

Gracia on Ethnic Philosophy

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English Abstract

Jorge Gracia has presented a novel account of Latin American philosophy as a kind of ethnic philosophy. I first reconstruct that account and then consider its possible implications for problematic (and therefore interesting) cases such as that of the Maya folk-cosmology narrated in the sacred book *Popol Vuh* -- which Gracia lists among the cases for which inclusion in the philosophical canon is disputed. Can Gracia's account help us to determine whether this pre-Columbian work belongs to Latin American philosophy or not? I argue that it leaves that crucial case undecided.

Resumen en español

En este artículo examino una concepción novedosa de la filosofía latinoamericana propuesta recientemente por Jorge Gracia. De acuerdo con esta propuesta, la filosofía latinoamericana es un tipo de filosofía étnica. Primero reconstruyo esta concepción y luego considero sus implicaciones en los casos más problemáticos, y por ello más interesantes, como el de la cosmología presentada en el libro sagrado de los mayas, el *Popol Vuh* — el que Gracia mismo cita entre los casos más controversiales. Mi ensayo argumenta que la concepción de Gracia no ayuda a determinar claramente si esta obra precolombiana forma parte de la filosofía latinoamericana.

Resumo em português

Neste artigo, examino uma concepção inovadora da filosofia latino-americana proposta recentemente por Jorge Gracia. De acordo com essa proposta, a filosofia latino-americana é um tipo de filosofia étnica. Primeiro, reconstruo essa concepção e, em seguida, considero suas consequências para os casos mais problemáticos, e, por isso, mais interessantes, como é o da cosmologia apresentada no livro sagrado dos Maias, o *Popol Vuh* (citado pelo próprio Gracia entre os casos mais controversos). Meu ensaio argumenta que a concepção de Gracia não ajuda a determinar claramente se essa obra pré-colombiana faz parte da filosofia latino-americana.

I

Jorge Gracia's recent *Latinos in America* offers insightful discussions of philosophical issues involving the rich experiences of Latin Americans and their descendants abroad. Of special interest to readers will be the book's novel proposal for categorizing Latin American philosophy, according to which it should be classified as a form of "ethnic philosophy."^[1] This way of understanding Latin American philosophy

might resolve a number of questions concerning the discipline's name and boundaries that have been at the center of current discussions. But how does the proposal square with the scope of Latin American philosophy, that is, with the question of which works are to count as belonging to the discipline? Whose works should we include?

Clearly, the correct answer should be conservative enough to count as Latin American philosophy the work of current mainstream professional philosophers such as Gracia himself and Guillermo Hurtado, both of whom have devoted a significant part of their work to examining Latin American philosophy. But it should also have something to say about the work of many "borderline" thinkers, whose inclusion in the discipline is sometimes questioned. These include works that, though not strictly philosophical in the technical sense, do plainly have philosophical import: e.g., the work of pre-Columbian thinkers, some literary figures such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and José Martí, and certain nineteenth-century leaders of the Independence and National Reorganization that followed, such as Simón Bolívar and Juan Bautista Alberdi – all of which show originality and wisdom in their treatment of philosophical ideas and arguments arising in a Latin American context.

By Gracia's own lights, one advantage of construing Latin American philosophy as a type of ethnic philosophy (hereafter, "ethnic Latin American philosophy") is that this conception allows the inclusion of many valuable intellectual works by Latinos that would not be counted as philosophical if assessed by the standards prevalent in either the philosophies of other ethnic groups or in the core areas of philosophy as traditionally construed. If ethnic Latin American philosophy could accommodate certain non-standard works -- say, those of Bartolomé de las Casas and Sor Juana -- together with the mainstream analytic products of Héctor-Neri Castañeda and Ernesto Sosa, that would count very much in its favor. But here I shall argue that Gracia's conception falls short of delivering this result since in the end it is unclear which works it will include or exclude, and how we are to decide this in any case.

One problematic (and therefore interesting) case is that of the Maya folk-cosmology narrated in the sacred book *Popol Vuh*. Gracia rightly lists this work among the disputed cases. Even so, *Popol Vuh* may be read as providing evidence of cognitive diversity of a sort relevant to philosophy in a number of ways (see, for example, Nuccetelli 2002); so it could be treated as a test case for Gracia's view. It is, I think, an objection to that view that it leaves this crucial case undecided. (Although I suspect that it leaves other borderline cases undecided as well, I'll not attempt to show that here.)

II

Assessing Gracia's ethnic Latin American philosophy requires some comparative overview of major, rival views on an unresolved question: what, if anything, is Latin American philosophy? This question is ambiguous, as can be seen by considering the parallel cases of 'Is there French philosophy?' or 'Is there a Latin American

Thomism?’[2] for which answers can vary according to what is meant by ‘French philosophy’ and ‘Latin American Thomism.’ Answers to the question about Latin American philosophy constitute a wide spectrum, with strong universalism (SU) and strong distinctivism (SD) at its opposite extremes, the central theses of which may be outlined as follows:

SU All of philosophy’s theories, methods, and topics are strictly universal;

SD None of philosophy’s theories, methods, and topics are strictly universal.

Since SU and SD are contraries, they are therefore incompatible (although they cannot both be true at once, they can, of course, both be false). As it happens, sympathy for one or the other of these extreme views is not at all uncommon in contemporary Latin American philosophy. For a recent defense of a thesis that comes close to SU, we need look no further than Greg Gilson’s interview of Mario Bunge for this Newsletter. Pressed on whether there is a distinctive Latin American philosophy, Bunge denies it on what appear to be strong universalist grounds.[3] At the other extreme, a paradigm representative of a doctrine along the lines of SD can be found in the work of Leopoldo Zea (e.g., 1948, 1989). Statements such as the following generalize to all philosophical theories:

The abstract issues [of philosophy] will have to be seen from the Latin American man’s own circumstance. Each man will see in such issues what is closest to his own circumstance. He will look at these issues from the standpoint of his own interests, and those interests will be determined by his way of life, his abilities and inabilities, in a word, by his own circumstance. In the case of Latin America, his contribution to the philosophy of such issues will be permeated by the Latin American circumstance. Hence, when we [Latin Americans] address abstract issues, we shall formulate them as issues of our own. Even though being, God, etc., are issues appropriate for every man, the solution to them will be given from a Latin American standpoint. (Zea 1948, 226)

In proposing the category of ethnic philosophy without explicitly holding that all philosophy is ethnic, Gracia appears to reject equally both SU and SD. His views clearly represent a more moderate “middle-way” somewhere between those extremes. Two possible candidates for such a view are weak universalism (WU) and weak distinctivism (WD):

WU Some theories, methods, and topics in philosophy are universal;

WD Some theories, methods, and topics in philosophy are not universal.

Unlike SU and SD, these have a chance of both being true at once. Clearly, these middle-way theses are incompatible with either SU or SD. WD would be upheld by anyone who thinks that some philosophical theories, methods, and topics are characteristic products of certain ethnic or cultural groups. It is in fact compatible with

the universality of other theories, methods, and topics— i.e., it is compatible with WU. Thus the middle-way position allows us to say that a distinctively Latin American philosophy exists, while insisting that other philosophical disciplines may be universal.

If I understand the view offered by Gracia in *Latinos in America*, it exemplifies one such middle-way combination of WU and WD: that is, it allows for both a characteristically Latin American philosophy, which he conceives as a type of ethnic philosophy, and universal disciplines such as ethics, metaphysics, and so on. If this is correct, then Gracia is committed equally to disagreeing with the extreme views of Bunge and Zea on the question at hand, and to holding instead that Latin American philosophy is an instance of a category of distinctive ethnic philosophy. In fact, it would be odd (and probably self-defeating) for Gracia to endorse either strong universalism or strong distinctivism since he would thereby be undermining the legitimacy of his own work, which is anchored in both the universal problems of philosophy (such as those of metaphysics) and the characteristic problems of Latin American philosophy (such the controversy over whether such a philosophy exists at all). But since any middle-way position postulating the existence of a distinctive type of philosophy must produce a plausible account of the scope of that discipline, we need to look closely at what Gracia has to say on this subject.

III

Gracia's ethnic Latin American philosophy, then, is a middle-way position that has the advantage of committing to neither denying the existence of a distinctive Latin American philosophy nor taking it to consist merely of philosophy in Latin America. Furthermore, in contrast to both strong universalists and strong distinctivists, Gracia might be able to accommodate the celebrated works of many Latin American nonphilosophers who have produced philosophically interesting doctrines.[4] But, as noted above, he would need to provide a plausible account of who is to be included and why. This would require an individuation criterion that explains what makes a theory, method, or topic part of ethnic Latin American philosophy. Let's consider, then, the case of Maya folk-cosmology in the *Popol Vuh* to show that Gracia owes us such a criterion. This narrative, which purports to describe the origins of both the universe and the Maya-Quiché people, unfolds in ways that seem utterly alien to what we now recognize as a philosophical theory. It is, however, analogous in important respects to the folk-cosmologies of nearly all pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, who are standardly credited with raising the very questions that triggered the development of Western philosophy. Thus the Maya folk-cosmology seems to qualify as Latin American protophilosophy -- a claim that can be held consistently with the view that more contemporary philosophical and scientific methods are needed now to properly discuss the philosophical issues raised by *Popol Vuh*.

In *Latinos in America* Gracia considers the question of whether that work is eligible for inclusion in Latin American philosophy, but demurs: [5] "Is the *Popol Vuh* to be included in Latin American philosophy? The issue now shifts to whether pre-

Columbians can be considered part of the Latino ethnos and why....Still, you probably want me to tell you what I think about the *Popol Vuh*: Does it belong or not to Latin American philosophy? I do not want to answer the question, because I do not find it philosophically interesting” (2008, 142). The passage does provide a criterion, albeit a sketchy and conditional one, for inclusion of *Popol Vuh* in Latin American philosophy: namely, it should be included if and only if the Maya are part of the Latino ethnos (here “ethnic group”). But this cuts both ways. If it turns out that there are good reasons for counting the Maya as part of the Latino ethnos, then it would follow apodictically that *Popol Vuh* should be considered as belonging to Latin American philosophy. Now I would say that there are clearly good reasons for so counting them, so it’s puzzling why Gracia withholds judgment on the issue. The argument is clear:

1. Given Gracia’s individuation criterion, *Popol Vuh* is Latin American philosophy if and only if the Maya are part of the Latino ethnos.
2. The Maya are part of the Latino ethnos.
3. Therefore *Popol Vuh* is Latin American philosophy.

Assuming that *Popol Vuh* has philosophical import, then, given Gracia’s criterion, there is no reason to remain agnostic on the subject.

As usual, however, it may be that the devil is in the details. What exactly is meant by “being part of a people”? The expression cannot refer to a relationship that is strictly actual, since that would lead to the implausible claim that, for example, ancient Greek philosophy doesn’t belong to current Greek or European philosophy. Today, after all, the ancient Greeks (since none of them are still living) are not literally part of the current Greek/European people. But we don’t, for all that, want to say that Plato’s *Republic* is not to be included in Greek/European philosophy! So the denoted relationship must allow for historical chains: the products of the ancient Greeks are in this sense part of Greek and European people’s culture today, and their philosophical works therefore eligible for inclusion in Greek/European philosophy.

Now according to the evidence of the social sciences, it is beyond dispute that the *Popol Vuh*, perhaps more than any other pre-Columbian narrative, is part of the culture of present-day Maya people, who have received it mainly through an oral tradition. By Gracia’s condition, we thus would not hesitate to include *Popol Vuh* in Latin American philosophy -- unless, of course, we were persuaded that the Maya people do not qualify as Latin Americans. But they plainly do, as can be seen by the popularity of some contemporary Maya among Latin Americans. Rigoberta Menchú, a Maya-Quiché Guatemalan Nobel laureate, is widely revered as an advocate of human rights for the indigenous peoples of the Americas. In light of the historical, geographical, and cultural facts – e.g., that Menchú is an honored citizen in Latin America – it would surely make no sense to exclude her from the broader Latino ethnos, nor would it, *mutatis mutandis*, to exclude other indigenous leaders such as the Aymara Evo Morales or the Zapotec Benito Juárez. Since Menchú in some ways represents the Maya

people, it would likewise make no sense to exclude these people from the Latino ethnos any more than it would to exclude the Aymara or the Zapotecs.

If we reason by Gracia's criterion in the passage above, it follows that the *Popol Vuh* is clearly included in Latin American philosophy. It thus appears that one could remain agnostic on the subject only at the price of being stuck with a dilemma that has no obvious solution. On the one hand, one could argue that the *Popol Vuh* cannot be read as a philosophical or proto-philosophical text at all (i.e., one could simply deny my claim above). But to support this would require setting up sound standards for what is to count as philosophy -- an unpromising assignment. On the other hand, one might try to argue that the Maya are not part of the Latin American people, but, for the reasons just provided, supporting this horn would be an equally difficult task.

IV

Perhaps Gracia's agnosticism is rooted in his views on Latin American philosophy as ethnic philosophy and the identity of Latinos as an ethnic group. He tells us very little about the former, only that it is the philosophy of an ethnos. About the latter, a topic not without controversy, he has a well-developed theory according to which there is no single property that all Latinos have in common. Rather, they share a net of family-resemblance relations that link the great number of subgroups referred to as "Latinos." Since they have no single, common feature at all, but do bear to each other those family-resemblance relations, they constitute an ethnic group. Gracia seems to link these two accounts: (1) Latin American philosophy as ethnic philosophy, and (2) Latino identity as a net of family-resemblance relations with no single property in common. For he holds that the philosophical works belonging to Latin American philosophy need have no single, identifying feature at all. Moreover, they need not share any feature with the philosophy of any other ethnic group. Furthermore, these works cannot be taken to capture a property shared by all Latinos throughout their history since there is no such property.[6]

What is it that makes works as dissimilar as Jorge Luis Borges's short stories, pre-Columbian folk-cosmologies, and analytic theories by figures such as Héctor-Neri Castañeda and Ernesto Sosa qualify as Latin American philosophy? Perhaps the individuation criterion in the previous passage about *Popol Vuh* could be generalized to state that any work would qualify as Latin American philosophy if and only if it can be considered part of the Latino ethnos. But this is too liberal, since any work whatsoever that can be considered part of the Latino ethnos would then qualify: Borges's short stories, Sosa's analytic epistemology, and even philosophical works in the style of European philosophy that have contributed nothing characteristically Latin American. To me it is ironic to grant that status to, for example, the writings of Antonio Rubio (Mexican, 1548-1615), whose compendium of Aristotelian logic, the textbook *Logica Mexicana*, was popular in Spain as well as Latin America during the Colonial era. Unlike *Popol Vuh*, Rubio's work passes muster with strong universalists and strong distinctivists alike -- but not with anyone who regards as truly Latin American only works

that broach subjects or methods that are originally or characteristically Latin American. I submit that more should be done by Gracia to sharpen an individuation criterion that, following the middle way between extremes, will capture what is distinctive about Latin American philosophy.

That said, I should add that I believe Gracia's book is an important addition to the Latin American philosophical canon, the type of work from which anyone interested in the subject can learn a great deal. For many years Gracia has been one of the field's leading scholars, and it is always a signal event when one of his books appears. Latin American philosophers may disagree about many things, but not about the well-deserved scholarly reputation of Jorge Gracia.

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Notes

[1] See J. J. E. Gracia, *Latinos in America: Philosophy and Social Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 140 and ff.

[2] I discuss the ambiguity problem at length in S. Nuccetelli, "Is 'Latin American Thought' Philosophy?" *Metaphilosophy* 4 (2003): 524-37, and S. Nuccetelli, "Latin American Philosophy," in *Blackwell Companion to Latin American Philosophy*, eds. S. Nuccetelli, O. Bueno, and O. Schutte, 343-56 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010).

[3] In Bunge's words: "I don't think that Latin America constitutes a distinct area of philosophy. Latin America is philosophically just as pluralistic as North America, Western Europe, India, or Japan" (G. Gilson, "The Project of Exact Philosophy: An Interview with Mario Bunge, Frothingham Chair of Logic and Metaphysics, McGill University, Toronto, Canada," *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 1 [2006]: 10).

[4] I count, e.g., Arturo Frondizi and Carlos Pereda among paradigm SU theorists who reject such works, and Leopoldo Zea and Augusto Salazar-Bondy among paradigm SD theorists who do the same.

[5] In previous work Gracia seemed to deny that pre-Columbian thought could count as part of Latin American philosophy. For example, in a topical entry in a current dictionary of philosophy Gracia and his collaborators write: "Latin American philosophy begins with the Spanish and Portuguese discovery and colonization of the New World" (J. J. E. Gracia et al., "Latin American Philosophy," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. T. Honderich, 462 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995]).

[6] Gracia writes that Latin American philosophy is "the philosophy of an ethnos, and insofar as it is so, and members of ethne do not necessarily share features in common, then what the philosophy of a particular ethnos is exactly will not require any features in common with other philosophies outside the ethnos or even within the ethnos throughout its history. This, I claim, is the best way of understanding the unity of Latin American philosophy (Gracia, *Latinos in America*, 140).