

There is Latin American Philosophy, but There Can't Be: How Jorge Gracia Made the Impossible Possible

by Elizabeth Millán Brusslan

Philosophy is notoriously difficult to define, and when we place adjectives such as 'Latin American' in front of it, we only complicate an already difficult task. I cannot think of another philosopher who did more to clarify the meaning of Latin American philosophy than Jorge Gracia did; he also brought its rich tradition into clear focus so that it could finally find its due recognition in the Anglophone world. As Gracia pointed out in one of his many contributions to the problem of defining Latin American philosophy: "One of the most heated topics of discussion among Latin American philosophers for the past fifty years has been whether there is such a thing as Latin American philosophy."^[1] Tackling this hotly debated matter of discussion, Gracia, with his characteristic insistence on clarity and parsimony, boiled it down to a simple matter of choosing between two possibilities: either (1) Latin American philosophy does not exist or (2) Latin American philosophy exists. And with his demand for precision, Gracia pushed us to consider two scenarios: "if we adopt a particular selective point of view with respect to certain philosophical texts, we can easily conclude that there is no Latin American philosophy or very little of it. And if we take a different selective point of view with respect to the same texts, we can conclude that there is Latin American philosophy—and furthermore, that there is much of it. It all depends on the measurement we use. And the measurement depends on many other things. Without doubt, ideologies play an important part, as do nationalism, structures of power and economic interests. Apart from the measurements, however, there is the real text. The matter does not concern just perspective, but also reality."^[2] Gracia always pushed us to deal not merely with perspective, with ideologies, with impressions, appearances, but also always with objective reality. Yet even reality cannot protect us from life's many absurdities. In the introduction to his excellent volume, *Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates*, Eduardo Mendieta observes that Gracia, in his waffling on the matter of whether Latin American philosophy exists or does not exist, brings to mind Samuel Beckett's Molloy: "there is Latin American philosophy, but there can't be, but there is."^[3] The sort of oscillation that does look like the waffling Mendieta imputes to Gracia is the result of a field that was too often inhospitable to the philosophical voices that spoke in Spanish. Indeed, the Spanish language (and we can add Portuguese too) was too often a barrier to the objective reality of the Latin American philosophical tradition.

Alas, in the at times, absurd realm of professional philosophy where we dwell, those of us working in the area of Latin American philosophy still have to prove its existence. This particular absurdity has been alleviated by the sort of careful historical and hermeneutical work Gracia did to shed light on the context and history of these traditions and the hard labor he put in to expand the field of Latin American philosophy. ^[4] Indeed, but for Jorge's work as an editor of a special issue of *The Philosophical Forum* in 1988, I would never have gone on in philosophy. Back in 1989, when I was an

undergraduate philosophy major with hopes of pursuing more work in a graduate program, those hopes were temporarily dashed when, upon learning that I wanted to go to graduate school to do work in Latin American philosophy, I was informed by one of my professors that I could not study Latin American philosophy, because Latin American philosophy did not exist. My discovery of the 1988 volume of *The Philosophical Forum*, dedicated to nothing less than Latin American Philosophy and edited by Jorge Gracia, put Buffalo, New York on my horizon and led me to the most supportive, generous mentor a young scholar could hope for and to an area in the field of philosophy that would provide a lifetime of projects and exciting philosophical problems.

1. Hospitality and the Latin American Philosophical Tradition

The existence of Latin American philosophy is still questioned by some. Those of us who want to include Spanish and the voices from the Latin American tradition are often looked upon as confused nomads who have lost our way, unaware of what “true” philosophy really is and of where the boundaries of the sacred territory lie. Creating a home for figures who have been excluded from the canon is no easy task: one of the many merits of Jorge’s long career in philosophy was that the fruits of his labor helped create at first a shelter for the displaced Latin American thinkers and then a more permanent home. In part due to his careful historical work, a space for Latin American philosophers was carved onto the map of philosophy in the United States, and thinkers committed to the Latin American tradition can now find a home in the profession of philosophy. Certainly, Jorge gave me and my work a home – if not for him, I would not be in this field, a field that I love, and which I have attempted to tend to with the level of care taught to me by him.

Jorge was a philosopher with many dimensions, much like the diamond he kept in his shoe as he tried to forge a path for himself in the United States after leaving Cuba.[5] The strand of Jorge’s thought that attracted me to Buffalo and helped me forge my own path in philosophy was Jorge’s work as a historian of the Latin American philosophical tradition. Early on, Jorge instilled in me a deep respect for careful historical work. My first publication was of a book by his dear friend, Ofelia Schutte, a thinker who remains a model for me of how one should do philosophy.[6] The next publication was also a review of a book that Jorge selected for me, an excellent study by Howard Tuttle that helped bring the work of Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset into sharper focus and present that work on equal footing with the work of German thinkers who often overshadow Ortega’s work.[7] My commitment to inclusive historical work is rooted in these early experiences with Jorge, of reading and studying thinkers who were brave enough to offer a new narrative to philosophers and to present a more inclusive history. Jorge opened the rich tradition of Spanish and Latin American philosophy to me, and he helped me to develop the tools and discipline I needed to make my own contributions to the field. Jorge also instilled in me a strong work ethic and level of humility: from Jorge’s example, I learned that any work that served the field of Latin American philosophy should be done and done well. While I was still a graduate student, Jorge invited me to collaborate with him on several encyclopedia

entries, these entries became vehicles for making our field more diverse and inclusive and for recognizing thinkers who had traditionally been neglected in encyclopedias of philosophy in the Anglophone world. We prepared entries for the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* on thinkers such as Argentine thinker, Alejandro Korn, and Spanish thinkers: Luis de Molina, José Ortega y Gasset, and Francisco Suárez. We even wrote an entry on Latin American Philosophy, decisively proving that it existed.[8] Jorge included me in several other projects aimed at making Latin American philosophy more visible in various bibliographies and encyclopedias.[9] Jorge even indulged me as I took one of the first English-language anthologies on Latin American philosophy, the one he had published in 1986, and expanded it to include the voices of Sor Juana, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Ofelia Schutte, as well as other leading thinkers of the Latin American philosophical tradition.[10] Jorge taught me the value of collaboration, and I do believe that this spirit of collaboration is what is expanding and diversifying the field of philosophy.[11]

2. Inclusiveness

Jorge, always practical, knew I had come to Buffalo to work on Latin American Philosophy with him, but he resisted letting me write a thesis on Latin American Philosophy, pushing me to my other interest, German philosophy, because he wanted me to have good job prospects (I wrote a thesis on Friedrich Schlegel, yet miraculously have enjoyed steady work in philosophy ever since). Even while I was not able to write my thesis on Latin American philosophy, Jorge gave me many valuable opportunities to deepen my knowledge of the history of both Latin American and Spanish philosophy. I was born in Spain, and Jorge, in the work we did for *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, allowed me to join issues of my own identity with my philosophical work, a move that was more important than I realized at the time, for it made doing philosophy, along the lines called for by Ortega, a more historically situated, existentially rooted experience for me. Such work made me feel at home in philosophy, a field that was not welcoming to young women and certainly not to young Hispanic women. Supporting my work was part of how Jorge opened the field to women; helping to make new generations of women feel at home in the field of philosophy.

That special volume of *The Philosophical Forum*, which was a kind of philosophical lifeline to me, provided a rich overview of the many directions of thought that philosophy was taking in Latin America.[12] Gracia's own article in that volume, "The Impact of Philosophical Analysis in Latin America" (1988-89), pushed a strand of Latin American philosophy that I have not pursued, but which is valuable to the field. In that volume, Gracia claims that "the main problem of Latin American philosophy arises from traditional Hispanic verbosity and Orteguian mannerism. The idea that in order to say something one must compose a one-hundred-page dissertation is not only absurd but counterproductive, although it is without a doubt, an entrenched Hispanic custom." [13] Another great merit of Jorge's was that he welcomed debate, never demanding that his students submit to his philosophical will, methods, or opinions. Literary flourishes or what Jorge called Orteguian mannerism was one such point of contention

between us: I am drawn to such flourishes, Jorge found them distracting. A great virtue of Gracia as a teacher was that he encouraged dialogue and criticism – as he writes in “The Boundaries between Philosophy and Literature: A Response to Elizabeth Millán and Amy Oliver”: “To have one’s work analyzed and criticized is certainly a great honor for a philosopher, for philosophy is born of dialogue, and without criticism it withers and dies.”[14] After all of these years, I am still Jorge’s student and always be will – yet, because of the room he generously opened for me to develop my own path in philosophy, I remain stubbornly verbose, and ever attracted to the poetic dimension of human experience.

Jorge’s work in the history of philosophy was pioneering and helped the field develop into the flourishing area it is today. Gracia did not, in those early days of the formation of the field, move towards talk of the colonial condition or liberation philosophy. Yet, while his methods, informed by his excellent training in medieval philosophy, tend to clarity and analysis, there are overlaps with his work and that of thinkers such as Walter Mignolo and even Enrique Dussel. It should not surprise us that Gracia would have a particularly sensitive approach to issues of cultural identity and immigration. In *Divergent Modernities. Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America (Desencuentros de la Modernidad)*, Julio Ramos presents the U.S. Latino migratory subject as the “bearer of traces,”[15] so that the “emergent U.S. Latino/a subject, as early as the 1880s, writes on that edge delineated by separation and fracture.”[16] Martí expresses the unique pain of the exiled thinker in “Sad Sunday,” “I bear the pain which the whole world observes/a rebellious pain which the verse breaks/ and that is, oh sea! The fleeting gull/passing on its way to Cuba on your waves!”[17] What Martí is able to evoke in his moving and powerful language reflects a condition that continues to challenge Latina/os/Hispanics today: the condition of separation and fracture. Gracia’s recent memoir reminds us of the conditions of separation and fracture he endured and faced in an academy that was not as open to diversity as one might have expected or hoped.[18] To work in this condition of separation and fracture and to achieve the beautiful unity Gracia achieved, not only for the field but for so many of his students, is a contribution that has reshaped the field of philosophy.

What is faced by individual immigrants is a microcosm replicated in the challenges facing the tradition of Latin American philosophy itself, a tradition born of separation and fracture. By thematizing the issue of Latin American and Hispanic figures in the history of philosophy, Gracia took important steps in the direction of decolonizing thought: of thinking of subjects in broader ways, of including insights from thinkers too often excluded from our discourse by the philosophical Minutemen that haunt our field, and so of moving in the direction of achieving the goal of making philosophy into a truly global search for truth.

3. Beauty, Openness, and Loss: Concluding Memories

Jorge, while not focused on issues of beauty in his work, brought so much beauty into the lives of his students. I found out about Jorge’s passing while in Montana, an

open, beautiful place that helped cushion the pain of this great loss. While gazing at the landscape of southern Montana, I thought of Jorge. Openness and beauty are two qualities that Jorge had in spades. As I looked back over decades of email exchanges, a word that came up again and again, especially in the subject headings of my messages to Jorge, was “advice”. Jorge was always there to give me advice, to lift my spirits when this profession seemed inhospitable, to protect me from the profession’s bullies, to help me develop strategies for dealing with the many colorful personalities of our profession. He was, as all of his students know well, quick to alert us when we needed to correct course, but also just as quick to give us loving words of encouragement. He always wanted what was best for us, and that was and remains a great gift.

In recounting to my son, Michael, why I was crying over Jorge’s passing, I told him that I had lost one of the few people who really desired my well-being and went out of his way to help me become who and what I wanted to be. Indeed, in one of our email exchanges, shortly after the birth of my son, Jorge was full of advice for me in my role as a mother. In that message, after beautiful words of praise for his two highly accomplished daughters (Leticia and Clarisa), he offered this wisdom: “The best thing for us as parents, it seems to me, is to give opportunities to our children and let them go in whatever way they want” – this openness to the talents of others combined with his commitment to opening up opportunities for others was unique and part of what made Jorge such a treasured teacher and mentor.

We were all so fortunate to have had Jorge’s keen intelligence, generous spirit, and uplifting laughter in our lives. I hope Jorge knew how much we loved and treasured him. In a field in which we are not trained to praise, but rather to bury, Jorge, though very demanding, praised when praise was due, and was always available to offer guidance. In a message from 2011, he reminded me to: “Never lose the joy of scholarship, it is the ticket to happiness and contentment.” Then Jorge added, “ It is very satisfying to see the success of my students, now that I am at the end of my own career, although still having fun doing new things and pushing the boundaries....I really have been fortunate with my students” – in response I wrote: “My good fortune in philosophy really began when I met you, and I will be forever grateful for your support – you helped me find my home in philosophy – who could have known that an interest in Latin American philosophy could coexist (and even flourish) with my strange interest in early German Romanticism – but you indulged me, and that, to harken back to Frost, has made all the difference. So I thank you, but no words can really express my gratitude – my debt to you is one that I carry most gladly.” In a typical move, Jorge deflected my words of gratitude, writing: “You are a very kind person and your warm and kind words about me are much appreciated. As I said, I consider myself fortunate to have had you as a student and I am fortunate to have you as a friend. However, you should not feel indebted to me, because you have already paid me amply with your own success and exemplary life. I am proud of you and do not expect from you, or any of my students, anything but a commitment to excellence and continued flourishing.” If only all

students could be nurtured and guided by a person like Jorge Gracia, perhaps our field would finally be inclusive and diverse.

My work will continue to be led by the bright light Jorge offered, and I will continue to insist (Jorge was all too well acquainted with my obstinance) that I do have a debt to Jorge, one that I can never possibly repay; it is a most beautiful debt, and I will always carry it close to my heart.

Elizabeth Millán Bruslan
DePaul University

Notes

[1] Jorge Gracia, "Ethnic Labels and Philosophy: The Case of Latin American Philosophy" in *Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003):57-67, at p. 66.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Eduardo Mendieta, ed., *Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 3.

[4] One of the earliest collections on Latin American philosophy was the volume that Gracia edited with Ivan Jaksic, *Filosofía e identidad cultural en América Latina* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1988). This collection holds a special meaning for me, for it guided me through my first encounter with the Latin American philosophical tradition. Such collections are important to the field for many reasons, not least for their role helping faculty to organize course reading lists, and in giving young scholars new vistas of the field. Another notable collection was Gracia's, *Latin American Philosophy in the 20th Century* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986). As I discuss below, Jorge and I expanded and reissued this as, *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004).

Another of Gracia's important contributions to documenting the history of philosophy in Latin America was his first book on Latin American philosophy, *Philosophical Analysis in Latin America*, co-edited with Eduardo Rabossi, Enrique Villanueva, and Marcelo Dascal (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1984). This book detailed the general tendency of analytic philosophy to be practiced in major urban centers in Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil. That these three countries were the most receptive to analytic philosophy was related to the fact that some of their philosophers had studied in England or the United States and returned to their home countries to introduce this mode of doing philosophy. In this work, Gracia also examined the historic development of analytic philosophy in Chile, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. His carefully documented observations

revealed the ways in which the arrival of analytic philosophy in these countries largely depended on whether analytic philosophers visited there. For example, the fact that Roberto Torretti, the Chilean philosopher, lived in Puerto Rico is arguably responsible for the initial development of analytic philosophy on the island (*Ibid.*, 380). In our article, "Towards and Appreciation of Latin American Philosophy: Jorge J.E. Gracia's Recovery Mission" Amy Oliver and I discuss how Gracia's early interest in the analytic tradition may have led him to mischaracterize the more literary aspects of the Latin American philosophical tradition (*CR: The New Centennial Review* 14:1 (2014):245-58). Gracia's response to our critique can be found in "The Boundaries between Philosophy and Literature: A Response to Elizabeth Millán and Amy Oliver," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 14:1 (2014): 259-65.

[5] For more on Jorge's journey from Cuba to the United States, see, Jorge Gracia, *With a Diamond in My Shoe. A Philosopher's Search for Identity in America* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2019).

[6] Review of Ofelia Schutte's "Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 32, No. 2 (1994): 318-319.

[7] Review of Howard N. Tuttle's "The Dawn of Historical Reason: The Historicity of Human Existence in the Thought of Dilthey, Heidegger and Ortega y Gasset," *Review of Metaphysics* XLIX, No. 2 (1995): 442-444.

[8] "Alejandro Korn", *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Ted Honderich, editor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 450. Co-author, Jorge Gracia. See also: "Latin American Philosophy", *Ibid.*, pp. 462-463. "Luis de Molina", *Ibid.*, p. 583. "José Ortega y Gasset", *Ibid.*, p. 637. "Francisco Suárez", *Ibid.*, p. 856.

[9] See for example, "Latin American Philosophy," co-authored with Jorge J.E. Gracia for *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Second Edition* (New York: Macmillan, 2006); "Affirmative Action and Latinos," co-authored with Jorge J.E. Gracia for *Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture, Society*, Ilan Stavans and Harold Augenbraun, eds. (Bethel, CT: Grolier Education Press, 2006); "Spanish and Latin American Philosophy," co-authored with Jorge J.E. Gracia for *Encyclopedia Americana* (Bethel, CT: Grolier Educational Press, 2006).

[10] See, *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century: the human condition, values, and the search for philosophical identity*, co-edited with Jorge J.E. Gracia (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 2004).

[11] My own attempt to bring together scholars from other countries and even other disciplines to shed light on the many valuable dimensions of the Latin American philosophical tradition include: *The Role of History in Latin American Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives*, co-edited with Arleen Salles (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005); Guest editor, with Hugo Moreno, of special volume on *Latin American Aesthetics for Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Fall 2014. See also, "Modern Latin American Aesthetics," with Hugo Moreno for the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, edited by Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); "Latino/a American Philosophy," with Don Deere for the *Oxford Bibliography of Latino Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[12] The special issue of *The Philosophical Forum* included an introduction, "Latin American Philosophy Today" by Gracia, and articles by Leopoldo Zea ("Identity: A

Latin American Philosophical Problem”), Horatio Cerutti-Guldberg (“Actual Situation and Perspectives of Latin American Philosophy for Liberation”), Ofelia Schutte (“Philosophy and Feminism in Latin America: Perspectives on Gender Identity and Culture”), David Sobrevilla (“Phenomenology and Existentialism in Latin America”), Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez (“Marxism in Latin America”), Iván Jaksic (“The Sources of Latin American Philosophy”).

[13] *The Philosophical Forum* 20, nos. 1-2 (1988-89), 25. My students should probably read this article, for then they would more fully understand the roots of my verbosity.

[14] “The Boundaries between Philosophy and Literature: A Response to Elizabeth Millán and Amy Oliver.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 1 (2014), 259.

[15] Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities, Divergent Modernities. Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, trans. John D. Blanco, foreword, José David Saldivar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 283.

[16] José David Saldivar, foreword to *Divergent Modernities* (op. cit.), xxviii.

[17] Quoted in *Divergent Modernities* (Ibid.), xxxviii.

[18] See *With a Diamond in My Shoe*, op. cit.