

# LATIN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

**FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

The Human Condition,  
Values, and the  
Search for Identity

edited by

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# Introduction

## DEFINING LATIN AMERICA: NATIONAL VERSUS CONTINENTAL APPROACHES

The selections included in Section A of Part IV deal with the problem of determining what it means to speak of "Latin America" and "Latin Americans" and the peculiar problems facing thinkers who analyze Latin American social reality, both within the countries of Latin America and in the United States. The nations and the people of the region that has become known as Latin America are not homogenous, as the umbrella term might lead some to think. The countries that constitute Latin America have different political systems, different currencies, different languages, and significantly different histories. Simón Bolívar was "the Liberator" of most of the countries of South America, including Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru (and British Guiana), but he did not liberate Mexico or Argentina from the clutches of Spain, for example. Obviously, each of the nations of Latin America shares a common past of colonization and an ensuing struggle for independence, but Brazil's relation to Portugal was quite unlike the relation that the Spanish colonies had to Spain. The nations of Latin America did not deal with the condition of colonization in identical ways, nor were they colonized in the same way.

Nevertheless, there are common themes that tie the philosophers of the region together at particular times. In dealing with the problem of defining the identity of Latin American philosophy, some philosophers favor what can be called a national approach whereas others favor a continental approach. For example, Sarmiento deals in particular with Argentina and the special problems besetting that nation. Likewise, Mar-

iátegui addresses Peruvian reality, not Latin American reality, and Ramos turns his attention to the problem facing Mexicans. In contrast, Martí addresses issues of *nuestra América* (our America), emphasizing what is common to all the nations that compose Latin America, and Vasconcelos speaks of a *raza cósmica* (a cosmic race), not of a Mexican race.

Which approach makes more sense? Certainly, if the main question facing Latin American philosophers is that of cultural identity, given the fact that there is great variety among the populations of different countries within Latin America, answers to the question might be substantially different from country to country or even within the same country, and so national or regional approaches might be more appropriate to capture the identity of these peoples. Consider, for example, the Mayan population of Chiapas, Mexico, and the Náhuatl-speaking weavers of Guerrero, as compared to the cosmopolitan population of Mexico City. (The radical differences between the lifestyles of the *criollos* or American-born Spaniards, the *mestizos*, or peoples of mixed indigenous and Spanish heritage, and the *indios* are still evident today.) Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay have large indigenous populations, whereas countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Venezuela, for example, do not.

So, one may ask whether this difference might not give rise to a substantially different response to the question: Who are we? Is it not the case that a Peruvian philosopher concerned with capturing or attempting to provide an analysis of Peruvian social reality has to take the Amerindian culture into consideration, whereas a philosopher in Argentina with the same philosophical task might legitimately be more concerned with the ways in which various waves of European immigration have influenced the social reality of Argentina? The popular and rather humorous saying that "The Mexicans descend from the Aztecs, the Peruvians from the Incas, the Argentinians from the ships, and the Venezuelans from the oil" has some truth in it insofar as it points to the unique historical circumstances of each of these nations. And this truth might be overlooked when we approach the issue of cultural identity by attending merely to Latin America.

The issue of identity has also a political dimension, for it is clear that the nations of Latin America have varied political pasts. Therefore, something important is lost when we generalize in our philosophical investigation of identity and speak of the identity of all Latin Americans as if it were the same, whether one is concerned with a Náhuatl-speaking weaver in Mexico or a cattle rancher in Argentina.

In order to arrive at a definition of Latin American identity, we would do well to pay close attention to both the national and the continental approaches to this problem. There is something like *nuestra América* that is worthy of philosophical attention and, therefore, it behooves philoso-

phers to go beyond national boundaries and to take something like a *raza cósmica* seriously. It does indeed make sense to speak of a Hispanic/Latino identity, yet this must be done with the awareness that the *gauchos* are particularly Argentine and an important element in understanding the particular breed of Latin American reality that is not only Latin American but also Argentine. Likewise, the problems of the indigenous populations in Peru and in Mexico are particular to those nations and are not representative of any continental problems besetting the entire region. In short, to capture accurately the social reality of Latin America, we must adopt both a continental and a national approach, for when we deal with the problem of the nations and the peoples of Latin America, certain aspects of social reality can best be addressed continentally and others are best dealt with via a national or regional approach. We uncover certain aspects of the social reality of the nations of Latin America if we approach the reality of postcolonial Latin American countries one by one, giving each their proper place of cultural, historical, and political significance, which otherwise would be missed.

#### A NEW DIMENSION OF THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY: HISPANICS/LATINOS IN THE UNITED STATES

The problems facing philosophers as they grapple with the issue of the identity of Latin American nations and peoples become even more complicated for philosophers who deal with these issues in the context of the United States. What happens to the identity of Mexicans (whether of European, indigenous, or *mestizo* descent), Cubans (of Spanish, African, or mixed race descent), Colombians, Dominicans, etc., who immigrate to the United States? Can we speak meaningfully of these groups with one single term? If so, what term would capture the identity of this group? Or is the group so diverse that no single term can adequately capture its identity?

These issues become particularly relevant when the question of rights is raised. In particular, do groups of immigrants from Latin America have special rights and should they receive special benefits because they belong to those groups? To shed light on this problem, we have included three selections from contemporary philosophers who have dealt with these issues. Selections from the work of Jorge Gracia, Linda Martín Alcoff, and Ofelia Schutte show that the discussion of the identity of Hispanics/Latinos in the United States is complicated precisely because the group comprises a variety of ethnic, religious, and racial strains. And it is no easy task to find a term that will do justice to this diversity, while capturing the underlying unity of the group.

Latin American philosophers have discussed and developed views of

the identity of the nations and peoples of Latin America, but their discussion of identity does not end there. They have also posed questions concerning the identity of Latin American thought and philosophy itself. There are many different approaches to this problem. Let us begin by considering the traditional ways in which this problem has been addressed by Latin American philosophers.

### THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN LATIN AMERICAN THOUGHT AND PHILOSOPHY: UNIVERSALISM, CULTURALISM, AND THE CRITICAL VIEW

In spite of the fact that Latin American philosophers have expressed many positions on the subject of what constitutes Latin American thought and philosophy, their opinions can be classified under three basic headings: universalist, culturalist, and critical. The first refers to a view inspired by a long tradition that goes back to the Greeks. According to this view, philosophy is a science (be it of concepts or of reality); as such, the principles it adopts and inferences it draws are meant to be universally valid and, consequently, it makes no sense to talk about a Latin American philosophy, just as it does not make any sense to talk about Latin American chemistry or physics. Philosophy, as a discipline of learning, cannot acquire idiosyncratic characteristics that may, in turn, make it Latin American, French, or Italian. Philosophy, strictly speaking, is simply philosophy, or philosophy "as such."<sup>1</sup> In spite of the fact that normally one may speak of "French" and "German" philosophy, this does not mean that philosophy as such is any different in the two cases. Categories like "French" and "German" are used as *historical* designations to refer to historical periods that include the thinking of the time or place one wishes to discuss. This does not mean that philosophy in a particular period is in itself any different from philosophy in another period. What may be considered idiosyncratic to the philosophy of a given period is not an essential part of philosophy, but simply the product of circumstances surrounding the development of the discipline at the time. As a result, then, such idiosyncrasies, which could also be called accidents, are not part of the discipline and are not included in its study; they are only part of historical studies concerning the period in question, just as a mathematical error is not part of mathematics, and just as the study of Egyptian physical theories is not part of physics. Philosophy, like mathematics and other disciplines of human learning, consists of a series of truths and methods of inquiry that have no spatiotemporal characteristics. Its application and validity are universal and therefore independent of the historical conditions in which they are discovered. The conclusion, for instance, that rationality is part of human nature is intended as a claim that is true or false anywhere and at any time.

Consequently, the answer to the question of whether there is a Latin American philosophy is, from this perspective, negative. Furthermore, this view not only denies that there is a Latin American philosophy, but it also rejects that there could be one, for it sees an intrinsic incompatibility between the nature of philosophy as a universal discipline of learning and such particular products as culture.

To this, the culturalist responds by contending that the universalist makes a serious mistake. Philosophy, as everything based on human experience, depends on specific spatiotemporal coordinates for its validity. There are no universal and absolute truths. Truth is always concrete and the product of a viewpoint, an individual perspective. This can be applied even to mathematical truths, as Ortega, a philosopher followed by many culturalists, suggests.<sup>2</sup>

Orteguian perspectivism, introduced in Latin America by many of Ortega's disciples, particularly José Gaos, is to a great extent responsible for the popularity of the culturalist view in Latin America. A philosophy that emphasizes the value of the particular and idiosyncratic lends itself quite easily to support the views of culturalist thinkers.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, many of them adopted this view without hesitation, adapting it to their conceptual needs. This is how the idea of a Latin American philosophy as a philosophy peculiar to the continent came about, a philosophy different from that of other cultures and particularly opposed to Anglo-Saxon culture and philosophy. This philosophy is supposedly the product of Latin American culture, which is in turn the product of the perspective from which Latin Americans think. This view has given way to the search for an autochthonous philosophy that can unambiguously reflect the characteristics of Latin American culture.

From this perspective, it is not only possible to find a Latin American philosophy, it is actually the case that any genuine philosophy produced in Latin America *must* be Latin American. If it is not, then it is simply a copy of philosophies produced elsewhere, imported and imposed on the continent. As such, these alien ways of thinking do not constitute a genuine or authentic philosophy when they are adopted in Latin America, since they do not have any relation to Latin American culture, being as they are the product of perspectives and conditions completely foreign to those of the continent.

Many of the thinkers who adopt this view conclude that, at present, there is no Latin American philosophy because the only philosophy that has been practiced in the region is imported. But at the same time, while accepting this, they trust in a different future. Others, on the contrary, point out that there are some Latin American philosophical perspectives that can be classified as Latin American, and although they may be few, they are sufficient to justify the use of the term "Latin American philosophy" with a culturalist connotation.

A third view adopted by Latin American philosophers in relation to this problem may be described as critical; it has been put forward as a reaction against both universalism and culturalism, although it takes some elements from both. This view, like universalism, rejects the existence of a Latin American philosophy not because the term "Latin American" is incompatible with the term "philosophy," but rather because until now philosophy in Latin America has had an ideological character, that is, it has not been a free pursuit. Philosophy has been used and continues to be used, *pace* the adherents of the critical view, to support ideas conducive to both the continuation of a status quo and the benefit of certain groups. To support this charge, those who adhere to the critical view point to scholasticism and positivism as philosophical developments that thwarted the development and progress of Latin American philosophy.

With regard to scholasticism, these critics point out that the Spanish Crown made use of scholastic philosophy to maintain its political and economic control over the New World. Scholastic philosophy, they suggest, became an instrument to sustain an otherwise ideologically untenable position.

In the case of positivism, they emphasize how certain Latin American governments used this philosophical school to justify both their notion of social order and supremacy of a ruling elite. The most frequently cited case is that of Porfirio Díaz's government in Mexico, which adopted positivism as the official doctrine of his dictatorship. The inference drawn, on the basis of this and other examples, is that until now there has not been, and in the future there cannot be, a genuine and authentic Latin American philosophy so long as present social and economic conditions prevail. Only when this situation changes and philosophy is no longer used ideologically to justify the *modus vivendi* can there be an opportunity for a genuine and authentic Latin American philosophy to develop. Some of those who defend this view think that this Latin American philosophy will be the product of a particular Latin American perspective, adopting therefore a culturalist view with respect to the future. Others, on the contrary, take a universalist position and suggest that this nonideological philosophy will be universally valid and not relative to the particular circumstances of Latin America. They all coincide, however, in viewing the role of philosophy in Latin America in a critical light.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Explicit questions about the existence of a Latin American philosophy were first explored in the writings of Leopoldo Zea and Risieri Frondizi in the 1940s. The growth of philosophical literature until then seemed to jus-

tify and perhaps even require an investigation into the nature, themes, and limits of the philosophical activity. The proliferation of specialized journals, the creation of philosophy departments in various universities, and the foundation of international associations that had started to coordinate philosophical activity in the continent made possible the raising of an issue that continues to concern Latin American philosophers until today.<sup>4</sup>

Even before Zea and Frondizi, however, the Argentine Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810-1884) had raised the problem of the character and future of Latin American philosophy.<sup>5</sup> An outstanding member of the thriving liberal movement of his time, Alberdi put forth his ideas under the influence of a liberalism very closely related to the philosophical rationalism, the anticlericalism, and the optimism about industrialization that were so characteristic of nineteenth-century Latin America. His view of philosophy, consequently, is not alien to the basic tenets of this movement. Alberdi, however, had a high degree of awareness with respect to the connection between philosophy and cultural identity that, for good reasons, has drawn the attention of many philosophers who have subsequently focused on the theme of Latin American philosophy.

According to Alberdi, a Latin American philosophy must have a social and political character intimately related to the most vital needs of the continent. Philosophy is an instrument that can help to introduce an awareness of the social, political, and economic needs of Latin American nations. This is why Alberdi categorically rejected metaphysics and other "pure and abstract" philosophical fields, for he viewed them as alien to urgent national needs.<sup>6</sup>

As the selections from Part A indicate, since the independence of the Latin American territories from the Spanish and Portuguese colonial yoke in the nineteenth century, the issue of the identity of the nations and peoples of Latin America has been explored in great depth by a wide variety of philosophers. This search to define the nations and the peoples of this vast and variegated region continued to shape the history of ideas in the twentieth century. The more rigorous philosophical discussion of identity took longer to be developed and sustained.

Our discussion of Alberdi's early comments attests to one of the intellectually rich ways in which this search for Latin American identity was carried out. Yet, in spite of Alberdi's reflections on the character of Latin American philosophy, it was not until the fifth decade of the twentieth century that the problem of the philosophical identity of Latin America was explicitly formulated and fully explored. The decade of the 1940s was a period in which intellectuals looked back on Latin American culture and attempted to use it as the basis for philosophical thinking. A generation of Mexican authors inspired in Ortega y Gasset's perspectivism, introduced in Latin America by the *transferrados*, or Spanish exiles, and particularly by José Gaos, sug-

gested that the cultural "circumstances" of the continent provided the basis for the development of an original Latin American philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Leopoldo Zea, the leader of these intellectuals, asserted that any type of philosophical reflection emerging on the continent could be classified as "Latin American philosophy" by virtue of the intimate relationship between philosophy and culture.<sup>8</sup> He also suggested that this philosophy had a historical foundation, owing to the fact that Latin Americans had always, in Zea's judgment, thought of their situation from a vitally Latin American perspective.<sup>9</sup> Zea categorically affirms the existence of a Latin American philosophy which springs from the unique historical circumstances of Latin American social reality. Following Ortega, Zea has a conception of philosophy as a historical product, emerging from particular perspectives, but not ending there. As he claims in the selection included below, "The Actual Function of Philosophy in Latin America": "When we attempt to resolve the problems of man in any spatiotemporal situation whatever, we will necessarily have to start with ourselves because we are men; we will have to start with our own circumstances, our limitations, and our being Latin Americans, just as the Greeks started with their own circumstance called Greece. But, just like them, we cannot limit ourselves to our own circumstances. . . . [We] must also be aware of our capacities as members of the cultural community called humanity." The problem that remains is how to bridge the gap between the particular cultural circumstances from which we begin and the universal circumstance of humanity toward which we strive.

Zea's culturalist perspective has won many adherents. His supporters find in his approach to defining philosophy a way of opening space for contributions that do not fall under the umbrella of the European and Anglo-American philosophical traditions and hence tend to remain marginalized. Abelardo Villegas, Diego Domínguez Caballero, and Guillermo Francovich are just a few of the philosophers who support Zea's view.<sup>10</sup>

A common criticism of this way of defining philosophy is that it amounts to a kind of philosophical nationalism, and that moreover, it leaves out of the group of Latin American philosophers those who work in logic, theory of action, ethics, and similar traditional, philosophical fields. A philosopher who does not specifically address the Latin American circumstance is not a *true* Latin American philosopher. Risieri Frondizi was a leading critic of Zea's way of conceiving Latin American philosophy. According to Frondizi, philosophy must be distinguished from cultural nationalism and should be considered independently of geographical boundaries. One should speak of philosophy *in* Latin America rather than of a philosophy *of* Latin America.<sup>11</sup> Philosophy, as Francisco Romero pointed out, has no last names, that is, it must be understood as a discipline with universal characteristics.<sup>12</sup>

Even Vasconcelos, whose work exerted a strong influence on Zea,

while sympathetic to a culturalist perspective, adopted a universalist position when discussing the nature of philosophical activity. Vasconcelos went so far as to deny explicitly the existence of a peculiarly Latin American philosophy on the grounds that the discipline was universal in character, although he conceded that it was the prerogative of each culture to reconsider the great themes of universal philosophy. Philosophical nationalism had no place in his thought.<sup>13</sup>

The polemic that suddenly surrounded the question of the existence of a Latin American philosophy in the 1940s had the effect, in many cases, of undermining the focus on identity in general that had characterized Latin American philosophical thought prior to the dispute, and which in many respects had prompted it. The controversy set a precedent for discussions of culture that became increasingly separated from the actual analysis of cultural phenomena. The culturalists themselves, who based their conception of a Latin American philosophy on a cultural perspective, have left few detailed accounts of the continent's cultural *ethos*, and frequently refer to culture in very general terms.

The controversy continued to grow and attracted much attention among members of practically every philosophical tradition, with the exception of philosophical analysis. Existentialists, phenomenologists, Thomists, Kantians, Ortegaians, etc., all felt compelled to explore this issue. But since none of the different interpretations of the cultural identity of the continent has become widely accepted, it became impossible in turn to establish a consensus on the notion of Latin American philosophy. This is the reason why during the 1960s a number of authors re-addressed this problem, although this time not in terms of universalism and culturalism. It was at this time that the critical position took shape. Augusto Salazar Bondy, for example, argued for the view that philosophy in Latin America is the province of intellectual elites. These elites borrowed European cultural forms uncritically, and they lacked an identifiable and rigorous method and awareness of other social groups. Viewed in this light, the problems of culture and philosophy have been the problems of only a small minority of intellectuals alienated from the rest of society, and from the economic, social, and political problems of the continent.<sup>14</sup> This position, which has also been shared by Juan Rivano and others, suggests that the history of the controversy concerning the existence and nature of Latin American philosophy epitomizes the lack of concern with the most urgent problems of their respective communities on the part of the region's intellectuals.<sup>15</sup>

It is in this context that the (so-called) philosophy of liberation appears. For philosophers like Enrique Dussel, Horacio Cerutti Guldberg, and Arturo Andrés Roig, the fundamental task of philosophy in Latin America consists in the social and national liberation from the unjust relations such as that of dominator-dominated which have traditionally char-

acterized it. For Roig in particular, this implies the integration of the Latin American peoples based on the consciousness of the historicity of the American "man" and of the history of philosophy in Latin America. He rejects the formalism and ontologism characteristic of traditional academic philosophy, favoring instead a philosophy of commitment that seeks integrating concepts in Latin America. This area of philosophy is rooted in the political discourse of the marginal and exploited segments of society, and given the enduring political and economic instability that plagues the countries of Latin America, liberation philosophy continues to be of great social relevance.

In spite of the strong disagreement voiced by the various authors discussed and in the works included below, most of them would agree that philosophy has historically provided one of the most important vehicles for the expression of cultural concerns in Latin American society. Not always listened to, and at times suppressed by regimes of the Right or the Left, philosophy in many ways reflects the very situation of Latin American society today. And given that the region does not enjoy the stability of its Northern neighbor, its philosophy will continue to reflect the general turmoil of the region, a place where the *caudillo* is not a ghost of the past, where tanks still roll onto the streets when problems become too threatening, and, in short, a place where the philosophers have no ivory tower in which they can hide from the distractions of the world.

## NOTES

1. Risieri Frondizi, "Is There an Ibero-American Philosophy?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 9 (March 1949): 355. See also a slightly different use of the expression in Fernando Salmerón, "Los problemas de la cultura mexicana desde el punto de vista de la filosofía," in *Cuestiones educativas y páginas sobre México*, p. 137; originally published in *La palabra y el hombre* 6 (1958).
2. José Ortega y Gasset, *El hombre y la gente*, chap. 13, in *Obras completas*, 3:115.
3. See Samuel Ramos, *Historia de la filosofía mexicana* (Mexico City: Imprenta Universitaria, 1943), p. 149.
4. One of the most useful bibliographical tools for the study of Latin American philosophy is the *Handbook of Latin American Studies*, which has been publishing a section on philosophy since 1939. The Web site maintained by José Luis Gómez-Martínez, *Repertorio Americano*, is also an excellent resource, with contributions from leading scholars on major Latin American philosophers. Gómez-Martínez's *Anuario Bibliográfico de Historia del Pensamiento Ibero e Iberoamericano* (published in five volumes, 1989-1993) is also a good resource.
5. A prolific writer and one of the outstanding members of the generation of Argentinean intellectuals who criticized the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas,

Alberdi spent many years in exile in Uruguay, Chile, and Europe. The piece of writing that most specifically addresses our subject of concerns here is "Ideas para presidir la confección del curso de filosofía contemporánea," in *Escritos póstumos de Juan Bautista Alberdi*, vol. 15 (Buenos Aires: Imprenta Europea, Moreno y Defensa, 1895-1901). This essay was originally published in 1842.

6. Alberdi, "Ideas," p. 613.
7. José Gaos, *En torno a la filosofía mexicana* (Mexico City: Porrúa y Obregón, 1952), 53-54, 88. An excellent study of the impact and importance of the Spanish contributions to Latin American philosophy is provided by José Luis Abellán's *Filosofía española en América* (Madrid: Ediciones Guadarrama, 1967) and José Luis Abellán and Antonio Monclús, eds., *El pensamiento español contemporáneo y la idea de América*, especially vol. 2, *El pensamiento en el exilio* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1983).
8. Zea, *Ensayos*, p. 166.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
10. Abelardo Villegas, *Panorama de la filosofía iberoamericana actual* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1963); Diego Domínguez Caballero, "Motivo y sentido de una investigación de lo panameño," in Zea, *Antología*, 157-69; Guillermo Francovich, *El pensamiento boliviano en el siglo 20* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1956), and "Pachamama," in Zea, *Antología*, pp. 79-87.
11. Frondizi, "Hay una filosofía iberoamericana?" p. 166.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
13. Vasconcelos, *Indología: Una interpretación de la cultura iberoamericana* (Paris: Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1926), pp. 109-10.
14. Augusto Salazar Bondy, *Existe una filosofía de nuestra América?* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1968), sec. 8, "Una interpretación."
15. Juan Rivano was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1926 and taught philosophy at the University of Chile until the Chilean military regime imprisoned him in 1975 and forced him into exile in 1976. Trained in logic, he has written mostly on the subjects of theory of knowledge and philosophy of science. Rivano addressed the problem of Latin American philosophy in his *El punto de vista de la miseria* (Santiago: Facultad de Filosofía y Educación, Universidad de Chile, 1965), pp. 145-72. Some of his publications include *Entre Hegel y Marx: Una meditación ante los nuevos horizontes del humanismo* (1962), *Lógica elemental* (1970), and *Introducción al pensamiento dialéctico* (1972).