

## IS “LATIN AMERICAN THOUGHT” PHILOSOPHY?

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**Abstract:** A durable question in Latin American thought is whether it could amount to a characteristically Latin American philosophy. I argue that if, as is now widely conceded, there is a role for philosophical analysis in thinking about problems that arise in applied subjects, such as bioethics, environmental ethics, and feminism, then why not also in Latin American thought? After all, the focus of Hispanic thinkers has often been upon the issues that arise in their own experiences of the world, and they make up a diverse group of peoples related by very idiosyncratic ethnic and historical connections. I believe that, given some appropriate criteria, the existing corpus of works by Latin American thinkers is a part of a distinctive philosophy.

Keywords: universalism, culturalism, the critical view, context sensitivity, philosophy as such.

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### 1

In 1925, the Peruvian thinker José Carlos Mariátegui raised the question of whether there is a characteristically Latin American thought or philosophy, and this is a problem to which Hispanic thinkers ever since have often returned. Although the problem may be understood in several ways, as shown by an extensive literature,<sup>1</sup> here we shall consider it in the form of two smaller questions. One asks whether there is a typically Latin American philosophy—and hence is factual, for any answer to it would depend on how things are and would therefore be either true or false. The other involves a modal question about possibility and is better cast as asking whether there *could* be such a philosophy. Accordingly, affirmative answers to each of these would read as follows:

*Factual claim:* There is a characteristically Latin American philosophy.

*Modal claim:* There could be a characteristically Latin American philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Gracia 2000 and Martí 1983, esp. 46–52.

We must bear in mind, first, that claims of this sort have been made to refer to either *thought* or *philosophy* in Latin America, and I shall at the outset use those terms as if they were roughly interchangeable. Second, if the factual claim is true, then the modal one is also—but not the other way around. Naturally, a negative answer to the modal question would conflict with the factual claim and, if well supported, would undermine the currently growing interest in Latin American philosophy—as well as the rationale for this article. But I intend to show that there are no good reasons to deny that claim.

Mariátegui (1925, 118), however, was led to deny it on the grounds that

All the thinkers of our America have been educated in European schools. The spirit of the race is not felt in their work. The continent's intellectual production lacks its own characteristics. It does not have an original profile. Hispanic-American thought is generally only a rhapsody composed from the motifs and elements of European thought. To prove this, one can merely review the work of the highest representatives of the Indo-Iberian intellect.

Now it is clear that this sort of criticism has force, and that Mariátegui is not entirely wrong here. It is plausible to hold that Latin America has been (or even is) culturally dependent on Western societies as he maintains in this passage. That would support a negative answer to the factual question, though it would have no bearing at all on the modal one. After all, cultural dependence need not last forever. Mariátegui, like other proponents of this "critical view,"<sup>2</sup> has addressed only the question of *what is*, without drawing any further conclusion about the *possibility* of a characteristically Latin American philosophy. Yet, as we have noted, a negative answer to the factual question would (if sound) be sufficient to challenge the currently growing interest in Latin American philosophy and the rationale of this article. But could that answer really be supported after all? The passage above takes cultural dependence to be one reason to think that it could. And it was invoked not only by Mariátegui but also by other critical theorists in the course of some heated debates.<sup>3</sup> Because the question is factual, it can be answered only by looking closely at the history and current status of Latin American philosophy.

Proponents of the critical view, however, believe that scrutinizing this philosophy will only reveal that it fails to be *characteristically* Latin American, for it has produced neither major philosophical figures nor significant local 'isms' that suggest the existence of original traditions. The Peruvian philosopher Augusto Salazar Bondy, for example, claims to have found intellectual bad habits among Latin American thinkers that

<sup>2</sup> The traditional parties in this debate have been regarded as defending either 'universalism', 'culturalism', or a 'critical view'. More on this in Gracia 1986 and Jaksic 1989.

<sup>3</sup> For details on these debates, see Schutte 1993.

can be traced back to the colonial period—and those thinkers are no less imitative and universalist today than in the past, he believes, because they still continue to welcome foreign schools and traditions. And is there not a sense of intellectual frustration conveyed by their theories, he asks (1969, 233–34), perhaps because the proponents realize that they lack a definitive profile and can contribute nothing interesting to philosophy and their community? Yet these shortcomings may be only inevitable results of external factors causing Latin America's cultural dependence and underdevelopment. Salazar Bondy in fact appeals to such factors when he notes that in the subcontinent philosophy “was originally a thought imposed by the European conqueror in accord with the interest of the Spanish Crown and Church. It has since been a thought of the upper class or of a refined oligarchical elite, when it has not corresponded openly to waves of foreign economic and political influence. In all these cases underdevelopment and domination are influential” (1969, 241).

Mariátegui and Salazar Bondy are, of course, not the only critical theorists who have pointed to external factors of this sort to deny the factual claim. For example, the Brazilian philosopher Afranio Coutinho has issued a similar indictment of his country's philosophy. With the exception of the positivists, he maintains (1943, 187–88), Brazil has had no original philosophers at all, for Brazilian thinkers have a “colonial mentality, which is not the ideal mentality for building a creative philosophy.” And, he continues, “I cannot imagine how we could have any other mentality without having complete independence—economic, and cultural—from the imperialistic powers.”

None of these passages, however, provides any support for the further claim that there *could be no* characteristically Latin American thought—for it is consistent with them that, once obstacles like cultural dependence and underdevelopment are overcome, such a philosophy may indeed take root and flourish. But then it seems the critical theorist has drawn a rather modest conclusion. We may summarize his argument as follows: Given the available evidence of past and current philosophy in Latin America, nothing *characteristically* Latin American has been developed *yet*.

Even so, this conclusion is quite damaging. As I noted earlier, it would appear to undermine the rationale for studying Latin American philosophy. But it is worth asking whether the critical theorist has in fact interpreted the works of Latin American thinkers in a way that is faithful to their intentions and appropriately charitable toward what is true in their writings. Salazar Bondy, for example, has clearly overstated his case. For although many Latin American thinkers did at times accept Western paradigms, it is not the case that all of them did or that they *always* did so, as may be seen from the works of the Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Jesuit missionary José de Acosta, who notably rebelled against Iberian Scholastics. And Mariátegui is certainly

wrong when he claims that "the motifs" of Latin American philosophy are European—since, after all, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Francisco de Vitoria, and many others did address problems that arose out of the *local* realities of the subcontinent. But doesn't it matter that some of these philosophers were born in the Iberian Peninsula? Surely not, for insofar as they were concerned with philosophical problems generated by issues specific to Latin America, they deserve a place in its philosophy.

Furthermore, they clearly did develop original schools of thought. For example, Vitoria created a school that made original contributions to natural-law theory and to the philosophy of international law and human rights. And what of the critics' charge that these thinkers fostered no 'isms'? In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Las Casas is widely acknowledged as a precursor of Indigenism, and Latin American philosophy did flourish in Sor Juana's feminism, in an autochthonous positivism, in Bolivarism, and of course, in Arielism. Salazar Bondy's indictment of Latin American thinkers for their careless and unoriginal habits of mind could be met by appealing to the exemplary intellectual character of such thinkers from different periods and traditions as Las Casas, Sor Juana, Simón Bolívar, José Martí, and Mariátegui himself. And the works of Domingo F. Sarmiento and José E. Rodó, when charitably interpreted, are counterexamples to Coutinho's claim that those who have a colonial mentality can never think creatively. Thus, in the absence of better reasons, we can retain the factual claim.

## 2

If we were to take the view that what is to count as 'philosophy' must always be the same sort of thing, so that it could not vary according to where or when it is practiced, then the modal claim would be false, and this view would entail the falsity of the factual claim as well. Such a universalist objection to these claims seems to rest on an analogy between philosophy and the sciences. According to a widely held view, contextual factors matter in the process of developing a scientific theory, but once the theory has been formulated such factors are irrelevant to its justification. Why shouldn't the same be true of philosophy? After all, the problems that have traditionally been thought most typically *philosophical* include, for instance, questions about the nature of reality, about how to solve skeptical challenges to knowledge—and what it *means* to 'know' something—about whether belief in God can be justified, and about what it means for a statement to be 'true'; and these problems all do appear universal. Moreover, rational argumentation seems a necessary method for any philosophers, no matter when or where they live.

On the other hand, given our reading of certain thinkers, it also seems abundantly clear that there is a characteristically Latin American philosophy. For Las Casas, Sor Juana, Sarmiento, and many others

not only addressed philosophical problems that arose in the subcontinent but also attempted to solve them in novel ways. We appear to be left, then, with a paradox; for the existence of a characteristically Latin American philosophy seems incompatible with its being a universal discipline. In other words, the following theses are both inconsistent and independently plausible:

- (i) There is a characteristically Latin American philosophy.
- (ii) The problems and methods of philosophy are universal.
- (iii) (i) and (ii) are incompatible.

To resolve this paradox, one of these must be shown false, but which one? On a certain 'culturalist' solution—defended by, among others, the Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea—when (ii) is cast in the proper way, (iii) would be false. To show this, the culturalist appeals to relations philosophers have to some culture, society, or, more generally, 'circumstance', holding that these are always relevant to the framing of their philosophical theories. Although these theories may concern universal problems and proceed by universalist methods, the product of the philosophers' reflection would invariably show their characteristic cultural perspectives. In fact, on this view no philosophical thought of any kind could be *perspective-less*, since it is only from within a certain cultural perspective that a thought could be entertained at all.<sup>4</sup>

On a culturalist construal, then, the universality of philosophy appears compatible with the existence of a characteristically Latin American philosophy. Zea (1948, 226) insists that

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.

Unfortunately, this line of argument is doomed to fail. It cannot succeed in proving the compatibility of (i) and (ii) for the simple reason that it is invalid. From the fact that members of a certain group belong to a distinct culture, it does not follow that the philosophical theories set forth by some of them would necessarily show that culture's perspective. Compare this with vision: clearly, human eyes vary in size, shape, and color across different groups. But this does not entail that such

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Zea 1948.

characteristic features of people's eyes will somehow affect the visual images framed by them.

Furthermore, the culturalist must argue that distinctive cultural perspectives will be evident in the work of philosophers not only in Latin America but also in other parts of the world. To Zea, philosophy in, for example, Greece, France, or Britain is universal and at same time characteristically Greek, French, or British. But the idea begins to seem suspicious if we try to test it with examples from the history of philosophy. What, if anything, could possibly count as *characteristically Greek* in Aristotle's theory of the syllogism, *French* in Descartes's attempted solution to the mind-body problem, or *British* in Hume's skepticism about induction?

Is there no way, then, to resolve the paradox? In fact, a culturalist might suggest that in Latin America "even in imitation, there was creation and re-creation."<sup>5</sup> But does it really make sense to regard theories entirely borrowed from foreign sources as part of a *characteristically* Latin American philosophy? The culturalist view here seems too liberal, since it would permit almost any philosophical theory proposed by a Latin American to count as Latin American philosophy. But surely it is one thing to hold that there is Thomism *in* Latin America and quite another that there is a characteristically Latin American Thomism. Of course, if we were to decide, in the end, that there is a *characteristically* Hispanic American thought, then it will be as result of our having found more examples of a characteristically Latin American Thomism. Given the culturalist's failure to demonstrate that there is such a thing, however, perhaps universalism must prevail after all.

### 3

Although the triumph of universalism in this debate might seem a plausible conclusion, there is an important reason why that solution would be too hasty. Thesis (iii) is false. Universalism can in fact be shown to be compatible with a characteristically Latin American philosophy. This becomes clear when we take a philosophy of that sort to be defined as follows:

A philosophical theory is *characteristically* Latin American if and only if

- (1) it offers original philosophical arguments, and

<sup>5</sup> Zea 1989, 41. In his 1948 (220), Zea similarly argues that "[t]he existence of Latin American philosophy depends on whether or not there is Latin American culture. However, the formulation and attempt to solve this problem apart from the affirmative or negative character of the answer, are already Latin American philosophy, since they are an attempt to answer affirmatively or negatively a Latin American question. Hence, the works of Ramos, Romero, and others on this issue, whatever their conclusions, are already Latin American philosophy."

- (2) it shows that its philosophical topics are in part determined by the relation its proponent bears to social and/or historical factors in Latin America.

Let (1) be 'originality' and (2) a special case of 'sensitivity to the environment'. When the notion of a *characteristically* Latin American philosophy is construed in this way, we find ample evidence of its existence in the works of, for example, the Latin American thinkers mentioned above. The writings of Las Casas, Sor Juana, Sarmiento, and many others plainly score high in both originality and sensitivity to the environment.

Moreover, this view has the advantage that it can easily accommodate universalism. It can grant that some issues, such as the problem of knowledge, the mind-body problem, and whether belief in God can be justified, have a universal import grounded in the tradition of Western philosophy, and it also acknowledges that philosophy is widely conceived of as having a core of universal problems and numerous branches, where elements of a general theory are analyzed more narrowly in connection with specific contexts. What exactly is the relation between the core and those branches? That is a complex problem of metaphilosophy that goes well beyond our concern here, but it is important to note that the existence of some standard branches and their relation to the core are ordinarily taken for granted and not often disputed among philosophers. This raises a suspicion that a double standard may be at work when some philosophers object to the idea of a Latin American philosophy. Although universalist objections to the existence of, for example, medical ethics are rare, objections to the existence of a Latin American philosophy are not at all uncommon. Yet if there is a role for philosophical analysis in thinking about the problems that arise in the practice of medicine, then why not also in thinking about the issues that arise in the ordinary lives and experiences of Latin Americans? After all, this diverse group of peoples, related by very idiosyncratic cultural connections, have a distinct identity rooted in their history.

In the absence of reasons to the contrary, then, we may conclude that the universalist's objection to the modal claim has been met and thus the paradox resolved. It seems that the universality of philosophy is after all compatible with the existence of a characteristically Latin American philosophy.

#### 4

We are not done yet, however, for there is an altogether different maneuver that may still undermine our argument, and it is grounded in a distinction between two different understandings of what philosophy is: a broad conception and a more narrow one. According to the Argentinian philosopher Risieri Frondizi,

it is undeniable that the works of Sarmiento, Bello, or Martí—to mention three great examples—contain philosophical ideas. But such ideas appear as a result of literary or political concerns to which they remain subordinated. *In none of them does philosophy have an independent status; none of them set forth philosophical problems motivated by philosophical interests.* We are, of course, not reproaching them for this; their work fills us with satisfaction and admiration. Nor are we trying to understand the historical causes, the cultural and political circumstances that hindered the growth of a philosophy in the strict sense. We only wish to point out what seems an undeniable fact: *that philosophy has been subordinated to non-philosophical interests.* (Frondizi 1949, 346; emphasis added)

If this is correct, what we earlier called “the factual claim” would break down into two smaller claims, depending on whether the factual claim involves philosophy construed strictly or more broadly. It would then be one thing to grant the existence of a characteristically Latin American ‘philosophy’ (in a broad sense), but quite another to concede that there was a Latin American *philosophy* (in the strict sense). By Frondizi’s definition, most of the works I mentioned earlier would amount only to philosophy in the broad sense (hereafter, ‘thought’)—for although they raise philosophical topics, these are often brought into service only for the sake of the thinker’s other interests, usually political, literary, or social concerns. By ‘philosophy as such’—that is, in the strict sense—Frondizi (1949, 347) understands something different: the pursuit of philosophical questions for their own sake (hereafter, ‘philosophy’)—that is, the occupation of professional philosophers at universities.

Once these notions have been distinguished, it is possible to agree that there is a characteristically Latin American thought while denying that any of it is philosophy. Since the works of Las Casas, Sor Juana, Sarmiento, and others certainly meet the criteria of originality and sensitivity to the environment—defined as (1) and (2) above—there is then a *characteristically* Latin American thought.<sup>6</sup> But these works all fall short of philosophy on Frondizi’s definition, for

- (3) A theory is philosophical (in the strict sense) if and only if it sets forth philosophical problems motivated by philosophical interests.

Note, however, that scoring high in (3) may sometimes be combined with a poor performance in criteria (1) and (2). Consider, for instance, the so-called *fundadores* (founders) of the early twentieth century, a group of Latin American philosophers who rejected the positivist emphasis on practical concerns and strove to develop a practice of philosophy in the subcontinent more in keeping with what their peers were doing at the time in major centers of the West. Through their efforts, journals, conferences, and other forms of professional interaction among Latin

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Martí 1983.



American philosophers were created. This, together with the new status achieved thereby for philosophy within the community, earned the founders credit for having established philosophical ‘normalcy’ in Latin America. According to Frondizi, the founders were the first generation of “real philosophers” in the region, because their theories, unlike those of previous thinkers, were independent of nonphilosophical interests.<sup>7</sup>

All this amounts to evidence that the founders met criterion (3). But what about criteria (1) and (2)? Heavily influenced by European philosophers of the time, they emulated in their methods and philosophical concerns the style of the continental tradition—especially as developed under the influence of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Husserl. When the founders rejected positivism in the early twentieth century, it was because of their general antipathy toward the positivists’ scientific orientation and emphasis on empirical knowledge. As an alternative to these, the founders championed metaphysics, defined somewhat obscurely as “the study of Being *qua* Being,” and nonempirical knowledge based on reason alone. Metaphysics and epistemology, construed in those ways, were the hallmark of the *fundadores* and their numerous disciples.

At the beginning, there were high expectations about these philosophers. One of the Argentinian leaders of the antipositivist movement, Coriolano Alberini (1927, 331–32), saw the founders as having initiated “a move-ment which has an authentic philosophic restlessness behind it, and which justifies many a hope for the future.” But their actual contribution to philosophy fell short of Alberini’s expectations. Some of the founders cultivated theories and topics first conceived by German existentialists of the time and later recast in the work of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset. Others turned to idealistic trends then in vogue in France and Italy. And a few, of course, remained faithful to Aquinas by endorsing neo-Thomist currents then growing in France and other parts of Europe. But, for all of these reasons and since a concern with issues bearing on the local realities of Latin America figured hardly at all in their agenda, we must conclude that the founders demonstrated *neither* sensitivity to their environment in their choice of subjects *nor* originality in their arguments. Thus we cannot credit them with having developed a *characteristically* Latin American philosophy. On the other hand, because their works meet criterion (3), they are clearly philosophical and find a place in the local history of ideas—even though it is difficult to see what contribution, if any, they have made to philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> Founders like Alejandro Korn (Argentinian), Carlos Vaz Ferreira (Uruguayan), and Antonio Caso (Mexican) prepared the ground for philosophers of the generation who followed, among whom are José Vasconcelos (Mexican), Francisco Romero (Argentinian), and Samuel Ramos (Mexican). Romero held the early founders in high esteem, coining the expression *normalidad filosófica* (philosophical normalcy) to refer to the contribution of that group to philosophy in Latin America. More recently, Jaksic (1989, 145) has suggested that perhaps the importance of that group has been overrated.

The founders, however, are not the only philosophers (in the strict sense) from Latin America who may be vulnerable to a critique of this sort. Many thinkers working within other traditions have also imported methods and problems while neglecting philosophical issues that have arisen in their own backyards, in the welter of social problems and ideological controversies that characterize contemporary Latin American societies. For example, some who work in the analytic tradition would be vulnerable to the same charge.<sup>8</sup> And although Latin American Marxist and socialist philosophers, including the so-called liberation philosophers of the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>9</sup> have often urged thinkers to be mindful of issues arising in their cultural and socio-economic environments, they have done little to produce original philosophical arguments addressing such issues (Mariátegui is a notable exception).

If the actual practice of strict philosophers in Latin America is as described here, then when criteria (1), (2), and (3) above are taken together, it follows that there is *no* characteristically Latin American philosophy to be found in their work.<sup>10</sup> Crucial to this unhappy conclusion, however, is Frondizi's notion of strict philosophy captured by (3) above. But must that notion be accepted? Note that, if applied consistently, it yields startling consequences, for then we should have to exclude from philosophy the works of Thomas Hobbes, Saint-Simon, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre, John Rawls, and many others! These works, after all, contain philosophical ideas that are clearly subordinated to their authors' social, political, and literary interests—and so would not qualify as philosophy according to criterion (3). On the other hand, Latin American thinkers, such as the founders, who gave hardly any thought to philosophical issues arising locally in the reality of their own societies but devoted themselves instead to alien problems and methods, making no significant contribution to them, would count as philosophers according to (3). Surely something has gone wrong here.

Furthermore, that criterion invites a sharp distinction between philosophy and thought—as it explicitly distinguishes between a strict conception of philosophy and a broader one. But then nearly all the works mentioned above would fail to qualify as (strict) philosophy, as would most

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Gracia et al. 1984. The development of para-consistent logic in Brazil and deontic logic in Argentina appear to be exceptions to this line of criticism against analytic philosophers in Latin America.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Sheldon 1984 and Löwy 1992. 'Liberation philosophy' is the name associated with the ideas of a group of philosophers who began to be active in Argentina in the 1970s, roughly at the same time as the liberation theologians of Latin America developed their movement in connection with a conference held in Medellín.

<sup>10</sup> There may of course be a characteristically Latin American thought. It is no part of my purpose to deny that—only to suggest that *academic philosophers* in Latin America have done little to contribute to it. Frondizi (1949) in fact observes that a very small part of the philosophical work in Latin America may have any claim to originality and creativity at all.

of what is done today in the flourishing areas of applied philosophy. Again, something has gone wrong. Given the odd consequences that seem to follow from (3), we might do better simply to abandon it. Are there, then, any good reasons at all to retain criterion (3)? Can anything be offered in its defense beyond the outdated prejudice that conceives of a 'first philosophy' as having a higher status than other areas of philosophy?

First, it must be acknowledged that in Latin America it has only been in the twentieth century that most thinkers concerned with philosophical issues have had access to philosophical training, for it was not until then that the practice of philosophy there achieved a social status of the kind it enjoyed in major Western centers. Yet many Latin American thinkers of all periods, whether formally trained or not, have been concerned with problems of social and political philosophy, ethics, and even feminist epistemology that arose in their own historical and social contexts, thus meeting criterion (2). And, to resolve them, they have devised arguments of their own—thus meeting criterion (1). Because of this, their works have continued to be of philosophical interest, making up a large body of characteristically Latin American philosophical *thought*. If criterion (3) drives us to conclude that all these, too, are devoid of philosophical content, properly construed, then it is surely counterintuitive.

The distinction between philosophical thought and strict philosophy, therefore, seems to be an unhelpful contrivance that is better rejected. It doesn't really matter whether Sor Juana's proclamation of women's right to knowledge, Acosta's rebellion against Aristotelian science, Mariátegui's "indigenous question," and so on are classified as either philosophy or philosophical thought, since it is difficult to see how anything of importance could hinge on that distinction. In fact, many of the major figures I have mentioned here are not by any stretch of the imagination philosophers as they are conceived of today. But it is clear that these figures had ideas that are philosophically interesting and were often quite astute in their insights related to these ideas even where they did not argue rigorously, as philosophers are expected to do now. Unquestionably, there is philosophy in Latin American thought – even though it is not always philosophers who have produced it. Progress in encouraging fruitful work in the philosophy of the subcontinent can be made only if, starting with those thinkers' clear and provocative ideas, we ourselves engage in reflecting upon issues specific to the diverse experience of Hispanic America.

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