

Working with Jorge J. E. Gracia

by Iván Jaksic

English Abstract

The primary focus of this article is Jorge J. E. Gracia's trajectory as mentor and colleague. It describes how he combined different interests, from medieval and Latin American philosophy, the history of philosophy, and metaphysics, to address issues of race, ethnicity and Latino/a identity. It provides insights into Gracia's commitment to dialogue, even if, and especially when, it involves sharp but honest criticism. The article addresses the specific moment when Gracia turned his attention to Latin American philosophy, from the publication of *El hombre y los valores en la filosofía latinoamericana* (co-edited with Risieri Frondizi 1975), to the anthology *Filosofía e identidad cultural en América Latina*, which Gracia and the author of this essay prepared in the early 1980's. Finally, the article provides some highlights that illustrate the types of critiques, and praise, that his writings on race, ethnicity and nationality have elicited.

Resumen en español

Este artículo está enfocado principalmente en la trayectoria de Jorge J. E. Gracia como mentor y colega. Aquí se describe cómo él combina intereses diversos, partiendo de la filosofía medieval y la filosofía latinoamericana, la historia de la filosofía y la metafísica para abordar temas de raza, etnicidad e identidad latina. El texto plantea algunas ideas sobre el compromiso de Gracia con el diálogo, incluso si, y especialmente cuando, dicho diálogo implica una crítica aguda pero honesta. El artículo aborda el momento específico en el que Gracia vuelve su atención a la filosofía Latinoamericana, desde la publicación de *El hombre y los valores en la filosofía latinoamericana* (co-editado con Risieri Frondizi, 1975) hasta la antología *Filosofía e identidad cultural en América Latina*, el cual Gracia y el autor de este ensayo prepararon a comienzos de los años ochenta. Finalmente, el artículo proporciona algunos apuntes que ilustran los tipos de críticas y loas que sus escritos sobre raza, etnicidad y nacionalidad han suscitado.

Resumo em português

O foco principal deste artigo é a trajetória de J. E. Gracia como mentor e colega. O artigo descreve como ele combinou interesses diferentes, da filosofia medieval e latino-americana, a história da filosofia e a metafísica, para tratar de questões de raça, etnicidade e identidade latina. Busca compreender o comprometimento de Gracia ao diálogo, mesmo que - e principalmente nesse ponto - isso signifique fazer críticas agudas, porém honestas. O artigo trata do momento específico em que Gracia voltou sua atenção à filosofia latino-americana, da publicação de *El hombre y los valores en la filosofía latinoamericana* (co-editado com Risieri Frondizi, 1975) à antologia *Filosofía e identidad cultural en América Latina*, a qual Gracia e o autor deste ensaio prepararam

no começo dos anos de 1980. Finalmente, o artigo levanta alguns pontos que exemplificam os tipos de críticas e de elogios que seus escritos sobre raça, etnicidade e nacionalidade ocasionaram.

Who would compile a book (*Debating Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Identity*, 2015) that includes such comments as, “My concern is with Gracia’s *grossly* inflated job description for what he refers to as ‘philosophy’” (33); “Gracia’s highly inflated near hyperbolic mischaracterization of whatever he intends to refer to by ‘philosophy’” (35); “Gracia’s sharp separation of fact and value in his portrayal of objective philosophical argument is too simplistic” (41); “Gracia’s Familial-Historical View of Hispanic ethnicity is deeply problematic in its central imagery of family and perhaps incoherent as an account of anything so grand as Hispanic identity” (103); “I am concerned that his theory may strike many as minimalist, thin, empty, and formal” (122); “Gracia’s reluctance to acknowledge his terminological revisionism produces some rather perplexing passages” (190); “Gracia’s geobiological conception of Hispanic identity is too empty” (118); Or simply, “Gracia may have gotten ahead of himself here...” (105); “I do not think that Gracia has been successful...” (112); “I think that Gracia is just wrong” (110)?

To gather a group of some of the sharpest critics of Jorge Gracia may indeed seem like an act of retribution from a disgruntled student. Retribution, for putting me through the reading of thousands of some of the driest pages in the history of philosophy. In the age before Starbucks or Peet’s, the only way to stay awake was by drinking an unspeakable substance that came out of vending machines in the hallways and basements of hospital-looking buildings in the then relatively new (1970s) Amherst campus of the University at Buffalo. I have every reason to be reasonably resentful for the sleep deprivation I endured for many years, but I also agree with every positive comment presented by the contributors to this volume.

Authors have referred to Gracia’s “passionate concern” (29) for the philosophical understanding of race, ethnicity and nationality, and stated that “his proposals are guided by a humane intelligence and reveal some of the difficulties with the way we ordinarily think about race and ethnicity” (55); “Gracia’s book marks the beginning of a fruitful new series of philosophically informed reflections on ethnicity and ethnic identity, whose discussion so badly needs the clear presentation, sharp thinking, and meticulous care that Gracia brings to his treatment” (91). Authors have noted Gracia’s “Characteristic humility and understatement” (102), and emphasized that “His pluralism and his sensitivity to the heterogeneity of Hispanic identity are laudable” (106). One contributor has stated that “Gracia might serve as a model of a Hispanic American philosopher who honors the highest standards of philosophy and deals with problems of the Hispanic American community in a fresh, illuminating, and provocative

manner” (113). Finally, that Gracia shows “Great sensitivity to the culture dimensions of the thorny philosophical problems that he encounters” (215). Perhaps the most eloquent statement consists of one word: “Thoughtful.” I can only corroborate such comments from personal experience working with him.

Gracia and I met in 1978, when he was expanding his philosophical horizons to include Latin American philosophy. It was his compilation with Risieri Frondizi, *El hombre y los valores en la filosofía latinoamericana*, published in 1975, that led me to the field. I remember well the day when this handsome book, published by the prestigious Fondo de Cultura Económica in Mexico, fell into my hands. Frondizi was known to me, but not Gracia. Before the internet it was not easy to find information about anyone, unless you thumbed through and cross-referenced the thick volumes of the *Social Sciences Citation Index*, so you can imagine my surprise when I found out that he was a young assistant professor just a few buildings away on my own campus. I wrote to him requesting a meeting but he was abroad at the time. When the response came, however, it was most encouraging.

I knew there was no other academic in the United States that could guide my interests at that time. To me, he was well established, but actually he had to struggle to legitimize the topics of his interests. In fact, much that he tried, he could not get his landmark anthology with Frondizi published in English. This was not very encouraging for someone entering the field, but his drive and perseverance irradiated a contagious confidence that this battle could be won.

I should make clear that I am not a philosopher: I am a historian, albeit a historian who studied philosophy and who would have most likely continued full time in the field. Alas, the military coup of 1973 in my country, Chile, changed all of this: it drove me first to Argentina and then to the United States. And yet, it was precisely because I had turned to the field of history that I could appreciate Jorge’s own commitment to the discipline. And he, I believe, appreciated the fact that I was not a total stranger to philosophy. He knew well the tradition I came from.

Chance brought us together, but probably not under the most auspicious circumstances. We both left our native lands at the age of 19, albeit under different circumstances and fleeing entirely different political regimes about a decade apart. Imagine a person whose life was turned around by Castro’s communism meeting another person fleeing the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. It could have been a disaster, but it was just the contrary, as we both realized that the effects could be the same: we both understood what it was like to be removed from one’s roots, and we both realized that while respectively a Cuban and a Chilean, each with a strong sense of national identity, we both belonged to a common new community, the Hispanic/Latino community. He was busy preparing his works on Suárez and the principle of individuation in the Middle Ages, while I was embarking on a doctoral thesis concerning the university reform movement of the 1960’s in Chile. But year after year we worked on

an area that intrigued us: the history of Latin American philosophy and its peculiar emphasis on cultural identity.

Little did I know that his interest in Latin American philosophy would eventually lead to the ground-breaking books that have been so thoroughly and intelligently discussed by the contributors to the present compilation. Gracia was a pioneer in building bridges between the Latin American and the African American philosophical approaches to the issues of race and ethnicity. As professor Outlaw remarks in this volume, “he has not developed his views in isolation from other thinkers” (Outlaw, 33). Indeed, Gracia is at his best when engaged in dialogue. That is the arena where he hones his ideas and learns from other traditions and perspectives. He proposes—never imposes—his views, thus helping the discussion to move along in new ways. As he himself states, “[a]s philosophers we need to be confronted by other perspectives; we need to face sharp criticisms; and we need to consider tough objections to the views that we value deeply in order to eliminate as many of those biases and prejudices as possible” (249). A debate with him can be heated, even contentious, but it is always respectful. After I graduated, he paid me the compliment of disagreeing with me on some historical issues. I took it as a sign that he now considered me a colleague. In the event, the disagreements never stopped us from collaborating in a partnership that now numbers nearly four decades.

Let me give you a concrete example, after reading and discussing the texts of numerous Latin American philosophers we could agree that there were two main tendencies, the universalist and the culturalist, roughly equivalent to Isaiah Berlin’s hedgehogs and foxes of Latin American philosophy. We could have settled on this comfortable binary scheme, but there was a lingering sense that some texts did not quite fit into the dichotomy and had, in addition, the aura of Marxist ideology. The challenge became how to separate the ideology from the philosophy because, as I was convinced, some of those philosophers were well trained and not exactly standard demagogues from the Left. After extensive readings we came to the conclusion that there was a critical strand, and were able to identify the leading exponents. We first published our conclusions in the *Inter-American Review of Bibliography* (I do not believe that any U.S. philosophy journal would have been interested in the subject at the time), and then in the introduction to our book, *Filosofía e identidad cultural en América Latina*, published in Venezuela in 1988. Today, this is the standard typology for the understanding of Latin American philosophy. It was Jorge Gracia who pondered it, and ultimately validated it. As he would say, if someone has an alternative view, come forward with it! Thus far, it represents the consensus of the field.

Gracia has always been a generous mentor: almost as soon as we started working we started publishing together. He gave me every opportunity to become acquainted with the demands of the academic profession, co-authoring a review or article here and there, giving joint talks to the Latino international or local community in Buffalo, and eventually publishing a book. No task was too small for him to communicate his academic values. These were big breaks for a graduate student who

was about to confront the harsh realities of the academic job market in the early 1980s. There was the tantalizing sum of two jobs available in my field when I graduated. I got exactly zero. Jorge is not the type who gives up, and supported me until I was finally in a position to fend for myself. I am grateful to him, but what I value the most is the rigorous training, a training that was never unpleasant, just the contrary. So, please, let me say something about Jorge's sense of humor.

After some obscure reading and discussion of a particularly dry piece of writing I remember Jorge telling me about the problem with theology. I expected a profound disquisition on Aquinas, but instead I heard him say that the main crime of theology was that it destroyed your sense of humor. He should know, as he spent decades studying theologians. But he was certainly not a victim of this malaise. His laughter was legendary in the hallways of Baldy Hall (where the philosophy department was then located). Sometimes we would startle the patrons in the nearby Lockwood Library where we often ended our meetings. Incidentally, Gracia in Spanish means humor (it also means grace) and, true to his name, he graces his writing with frequent turns to colloquial phrases and hilarious asides.

What doubt could there be that Gracia has been a leader in the philosophical discussion of the topics mentioned in the title of this book? As Susana Nuccetelli writes in this volume, "Gracia has for many years been one of the field's leading scholars, and it is always a signal event when one of his books appears" (Nuccetelli 2015, 202). Let me just add that, as it is amply demonstrated in this volume, he has brought what used to be a marginal philosophical concern into the mainstream of American philosophy, thereby opening new venues, new aspirations, and new energies to our field. Above and beyond these great contributions, let me emphasize his inspiring mentorship. This, in the end, is what matters the most in an intellectual community that can only thrive on dialogue.

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