



Skepticism about Latin American Philosophy

Ceticismo sobre a Filosofia Latino-Americana

Escepticismo sobre la Filosofía Latinoamericana

Susana Nuccetelli ^[a] 

Saint Cloud, MN, USA

St. Cloud State University

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Abstract

A long and varied history of claims about the nature of Latin American philosophy invariably features a normative claims concerning its shortcomings in virtues such as originality, authenticity, peculiarity, and internal or external recognition. As argued in this paper, what to make of such metaphilosophical skepticism depends on the semantics of the ambiguous term ‘Latin American philosophy.’ When interpreted as a distinctive branch of applied philosophy in the way I have proposed in some of my earlier works (2002, 2020), there are *no* good reasons for skepticism about this type of philosophy. By contrast, there are good reasons for skepticism when interpreted in the universalist way proposed, for example, by Venezuelan philosopher of science Carlos Ulises Moulines (2010). Since each of these interpretations captures what speakers might commonly mean by ‘Latin American philosophy,’ the question of what to make of the quality of the area of philosophy designated by this term is contingent on what we mean. In the course of arguing for this conclusion, this paper rules out some universalist as well distinctivist alternatives.

Keywords: Skepticism. Latin American Philosophy. Philosophy. Metaphilosophical.

^[a] Doutora em Filosofia, e-mail: susana.nuttecelli2022@gmail.com

Resumo

Uma longa e variada história de afirmações sobre a natureza da filosofia latino-americana invariavelmente apresenta reivindicações normativas sobre suas deficiências em virtudes como originalidade, autenticidade, peculiaridade e reconhecimento interno ou externo. Como argumentado neste artigo, o que fazer desse ceticismo metafilosófico depende da semântica do termo ambíguo 'filosofia latino-americana'. Quando interpretada como um ramo distinto da filosofia aplicada, da forma como propus em alguns dos meus trabalhos anteriores (2002, 2020), não há boas razões para o ceticismo em relação a esse tipo de filosofia. Por outro lado, existem boas razões para o ceticismo quando interpretado de maneira universalista, como proposto, por exemplo, pelo filósofo venezuelano da ciência Carlos Ulises Moulines (2010). Uma vez que cada uma dessas interpretações captura o que os falantes comumente podem querer dizer com 'filosofia latino-americana', a questão sobre a qualidade da área de filosofia designada por esse termo é contingente ao que queremos dizer. Ao argumentar em favor dessa conclusão, este artigo descarta algumas alternativas universalistas e distintivistas.

Palavras-chave: Ceticismo. Filosofia Latino-americana. Filosofia. Metafilosófico.

Resumen

Una larga y variada historia de afirmaciones sobre la naturaleza de la filosofía latinoamericana inevitablemente presenta reclamos normativos con respecto a sus deficiencias en virtudes como originalidad, autenticidad, peculiaridad y reconocimiento interno o externo. Como se argumenta en este documento, qué hacer con respecto a tal escepticismo metafilosófico depende de la semántica del término ambiguo 'filosofía latinoamericana'. Cuando se interpreta como una rama distintiva de la filosofía aplicada, de la manera que he propuesto en algunos de mis trabajos anteriores (2002, 2020), no hay buenas razones para el escepticismo acerca de este tipo de filosofía. En cambio, existen buenas razones para el escepticismo cuando se interpreta de manera universalista, como propuesto, por ejemplo, por el filósofo venezolano de la ciencia Carlos Ulises Moulines (2010). Dado que cada una de estas interpretaciones captura lo que los hablantes comúnmente pueden querer decir con 'filosofía latinoamericana', la pregunta sobre qué hacer con la calidad del área de la filosofía designada por este término depende de lo que queramos decir. En el transcurso de argumentar en favor de esta conclusión, este documento descarta algunas alternativas universalistas y distintivistas.

Palabras clave: Escepticismo. Filosofía Latinoamericana. Filosofía. Metafilosófico.

Introduction¹

Universalism figures in many attempts at describing the nature of Latin American philosophy such as Gracia and Vargas's (2013/2018):

“In its most expansive sense, Latin American philosophy is philosophy produced in Latin America or philosophy produced by persons of Latin American ancestry who reside outside of Latin America. It is typically taken to exclude philosophy produced in non-Iberian former colonies, with the occasional exception of former French colonies in the Caribbean. Other names have also been used to refer to the whole or part of Latin American philosophy, including Spanish American, Hispanic American, Iberoamerican, and Latino/a philosophy. The first two refer specifically to the philosophy of former Spanish colonies, the third to that of former Iberian colonies, and the fourth to the philosophy produced in the United States by descendants of Latin Americans.”

But universalist is also the less expansive view of Moulines (2010), which considers Latin American philosophy any philosophical works that meet the following conditions:

1. [T]hey are ‘universal’ in the sense that they use concepts and provide arguments that are intended to be universally valid;
2. [T]hey have been developed by Latin American authors;
3. [T]hey have been originally devised, at least partially, in some Latin American countries; and
4. [T]hey have found widespread interest both in and outside Latin America. (MOULINES, 2010, p. 460)

Moulines takes conditions (1) through (4) to express an understanding of Latin American philosophy that is “‘universalist’ as much as ‘distinctivist’” (p. 460). As examples of the field he includes by Brazilian Newton da Costa’s paraconsistent logic, Argentinean Carlos Alchourrón and Eugenio Bulygin’s deontic logic, Alchourrón’s belief revision (developed in collaboration with some Europeans), Argentinean Mario Bunge’s scientific realism, Chilean Roberto Torreti’s historical approach to the foundations of physics, and his own structuralist theory of science. Condition (1) makes Latin American philosophy too narrow since it excludes for instance many of the topics of Latino philosophy. Conditions (2) and (3) concern not only what we’ll call ‘peculiarity’ but the vastly more demanding virtue of originality. And condition (4) concerns recognition, a virtue that standardly has evaluative connotations.²

But Moulines’s conditions capture some of the ordinary semantic intuitions about the expression at stake here. Yet once we accept his conditions, we commit ourselves to skepticism about Latin American philosophy simply because there are very few instances of philosophical theories that meet them. As noted, they require that theories meet not only the very demanding virtue of originality but also that of recognition. As we’ll see next, the field meager output in originality was emphasized by some early skeptics, among whom are thinkers of persuasions as diverse as analytic philosophy, phenomenology, and Marxism. Its meager output in internal and external recognition has been at the center of more recent skepticism from analytic philosophers.

¹ A partial version of the text was published in "Latin American Philosophers: some recent challenges to their intellectual character," *Informal Logic*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2016, pp. 121-135.

² Such connotations fuel common fallacious reasoning of the sort ‘Everybody is reading x, therefore x must be good,’ as well as some early naturalist attempts to define ‘x is valuable’ in terms of ‘an interest has been taken in x’.

Early Skepticism

Latin American philosophy's lack of originality and authenticity fuels the following metaphilosophical skeptical claim: Metaphilosophical Skepticism about Latin American Philosophy (MSLAP): At most, only a very small part of Latin American philosophy is of any value.

Among early proponents of MSLAP was Brazilian analytic philosopher Euryalo Cannabrava (1908-1981), who in 1949 arrived at this thesis by comparing philosophical developments in each part of the Americas. His critique of Latin American philosophy focused on the cognitive-skills dimension of its practitioners, finding their reasoning affected by sophistry and a kind of literary thinking opposite to the reasoning prevalent in North American philosophy. Cannabrava laments the wide reception of continental philosophy in Latin America, which at the time meant mostly contemporary offshoots of German idealism construed broadly to include phenomenology and incipient existentialism. He believed that Latin American philosophers were attracted to continental philosophy precisely because of its "lack of intelligibility," and "its metaphysical abuses and frequent violation of the rules of correct thinking" (1949, p. 114). He held that Latin American philosophy was at its worst when addressing issues in philosophy of science because philosophers there were not familiar with the methods and theories of science.³ In order to explain what is wrong with Latin American philosophy, Cannabrava appeals to factors concerning the origins and history of the discipline, including its development in connection with literature and the arts, where precise reasoning and linguistic clarity are intentionally avoided. By contrast, in the English-speaking world, philosophy developed in connection with the formal and the empirical sciences, where precise reasoning and clear language are important values.

From a different philosophical persuasion, heavily influenced by the anthropology of the spirit of Husserl, Dilthey, Scheler and Hartman, Argentinian Risieri Frondizi (1910-1983) argued that Latin American philosophy had a serious originality problem. While working on a report for the *Handbook of Latin American Studies* published by the Library of Congress, Frondizi came to the conclusion that only 10% of academic philosophy in Latin America is original in either theory or method. While Cannabrava's focus on critical thinking, Frondizi's focus is originality, or the requirement that, to be of value, a philosophy must be absolutely novel. Since the evidence supporting his argument for metaphilosophical skepticism is beyond dispute, the force of the argument rest on the requirement of originality, which might be too demanding if Gracia 2003 is right.

Originality is also a requirement for Latin American philosophy in the work of some twentieth-century Marxist thinkers. Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930) in 1925 came to a skeptical conclusion about Latin American philosophy from factual premises about the cultural and economic dependence of Latin America upon Europe, and the assumption that no region can have original, even authentic, philosophy unless it has achieved independence on both counts.

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. (MARIÁTEGUI, 1925, p. 118).

In 1968, Augusto Salazar Bondy (1927-1974) agreed, noting that in the subcontinent, philosophy

³ On Cannabrava's view, "[i]n Latin America we do not have philosophers like Morris Cohen, Victor Lenze, Ernest Nagel, and F. S. C. Northrop, who have studied the sources of science and followed closely its development..." By contrast, philosophers such as Mexican Antonio Caso lack any "real acquaintance with [science's] development or technique" (1949, p. 117).

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. (*Latin American Philosophy*, p. 241)

To Brazilian Afranio Coutinho, with the only exception of the positivists, 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.” (COUTINHO, *Philosophy in Brazil*, pp. 187-188.)

Salazar Bondy made an effort to provide a subtle account of the virtues that might be missing in Latin American philosophy. Inspired in that account are the following:

1. Originality = The virtue of works that are novel
2. Authenticity = The virtue of works are their authors’ genuine products (i.e., they are non-spurious)
3. Peculiarity = The virtue of works are autochthonous (i.e., they related to a certain region by virtue of having an author from the region or a causal link to someone from the region).

The most demanding of virtue in this set is (1), originality. Having (1) is sufficient but not necessary for (2). Conversely, (2) is necessary though not sufficient for having (1). If a work is the product of plagiarism, it would lack (2) and therefore also (1). But a work may have (2) by being genuine and lack (1) if it fails to be sufficiently creative. Although it would also lack (3) if not related to Latin America, having (3) doesn’t guarantee having either (1) or (2). Another virtue that recurs in the debate about Latin American philosophy concerns having recognition, which we Mexican philosopher Guillermo Hurtado (1962-) puts in term of

1. Being tradition generating

The set (1) through (4) features virtues that are all a matter of degree. But only in the cases of (1) and (2) a significantly low degree in the virtue amounts to vices (viz., being unoriginal and inauthentic respectively). (1) and (4) are very demanding while (3) is not demanding at all, and (2) seems a condition for any philosophical work to be taken seriously.

Recent Skepticism

Like the twentieth-century skeptics, current ones acknowledge that philosophy exists *in* Latin America as a discipline and profession autonomous from science, theology, literature, politics, education, and other disciplines or practices. They also acknowledge that philosophy in the region meets current Western standards of proper representation in educational systems, learned societies, associations, journals, presses, etc. But they think that, as a consequence of some critical-thinking vices, Latin American philosophy is deficient in (4). Its vices create both internal- and external-recognition problems, which Uruguayan/Mexican Carlos Pereda (1944-) cast in terms of these two “invisibility” problems:

- **External Invisibility Problem (EIP)** – The problem that most philosophers from major Western centers of philosophy regularly neglect to consider the work of Latin American philosophers.
- **Internal Invisibility Problem (IIP)** -- The problem that most Latin American philosophers regularly neglect to consider each other’s work.

Pereda (2006) supports the EIP and IIP by anecdotal evidence and analysis of publications. Internal invisibility is the problem that Latin American philosophers do not intellectually engage with each other. Given external

invisibility, the producers of philosophy ignore the work of Latin American philosophers. To show that the IIP arises, he invokes data from the *Enciclopedia iberoamericana de filosofía*, a Spanish collective publication whose first volume appeared in 1987, whose volumes devoted to general subjects lack sufficient references to Latin American and Spanish authors. To show that the EIP arises, fellow skeptic Guillermo Hurtado# (1999) invokes data from the 1998 *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* showing the under- and mis-representation of Latin American philosophy in the English-speaking world. Since the IIP and EIP support skeptical normative charges, we need a closer look at the reasons for thinking that these problems arise. If Pereda is right, they arise because of Latin American philosophers have a number of intellectual vices subsumed under the category of “arrogant reasoning.” Here we need to assume that Pereda is making a non-universal generalization, for otherwise his charge is self-defeating because he, among other new skeptics, would suffer from such vices.⁴ The vice-affected philosophers he identifies fall in two categories: they are either distinctivists or universalists. Distinctivists hold that philosophical writings always show the local perspective of their authors (i.e., they always have peculiarity). Universalists deny this. Consequently, the vices of arrogant reasoning characterize each of these stances:

	Nature of Latin American philosophy	Pereda’s diagnosis:
Distinctivists	A philosophical work is always related to a certain region	Distinctivism suffers from national enthusiasm
Universalists	The denial of distinctivism	Universalism suffers from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subaltern fervor • Craving for novelty

According to Pereda, the nationalist enthusiasm that affects distinctivists is the result of their taking anti-colonialist stance to an extreme, as shown by their reluctance to study major Western figures such as Aristotle or Frege and their emphasis on the need to focus on works that are “theirs” (i.e., regional). Subaltern fervor is the vice of universalists because they invariably assume that the right philosophical view must come from elsewhere. Craving for novelty is present when intellectual curiosity, generally a virtue, is brought to an extreme and becomes an uncontrollable impulse for being up-to-date. At that point, knowledge ceases to be the aim of inquiry.

Pereda (2003, p. 67) contrasts these vices of philosophers with the virtues of Latin American essayists, who since the early days of the Iberian Conquest produced a hybrid genre with elements of philosophy, politics, literature, and the sciences. Their work has had (and still does) internal and external visibility as well as certain intellectual virtues that could help philosophers such as

1. Freshness (“Frescura”): The virtue of approaching a problem from a new angle; breaking with the past; aiming at surprising.
2. Particularity (“Particularidad”): The virtue of starting out with sufficiently described specific cases.
3. Publicity (“Publicidad”): The virtue of addressing non-experts; avoiding jargon.
4. Interpellation (“Interpelación”): The virtue of aiming mostly at persuasion, not at informing.

⁴ Plainly, if Pereda’s work is seriously affected by intellectual vices, then why should we accept his argument? To avoid this objection, he needs to restrict the scope of his skeptical claim.

In line with Pereda’s diagnosis is that of Argentinean philosopher Eduardo Rabossi (1930-2005). According to Rabossi (2008), the Latin American philosopher is, above all, a periphery thinker with the self-image of a ‘*guacho*’ (a homeless orphan, a street urchin) who not only fails to acknowledge his own “philosophical parents,” but does not want to know about them at all. As Rabossi puts it, the Latin American philosopher “doesn’t take them into account, he doesn’t read them, he is not even interested in criticizing their defects or limitations; for him, his own philosophical past doesn’t exist” (2008: 103, my translation). Lacking awareness of their own philosophical past and unwilling to establish dialogue with local peers, Latin American philosophers can have neither philosophical traditions nor genuine philosophical communities. The typical vices of these periphery philosophers can be classified in two categories,

Category I: Vices Amounting to Individual “Tics”

Philosophical orphanhood (<i>guachidad filosófica</i>), or the systematic neglect of local traditions
Acritical adoption of an area, school, or thinker from major philosophical centers of the West
Compulsion to import philosophy without developing local traditions
Tendency to conflate the practice of philosophy with that of advocacy

Category II: Vices Amounting to Bad “Manners” of Professional Interaction

Biased attitude against other works and practitioners (as manifested in a tendency to disqualify works out-of-hand by claiming that they are not philosophy or that they are bad philosophy)
Refusal to learn about the work of others
Avoidance of authentic dialog with each other

Besides Pereda and Rabossi, Hurtado has made another attempt at spelling out the vices of Latin American philosophers, which he regards as analogous to the vices of Mexican philosophers (2006: 206 ff.; 2007: 24 ff.). On his view, by adopting a “modernizing model” of philosophy, philosophers of the region have developed bad traits of intellectual character, including a proclivity to form small groups and spend most of their time trying to learn some imported philosophy, citing only foreign philosophers without paying much attention to regional peers. Modernizers have a compulsion to adopt the latest tradition after uncritically replacing previous traditions when they deem them unfashionable. At the end of the day, in Latin American philosophy “...each modernizing movement got lost for the upcoming movement...” (Hurtado 2006, p. 206), leaving in place neither traditions nor stable communities of inquiry. “But the foreign philosophers,” laments Hurtado, “even those who visit our countries to deliver talks, very rarely quote us in their work. There is therefore no genuine dialogue...” (HURTADO, 2006, p. 205). Like Pereda and Rabossi, Hurtado too draw a skeptical conclusion from anecdotal evidence about these philosophers’ vices and seems to think that Latin American philosophy’s IIP is more pressing than its EIP .

Mexican new-skeptic Maite Ezcurdia (1966-2018) disagrees. On her (2003) view, it is rather the EIP that must be fixed first. If most Latin American philosophers do in fact work within a modernizing-] model, it is likely that they would be motivated to consider their peers’ works only after some of these works have acquired international recognition. Fixing the EIP would fix the IIP. Be that as it may, Ezcurdia fully endorses skepticism about Latin American philosophy on the basis of its scoring low in originality. She distinguishes interpretative, argumentative, problem-making, and problem-solving originality. Since Latin American philosophers have generally done well at interpreting the works of philosophers from the major centers of the West, their works exhibit the virtue of interpretative originality to a significant degree. But they are lacking in originality of the other three kinds. Ezcurdia’s brief diagnosis of these problems for Latin American philosophy quickly leads to a recommendation about how to fix the invisibility problems facing it: namely, by means of fostering originality of the other three types, especially problem-solving originality.

There are, however, reasons to think that given these arguments for metaphilosophical skepticism, any attempts to fix the IIP and EIP are likely to be futile. For one thing, by all counts, most of its practitioners are universalists. If the diagnoses of Pereda, Rabossi, Hurtado, and Ezcurdia are right, then there are a vast number of Latin American philosophers who suffer from subaltern fervor, craving for novelty, philosophical *guachidad*, adherence to a modernizing model of philosophy, etc. Since *per force* those philosophers devote considerable time and effort to assimilating the latest fads coming from Europe or North America, then they are hardly free to devote themselves to reforming their intellectual characters and producing work that is original to a significant degree. Such activities would require motivation, time, and effort that they lack. After all, they are too busy learning and abandoning different Western traditions, replacing old fads with new ones that they try to assimilate, only to abandon them in short order and begin all over again (I was once told that there is a new fad in philosophy every ten years!). Thus, there seem to be empirical constraints for the Latin American universalists to following the new skeptics' recommendations for improving their own intellectual character.⁵

Furthermore, the new skeptics' position is vulnerable to the following, non-fallacious *ad hominem*: their recommendations run into the same IIP they are trying to fix, namely, the lack of dialogue between Latin American philosophers and between them and their peers in North America. For one thing, the new skeptics never engage with, or at any rate acknowledge, the arguments and subtle conceptual distinctions of the early skeptics (which include many others besides Cannabrava, Salazar Bondy, and Frondizi). References to skepticism about Latin American philosophy by new skeptics, when included, are limited to their own work. For example, a notable absence in Ezcurdia's discussion of originality is Salazar Bondy's subtle analysis of this virtue and its relevance to philosophy. Furthermore, although there is a great deal of overlap among the new skeptics' own recommendations, with a few exceptions they don't acknowledge each other's works. In addition, they invariably ignore the contributions to the debate from some Latino philosophers. For example, they have not engaged with Jorge Gracia (1942-2021) when he argued in 2003 that originalism makes an unreasonable demand on any kind of philosophy -- or when he construed Latin American philosophy as an ethnic philosophy. Or with my view that it is a branch of applied philosophy (NUCCETELLI, 2003, 2013/2021).

In reply to extreme metaphilosophical skepticism, we should first note that by reviving in fact what is an already existing skeptical view about the nature of Latin American philosophy, the new skeptics are a counterexample to the claim that Latin American philosophers fail to be tradition generating. After all, works like the present essay show that there is already in Latin America at least one philosophical tradition of the very sort these skeptics claim the region lacks. As we have seen, this metaphilosophical tradition can be traced from the beginning of the twenty-first century in the work of the new skeptics to the early twentieth century in the work of Mariátegui, Cannabrava, Frondizi, Salazar Bondy, and many others. Moreover, metaphilosophical skepticism about Latin American philosophy has advanced the understanding of critical-thinking virtues that can promote, as well as the vices that can hinder, the development of philosophy as a discipline and of individual philosophers as professionals. Although much more needs to be said, its analysis amounts to some progress in accounting for relevant critical-thinking virtues and vices that were left out of the critical thinking literature, such as the Delphi Report (FACIONE, 1990). For it has yielded at least the following additions:

⁵ To my knowledge, Rabossi made no such recommendation. But his critique is consistent with the recommendations by other new skeptics, in particular Hurtado's. According to this, the IIP can get resolved if "we create a genuine critical dialogue among ourselves and simultaneously exercise a constantly renewed memory of past dialogues" (2006, p. 210).

INTELLECTUAL VIRTUES

Having interpretative, problem posing, problem solving, and argumentative originality

Being authentic

Being tradition generating

Being problem- rather than information-centered

Aiming primarily at arguing, not at informing

INTELLECTUAL VICES

Craving for novelty

Having subaltern fervor

Having nationalist enthusiasm

Engaging in dogmatic advocacy

Having disqualifying biases

Having the disposition to behave like a philosophical orphan

Of course the recognition problems for Latin American philosophy involve more than some virtues and vices of critical thinking and are possibly overdetermined. Any complete explanation would have to consider also economic, historical, and cultural elements. Among the former is the fact that the greater wealth of private and public universities in countries that are producers of philosophy provides their philosophers with access to libraries and other research resources that their Latin American peers lack. Furthermore, English has become the *lingua franca* of the academic community, as well as a barrier for many Latin American philosophers who wish to publish in Western journals or with imprints that can best promote their work in the international forum. And perhaps Cannabrava was not far off the mark after all in associating some critical-thinking dispositions of Latin American philosophers with historical and cultural contingencies concerning the development of their discipline in the subcontinent.

This is not to deny that we can ascribe virtues (1) and (4) to theories. Yet given that they are not many, universalism construed as Moulines 2010 entails a moderate skepticism about the field. But there is at least one distinctivist construal of Latin American philosophy under which that kind of skepticism seems false.

Distinctivism

It is plausible that 'Latin American philosophy' sometimes refers to a type of philosophy that is *characteristically* Latin American. Compared for example with 'French philosophy.' On my view, when thus construed, instances of it are any work of philosophical import that's sensitive to a Latin American context. Practitioners of it have been, and are, many academic as well as nonacademic philosophers whose works deal with philosophical issues that concern either Latin Americans and/or their descendants abroad. As a result, what I conceive of as applied or practical Latin American philosophy mostly deals with issues of moral, social, and political philosophy that are content-related to Latin America. Its existence is compatible with that of epistemology, metaphysics, moral theory, and other general branches of philosophy. Latin American philosophers may devote their efforts to general philosophy, applied philosophy, or both – as some actually do (including this writer).

Now the view of Latin American philosophy as applied philosophy has a bad reputation since in the late twentieth century it has been ascribed to an article by Argentinian Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810-1884). Published in *El Nacional* of Montevideo in October 2, 1840, it makes the preposterous claim that "[Latin] America should practice

what Europe thinks” about general philosophical matters (ALBERDI, 1988 [1840], p. 94-95). The remark is consistent with Alberdi’s general Eurocentric outlook, and appears to presuppose that Latin Americans are less capable of doing general philosophy than either Europeans or North-Americans. But the impact of Alberdi’s reflection has been inflated: he was speculating about what type of philosophy should be taught in a single philosophy course to be part of the curriculum of an elite high school recently created in Montevideo. Like it’s relative in Buenos Aires, that “escuela nacional” would educate future leaders of the newly independent nations. On Alberdi’s view, the course should focus on issues of practical social and political philosophy that could offer some “positive benefit” to their “nascent” nations.⁶

In any case, my proposal need not carry Alberdi’s connotations. After all, his was a recommendation for a Latin American philosophy course, while mine aims at capturing one of the senses of the term ‘Latin American philosophy’: that pointing to a characteristically or distinctively Latin American branch of philosophy. When construed as a type of applied philosophy that conducts philosophical inquiry on issues that are related to Latin America, there is no room for skepticism since the field includes a long and varied list of contributions that are sufficiently original and have enjoyed at least internal recognition.

Distinctivist competitors of my view include the ethnic-philosophy conception of Cuban-American Jorge Gracia (1942-2021), and the perspectivism of Mexican Leopoldo Zea (1912-2004). Perspectivism holds that peculiarity confers on Latin American philosophy originality. The field has peculiarity because its practitioners mostly come from Latin America, so they are bound to regard the standard problems of philosophy from a Latin American perspective. As a result, it does not matter that they imitate philosophers from other regions of the world: originality and authenticity will develop *por añadidura* (‘as an addition’). Accordingly, Zea writes,

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 (ZEA, 1974/1943, p. 226).

But Zea’s argument is invalid, let’s have a look at Gracia’s, which considers Latino philosophy a type of ‘ethnic’ philosophy. Unlike non-ethnic philosophies, the ethnic ones have an open subject matter because in each case it is a relevant ethnos or group of people who decides what to include in it (GRACIA, 2008, p. 142-144). Thus, if the Latino ethnos decides to include some major philosophical traditions of the West, then those traditions too would be part of Latin American philosophy – hence the expansive conception of the field cited above.

In defense of conception, Gracia argues that it avoids regarding any single property (language, geographical location, place of birth, etc.) as necessary and sufficient for inclusion in Latino philosophy. But he is wrong about this, since according to his proposal, it is the property of being included in the philosophy in question by the Latino people that is necessary and sufficient for any intellectual product (a tradition, a theory, an argument) to belong to Latino philosophy. In addition, if the Latino people decides that, say, David Sosa’s work in philosophy of language or mind counts as Latino philosophy, that would make it belong to this type of philosophy. These results suggest that Gracia’s ethnic conception of Latin American philosophy is a kind of meta-philosophical relativism according to which what counts as philosophy in certain areas is a matter of group opinion. Moreover, since Latinos themselves are of many

⁶ For example, Pereda (2006) contends that Alberdi’s remarks dishonor Latin Americans. But again, Alberdi was responding to a request for a recommendation about the sort of philosophy course that should be offered in a high school of Montevideo that was about to open in the 1840s, when questions about national organization were most pressing.

different philosophical persuasions, we can hardly expect that they might one day converge on a list of what should count as their ethnic philosophy.

The relativism of Gracia's ethnic-philosophy approach has proven attractive to some Latino philosophers of a reductionist persuasion. José Antonio Orosco (2016: 26) for example takes the approach to be friendly to the task that he considers fitting to Latino philosophers: namely, developing the philosophical perspective of their own ethnos, whether it be a Mexican ethnos, a Cuban ethnos, or whatever. This task in turn requires reflection on "questions about [Latino] identity, power, and citizenship in the United States" (2016, p. 27). But, thus interpreted, Gracia's proposal opens the door to a reductionist view of Latin American and Latino philosophy according to which these disciplines should focus exclusively on matters of applied social and political philosophy. Although these matters have traditionally attracted considerable interest within the discipline—triggering many developments in the history of Latin American philosophy—philosophical inquiry is an inherently open-minded set of inquiries that are worth undertaking for their own sake because they take us closer to the truth about the issues at hand. If the sole value of Latin American philosophy turns out instead to be only that of a mere means for social change, its inquiries would on my view cease to be philosophical and become ideological.

After all, philosophers commonly lack the knowledge necessary to develop scientifically acceptable theories of social change and are thus susceptible to making unsupported empirical claims that can have negative consequences for Latin American philosophy, a discipline that is sometimes suspected of relying on armchair sociology and political science. In connection with this criticism, there is another argument against the ethnic-philosophy view: it could have bad consequences for Latin American philosophy, since it might contribute to perpetuating those biases that undermine its standing in the profession—a practical problem often noted by Latino philosophers (e.g., the last chapter in Gracia, 2000; Mendieta, 1999; Sánchez, 2011; Vargas, 2007, 2010).

Finally, the ethnic-philosophy theorists can avoid a skepticism problem for Latin American philosophy only at the price of extreme relativism about this kind of area of philosophy. Given their view, there are two classes of philosophy. On the one hand, there is philosophy properly construed with its different branches, each of which follows the rules of inclusion set by the consensus of the community of philosophers. On the other, there are ethnic philosophies whose only standard of inclusion seems to be acceptance by an ethnos. That leads to thorough-going relativism Nuccetelli (2018) because different people within an ethnos would disagree about the issues that need be the focus. In the end, the lack of standards other than—what's accepted by an ethnos might contribute to an existing bias against Latin American philosophers (at least those in the USA) according to which they commonly make either false or unsupported empirical claims about issues that belong to other humanities or the social sciences.⁷

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⁷ Siegel (2014) makes this point, which Silva (2015) disputes by dismissing as ideological.

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