

Latin American Philosophy

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Latin American philosophers have often thought about whether there *is* a Latin American philosophy. Although, as raised by them, the question might at first appear idiosyncratic, even self-defeating, this chapter will show that it is neither, at least when certain conditions are satisfied. Such appearances can be explained away by pointing to the ambiguity and vagueness of the expression ‘Latin American philosophy.’ Given its ambiguity, at least two construals, which I shall call “universalist” and “distinctivist,” are possible. Given its vagueness, for some cases it is difficult to determine whether certain works fall under a philosophy of that sort. But parallel semantic shortcomings affect other areas of philosophy, which, as we shall see, may likewise not only be construed in the universalist or distinctivist way, but also have borderline cases.

1. The Question of Whether There Is a Latin American Philosophy

When a question is ambiguous, seemingly contradictory answers can be offered without inconsistency or relativism. Compare, ‘Is there a Latin American Thomism?’ – which admits of several different readings such as ‘Is there Thomism *in* Latin America?’, ‘Is Thomism one of the traditions in Latin American philosophy?’ and ‘Is there a *characteristically* Latin American Thomism?’. As a result, accepting the proposition expressed by one of these questions is consistent with rejecting, or suspending judgment about, the proposition expressed by one of the others (Nuccetelli, 2002).

Similarly, Latin American philosophers have understood and answered the question of concern here in a number of ways. Some endorse versions of ‘SU’ (strong universalism), according to which

SU All theories, methods and topics philosophy are universal.

Given SU, no philosophical theory, method or topic is distinctively Latin American. Views along these lines are not at all uncommon among Latin American philosophers. For example, Mario Bunge (a prominent Argentine philosopher of science working in Canada) has recently declared: “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” (Gilson, 2006, p. 10). But SU, as held by Latin American philosophers, faces serious objections, such as the charge of being self-defeating or leading to a skeptical view about Latin American philosophy. We shall later discuss these objections in connection with the work of two proponents of the doctrine. Note that the plausibility of SU is contingent upon the failure of weaker versions of universalism and distinctivism.

Other universalists embrace weaker theses that are in fact consistent with distinctivism. For example,

WU Some of the theories, methods and topics of philosophy are universal.

Given WU, there is logical space for some such theories, methods, and topics to be distinctively Latin American in some sense. Weak universalists may take the existence of Latin American philosophy to depend entirely on whether the discipline of philosophy, with at least some of its standard manifestations (schools, professional associations, spaces in the academy, and so on), exists in the subcontinent – without excluding the possibility of a characteristically Latin American philosophy, about whose possibility they could keep an open mind.

Jorge Gracia has recently expounded a view which amounts to a form of weak universalism. On this view, Latin American philosophy is ‘ethnic philosophy’, understood as follows:

[A]n ethnic 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. (2008, p. 140)

The view clearly accommodates the notion that some philosophical theories, methods, and topics are universal while others aren’t. One of its advantages, Gracia contends, is that it allows the inclusion in Latin American philosophy of works that cannot be counted in either the philosophy of any other ethnic group, or in universal philosophy, which Gracia equates with ‘scientific’ philosophy. Latin American ‘ethnic’ philosophy can make room for works that fit Gracia’s qualifying conditions, whether they be nonstandard ones such as those by Bartolomé de las Casas and Jorge Luis Borges, or mainstream ones such as those by Hector Neri-Castañeda and Ernest Sosa.

But in the end it is far from clear which works are included or excluded. For example, as we shall see later, the view doesn’t help in deciding whether a well-known Maya folk-cosmology, *Popol Vuh*, belongs to Latin American philosophy. Gracia provides only a sketchy conditional criterion according to which it should be included if and only if the Maya are part of the Latin American people. But that will be shown to leave us with a difficult dilemma instead of an answer to the question of the place of works such as *Popol Vuh* in Latin American philosophy. Another apparent advantage of construing the discipline as ethnic philosophy is in avoiding relativization to “some exclusively external standard of rationality, topical relevance, or methodology” (p. 142). This,

however, is puzzling. For one thing, it is unclear which alternative proposals, if any, would entail relativizing Latin American philosophy to an “external standard of rationality.” Furthermore, obviously any account of the discipline must have a relativization of some sort (at least, to *Latin America*). Gracia’s account in fact relativizes philosophy to a certain ethnic group. In addition, both a discipline’s topics and methodology are factors internal, not external, to that discipline. Hence something more is needed to understand what an ethnic philosophy is, whether Latin American philosophy is such a discipline, and how that could help to resolve some of the matters in dispute.

Another example of weak universalism is my own 2002 proposal, which may be labeled an ‘applied-philosophy’ view. On this view, universalism and distinctivism are compatible, given that a philosophy is *characteristically* Latin American just in case it develops

- 1 original philosophical arguments, and
- 2 topics that are at least in part determined by the relation its proponents bear to cultural, social, and/or historical factors in Latin America.

Construed in this way, there is ample evidence of the existence of a characteristically Latin American philosophy in the works of Latin American thinkers – including both the ‘amateur philosophers’ and the professional ones – many of whom plainly score high in both originality and sensitivity to the cultural, social, and historical context.

At the same time, the applied-philosophy view agrees with universalism on one important point: that there are some issues, such as the problem of knowledge, the mind–body problem, and whether belief in God can be justified, that have a universal import grounded in the tradition of Western philosophy. There is, then, a core of fundamental questions of this sort that belong to universal philosophy. And Latin American philosophy is related to this core of philosophy in the same way that other branches of applied philosophy are, such as medical ethics, environmental ethics, feminist philosophy, philosophy of biology, and philosophy of law.

Weak universalism of this or other sort avoids the threat of a strong ad hominem facing strong universalism. For note that the latter is committed to cash out ‘Latin American philosophy’ as ‘philosophy *in* Latin America,’ but once it does that, it must accept the existence of a Latin American philosophy in that sense, or face the objection of holding a self-defeating view. Were they to say that there is no such a philosophy, what exactly would be what they themselves are producing? Yet universalists often reject the existence of a Latin American philosophy without noticing that by doing so their view is either self-defeating or implicitly distinctivist. We shall now consider what this means. Distinctivists claim that,

- D The theories, methods and topics of Latin American philosophy are *characteristically* Latin American.

Although compatible with WU, D conflicts with SU. On some versions, D is a thesis about the possibility (rather than the actuality) of a characteristically Latin American philosophy. But those who hold a thesis along D’s lines seem committed to providing a plausible account of a philosophy of that sort in order to make their view acceptable. Distinctivists are especially constrained to account for what ‘characteristically’ stands

for. Clearly, the term must pick out a certain virtue of philosophical theories, methods, and topics developed by Latin American philosophers, whether in Latin America or abroad. For distinctivism, the debate is not about whether a Latin American philosophy exists at all, but rather about whether an *x* Latin American philosophy exists – where ‘*x*’ stands for being original, authentic, autochthonous, and the like (more on these later).

All this suggests that the question of concern here is affected by *ambiguity* (roughly, more than one meaning) and *vagueness* (roughly, indeterminacy about reference). But such semantic shortcomings fall short of rendering the question of concern here idiosyncratic or self-defeating, as suggested by analogous metaphilosophical questions about the existence of other areas of philosophy. Consider, ‘Is there a French philosophy?’ Here a universalist reading would individuate the relational property *being a French philosophy* by invoking only certain geopolitical factors, so that the question turns on whether there is philosophy *in* France. But a distinctivist reading would proceed differently – for example, by taking its answer to turn at least in part on whether there are certain theories, methods, or topics that are *typical of the sort of philosophy* currently done in France. Once again, then, some apparently conflicting answers are in fact consistent. One might accept the existence of philosophy in the geopolitical entity called ‘France,’ and at the same time consistently deny the existence of a philosophy with distinctively *French* theories, methods, or topics.

Even questions such as ‘Is there a Greek philosophy?’ seem susceptible of different construals along these lines. In the universalist reading, a Yes answer would depend on whether the discipline of philosophy exists in Greece; while in the distinctivist reading, it would depend on whether there is a philosophy that is characteristically Greek. Elsewhere I have argued (2002) that, under certain construals of the latter, the correct answer is ‘No.’ Even if we take into account only ancient philosophy, there is nothing *typically* Greek in the works of Plato, Aristotle, etc. (Indeed, it is often said that it’s their very *universality* that partly accounts for their enduring appeal and relevance to our lives.) By contrast, it is of course undeniable that these do make up a body of *original* philosophy, so that the existence of a *characteristically* Greek philosophy in that sense is beyond doubt.

If this is correct, then the ambiguity of the question, ‘Is there a Latin American philosophy?’ seems no more likely to invite equivocation than some parallel questions involving a number of other philosophical disciplines. Since it’s crucial in philosophical disputes to avoid ambiguity whenever possible, I’ll make plain hereafter which of these two readings of the question is at stake whenever possible. Although these readings are different, as pointed out before, they are not exclusive, since it is also possible to ask about the existence of a *characteristically* Latin American philosophy *in* the subcontinent. And they are not contradictory, since the correct answer could be either assent or dissent in both readings of the question.

2. Is There Philosophy in Latin America?

The question now is about the existence of philosophy *in* a certain geographical area made up of political entities – such as Cuba, Uruguay, Venezuela, and so on. Thus

understood, it calls for a straightforward assent that is supported by well-known facts attesting to the existence of the discipline in the subcontinent: viz., a number of institutions, works, and practitioners devoted to philosophy in Latin America. These constitute sound evidence that, in Latin America, Western philosophy not only exists, but appears to be thriving. It is practiced in specialized departments that grant undergraduate, and in some cases graduate, degrees in philosophy. There are scholarly journals, websites, and publications of the usual sorts. Furthermore, philosophical works covering a spectrum of representative topics, treated from a variety of traditions, are commonly available. And, since at least the 1940s, there are regular conferences, workshops, and other public venues of expression of academic philosophy (see, for example, Baschetti, 2005; Villegas, 1963; and González & Stigol in this volume).

In light of the evidence, then, there is no doubt that philosophy exists in Latin America. As we saw, this conclusion (crucial for universalists willing to avoid self-defeat) triggers the acceptability constraint above, since its acceptance requires a plausible account of what, exactly, Latin American philosophy consists of. In turn, this commits to finding suitable solutions to a number of problems, such as determining the scope, name, boundaries, and historical roots of the discipline.

The scope of the discipline

As noted earlier, by 'Latin American philosophy,' universalists take themselves to mean 'philosophy in Latin America' rather than 'characteristically Latin American philosophy.' As a consequence, the issue of what, exactly, that philosophy consists of is particularly pressing to them. For one thing, they must now determine what to make of the celebrated work of certain Latin American thinkers who have clearly broached philosophically interesting ideas, but are themselves perceived as only 'amateur philosophers.'

This raises the uncomfortable but unavoidable question: Who counts as a philosopher? In Latin America, it was not until the first half of the twentieth century that philosophy acquired an academic status similar to the one it already had by then in Europe and North America. During the colonial period (roughly, from the late fifteenth century to the early nineteenth century), Iberian rulers imposed in the New World their own scholastic conceptual framework, a paradigm of philosophical thinking that was already obsolete in other parts of Europe. For the most part, Latin American academic philosophers of the period failed to produce original philosophical work within that framework. Even so, during the colonial era, and during the wars of independence and the national organization that followed them, a number of amateur philosophers wrote insightful pieces that bear on various areas of philosophy, ranging from feminism and ethics to social and political philosophy. Though not philosophers by training, they were clearly motivated by philosophical curiosity and developed, in the course of their own reflections on issues related to their careers as generals, politicians, grammarians, librarians, scientists, and literary figures, significant new ideas that can only be called *philosophical*. This group includes, among many others, Juana Inés de la Cruz, Simón Bolívar, Juan Bautista Alberdi, Andrés Bello, José Martí, José Carlos Rodó, Justo Sierra, and José Ingenieros. If we were to exclude from our pantheon thinkers of this caliber as 'insufficiently philosophical,' the risk is that we'd be left with

a Latin American philosophy consisting of only a very thin and unoriginal corpus of philosophical work.

This is, however, very far from being a settled issue. Given certain universalists' standards for what is to count as philosophy, amateur philosophy is *not* philosophy. As a result, when faced with an acceptability constraint, those universalists generally offer a severely skeptical account of Latin American philosophy. Once amateur philosophers are excluded, universalists are left with a comparatively short list of contemporary philosophical practitioners and philosophical theories in Latin America – and this leads them to see Latin American philosophy as being 'unsubstantial,' 'imitative,' 'fruitless,' and the like. But note that, in the hands of such 'skeptical' universalists, the question at stake has implicitly the form, 'Is there an x Latin American philosophy?' – where ' x ' stands for 'substantial,' 'original,' 'consequential,' and so on. That is, skeptical universalists are in fact asking what is in some sense a distinctivist question. If they are right in their answers, then although Latin American philosophy might be of some historical interest, it would not be worth considering for its own sake.

Examples of this universalist approach are not difficult to find. Consider the skeptical universalism of two generations of Latin American philosophers, one represented by the Argentine, Risieri Frondizi (1910–83), and the other by the Mexican, Carlos Pereda (contemporary). In his influential (1949) paper, Frondizi excludes from Latin American philosophy many celebrated works of the amateur philosophers from various historical periods, from the sixteenth century to at least the early twentieth century. On his view, to be eligible for inclusion, those thinkers should have pursued 'philosophy as such' – by which he appears to mean 'philosophy for its own sake' – and a quick look into their work reveals that they certainly did subordinate narrowly philosophical concerns to other nonphilosophical interests, such as literary, social, and political ones. It follows that they must be ruled out as Latin American *philosophers*.

Frondizi is then led to answer his question 'Is there a Latin American philosophy?' in the negative. But the argument offered to support that conclusion suggests that he is in fact asking about the existence of a *substantial, original* philosophy of that sort. With no amateur philosophers included, he is then committed to skeptical universalism, the view that the discipline of philosophy does exist in Latin America but has very little to be said for it. Again, once the amateur philosophers are excluded, Latin American philosophy appears an anemic exercise devoid of significant history, theories, methods, and number of practitioners. It would comprise mostly contemporary works, since academic philosophy began in Latin America only in the early twentieth century, through the efforts of the so-called *fundadores* (founders). Moreover, since those who have the more original views were not these trained philosophers, and so are at best amateurs, the discipline does seem vulnerable to the objection that it is imitative and fruitless.

More recently, Carlos Pereda's reflection on Latin American philosophy, which he calls 'thought,' offers a parallel case of skeptical universalism. Consider Pereda's take on the work of another contemporary Mexican thinker, Luis Villoro (2006): we are told by Pereda that it contributes no less to Latin American philosophy when it applies analytic methods to some universal topics of epistemology than when it addresses distinctive issues concerning the Latin American Indians. But this claim clearly equivocates between the two different construals of 'Latin American philosophy' mentioned

earlier. After all, suppose the epistemological work of Villoro, say, on Cartesian skepticism, is such that it adds nothing *characteristically* Latin American to the discussion of that topic. That work might then count as ‘Latin American philosophy’ only in the weak sense of ‘philosophy in Latin America’ – where the relevant discipline is construed universalistically. Another matter is Villoro’s (and any other philosopher’s) philosophical work on the Latin American Indians, which as far as topic is concerned, would clearly count as characteristically Latin American. It would therefore plainly belong to Latin American philosophy, distinctivistically construed. Now since anything that qualifies as *characteristically Latin American philosophy* qualifies as *philosophy* but not vice versa, therefore the two different construals of the question should not be conflated.

Skeptical universalism also fuels Pereda’s endorsement of a conception of ‘philosophy in Latin America,’ which takes it to be ‘unbridled’ in the sense of lacking specific subject matters and welcoming them all. Against what I have called here ‘distinctivism,’ Pereda writes:

Outside of the persistence of certain colonial habits, I do not understand why some Latin Americans want to stop the rest from acquiring this wise ‘unbridled’ character: from ‘delving into everything.’ This simplifying force has a long history among us, one of whose origins may be found in the claims of Juan Bautista Alberdi. (2006, p. 201 n.10)

But there are two problems in this passage. For one thing, it conflates doing philosophy in Latin America (about which it is plausible to say that it has ‘delved into everything’) and doing a characteristically Latin American philosophy, a necessary condition of which is having certain distinctive features. Furthermore, it traces back to Alberdi (Argentinean, 1810–84) the view that Latin American philosophy must in some ways be limited to social and political philosophy. Here Pereda has in mind the Alberdi of ‘Ideas . . .,’ a short article that appeared in the newspaper *El Nacional* (Montevideo, October 2, 1840), and was not reprinted until the turn of the nineteenth century. To set the record straight, the article does *not* endorse the view that philosophy in the newly independent Latin American nations should be only ‘applied philosophy,’ with emphasis on autochthonous political and social problems. Rather, as suggested by its title (see references), the piece attempts to provide directions for developing a course in contemporary philosophy that could be offered in secondary schools. Given its purpose, time, and place of publication, it is very implausible that Alberdi’s ‘Ideas . . .’ could have had the distinctivist influences Pereda attributes to it.

The Cuban journalist and poet, Jose Martí, and the Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, might both be counted as amateur philosophers of great talent and acuity, and Pereda praises them as Latin American essayists whose work ought to be admired and whose success ought to be studied and emulated by Latin American philosophers. But he ultimately agrees with Frondizi that these and other amateur philosophers don’t belong to philosophy in Latin America. As a result, Pereda too is led to a skeptical conclusion about the Latin Americans who *do* count as philosophers: namely, that those practitioners of the discipline in the subcontinent exhibit a number of vices, such as demonstrating ‘subaltern fervor’ (i.e., being imitative), ‘craving for novelty’ (i.e., being impressed by the latest philosophical fads) and ‘nationalist enthusiasm’ (i.e., having narrow-minded

distinctivist tendencies). In the end, such pessimistic conclusions don't differ much from Frondizi's. Other well-known arguments for similar conclusions are to be found, e.g., in the work of Augusto Salazar Bondy (1968) and José Carlos Mariátegui (1925, see Pearlman, 1996).

The name of the discipline

The strategy of countenancing a broader discipline, sometimes called 'Latin American thought,' is indeed an option. But it is not available to skeptical universalists unless they were to conceive it as entirely separate – viz., a non-philosophical discipline devoted to the work of amateur philosophers. *There is already* a discipline by that name recognized widely in Latin America, *pensamiento latinoamericano*, but it standardly includes the works of both philosophers and amateur philosophers.

On the other hand, non-skeptical universalists may countenance a discipline of just that sort without being committed to denying that there are some philosophical theories, methods, and topics that are exclusively universal. Different versions of this weak universalist position can be found in Nuccetelli (2002) and in recent work by the Cuban American philosopher, Jorge Gracia (I see Gracia's proposal as agnostic about the inclusion of amateur thinkers; more on this below). Besides 'Latin American thought,' other labels proposed for the discipline more inclusively construed include 'Hispanic-American thought' (Mariátegui, 1925), 'Latino philosophy' (Gracia, 2008), and '*el filosofar lationamericano*' ('Latin American philosophizing'; Miró Quesada, 1974). Although the last, a quite unusual label, has never caught on, it clearly aims at capturing the distinctiveness of philosophy in Latin America.

The boundaries of the discipline

However called, non-skeptical strong universalists are committed to including in the discipline only philosophical works individuated by reference to certain geopolitical entities: viz., the subcontinent and group of countries that make up Latin America. Recall that for such universalists, the discipline boils down to what we have called 'philosophy *in* Latin America.' Although this expression might be taken to set clear boundaries, it has several shortcomings: it doesn't apply to the proper cases and it doesn't rule out borderline cases (which amounts to saying that *it is indeterminate*, or at least unclear, whether it applies to those cases). One way to interpret the expression is as denoting the property:

- (1) Being philosophy produced *in* Latin America.

But (1) faces problems. Clearly, it doesn't apply to works in Latin American philosophy done by Latin Americans outside the subcontinent, such as Gracia's and my own. And it doesn't rule out *non*-Latin Americans whose works seem either a borderline case, such as Ortega y Gasset's (a Spanish philosopher, 1883–1955, who did some work in Latin America), or not part of the Latin American philosophy corpus of at all (e.g., Larry Laudan, U.S. philosopher of science now working at the Universidad Autónoma in Mexico). So the criterion captures neither necessary nor sufficient conditions. Moreover, it leads to

absurd conclusions when the principle is developed further. It comes out as preposterous when we try a similar move for biology, since then the part of Charles Darwin's theory developed in the course of his long travels in South America should come out as Latin American biology!

Another possible interpretation is

(2) Being a philosophical work produced by a philosopher born in Latin America.

(2) is certainly not necessary, and if sufficient, it would be a very weak criterion indeed, as shown by the cases of philosophers who, though Latin American by birth, have produced important work on theories, methods, and/or topics that bear no especial relation to Latin America. Surely the work of Ernest Sosa (Cuban-born epistemologist, United States) and of C. Ulises Moulines (Venezuelan-born philosopher of science, Germany) is eligible for Latin American philosophy understood as (2), but this is a very weak, uninteresting sense of the term. On the other hand, that (2) is not a necessary condition is shown by, for instance, foreign-born Latin American philosophers who are nonetheless standardly counted in the history of the discipline, such as the Italian-born Rodolfo Mondolfo (1877–1976) who worked extensively in Argentina.

We needn't now continue our search for other simple criteria, such as 'being the philosophical work of those of Latin American descent' and the like, since it's likely that these are vulnerable to similar objections. Let's consider instead a more a disjunctive criterion such as,

- (3) A philosophical work qualifies for Latin American philosophy if and only if it is either
- (a) produced in Latin America, by a Latin American philosopher or by a foreign philosopher settled in Latin America; or
 - (b) produced outside Latin America, by a philosopher who is Latin American by birth or descent.

This inclusive disjunction featuring some of the above conditions is not, however, without problems. For one thing, it is too liberal since it would count as Latin American philosophy any philosophical work by a Latin American philosopher, *even if it bears no other relation to the subcontinent than the historical connection of its author*. Many would, for example, hesitate to count among the practitioners of Latin American philosophy international figures such as Bunge, an Argentinean philosopher of science who has worked mostly in Canada (beginning with Bunge himself, given what he says in the passage quoted above).

It may be replied that all of these difficulties are just semantic ones: having already accepted that the expression 'Latin American philosophy' has at least two readings – one universalist, the other distinctivist – universalists might invite us to further acknowledge that the expression is also vague. If so, then it is as indeterminate whether the expression applies to the works of figures such as Bunge, Sosa, Ortega, and many others, as it is whether 'tall' applies to George W. Bush or 'young' to Queen Latifah. But that doesn't preclude the expression from determinately applying in other cases.

The historical roots of the discipline

Skeptical universalists often credit the *fundadores* of the early twentieth century with the origins of philosophy in Latin America, who actually did initiate a ‘standardization’ academic philosophy in the subcontinent (e.g., Alberini, 1927; Cooper in this volume). But many non-skeptical universalists and distinctivists are willing to credit philosophers or thinkers of other periods as well. On a recent proposal (Oviedo, 2005), it is only with the work of José Ingenieros and other nineteenth-century positivists that the discipline began. But proposals of this sort cannot accommodate the evidence of Western philosophy in Latin America during earlier periods such as the colonial one (see Beuchot, 1996).

An interesting problem regarding the origins of the discipline is created by written documents suggesting the existence of pre-Columbian philosophical thought. It has been argued (León-Portilla, 1963, pp. 8–9, 23 and ff.; Nuccetelli, 2002; Maffie in this volume) that certain well-preserved texts are evidence of the existence of philosophical thought among the Maya and Aztec in the form of folk-cosmologies and reflections on problems of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. Prominent among the existing documents are the Maya’s *Popol Vuh* and their *Books of Chilam Balam* or *Códices* – though there is also evidence from Spanish chronicles of the New World (see Restrepo in this volume).

Needless to say, pre-Columbian thought unfolds in ways that seem utterly alien to our standard conceptions of philosophy. But a strict compliance with such standards cannot be held as a necessary condition of being counted as philosophy. After all, it has been not uncommon in the history of Western philosophy to include as *philosophy* path-breaking works that also flout prevalent standards of format or content. One thinks immediately of the writings of Parmenides, Plato, and Wittgenstein. Moreover, those who wish to exclude pre-Columbian thought from the history of Latin American philosophy cannot argue that such a thought raises issues we would now think not properly philosophical. For in that case the works of nearly all pre-Socratic Greek philosophers would have to be excluded too, since they raise questions that are in fact quite analogous to those in pre-Columbian folk-cosmologies. And, as in the case of Pythagoras, their answers were often also mixed up with myth and religion (see Nuccetelli, 2002).

On the other hand, as in the case of the relation between pre-Socratic thought and Western philosophy, pre-Columbian philosophical works have been taken to make up at least a proto Latin American philosophy – a claim that is consistent with holding that more contemporary philosophical methods are needed *now* to properly discuss the same issues. Among those who reject the parallel, some argue that only in the case of pre-Socratics there is some continuity in the method used (Nuccetelli, 2002). Others suspend judgment: “Latin American philosophy,” write the authors of a topical entry in a current dictionary of philosophy, “begins with the Spanish and Portuguese discovery and colonization of the New World” (Gracia et al., 1995, p. 462). Gracia himself appears to be also agnostic on the matter, since when reflecting upon whether the Maya folk-cosmology in the *Popol Vuh* belongs in the discipline, he has this to say:

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, p. 142)

Even when professing agnosticism, Gracia clearly provides here what he considers a condition for the folk-cosmology in the *Popol Vuh* to amount to philosophy: viz., that “pre-Columbians can be considered part of the Latino ethnos.” In other words, the philosophical ideas in the *Popol Vuh* would belong to Latin American philosophy if the Mayans themselves belong to what Gracia calls ‘Latino’ people (to whom I’m referring here as ‘Latin Americans,’ widely construed to apply also to persons of Latin American heritage.) But what is meant by ‘belonging to a people’ is in need of clarification. For example, it cannot be relativized to actuality only, for that would lead to the implausible conclusion that, for example, Ancient Greek philosophy doesn’t count as European philosophy. After all, *today* the Ancient Greeks are not literally *part of* the European people. But we don’t want to say that Plato’s *Republic* is not to be included in European philosophy. So the relation must allow for historical chains: Ancient Greeks are in this sense *part of* the European people, and their philosophical works therefore eligible for inclusion in European philosophy. Now it is beyond dispute that the *Popol Vuh*, perhaps more than any other pre-Columbian narrative, is part of the culture of the Maya people today, who have received it mostly through an oral tradition. So, by the above condition, the *Popol Vuh* would qualify for inclusion in Latin American philosophy unless the Maya do not qualify as Latin Americans. But clearly they do. After all, consider Rigoberta Menchú, a Maya Quiché Guatemalan who is a Nobel laureate well known as an advocate of human rights for indigenous peoples. Surely, in light of the historical, geographical, and cultural facts – e.g., that Menchú is held in high regard as an honored citizen in Latin America – it would make no sense to deny that she is Latin American. Likewise, it would make no sense to exclude the people whom she represents: the Maya.

It follows that, if we reason by Gracia’s criterion in the passage above, the *Popol Vuh* comes out as included in Latin American philosophy. So, it seems that if Gracia chooses to remain agnostic on the subject, he would now face a dilemma with no plausible solution. On the one hand, he could argue that the *Popol Vuh* cannot be read as a philosophical or proto-philosophical text at all (i.e., he could simply *deny* our assumption above). On the other, he could insist that the Maya are *not* part of the Latin American people. But supporting the latter horn would be an uphill battle. And to support the former would require setting up sound standards for what is to count as philosophy, an equally unpromising assignment.

But skeptics and agnostics about pre-Columbian philosophical thought often do include in Latin American philosophy the works of Scholastics such as Antonio Rubio (Mexican, 1548–1615), whose textbook *Logica mexicana (Mexican Logic)* was at the time also popular in Spain. For this work, the problem would be just the reverse of what we’ve had with the *Popol Vuh*: it would pass muster with universalists but not with distinctivists. From the latter’s perspective, to which we now turn, no work can count

as Latin American philosophy unless it clearly shows something characteristically Latin American – and *Logica Mexicana* fails to do this.

Is there a characteristically Latin American philosophy?

Recall that for distinctivists, a characteristically Latin American philosophy is one that has one or more virtues, such as *being original*, *being authentic*, or *being autochthonous*. Furthermore, weak universalists keep an open mind about such a philosophy, and at some points even strong universalists have had some such qualities in mind when they denied the existence of a Latin American philosophy. Although failure to identify the specific quality at issue in discussions of the existence (or possibility) of characteristically Latin American philosophy is endemic, here is a tentative list of what may be at stake:

- (1) Being an original or novel Latin American philosophy
- (2) Being authentic or genuine Latin American philosophy
- (3) Being an autochthonous Latin American philosophy.

When understood as having property (1), there is a characteristically Latin American philosophy just in case such a philosophy has theories, methods, or topics that are (in some relevant sense) distinct from those of standard philosophy. (1) entails (2), which boils down to the negative quality of avoiding being imitative. But neither of these entails having (3), which amounts to the property of being relevantly related to Latin America. Different parties in the debate have had one or more of these construals in mind. As we have seen, Frondizi's and Pereda's skepticism construes 'characteristically' as (1) and (2). But other skeptics have in mind (2) and (3): among others, José Carlos Mariátegui and Augusto Salazar Body have held a colonial-mentality view according to which Latin America's dependence on the West is an insurmountable obstacle to the development of a characteristically Latin American philosophy in those senses. Yet even so, they are merely *describing* a condition that need not last forever.

On the distinctivist camp, Leopoldo Zea (Mexican, 1912–2004) construes it as (3), for his perspectivism is indifferent about whether Latin American philosophy has (1) or (2). For Zea, philosophical works invariably show the cultural perspectives of those who produce them. Thus, in Latin America, "even in imitation, there was creation and re-creation" (1989, p. 41). Now of course it cannot be denied that Latin American literature did undergo a process of this sort. But in the case of philosophy, textual evidence is needed to support the idea that a philosophy entirely 'borrowed' from foreign sources could be *characteristically Latin American*. In any case, Zea's perspectivism holds:

- (i) There is a characteristically Latin American philosophy.
- (ii) The problems and methods of philosophy are universal.
- (iii) Philosophers' 'circumstances' always shape their theories and methods.

The perspectivist adds (iii) to make (i) and (ii) compatible, since now there is logical space for a universal philosophy that at the same time "permeates" its context. But this

perspectivist thesis is quite strong, entailing that no philosophical doctrine of any kind could be *perspective-less* (it is only from within a particular set of social circumstances that a doctrine could be entertained at all). As Zea puts it,

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. (1986, p. 226)

We might reasonably ask whether Zea's argument here can really bear the weight of such an ambitious claim. For philosophers' cultural differences need not affect their theories or methods. Compare visual images: Although people's eyes vary in size, shape, and color across different groups, those variations have no bearing on their visual images. But even if this is not a perfect analogy, Zea's argument would still be in need of support, given the evidence from the history of philosophy. It would be odd, to say the least, to hold that there is something autochthonous in Aristotle's theory of the syllogism, in Descartes' attempted solution to the mind–body problem, or in Hume's skepticism about induction. In addition, perspectivism seems quite liberal: it permits almost any philosophical theory, method or topic at issue in Latin America to count as *Latin American* philosophy.

Related chapters: 1 Pre-Columbian Philosophies; 3 Colonial Thought; 9 'Normal' Philosophy; 18 Identity and Philosophy; 22 Philosophy, Postcoloniality, and Postmodernity.

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