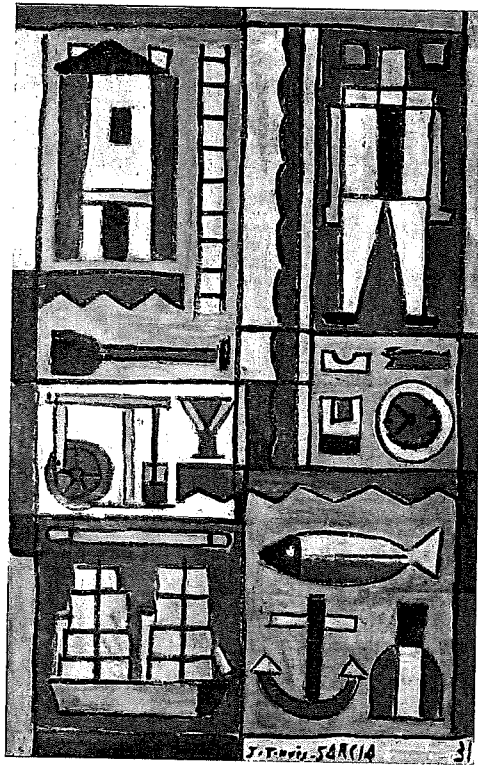


*Blackwell
Companions to
Philosophy*

A COMPANION TO LATIN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY



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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,

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