophy of the Latino ethos. But this is not what I say. I say that “an ethnic philosophy is the philosophy of an ethos,” not that any work belonging to an ethos also belongs to its philosophy (p. 139). The condition I stipulate is necessary but not sufficient, which means that additional conditions are in order.

In some cases, the “sufficient” criteria for belonging to the philosophy of an ethos are determined internally by the ethos, in some they are determined externally by people outside the ethos, and in still other cases they are determined both internally and externally. In my view the matter depends on how the ethos has been constituted by history. Indeed, the conditions can vary widely not just from ethos to ethos, but even throughout the history of the same ethos. This does not differ from what applies to the identity conditions of ethne. For some ethne a genetic link is sufficient for belonging to the ethos, but for others a cultural (say, religion) or a geographical tie is
sufficient. The mechanisms of such determination may depend on one or more communities as well as historical and contextual circumstances at play. I add more on this below, but for the moment what I have stated should suffice to indicate why Nuccetelli’s criticism against the lack of providing a specific criterion of inclusion in Latin American philosophy fails.

**Failure to Apply the General Criterion I Offer to the Popol Vuh**

This takes me to the third criticism voiced by Nuccetelli: although I offer a general criterion of inclusion in Latin American philosophy I fail to apply it to the case of the *Popol Vuh*, which nicely satisfies it. Nuccetelli questions why I do not count this work as part of Latin American philosophy when it is a work produced by the Maya, who are part of the Latino ethnos. If it is a work produced by the Latino ethnos, she argues, it should, according to the general criterion I have provided, count as part of Latin American philosophy when this philosophy is understood as an ethnic philosophy.

It should be clear why I do not apply the general criterion to the *Popol Vuh* after my discussion above. First, as a historiographer, it is none of my business to establish whether this work belongs to Latin American philosophy or not, although as a historian of Latin American philosophy I may have views on it based on the conception of philosophy I may want to use – which explains why I have excluded it in some places because I was working with an externally determined universalist conception of philosophy. Second, the general criterion to which Nuccetelli refers is not in fact a criterion I endorse, as noted in the previous section: that the *Popol Vuh* is a work produced by the Latino ethnos does not entail that it is part of Latin American philosophy. Whether it is or not depends on other factors, not just on the fact that it was produced by this ethnos.

But more than this can be said against Nuccetelli’s criticism. If we adopt the view of Latin American philosophy as ethnic, then the same general characteristics that apply to ethne should apply to Latin American philosophy because the *Popol Vuh* is an ethnic product. For our purposes, most important among these characteristics is that what is considered ethnic identity changes with times and circumstances, as do what are considered to be ethnic products. As I have argued elsewhere at greater length, criteria of inclusion in ethne are not the same for all ethne, and even for the same ethnos throughout its history. Whoever is considered Latino today may not be considered Latino some time in the future, or may not have been considered Latino at some time in the past. Just as the view of who qualifies as a member of an ethnos changes, so do views on what counts as part of particular ethnic identities and ethnic products. It thus makes no sense to try to establish criteria *sub specie aeternitatis* for ethnic identity and ethnic products, including ethnic philosophy. Just as the criteria for being Latino changes depending on history and context, so the criteria for Latin American philosophy, when this is understood in ethnic terms, changes depending on history and context.

In the case of Latin American philosophy, then, we should not expect to have a
canon that will remain the same forever. Canons are cultural constructs and as such are flexible and mutable. The criteria of particular ethnic philosophies, Latin American or otherwise, are determined historically and contextually and often include both internal and external factors. Social and cultural historians develop theories about those criteria and the reasons why particular societies may develop them, among other things; they do not develop the criteria themselves. Philosophers develop theories about the nature of philosophy and its kinds rather than criteria of particular ethnic philosophies.

**The Case of the *Popol Vuh***

But what do we make of the *Popol Vuh*? The question, as noted above, is not one that was relevant to the task I set out for myself in *Latinos in America*, but it is nonetheless an interesting and legitimate question if one is concerned with whether to include this work in a discussion of Latin American philosophy in the classroom or in a historical study. Since Nuccetelli wishes me to answer it, let me put on the hat of historian of Latin American philosophy and take up this question here. In my view, and contrary to what Nuccetelli seems to think, the answer is not obvious even if one adopts a conception of Latin American philosophy as ethnic, although this view of Latin American philosophy helps us to better understand the issues involved in finding an answer.

Before an acceptable answer to this question can be offered we must be clear concerning the kind of conception of philosophy we are using, since the answer to the question may vary depending on this. It is one thing to ask whether the *Popol Vuh* is part of Latin American philosophy when this philosophy is conceived in universalistic terms, and another to ask this question when this philosophy is conceived as an ethnic philosophy, although Nuccetelli seems to think that the answer in both cases is affirmative.

In the first case, Nuccetelli argues in its favor because the *Popol Vuh* could be taken, as is the work of the pre-Socratics, as a kind of protophilosophy. Just as the work of Thales and Parmenides, for example, led to the well-developed philosophy of Socrates and other Greek philosophers and is therefore considered part of Greek philosophy, the *Popol Vuh* can be taken as a protophilosophy to the well-developed philosophy of Bartolomé de Las Casas and those who followed him, and therefore should be considered part of Latin American philosophy. Contrary to what Nuccetelli believes, however, the question of whether the *Popol Vuh* is a kind of protophilosophy to Latin American philosophy, if one holds a universalistic conception of philosophy, is not so clear, and there can be justifiable disagreement regarding this issue. For example, one could argue that the work of the pre-Socratics constitutes a major break from the religious and mythical works that preceded them, and in this sense it is closer to later Greek philosophy than to religion. The pre-Socratics were not primarily concerned with the “creation” of the universe, nor did they provide theories about the origin of the universe in terms of the wills of gods. Their inquiry was fundamentally intended to explain why things happen as they do, and their answers were in terms of natural
causes, elements, and the principles of intelligibility that explain the causes, such as attraction, atoms, and the logos. This is quite different from questions concerning the creation of the world as explored in religious cosmologies included in mythical works such as the Popol Vuh, and the answers given that involve divine and supernatural beings. For these reasons alone one could very well conclude that the Popol Vuh, in contrast with the work of the pre-Socratics, cannot be considered protophilosophical. Obviously the point is arguable, but that is not relevant for my purposes or Nuccetelli’s argument. What is relevant to both is that the case for considering this work as protophilosophical is not as clear or easy to make as Nuccetelli claims when we are working with a universalistic conception of philosophy.

Let us now look at the situation in which we adopt the view of Latin American philosophy as ethnic. Is it clear that in this case, as Nuccetelli argues, the Popol Vuh should be considered part of the Latin American philosophical canon? One of the reasons why Nuccetelli is mistaken in this regard is that, contrary to her opinion, one could legitimately question the degree to which the Maya are part of the Latino ethnos. Not that I want to do so – in fact, I think that it makes sense to consider it so, but not everyone would agree. For example, for those who view mestizos as properly constituting the Latino ethnos, the pre-Colombian, uncontaminated, and unmixed Maya should be considered a different ethnos. Indeed, many authors pit these two groups of people against each other rather than viewing the Latino ethnos as encompassing the Maya ethnos. Moreover, the evidence that Nuccetelli provides for counting the Maya as part of the Latino ethnos (i.e., the popularity of some Maya, such as Rigoberta Menchú, among Latin Americans) is a nonstarter for too many reasons to enumerate here. In short, if the skeptics of the Maya Latinity are right, then it is not at all the case that the Popol Vuh can be counted as a product of the Latino ethnos and therefore part of Latin American philosophy.

I already mentioned above the other reason why Nuccetelli is mistaken: in order to count the Popol Vuh as part of Latin American philosophy, this work must be considered to be part of Latin American philosophy by those who determine such a status, whether internally, externally, or both. This cannot be taken for granted and requires an investigation into the matter, an investigation that falls under the province of historians rather than of philosophers.

A comparison of the status of the Popol Vuh and some of the works that narrate the Hindu myths of creation illustrates how the concept of ethnic philosophy is useful in understanding the status that these works enjoy. On the one hand, there is wide disagreement among historians of Latin American philosophy on whether the Popol Vuh should be considered part of Latin American philosophy, whereas many of the Hindu narratives are widely accepted by both Indian and Western historians of philosophy as part of Indian philosophy. Something similar occurs with some of the works of Chinese philosophy – they are considered philosophy by both Chinese and Western historians of philosophy. So why the discrepancy? Because the judgment is based on criteria determined largely by the ethne that produced those works. Indian and Chinese historians of philosophy include these works in the canons of the philosophies they
study, even though these works are very different from anything produced in the West and what is taken to be part of Western philosophy by Western historians of philosophy.

The situation of the *Popol Vuh* in Latin America is different because a majority of historians of Latin American philosophy consider themselves part of the Western philosophical tradition and use the criteria prevalent in this tradition to judge inclusion in the Western philosophy canon. If instead of adopting Western criteria they tried to use criteria developed by Latin American thinkers themselves that reflect the perspective of the ethnos, then they might be more amenable to the inclusion of the *Popol Vuh* among works of Latin American philosophy. Perhaps this will happen in the future, but it is certainly not a widespread phenomenon today. In fact, I am pessimistic that it will happen because of the divided roots of Latin America. It is easy for China and India to develop their own view of what counts as philosophy, independently of the West, and as such remain largely unchallenged in their views. Latin America is closely tied to the West. Indeed, it is precisely the mixed character of Latin America, between the West and pre-Columbian America, that has characterized most members of the Latino ethnos, and thus also of its ethnic products. I do not foresee a future in which this ethnic *mestizaje* will become irrelevant or uncontroversial.⁶

In short, the understanding of Latino philosophy as ethnic opens the door for the consideration of works such as the *Popol Vuh* as part of Latin American philosophy, but it does not ensure their inclusion. This is precisely what I argued in *Latinos in America*.

Morals of this Exchange

In closing I would like to point to some lessons we can learn from my exchange with Nuccetelli. First among these is that the notion of ethnic philosophy can help us understand why certain works are included or excluded from the canon of different philosophies, particularly in the case of Latin American philosophy.

Second, the exchange points to the need to take into account the changing and passing nature of cultural products such as philosophy. It is a mistake to conceive of them as permanent, obeying laws *sub speciei aeternitatis*. Philosophy is a cultural product and should be treated as such, even though the understanding it seeks may transcend particular times and places.

Third, in the discussion of Latin American philosophy it is helpful to keep questions of history separate from questions of historiography. The inquiries, objects, and methodologies are different.

Finally, although not explicitly discussed here, it is beneficial to introduce the notion of a Latino philosophy to which I referred at the beginning, rather than to use the notion of Latin American philosophy, because the broader notion encompasses both the philosophy of Latinos in Latin America and the philosophy of Latinos in the United States and elsewhere. Indeed, if it makes sense to speak of a Latino ethnus, it should
also make sense to speak of a Latino philosophy when philosophy is considered ethnically. Moreover, this should not be taken as undermining the discussion on Hispanics and Hispanic philosophy when the first category includes people from the Iberian peninsula and the second includes the philosophy of Latinos and Iberians, as I have argued elsewhere.  

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References


Notes


6For more on my views on this issue, see Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), chapters 4 and 5.
See particularly Gracia, *Hispanic/Latino Identity*, in addition to *Latinos in America*, chapter 3.