

Some Important Lessons We Learned from Jorge Gracia about How to be a Philosopher

by Gregory Fernando Pappas

I consider Jorge Gracia to be one of the most important Latino philosophers from his generation. Other people will and should write about Jorge's accomplishments as a philosopher that to me are obvious. The philosophical accomplishments of my mentor, colleague, and amigo Jorge are outstanding in the areas of medieval philosophy and metaphysics, as well as much of his recent work on issues of race, ethnicity, and identity. His familial-historical view of ethnicity and his genetic common-bundle view of race helped shape the field and addressed many issues that previous theories had left unanswered.

I instead want to share seven of the most important lessons we learned from Jorge Gracia, the philosopher, the person, the mentor, and amigo. Like many from my generation, I am fortunate and grateful for Jorge's example on how to be a philosopher in a marginalized area of academic professional philosophy..

1) Jorge Gracia taught us to be critical of boxes and labels, and of the philosophical "churches" or tribalism that can occur in academic philosophy. Instead, he taught us to seek our own voice and resist fashion in philosophy.

Jorge was aware that much of academic philosophy was engaged in fashion and forms of philosophical tribalism based on some identity. We often complain about the hegemony of the canon, but not about how we often get caught in fashion, what is trendy, a philosopher, a concept, or idea. The pressure to write about what is in fashion or what fits into the current academic philosophical boxes is real. Our philosophical societies encourage this. Not paying attention to the trends and the identity boxes can make the difference between a manuscript being read widely in my academic field or even being accepted by an academic press.

Let's face it, Jorge was a philosopher out of fashion in academic philosophy. He did dress very well, but he was doing metaphysics when that was out of fashion and in some philosophical circles even a bad word. The truth is that Jorge's philosophy was at times not only out of fashion but did not fit into the boxes or labels with which we classify philosophers today. This sometimes led to it being unappreciated or underappreciated.

I have heard scholars in personal conversations label him as an "analytic" and "universalist," in the bad sense of these labels. He was considered "analytic" simply because of his great mastery of conceptual analysis and logic. What they missed is that the capacities came primarily from Jorge's early work on medieval philosophy and metaphysics.

There are others that were quick to label Jorge Gracia as a “universalist,” but this was a misunderstanding of his pushback to or criticism of exaggerated responses to universalism as the assumption of the Archimedean standpoint. I agree with Jorge that there are contemporary forms of “historicism” (I prefer the term “contextualism”) in philosophy that as a reaction to hegemonic forms of universalism have made the mistake of conceiving ourselves as trapped in a particular culture, race, gender, or political ideology. There are forms of historicism- or identity-centric philosophies that can be as counterproductive as the most objectionable forms of universalism. If you read Jorge carefully he was only a universalist in the sense of having the healthy aspiration of producing ideas that can be useful and true beyond one’s particular context or circumstance. He was fully aware of the inescapable fact that we can only do philosophy from the particular contingent historical context, and that these circumstances color one’s answers to philosophical problems. I am confident that this was his view because of my many conversations with him on this issue. Jorge guided me to Risieri Frondizi’s book *El Punto de Partida de la Filosofía*, one of many great philosophical texts that remain unknown and untranslated.

Jorge Gracia supported my own journey to resist established academic boxes. As a mentor, he saw my early navigation in between two philosophical traditions, Latin American and American philosophy. From him and also from reading Gloria Anzaldua, I learned that was okay to work in between traditions, i.e., to be “inpure” and write about things that are not in fashion. There is no shame.

More importantly, with his own example Jorge encouraged me and others of my generation to seek our own voices just as he did. He drew from such unlikely sources as Du Bois and Wittgenstein to create his own voice, for instance, with his familial-historical view of ethnicity and his genetic common-bundle view of race. He was open to ideas coming from any tradition as long as the ideas or arguments were good. I am not denying that Jorge had his own bias and blind spot. Don’t we all? But he did try to open himself to arguments presented regardless of the identity of the philosopher, and avoid ad hominem arguments.

Jorge demonstrated (and taught me) the importance of metaphysics and how epistemology has been overrated; at a time when it was not trendy to adopt such a stance. On the topic of metaphysics, I thoroughly enjoyed our conversations about how many trendy contemporary philosophers were fooling themselves by saying that they were doing only epistemology or political philosophy without making some deep-seated metaphysical assumptions.

With his example, Jorge Gracia taught us to stand up for our own ideas, even if they are not popular or there are consequences for being out of fashion.

2) Jorge Gracia taught us the importance of self-criticism in philosophy.

If you read enough of Jorge's texts, both articles and books, you will notice a recurrent pattern, style, and structure. There was always a main thesis, but he spends a lot of time and space answering not only actual objections that have been raised, but answering the best possible conceivable objections. There were no "straw man" objections anywhere in his books. Jorge did not know how to take a stand in any philosophical issue without engaging in self-criticism with great razor-sharp rigor, analysis, and logic.

In the last ten years I have witnessed some erosion of the art of self-criticism in philosophy conference presentations, dissertations, and publications by graduate students and established scholars. I hope that may just be my limited experience.

3) Jorge Gracia taught us the importance of both pluralism (inclusivity) and solidarity within Latin American philosophy.

Not that long ago there were no Latin American philosophy conferences, courses, or texts. If it wasn't for the generation of Jorge Gracia, Ofelia Shutte, John Haddox, and Patrick Romanell, a succeeding generation would not have been able to get off the ground, even in teaching introductory courses on Latin American philosophy. Jorge cared about expanding the Latin American philosophical canon and was opposed to philosophical tribalism or churches. He really cared about showing the rest of the philosophical world that there is a rich history of Latin American philosophy that remains unexplored and marginalized, and that we need to work on making the figures and texts available. Today we have the responsibility of building on what the generation of Jorge Gracia and Ofelia Schutte created. The history of the struggle to get Latin American-Latino philosophy some respect in philosophy starts with Jorge Gracia and his generation. I worry that the new generation may not have the collective memory needed to not take for granted what they have, and understand the responsibility they have.

How are we doing? I think Jorge would want us to take this opportunity not just to talk about him, but talk about all of us, where we are and what directions we should take in Latin American philosophy. I hope we keep moving in the more pluralistic and inclusive direction started by Jorge Gracia and that generation in general. We have come a long way, but there is still a lot of work to be done. There are still a lot of translations to be done.

Compared to the years of Jorge and Ofelia, we have a great deal of pluralism and more resources than ever. We have many reasons to celebrate. In one of our last conversations, Jorge shared that he was happy about what has happened to LA philosophy in the United States. He was more excited about the *IJP* than I was.

There is a growing pluralism in the field. We now have new classifications or labels: Mexican Philosophy, Mexican-American philosophy, Latinx, Latinx feminism,

Caribbean philosophy ... each with their own conferences and places to publish. This pluralism is healthy and goes against the hegemony of one flavor or tradition. I have only two worries that I learned from Jorge. First, will the new areas of specializations and the fact that there is already little community of inquiry in the academy lead to silos, enclaves, or lack of collaboration on behalf of the bigger tent Latin American or even Latinx philosophy? The second worry is how the identity battles and “Olympics of oppression” already in the academy will affect us. I have already witnessed several times scholars from one of the above groups dismiss members of the other group on the grounds of not just their philosophical orientation but their politics, race, or gender. I have no illusions of some harmonious coalition and I am not naive, but I certainly hope these tensions do not destroy us, especially in light of the larger challenge of pushing Latin American philosophy into the twenty-first century.

4) Jorge Gracia taught us generosity and the importance of mentoring new generations.

Latin American philosophy is what it is today thanks to Jorge Gracia. The anthology on Latin American philosophy he edited in the mid-1980s was the first work of its nature published in English by a philosopher. He received an NEH for Latin American Philosophy and, as the founding chair of the APA Committee for Hispanics in Philosophy, created spaces in the APA for all of us interested in this marginalized philosophy. There would be no *Interamerican Journal of Philosophy* without Jorge’s support. He encouraged us and had plenty of advice when needed.

Jorge Gracia’s generosity was key to many in my generation and to keeping a marginalized philosophical tradition alive. This included encouraging and mentoring the new generation of students and writing many letters of recommendation. Even before I met him personally, when he found out that I was planning to teach a graduate course in Latin American philosophy he sent me materials and a syllabus. My generation has benefitted from the generosity of scholar-mentors like Jorge and Ofelia Schutte. I hope we have passed this down to the younger generation and hope they will do the same.

5) Jorge Gracia taught us to distinguish between philosophy and academic professional philosophy.

This is an important distinction I learned from Jorge and from studying the history of philosophy in the twentieth century. Today we take for granted what is a relatively new phenomenon, the professionalization of philosophy. Jorge, as well as early twentieth-century American philosophers like William James, were critical of what this phenomenon did to philosophy as an activity. One quote of Jorge is sufficient to make this point: “Philosophy is too often practiced for reasons which have nothing to do with philosophy: power, professional prestige, and intellectual immortality” (Jorge J.E. Gracia).

6) Jorge taught us that philosophy should be personal. Our identities should be invested, but philosophy should not be so personal that one is not willing to be self-critical of one's own group and loyalties.

I learned from Jorge that we should be critical of forms of universalism-objectivity (the Archimedean standpoint) but be careful to not be so militant about our identities—racial, gender, class, ethnic—that we forget the important self-critical function of philosophy. Philosophy can be a resource to achieve the sort of critical distance, a certain amount of decentering away from our loyalties, that makes philosophy crucial at a time when there is so much tribalism. As Ofelia said recently, and I am sure Jorge would agree: “I think that as much as we need to defend our identities, if we did not practice a certain de-centering, we might miss hearing the plight of those whose knowledge might make us wiser.”

7) Jorge taught us to take philosophy seriously, but not so seriously that one gets offended, cannot laugh at ourselves, or are willing to risk other good things in life such as friendship.

This last point about not taking your ideas too seriously goes hand in hand with Jorge's great sense of humor. I can still hear his unique uninhibited laughter! He worked hard, his productivity was remarkable. I would tease him a lot about saying that he was finally slowing down. He worked hard, but playfulness and laughter were, at the end of the day, more important to him. He taught us that, especially among amigos/as, no disagreement at the level of philosophical ideas is so important that we cannot laugh together about ourselves and our importance. There is still “La Vida” and Convivencia to be had and celebrated.

I have so many fond personal memories of Jorge as the distinguished philosopher who was always ready to take a pause from the academic “seriousness” of philosophy to join me in celebrations of our friendship: dining together, sharing jokes and “*chismes*” in the APA, or just listening to jazz together at the Toronto Jazz Festival. Jorge laughed “con ganas,” and with that celebratory communal tone common among us from the Caribbean.

Gracias Jorge por tu apoyo incondicional en la filosofía y en mi vida. Te extraño mucho.
Goyo

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