

APA Newsletters

Volume 05, Number 1

Fall 2005

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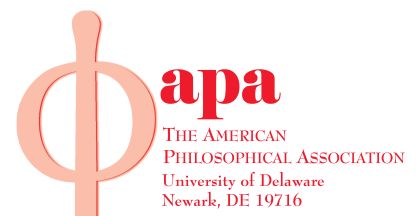
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Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

Arleen L. F. Salles, Editor

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FROM THE EDITOR

The current issue of the *Newsletter* is devoted to short papers presented at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Institute on the topic *Latin American Philosophy: The Appropriation of European Thought in Latin America*, held this past June. Professor Jorge J. E. Gracia led the Institute, co-directed by Professor Susana Nuccetelli and hosted by the State University of New York at Buffalo. The Institute featured a number of formal and informal presentations by invited faculty and participants. Essays by some of the participants are included in this issue. They take up a diverse set of issues—the morality of the Conquest, the political thought of Latin American intellectual leaders and statesmen in the nineteenth century, the legitimacy of the question about the existence of a Latin American philosophy, and a review of the issue of what role, if any, history should play in philosophy.

In “Understanding the Sepúlveda–Las Casas Debate,” John White argues that a careful examination of some of the discussions in the colonial period shows that not all Spanish colonial thought should be rejected as the product of the colonized mind. Using the Sepúlveda–Las Casas debate as his focus, White reminds us that colonial thinkers like Las Casas importantly contributed to the philosophical discussion of key issues raised by the Conquest, among them, how to understand the notions of rationality and human dignity. Instead of dismissing Spanish colonial thought, White argues that, when correctly understood, some colonial thought can be shown to be crucial for Latin American philosophy.

In “Moral Relativism and the Spanish Conquest,” Gary Seay takes the Conquest as a starting point to discuss the inadequacy of normative ethical relativism. He critically reviews several arguments in favor of relativism and suggests that, if we are to think clearly about history, we must use moral categories that carry full normative weight.

Iván Marquez’s contribution examines Simón Bolívar’s project of political development for Latin American nations. Marquez provides an insightful account of the different factors that shaped Bolívar’s political thinking, making clear to us the extent to which Bolívar understood the challenges that Latin American nations had to face. Considering that Latin America is currently facing some of the same challenges, Marquez claims that Bolívar’s diagnosis and prescription are still relevant and ring true.

In her piece, María Morales focuses on *Facundo* to assess Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s view of political order, his prescription for preventing new forms of colonialism, for building strong nations, and for engaging in the crucial task of

national self definition. Morales provides a critical overview of Sarmiento’s main ideas in the text and argues that, even if many of them are not compelling, Sarmiento raises issues that are still very relevant to Latin American nations, such as how to prevent mental and spiritual colonialism, what is the role that education should play in creating people who are truly free, and what is the role of economic considerations in the liberation of the new nations.

In his essay, Michael Monahan looks at the question of whether there is a Latin American philosophy. Instead of trying to provide an answer to the question, Monahan questions the question itself. According to him, if we are going to make progress on the issues of whether there is a Latin American philosophy, we need to examine the reasons behind the question itself. But an examination of the motives will necessarily lead to philosophical questions. “It may very well be that the question provides its own answer in the course of being asked.”

The *Newsletter* closes with a piece by Renzo Llorente, who engages in a critical examination of three articles included in the new book, *The Role of History in Latin American Philosophy*, edited by Arleen Salles and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert. Llorente raises serious and pointed questions about the relationship between history and philosophy and about the connection often made between misuses of history and lack of original philosophical production in Latin America.

All the essays are thought provoking, and they raise a number of significant questions and philosophical challenges. We hope that readers will see them as a springboard for their own thinking about these and related issues.

Contributions

I encourage our readers to contribute to the *Newsletter*. Articles that address recent developments in Hispanic/Latino thought, book reviews, and reflections on topics of interest to the philosophical community are welcome. Please submit two copies of essays. References should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

If you have published a book that is appropriate for review in the *Newsletter for Hispanic/Latino Issues*, send us a copy of your book.

Please feel free to send announcements and letters. The Editor encourages suggestions that might help toward creating a more diversified *Newsletter*. All items and inquiries should be sent to the Editor: Arleen L. F. Salles, Division of Humanities, College of Professional Studies, St. John’s University sallesa@stjohns.edu

ARTICLES

Understanding the Sepulveda–Las Casas Debate

John R. White

Franciscan University of Steubenville

Introduction

One of the important tasks for scholars of Latin American philosophy is to recover the valuable contributions of the colonial period. This is so because both the efforts of Latin American nations to find their identity apart from Spain and the excesses of the Black Legend have tended to obscure the value of the energetic debates of the colonial period, which resulted in important philosophical advances in the areas of philosophical anthropology, international law, and ethics, including theories of natural rights.¹ As part of this effort of recovery, I shall turn to the great debate between Juan Ginés de Sepulveda and Bartolome de Las Casas concerning the meaning and justification of the Conquest.

Understanding this debate reveals the importance of Spanish intellectual culture for Latin American philosophy, for it shows that support for the Conquest was not without its critics in Spain, that there was at least some public ambivalence about the Conquest—probably more in Spain than in other colonial powers²—and that a good deal of high-quality philosophy was produced in the process of working out this ambivalence. Thus, we should not assume that all the philosophy of the colonial period was simply an expression of an oppressor class (though there are elements of that even in Las Casas) but realize that it includes original and significant attempts to understand the central philosophical issues raised by the Conquest. Understanding these arguments will illuminate why Latin American philosophers have reason to recover some of Spanish colonial culture as a worthwhile and valid part of their own cultural and intellectual inheritance.

For these purposes, it will be sufficient to focus on the passages taken from Sepulveda and Las Casas in two standard anthologies of Latin American philosophy, Nuccetelli and Seay's *Latin American Philosophy* and Gracia and Millan's *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century*.³

What is Scholasticism?

It seems to be a well-kept secret that scholasticism was not an invention of the Medieval European university but came to “the West” in the Middle Ages from outside Europe. Scholasticism as a method of education and research began in the second century CE, in the Greek-speaking world and, from there, spread to the Eastern Empire and, later, to the Islamic countries of the Middle East. It then traveled from the Middle East across northern Africa in the early Middle Ages to the Iberian peninsula, where it cross-pollinated with Jewish and Christian thought and culture, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Scholasticism is, therefore, not only a method of teaching and thought that dominated Spain in the sixteenth century; it was part of the distinctive contribution of the Iberian peninsula to Europe, some five hundred years earlier, as the conduit through which this already thousand-year-old method could begin to take its Western, and chiefly Christian, form.⁴

Understanding Sepulveda and Las Casas requires, first of all, that we come to grips with the nature of this style of thinking called “scholasticism.” Both Sepulveda and Las Casas thought primarily in scholastic terms (though Las Casas was also a

humanist), and understanding scholastic texts characteristically requires more than simply looking at the arguments, for the nature and force of the arguments themselves will be in some measure obscure to the extent that we do not understand scholastic literary genres. I shall therefore begin by speaking in broad terms about what scholasticism is and how it helps us to interpret these specific texts.

“Scholasticism” really refers to two distinct but related things: it refers, first of all, to a pedagogy (i.e., a style of intellectual education), and, second, to the literary styles and philosophical and theological methods that this pedagogy engendered. As regards the pedagogy, scholasticism was primarily an oral practice, but one which produced literary styles as a kind of natural outgrowth of the oral practice. What, then, is scholasticism? In general, scholasticism can be characterized by three traits.⁵

First, scholasticism is a style of thinking that arises from doing commentaries. Scholastic pedagogy required that a student would comment on texts that were held to be, in some sense, “normative.” In practice, this meant that the commentator would examine some text and then interpret or explain it by formulating the textual ideas in terms of formal-logical methods. By way of example, the first practice of scholasticism used the works of Plato as the basis of commentary. The commentators would then reduce a passage of Plato to syllogisms, after making appropriate distinctions and clarifying potential confusions. This pedagogy would naturally result in written commentaries on great texts, such as the typical theology “dissertation” of the Latin Middle Ages, the *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*. On the other hand, thinkers trained in scholasticism might also produce other works (think, for example, of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*), which were based, in part, on commentaries, as is evidenced in the fact that the authors (at times glibly) used passages from these same normative texts as premises for their own arguments without any justification other than their being from the normative sources. This seeming glibness arises from the fact that there was a generally accepted range of interpretations of texts based on the commentaries. We could call this an inherently conservative dimension of scholasticism in that it supposes a set of “great books,” which are used as normative, authoritative texts and whose interpretation is, in some measure, taken for granted, even if there was a range of acceptable interpretations within certain boundaries.

This first characteristic of scholasticism explains the sometimes-surprising character of scholastic argumentation, including some of that of Sepulveda and Las Casas. For example, the reader of a scholastic text will sometimes wonder why it is that a mere quotation from, say, Aristotle seems to function as a self-evident premise, or even as something like a proof. The reason is because Aristotle's are among the normative texts for Latin scholasticism. Thus, to quote passages from Aristotle amounts to offering a strong, presumptive argument for a conclusion. In the case of Sepulveda and Las Casas, there are basically four kinds of normative texts that are used in this way: the writings of Scripture, the teachings of the Popes, the texts of Aristotle, and the texts of Thomas Aquinas. It should be noted that Aquinas was not always considered a normative source in the scholastic period (ca. 1200-ca. 1650). But, at this point in time (sixteenth century), especially in Spain, Aquinas's thought had perhaps the same normative status as Aristotle's.

Besides the characteristic of commentary and normative textuality, there are two other basic features of scholasticism. The second feature of scholasticism is what I will term “dialectical logic.” By dialectical logic, I mean not only the use

of formal logic but especially the style of posing arguments and counter-arguments as if one's interlocutor is present. This second feature of scholasticism is closely associated with the third, namely, the practice of public disputations. As I mentioned above, scholasticism was just as much a pedagogy as a method of philosophy and theology, and, as such, it was more an oral than a written discipline. The fact that public disputation is among those primary pedagogical tasks helps explain some of the features of the texts. It was often the case that a public disputation would be taken down by a secretary and then turned into a written text by the author. But even when this was not the case, the author usually wrote as if there were an imagined disputant over and against whom he is arguing. This tends to give scholastic texts a "living" character, as if there are disputants "right there."

Besides examining the general characteristics of scholasticism, we should look at the mechanics of the arguments. Happily, these particular passages of Sepulveda and Las Casas offer fine examples of the basic kinds of argument characteristic of late scholastic thinking. First of all, the model argument for a scholastic author is what was called a "scientific syllogism" (i.e., a necessary conclusion drawn from necessary premises). This is a type of a priori argument in that, to the extent possible, nonempirical concepts are used in the premises and are understood to establish their conclusions beyond a doubt.

When developing a counter-argument, there are three typical forms that we can differentiate in these passages. First of all, there is the counter-argument that questions the interpretation of some authoritative text or the manner in which that authoritative text is used in the argument. Las Casas, for example, will criticize how Sepulveda interprets Aristotle or the papal Bull he uses to justify the Conquest. Notice that both Sepulveda and Las Casas accept the authority of these texts: the issue is not whether the texts are normative but how they are to be understood.

The second form of argument uses standard logical devices for criticizing an author. Thus, an interlocutor may criticize an author for equivocations, for logical fallacies, for misunderstanding the sort of implication his premises have, and so forth. In the texts we examine, Las Casas will argue against Sepulveda on the grounds that Sepulveda is equivocating on the use of the term "barbarian." Once the correct distinctions are made, Las Casas argues, Sepulveda's arguments are seen to fail.

The third form of counter-argument is what we could call an "empirical" form of argument. This was perhaps not a typical form of scholastic argumentation, but, because of the topic at hand, it was required for certain arguments. The reason for this is that the disputes and debates over what was legitimate in the New World were often undertaken by disputants who had never been there. Hence, the disputants often relied on what were claimed to be factual reports of what went on in the New World, though the disputant himself may have had no way of judging the validity of these reports. Indeed, in this respect, we might want to differentiate between two kinds of empirical arguments: those based on reports of observations and those based on actual observations. In the case of this debate, Sepulveda never went to the New World, but Las Casas spent many years there, having traveled there at least four different times, and to many different parts of what we now call the Caribbean and Latin America. Though both our disputants might use reports of the New World, Las Casas was in a better position to judge which reports were more likely true.

The Passages

With these points in mind, we should be able to understand these passages from Sepulveda and Las Casas without too much difficulty.

The example of Sepulveda's arguments is taken from the *Prologue to the Members of the Congregation*.⁶ The sorts of arguments used here are sometimes termed "natural law" arguments (i.e., arguments based on the medieval and modern scholastic notions of a moral law derived from the knowledge of human nature). For our purposes, what is presupposed for understanding these natural law arguments are some basics of Aristotelian and Scholastic metaphysics.

First, all living beings, on Aristotle's account, have relatively stable natures or essences, where a "nature" describes a specific unity of features defining what the being is and how it functions. Since this is true of all living beings, it is also true of human beings. Second, nature or essence also includes or implies a purpose or end, whereby the being in question finds its proper fulfillment as a being of that nature. We can say, speaking somewhat roughly, that there are "static" and "dynamic" characteristics that define a being on this account: its static nature and its dynamic orientation to its proper end or purpose. Moreover, these two are closely related to each other because a being finds the fulfillment of its nature precisely in attaining its proper end. In the case of humans, once we find the proper end to being human, we understand what it is human beings are meant to be morally: fulfilling its end or purpose is what being a *good* human being consists in. To put the point in perhaps more "existential" language, the meaning of our being is found in our end.

If we understand these underlying assumptions, we can reduce Sepulveda's arguments justifying the Conquest to the following:

1. Human beings have a proper nature and also a proper end.
2. This proper end of human nature is the exercise of rationality.
3. If people habitually or characteristically act in ways not in accord with that end, they must be subdued and forced to live in accordance with it.
4. But this certainly is not the case with indigenous people; as the reports claim, the Amerindians practice cannibalism and sacrifice the life of innocents and are, therefore, not living in accord with rationality.
5. Therefore, it is fitting, indeed required, that Spain subdue them and force them to a rational life, in accord with their end.

The conclusion Sepulveda wants to draw from this is not simply to *legitimate* Spain's actions in the New World but really to claim that Spain is *obliged* to undertake the Conquest with its brutal methods, so that these "barbarians," as Sepulveda terms them, live in accord with their God-given reason. Sepulveda uses Aristotle's concept of "slave by nature" as a justification for his view, suggesting that, since these people cannot govern themselves, someone else—in this case Spain—must govern them.

The kind of argument Sepulveda offers is not purely a "scientific syllogism" but is close to that ideal. Premises 1, 2, and 3 are no doubt thought to be necessary and self-evident propositions. The fourth premise is partially empirical insofar as it requires observation of actual examples, but it, too, is basically a logical consequence from premise 3, except for the observational content. So, though the argument does not exemplify the scholastic ideal of argumentation perfectly, it is quite close to a strict proof in the scholastic sense.

The two texts from Las Casas have distinct functions in connection with Sepulveda's arguments. The passage from the *Biographical Addenda* is, first of all, not a scholastic text.⁷ It is an essay describing some of the experiences that Las Casas had in the New World. The text demonstrates that Las Casas was not only an excellent Scholastic thinker but also a talented Humanist writer. He seems also to have been aware of writings of the Humanists because there appear definite references or parallels to More's *Utopia* and other Humanist works.

In this passage, Las Casas does essentially four things: 1) He describes the indigenous peoples, whom he insists are not "barbaric" but are peaceable and posed no threat to Spain prior to the Conquest; 2) He claims that Scriptural and church authority in no way justify the Conquest of the indigenous peoples; 3) He argues that, since there are neither defensive nor religious grounds for the killing and enslavement of the indigenous peoples, the Conquest cannot be justified on the grounds that it serves Christian purposes (as it was often argued); 4) He concedes that seeing these points may not be easy for the Spaniard of his time. In this respect, Las Casas is rejecting self-righteousness, both in himself and in others. There may be understandable reasons why people do not see these points, Las Casas thinks. Nevertheless, it is necessary that the work be done to see, understand, and defend the dignity of the indigenous peoples.

The second text from Las Casas is taken from his *In Defense of the Indians*, and it is a scholastic text hitting directly on Sepulveda's arguments.⁸ Las Casas claims his own empirical authority concerning the indigenous peoples, having gone to the New World several times himself and lived there for many years. He also offers several kinds of counter-arguments to Sepulveda, often intertwining them in a single, sustained critique.

Essential to Las Casas's critique is Sepulveda's use of the term "barbarian." Las Casas believes that Sepulveda's interpretation of the Amerindians as barbarians, which works as a basic assumption in his argument, is used equivocally. Las Casas, therefore, differentiates three different uses of the notion "barbarian" by Aristotle.

First, the term "barbarian" can mean any "inhuman, wild, or merciless person." Las Casas, with more than a hint of sarcasm, says that the Spaniards are not unacquainted with this sort of barbarism, suggesting, therefore, that the conquerors were themselves "barbarians" in this sense, in particular in their treatment of Amerindians. The second use of "barbarian" refers to anyone lacking a written language. Las Casas points out that this kind of barbarian is *not* what Aristotle calls a "natural slave" because such people are capable of self-governance and can live in community. The third sense of "barbarian" is the proper and strict sense of term: it designates those who are "cruel, savage, and strangers to reason." Las Casas stresses that Aristotle thinks this third kind of "barbarian" extremely rare. It is this third kind of "barbarian" that Las Casas associates with Aristotle's notion of "natural slave" (i.e., of the kind of person who, though having reason, cannot exercise it, except to the point that he or she follow someone else's governance).

Once these distinctions are made, Las Casas can claim that Sepulveda's arguments rest on an equivocation. Sepulveda assumes, Las Casas thinks, that the Amerindians are barbarians in the third sense, that they are natural slaves in need of being ruled by someone else. Las Casas, in contrast, says that they can only be called barbarians in the loose, second sense of the term, a point he can claim in part because he had witnessed what these people were like. Las Casas knows them to be

peaceable. He rejects both the claims to cannibalism and to human sacrifice—the latter, Las Casas notes, being a practice exercised only on those already condemned to death by law. He further claims that the Amerindians had excellent laws and institutions. In short, Sepulveda has condemned the indigenous peoples to suffer the brutal rule of the Spaniards on the grounds that they are barbarians in the strict sense of natural slaves, when, in fact, they are only barbarians in the second, loose sense, which by no means implies the need to be ruled by others, or the requirement of supposed non-barbarians like the Spanish to conquer them.

We can see in Las Casas's argumentation the combination of the three different types of counter-argument analyzed above. He argues against Sepulveda's interpretation of Aristotle, and, just as we would expect, he uses Aristotle, as it were, against Sepulveda, thereby retaining the normativity of Aristotle's text while simultaneously criticizing Sepulveda's interpretation of it. Second, he uses logical techniques to criticize Sepulveda by pointing out his argument is based on an equivocal use of the term "barbarian." Finally, he uses an empirically-based argument against Sepulveda by insisting on his own empirical authority to claim that the Amerindians are not at all like Sepulveda's chosen witnesses claim they are.

Las Casas further offers an argument that expresses his own clear sense of the full "personhood" of the indigenous peoples: even if the indigenous peoples were natural slaves of the sort Sepulveda describes, how could that justify their current treatment at the hands of the Spanish? As long as they pose no threat to anyone, one cannot justify the use of force against them. Whereas the previous arguments are based on the fact that the Amerindians are not barbarians, this one is interesting in that it suggests that, even if they were, "barbarians have rights too." If a people pose no threat, even if they are barbarians in the third sense, there is no justification for violence against them.

Las Casas adds a theological argument, though with an Aristotelian twist. If, as Sepulveda claims, the entire New World were filled with barbarians in the sense of natural slaves, it would suggest that God failed in his creation; for what possible sense would it make for God to create potentially millions of people, "rational animals" in Aristotle's sense, who cannot, in fact, use their reason?

Conclusion

It can be tempting for Latin American philosophers to reject the achievements of Spanish colonial thought because of the justifiable rejection of the brutality of the Spanish Conquest. But not everything from the colonial period is purely a product of the colonial—or the colonized—mind. The achievements of Las Casas, which these passages illustrate but by no means exhaust, are significant from both an historical and a purely philosophical standpoint. Las Casas was able intellectually to transcend the differences between the European and American indigenous peoples enough to understand that the essence of rationality is not equivalent to how sixteenth-century Europeans exercised it, and he was, therefore, able to see the dignity of human nature exemplified in ways Europeans could not always understand. Las Casas was able to separate the claim to barbarism from the alleged right to conquer barbarians, and he was also able to drive a wedge between Spanish and Catholic triumphalisms, so that one could reject the justification of the Conquest in terms of Christianity. These achievements are potentially lasting contributions to the timeless goals of philosophical understanding and human liberation. They should, therefore, not be lost on Latin American philosophers and scholars.

Endnotes

1. See Roberto Fernandez Retamar. "Against the Black Legend." In *Caliban and Other Essays*, translated by Edward Baker (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
2. *Ibid.*, 60.
3. Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay. *Latin American Philosophy. An Introduction with Readings* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Prentice-Hall, 2004) and J. E. Gracia and Elizabeth Millan-Zaibert. *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century. The Human Condition, Values, and the Search for Identity* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004).
4. See Sten Ebbesen. "Ancient Scholastic Logic as the Source for Medieval Scholastic Logic." In *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Nuccetelli and Seay, 39-41.
7. *Ibid.*, 42-54.
8. Gracia and Millan-Zaibert, 33-49.

Moral Relativism and the Spanish Conquest

Gary Seay

University of Texas–Pan American

Bernal Diaz del Castillo, one of the *conquistadores* who accompanied Cortés to Mexico in 1519, appears to have been horrified by some of the practices he witnessed among the Aztecs. In his chronicle, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico*, he writes,

Every day we saw sacrificed before us three, four, or five Indians whose hearts were offered to the idols and their blood plastered on the walls, and the feet, arms and legs of the victims were cut off and eaten, just as in our country we eat beef brought from the butchers. ...When they sacrifice a wretched Indian they saw open the chest with stone knives and hasten to tear out the palpitating heart and blood, and offer it to their Idols, in whose name the sacrifice is made. Then they cut off the thighs, arms and head and eat the former at feasts and banquets, and the head they hang up on some beams, and the body of the man sacrificed is not eaten but given to...fierce animals.¹

Diaz plainly regarded all of this as evidence of moral depravity, and the remainder of his narrative reveals that the Spaniards were, for the most part, clueless regarding the question of what to do about it. When we think about the Spanish Conquest today, we may feel inclined to embrace the moral relativist conclusion of Alasdair MacIntyre, that, when confronted with an alien culture, we are not entitled to criticize its practices because we do not understand them.²

But before we let ourselves be drawn toward a conclusion as extreme as that, we should attend first to a more fundamental problem: Do we really understand what "moral relativism" is? I shall argue that when we attempt to make sense of this notion, we discover that its most popular form is fundamentally incoherent. And this will have significant consequences for what we are able to say about the Conquest and about the doomed encounter between Iberian and indigenous Amerindian cultures that was the crucible from which modern Latin America gradually emerged.

Some standard philosophical distinctions may help to bring our problem into sharper focus. First, moral relativism appears initially to be an attractive view because of the extreme variability of moral beliefs among persons and among cultures, and, without doubt, this diversity can be traced to differences in our backgrounds and in the courses of our lives. But, philosophers will be quick to point out, it is one thing to ask, *What caused me to have the moral beliefs I have?* and another to ask, *What justifies my holding those beliefs?* To explain how I came to hold my moral beliefs is not the same as showing that those beliefs are good ones to hold. Yet, at least one form of moral relativist, the *cultural relativist*, will usually ignore this distinction. Here is William Graham Sumner, one of the founders of modern sociology, in a passage from his influential book, *Folkways*:

When the elements of truth and right are developed into doctrines of welfare, the folkways are raised to another plane. ...Then we call them the mores. The mores are the folkways, including the philosophical and ethical generalizations as to societal welfare which are suggested by them. ...For every one the mores give the notion of what ought to be. This includes the notion of what ought to be done. ...All notions of propriety, decency, chastity, politeness, order, duty, right, rights...are in the mores. ...'Immoral' never means anything but contrary to the mores of the time and place. Therefore the mores and the morality may move together, and there is no permanent or universal standard by which right and truth in these matters can be established and different folkways compared and criticised.³

For Sumner, to explain—ethnographically—how we come to have our moral beliefs *just is* to justify them since there could be no *extracultural* standpoint from which to judge them good or bad. Once we've accounted for *how they came to be*, that's all the justification they need. The philosopher's question, "What is the right thing to do?" can always be settled, in any actual case, by reference to the society's prevailing mores.

This leads us to the familiar distinction between *Descriptive Ethical Relativism* and *Normative Ethical Relativism*. The former is merely the doctrine that:

DER Cultures differ fundamentally in their basic moral beliefs, and these are the foundations of the wide variation in practices found in different societies.

This thesis raises no controversy for philosophers. It is, of course, possible that such apparent diversity in practices might, after all, be only different ways of observing certain deep-rooted moral principles on which all societies agree. But whether that is true or not is not really a philosophical question. It is an empirical matter to be settled by the social sciences.

If **DER** is relatively unproblematic, this may tempt us to think that *Normative Ethical Relativism* is too. But that would be a mistake. That is the view that:

NER With regard to a single action or practice, two opposite moral judgments could both be right at the same time.

This is a different sort of doctrine since it is a claim not about *beliefs about right and wrong* but about *right and wrong*. As such, it is highly controversial to philosophers. It is *not* the sort of doctrine that could be confirmed or disconfirmed by the social sciences. Moreover, because it presupposes a doctrine not about what people *do* but about what they *ought to do*, **NER** does not obviously *follow* from **DER**. **NER** can be construed in more than one way,⁴ but, for present purposes, the most important form is *Cultural Relativism*:

CR The rightness or wrongness of any practice always *just consists* in its being approved or condemned by the prevailing *mores* of a culture. Reasons given to justify or proscribe a practice morally can be framed only in terms of culturally local mores.

This we recognize as Sumner's position. It has two important corollaries that have continued to make trouble for philosophers who have endorsed it.⁵ One is the *Toleration Principle*:

T One should not make moral judgments about practices within alien cultures.

And the other is the *Cultural Isolation Principle*:

CI There could be no transculturally valid judgments of objective right and wrong, since the sanction of a moral judgment *can only* be based in the moral rules of *some actual culture* or other.

This popular conception of moral relativism is, in fact, incoherent; **CR** and its two corollaries are vulnerable to several forms of *reductio*: anyone who wishes to endorse cultural relativism will, in the end, be driven to conclusions that are either inconsistent or highly counterintuitive.

Let's first consider the Toleration Principle. Cultural relativists may believe that their view requires accepting **T** since an outsider's judgments about a culture's practices would likely carry an ethnocentric bias. But there are a number of problems with this.

1. The judgment that *one should be tolerant* is itself already a putatively objective normative judgment since it is being presented as a *transcultural* principle stipulating a duty of respect owed by everyone to all cultures.
2. To prescribe tolerance is not a position of neutrality. It is a substantive judgment, as can be seen from the fact that not everyone thinks that one should be tolerant. (Osama bin Laden doesn't think so. Neither does the Reverend Jerry Falwell.)
3. Is it true that the most *rational* thing to do when confronted with very surprising or shocking practices in alien cultures is simply to *accept* them with an unruffled detachment? Bernard Williams suggests that sometimes, when confronted with truly ghastly practices—as Cortés and his men were when they first observed the Aztec rites of human sacrifice—the normal, rational, human reaction is moral revulsion and the sense that interference is warranted. If a relativist responds that Cortés and his men had no right to be in Mexico anyway, this objection is itself vulnerable in two ways: (1) it is necessarily a *nonrelative* judgment presupposing an extracultural moral standpoint—and, thus, unavailable to a cultural relativist—and (2) it does not face up to the moral question of what Cortés was supposed to *do* in that bizarre situation. "...[I]f a burglar comes across the owner of the house trying to murder somebody," Williams asks, "is he morally obliged not to interfere because he is trespassing?"⁶
4. Finally, when cultural relativists say, "one should not make moral judgments about practices in alien cultures," they seem mostly to mean, "one should not make judgments of *disapproval*." As Mary Midgley has pointed out, they themselves often have no hesitation in issuing effusive judgments of praise regarding such practices.⁷ Westerners of today may be inclined to do this very thing when confronted with the customs of native Amerindian societies of

Latin America, for instance, saying, "The Guaraní and the Quechua are so much more respectful of nature than we are! Their cultures have wholesome values that we would do well to adopt!" But if judgments of praise are allowed, why not criticism? This shows that anyone disposed to say this kind of thing does not for a minute believe that transcultural moral judgments are really inappropriate.

There are, then, some good reasons to think that **T** and **CR** are inconsistent. Now, what about the Cultural Isolation Principle? We'll discuss that together with **CR** itself, since they are closely connected. This combination of doctrines has traditionally faced significant problems.

1. How does the fact that a society approves of some action or practice make it *right*? How does the fact of social disapproval make some act or practice *wrong*? Plainly, this raises both:
 - a. The "Is-Ought" problem—since it's not clear that a value-claim can be derived from a claim about social facts—and
 - b. The "Cultural Infallibility" assumption—since **CR** seems to take for granted that cultures cannot be mistaken in what they hold to be right or wrong.

Of course, the day has long since passed when philosophers generally could be counted on to agree that there is such a thing as a "fact-value gap." But even if we grant the subtlety of contemporary naturalist, reductionist, and moral particularist arguments, it is still not clear how general, or even universal, assent to a well-established folkway could *make* some practice *right*. Surely, it must be possible for societies to be occasionally mistaken in their well-established beliefs. If they can be wrong about matters of fact—believing, for instance, that the sun orbits the earth, or that some diseases are caused by demonic possession—why not also about questions of right and wrong? Indeed, it seems beyond dispute that actual societies *have been* wrong in their mores—taking for granted, for example, that women should be treated as the property of men, or that persons with dark skin could justifiably be denied basic civil rights, enslaved, or even killed. Is not the transparently objective wrongness of these things more obvious than the truth of a philosopher's doctrine denying the possibility of objective wrongness?

2. Another very common objection to raise at this point is the following: If "right" and "wrong" are simply *defined* by the mores of one's culture, then it seems that social criticism could not even be comprehensible, much less justified. In that case, any attempt to change the social order would be *immoral* by definition.
3. Even worse, if **CR** is true, then *just any* practice would be right if it were widely accepted in a society. And this seems counterintuitive in the extreme (e.g., could torturing children for fun be right if it were generally approved within a culture?).
4. Finally, accepting **CI** entails accepting the view that that there could be no *extracultural* moral reasons, and, hence, no transcultural, objective standpoint from which the practices of a society could be seen as unjust. But, clearly, anyone who held these views *could not* also hold that there are such things as "human rights violations"—since, on this view, there could not be any human rights to be violated.

How, then, are questions about universal rights related to our discussion? Underlying the current revival of philosophical interest in human rights,⁸ without doubt, is a deep skepticism about cultural relativism and an inclination to the contrary view, that societies *can* sometimes be wrong about what constitutes a morally justified social practice. Contemporary discussions of human rights are, of course, in some respects only revisiting a much older discussion of “natural rights” that flourished among Thomist philosophers at the time of the Conquest. At Salamanca, in the early sixteenth century, the Dominican scholar Francisco de Vitoria presented carefully crafted arguments to support the view that the indigenous peoples of the Spanish New World had natural rights to dominion over their territories and to their property, including their land, and that the Conquest, to the extent that it deprived them of these things, could be criticized on moral grounds.⁹

But twenty-first-century philosophers involved in debates about human rights do hope also to do a better job of defending the notion that there can be a moral standpoint independent of culture in terms of which social practices can be assessed,¹⁰ and this defense can be successful only if relativist objections can be decisively met. My intention here is not to enter into discussions about human rights but only to try to undermine cultural relativism. That is the more basic issue; for, if cultural relativism is true, then there are no universal human rights.

So far, we’ve considered some conventional objections to cultural relativism. Now we need to ask, what conclusions can be drawn about the Conquest itself if relativism is true? Clearly, there are at least two different kinds of cross-cultural moral assessment that we need to consider:

1. The Spaniards’ judgments of moral repugnance toward some practices of the native peoples, and
2. Our own judgments of moral repugnance toward the Spaniards’ treatment of the natives.

Already, we’ve looked briefly at (1), and we’ve seen that anyone who thinks the moral illegitimacy of the Conquest itself vitiates the moral standing of the Spaniards in criticizing the Indians is, thereby, himself unable to appeal to cultural relativism since he’s assuming that the Conquest *actually was* morally illegitimate in some extracultural sense. But suppose that one temporarily suspends judgment about the morality of the Conquest itself. One is then faced with the question, were Bernal Diaz and his fellow soldiers *justified* in their condemnation of the Aztec practices of cannibalism, idolatry, and human sacrifice? We may be inclined to dismiss their condemnation of idolatry as ethnocentrism, but what should we say about the other two?

The Aztecs were, of course, not alone among New World peoples in their use of human sacrifice as a religious rite. Recent archeological discoveries in Peru reveal that the ancient Incas sacrificed young children. But it seems that a cultural relativist will have to say that these practices were *not wrong* in the case of the Incas any more than the sacrifice of adult captives was in that of the Aztecs since no judgment of culture-neutral rightness or wrongness is possible. Anyone who accepts *CR* and its corollaries is committed to the position that the ultimate moral sanction of any practice can only be by mores accepted *within a society* and, thus, will not be able to condemn the religious rites of these native peoples as immoral. We may regard these killings as abhorrent, as no doubt did the sixteenth-century Spaniards who witnessed them, since these practices are offensive to our culture’s mores. But, for a cultural relativist, there is no transcultural sense in which these practices *actually were* abhorrent. Although we condemn them, there is no objective sense in which they *deserve to be* condemned.¹¹

Now, what about (2)? What should a cultural relativist say about the behavior of the Spaniards in the Conquest? Here is Father Las Casas describing how the *conquistadores* treated the Indians:

They forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could manage to slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual’s head from his body with a single blow of their axes. ...They slaughtered anyone and everyone in their path, on occasion running through a mother and her baby with a single thrust of their swords. They spared no one, erecting especially wide gibbets on which they could string their victims up with their feet just off the ground and then burn them alive thirteen at a time, in honor of our Savior and the twelve Apostles...¹²

This is only one of numerous similarly horrific episodes recounted by Las Casas. Nor were his accounts atypical. Here is another Spanish friar reporting what he witnessed:

Some Christians encounter[ed] an Indian woman, who was carrying in her arms a child at suck; and since the dog they had with them was hungry, they tore the child from the mother’s arms and flung it still living to the dog, who proceeded to devour it before the mother’s eyes.¹³

In addition to these atrocities, whole populations of natives were worked to death as slaves in the fields and mines, and even more were decimated by European diseases to which they had no immunity. Kirkpatrick Sale, in *The Conquest of Paradise*, cites persuasive evidence by modern historians that, on the island of Hispaniola alone, more than seven million indigenous people died between 1492 and 1514, which amounts to more than ninety-nine percent of the population.¹⁴

When we think about these reports, it will be instructive to notice the difference between what we are all inclined to say and what cultural relativism allows us to say. On the one hand, cruelty and genocidal killing on this scale evoke only horror and moral revulsion. As we struggle to imagine how anyone could have behaved as the *conquistadores* did, we can think only of scenes from Dachau and Auschwitz. But if cultural relativism is true, then none of these things were wrong in any objective sense—that is, in any extracultural sense—since there is no standpoint independent of culture in terms of which they can be judged wrong. The notion “objectively wrong” is simply an empty concept—a kind of mirage that has bedeviled philosophers but which turns out, on closer inspection, to be an illusion. On this view, *we* perceive wrongness in the Spaniards’ treatment of the indigenous peoples, but that is because *our culture’s* mores condemn it. Since our morality enjoins us to avoid cruelty and genocide and to condemn those who perpetrate it, we will try to persuade other societies to see it our way. But that is the most we can do, for, in the end, all evaluative standards are culture-bound. Isn’t the belief that moral judgments could somehow be transculturally valid only a relic of Enlightenment thinking? If we are, for example, postmodernists, we may prefer to adopt a cultural relativist position of bemused detachment from the above discussion, asking whether a belief in the possibility of “moral objectivity” isn’t just another foundationalist delusion?

Yet, this position is not persuasive. Ultimately, cultural relativism fails because it cannot accommodate the one question whose answer we most need to know: What sort of mores is it *desirable* to have? What model of multicultural society is the one we *should* have? We envision presently evolving modern societies as rightly pluralistic, yet we want our social practices to be governed by rules that any reasonable person could acknowledge as fair. And this plainly requires striving to attain a moral standpoint independent of culture and its biases. The society we all want, after all, is not merely whatever society we happen to have; it is the society that is optimally *just*. And it is *not* unreasonable to ask about how to achieve this goal.

But cultural relativism fools us into thinking that certain kinds of moral judgments—transcultural ones—are either off-limits or impossible. It is a profoundly conservative position, for it leaves everything where it is, morally speaking, and makes social criticism unintelligible. It seems attractive only because it appeals to a form of lazy-mindedness: one in which you don't have to struggle to figure out what you ought to do (because there *isn't* anything you ought to do). Of course, there is something you "ought" to do—in the inverted-commas sense—but it's not clear how a mere convention can actually carry normativity. That is, it does not seem to be a motivating reason because it appears to fall short of expressing a full-blooded, moral obligation.

To be morally obligated to do something, we all ordinarily think, is to have a *genuine duty*, in some *nonrelative sense*. To act on such a duty is to be motivated by moral reasons that recognize some real, objective good to be achieved, or palpable, objective evil to be avoided. Anything less than that is not moral obligation at all.¹⁵ In fact, it is only when we think of moral duties as having a nonrelative status—in the sense of being owed independently of any merely cultural requirement—that we take the duties seriously. And, of course, we reason like this all the time. This then leads to the question, is cultural relativism a view that anyone *could actually hold* in her own life? No doubt many people—especially intellectuals—imagine themselves to be cultural relativists. But, although this might seem an appealing view in theory (at least, until one sees what it entails), is anyone really prepared to endorse it *in practice*?

In reality, we can't live our lives without making moral judgments. Since we are always having to decide what we *ought to do* in situations that affect others whom we care about, we cannot really be normative ethical relativists of any sort in our everyday lives. Consider situations in which you're trying to decide what sort of education to provide for your children, or how to care for your aged parents. Here, your aim is to do what is right, not merely what society's mores dictate. Actually *taking action* on our decisions, when they affect others about whom we have feelings of special closeness or regard, requires believing that *that action really is better or more right* than some other possible course of action available to us.

If these observations are correct, then we have good reason to be skeptical about normative ethical relativism—at least in the form of cultural relativism. That doctrine seems to rest on a confused view of how actual moral reasoning works, and, if we take it seriously, we are then unable to make sense of a large and familiar part of our ordinary experience as social beings. In a similar way, our ability to think clearly about history is compromised if we cannot use moral categories that carry full normative weight. When we consider the Spanish Conquest, in particular, to withhold judgments of blame is to falsify the historical record.¹⁶

Endnotes

1. Bernal Diaz del Castillo. *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico, 1517-1521*, translated by A. P. Maudslay (London: George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1928), 161, 295.
2. Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).
3. William Graham Sumner. *Folkways* (New York: Ginn and Company, 1907).
4. Another is *ethical subjectivism*, which relativizes moral rightness and wrongness to the attitudes of individuals.
5. Among those sympathetic to some form of cultural relativism are most postmodernist thinkers, including the philosophers Richard Rorty (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989]) and Alasdair MacIntyre (op. cit., and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988]). Other contemporary philosophers who have attempted to defend moral relativism include Gilbert Harman ("Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review*, 84 [1975]: 3-22) and David Wong (*Moral Relativity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984]).
6. Bernard Williams. "An Inconsistent Form of Relativism." In *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral*, edited by J. W. Meiland and M. Krausz (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1982), 174.
7. Mary Midgley. "Trying Out One's New Sword." In *Heart and Mind: The Varieties of Moral Experience* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).
8. See, e.g., Alan Gewirth. *The Community of Rights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Robert Paul Churchill. *Human Rights and Global Diversity* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006); and William J. Talbott. *Which Rights Should Be Universal?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
9. Francisco de Vitoria. "The American Indians." From *De Indis et de Iure Belli*, translated by Jeremy Lawrence and Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), reprinted in *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought*, edited by Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999). On this subject, Vitoria had a great deal to say, some of it endorsing views not easily reconciled with those cited here.
10. Talbott, 48-49, 82.
11. Even Las Casas, in his defense of the Indians' practice of human sacrifice, did not go so far as this. Invoking the Aristotelian doctrine of "probable error," he held that they were acting only on the advice of their own wise men, and, thus, in a way that was reasonable under the circumstances. But even if these human sacrifices could be explained and justified provisionally, Las Casas clearly believed that they could not be defended in absolute terms. Bartolomé de Las Casas. *Witness: Writings of Bartolomé Las Casas*, edited and translated by George Sanderlin with a foreword by Gustavo Gutiérrez (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971), 162-7.
12. Bartolomé de Las Casas. *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, edited and translated by Nigel Griffin with an introduction by Anthony Pagden (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 15.

13. Letter from a group of Dominicans to M. De Xeries, quoted in Tzvetan Todorov. *The Conquest of America*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 139.
14. Kirkpatrick Sale. *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990), 161.
15. Arguably, there is something in the very nature of morality that is incompatible with relativism. See Williams, 173.
16. This paper has been greatly improved by helpful suggestions from Susana Nuccetelli.

Observations on the Political Thought of Simón Bolívar (1783-1830) in The Jamaica Letter (1815) and The Angostura Address (1819)

Ivan Marquez
Bentley College

I. A Brief Natural History of a Continent

Simón Bolívar's political discourse mixes comparative politics, social morphology, human ecology, and geography to formulate a developmental politics for newly independent nineteenth-century Latin America. His politics evoke, if not invoke, Aristotle's *Politics*, Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*, Rousseau's *Discourses* and *The Social Contract*, the work of Baron von Humboldt, Jefferson's writings, and Hegel's *Lectures on Universal History*. The ultimate goal of Bolívar's developmental politics is federalism and democracy, in general, and the creation of a pan-American federation of individual democratic republics, in particular.

However, meanwhile, at the early stages of political development of these newly independent territories, Bolívar recommends centralized governments in the individual republics, with a very strong executive and a strong army to keep stability at home and security abroad. The political development of Latin America is marked, and will be marked, by its relative success in dealing with three particular problems that are characteristic of this region: (1) the problem of size, (2) the problem of heterogeneity, and (3) the problem of colonialism.

First, size is a fundamental element influencing the character and organization of any politics. Large regions cannot be adequately organized in any way people want. In fact, strong centralized governments seem to be best suited for the long-term stability of large countries. Secondly, size becomes even more problematic when it is combined with high degrees of heterogeneity of peoples and environments, as is the case in Latin America. A flat and homogeneous vast expanse, evenly populated by a single monolingual ethno-race, is much easier to organize politically than a continent with the greatest north-south mountain range, the Andes, the biggest jungle on Earth, the Amazon, and the driest desert, the Atacama, and populated by hundreds of different human groups divided and united by very intricate and diverse histories. Third, the challenges of governability brought by size and heterogeneity are further exacerbated by the problem of colonialism, namely, the political, psycho-socio pathology of the colonized. Governance in countries that, for three hundred years, were colonies of what was, at the time, the most powerful absolutist empire in the world creates three additional problems: the relative

political immaturity of the population, the entrenchment of colonial structures of power, and the intellectual and psychological subjection to foreign models of political organization and socio-economic ethos.

II. The Dynamics of the Process of Liberation and Nation Building

Bolívar clearly understands the Latin American "problematic," and, on the basis of this understanding, he tries in *The Jamaica Letter* and in *The Angostura Address* to sketch out a historical project of political development reaching into the past and extending into the future. The project is one with everybody but not of everybody. It is, in essence, a particularly *criollo* (Creole) project, where the *criollo* is seen as the main historic-political agent, while the blacks and indigenous peoples are seen as dependent entities in the process, occupying an ambiguous place somewhere between helpers and subaltern agents.

Bolívar's outline of the process of liberation and nation building can be delineated by identifying seven historical moments. First, there is the Spanish conquest and colonization of the New World, with the total destruction of the previous political, social, cultural, and economic indigenous structures. Imperial structures are put in their place, constituting a foreign tyrannical rule that eventually becomes ordered and well-functioning. Secondly, we have the development of a *meztizo-criollo* world with considerable economic wealth and socio-cultural identity and structures. Third, there is the advent of the British, American, and French revolutions and the concomitant development and diffusion of Enlightenment liberal-republican ideals. Fourth, we have the crisis of Spain that culminates with the Napoleonic invasion of Spain and the instauration of Joseph Bonaparte's rule. This crisis makes manifest Spain's status as a moribund empire, politically dysfunctional, militarily weak, economically parasitic on the colonies, and culturally backwards—even seemingly non-European, due to its African-Arabic element, and pre-modern, due to its Catholic, Counter-Reformist, ultra-conservatism, resisting Enlightenment, and its virtually feudal social structures and pre-industrial economy. The emperor has no clothes. Fifth, there are the Wars of Independence leading to the end of the Spanish empire, the destruction of colonial social, political, and economic structures, and the severing of the links to Spain. Sixth, finally, independence has been achieved but at the expense of everything else. There is independence but also anarchy, chaos, lack of civility, and an absence of personal and socio-political virtues. The whole region has devolved to a Hobbesian state of nature. Lastly, there is Bolívar's sense of the future prospects for regional development. To him, these boil down to two: (1) a complete descent to a state of nature with the total destruction of the region, or (2) the use of the independence that has been acquired to reconquer the socio-political goods that have been lost in the very effort to acquire that independence.

To avert the total demise of political and social organization, Bolívar identifies some political, social, and economic means to enable a slow but steady development toward a free, equal, and independent federation of democratic republics in the region. First, analytically but not chronologically, there has to be firm but subtle governance. Political power has to be wielded with a strong hand but not a heavy hand. Secondly, an autonomous and sovereign national consciousness must be developed out of a heteronomous, *meztizo*, dependent, colonial consciousness. Third, a provincial, *caudillo* (pre-political) will power must slowly give way to a centralized, representative, planned political power. Individual will must yield to the general will. Fourth, and concomitant

with the previous movement, there has to be a moderation of the destructive, anarchic will(s) of the majority simultaneously with the curtailment of the despotic power of public authority. Fifth, slaves must be freed and slavery abolished because where there is slavery political liberty can never be fully established or maintained. Sixth, lands must be distributed to patriots to help boost a new national consciousness, a sense of loyalty toward and faith in the political structures of the emerging nation-states, lending these structures a fair share of legitimacy in the eyes of the majority, and to create a new order of land ownership and tenancy. Seventh, political and economic bonds must be strengthened with nations that played the role of war benefactors during the process of independence from Spain, thus substituting the old imperial-colony axis with a new multi-axial network of political and economic relationships that will allow for the region to sustain itself in the present and to grow further in the future. Eighth, a canal in the Isthmus of Panama must be built to unify the Atlantic and Pacific shores of the continent, providing for an easier means of communication, transportation, and trade in the region, aiding in the process of political and economic integration of the region with the rest of the world.

For Bolívar, the impending question is: Can we get there on time? Can we integrate and develop stable and well-functioning structures leading to a well-ordered society before the centrifugal forces of anarchy lead to greater and greater fragmentation and eventual total collapse? At this point in the analysis, Bolívar changes from programmatic to philosophical and ironic, commenting that operative freedom is hard, and tyranny ultimately comfortable—it is easier to be a slave than one's own master.

III. On Political Education

Like many political thinkers before and after him, Bolívar puts much hope in the powers of education to overcome some of the shortcomings of the historical process of development in the region, especially the effects of colonialism and the tendency toward *caudillo* provincialism and anarchy. Bolívar believes that a citizen of a healthy republic must love country, law, and leaders. The political leaders are the face and basis of this republican ideal. Thus, leaders should be the first to embody the socio-political virtues that lead to a cultivation of a political culture of civility. The leaders are not only political leaders but also teachers, and a vanguard in a process of political education, understood as edification (*Bildung*), an education for republican citizenship. A government organism acting like a virtual fourth power, in addition to the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary powers, should be established to be in charge of national education and the protection of civic virtue, having the role of moral educator and watch dog, and whose dominion is children and the hearts of men.

Bolívar put much emphasis and hope on the idea of the development of a hereditary civil servant class. This civil servant class would be invested from birth in the development and exercise of virtue without having to simultaneously engage in Machiavellian political power mongering to defend their own self-interest. In order for this to be possible, a select group of individuals has to be raised knowing that their economic future is secure, by salary or the possession of an (land) estate, and with a mandate to develop the virtues necessary for excellence in politics. Only economically self-sufficient and virtuous individuals can consistently put the general will ahead of their own individual will due to the fact that they do not have to politically safeguard their own private self-interest because this one is structurally assured from the beginning; thus, it is an unquestioned given.

Bolívar's ideal of a governing class that is more or less immune to political corruption has elements akin to the Aristotelian landowner-citizen of a *polis*, the Confucian Mandarin class, and the Jeffersonian idea of the self-reliant farmer citizen constitutive of the American yeoman polity. This civil servant class would be a legislative class—a hereditary senate—playing a function closer to the function of the United States judiciary, upholding the interests of the general will, faithful to the spirit of the constitution, and keeping the relatively strong executive and also the people in check, thus allowing for the overall balance of political powers so strongly endorsed by Montesquieu.

IV. The Perplexingly Exceptional Case of the United States of America

Between 1799 and 1810, Bolívar was abroad in Europe (Spain, France, Italy, and England) and the United States, living in Madrid from 1799 to 1802 and in Paris from 1804 to 1806. These experiences allowed him to acquaint himself with the political climate of these diverse countries, gaining him a first-hand education in comparative politics. Bolívar saw the transformation of France from a postrevolutionary republic to a Napoleonic empire, the weakening of the Spanish empire, the practical functioning of political institutions of the British constitutional monarchy, and the federal republicanism of the United States. Of all these political systems, Bolívar was most impressed by the model of the United States, given that he considered the establishment of a combination of federalism and republicanism as the ultimate and universal goal of all political development—the end of Universal History, so to speak, à la Hegel.

But the model of the United States was always regarded by Bolívar as a miracle, the perplexing exception that proved the rule, and he was never able to really account for its relative success there *vis à vis* its relative failure everywhere else. It is worth taking up Bolívar's puzzle about the United States' alleged political exceptionalism to try to find an explanation for it, or, otherwise, to explain it away. I think that one only needs to extend Bolívar's own geography-minded thinking to explain the United States' case, as much as any explanation is really possible for a phenomenon of this kind.

First, the United States consisted of a relatively homogeneous Northern European, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant population of families of farmer settlers, who took away land sparsely populated by an assortment of hunter-gatherer and farming Native American Indian groups by wits or force. Second, there was no significant amount of gold or silver in the region, so the economy that was established revolved around farming and crafts. Moreover, in the North, the weather and soil were not particularly suited for easy and bountiful, large-scale farming, thus the region lacked the qualities that fuel greed and the mass accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few that, in turn, leads to great social stratification and inequality, bringing with it a strong militarization of society to preserve order amidst what is perceived by many as arbitrary privilege. Third, the relatively flat and gentle topography of the East and the whole North Atlantic coast allowed for easy interconnection and, thus, regional integration. Fourth, in geography, size does matter, and, politically, for a fledging republican federation of states, small is better. And the original thirteen colonies forming the United States of America comprised a small fraction of the area that Bolívar dreamt of uniting in the Southern continent. Fifth, what was for Bolívar the paradox of slavery within a democratic republic ended up being advantageous for the short-term economic development of the United States. Slave labor allows for the harnessing of a large population of people without having to deal with them

politically as fellow citizens with political rights or economic stakes of their own. This buys a country time, serving as a social subsidy of human power, allowing the country to increase its wealth, develop its infrastructure, and consolidate itself politically at home and abroad within a simpler political context of wills. Last but not least, there was the existence of an ever-expanding Western frontier that served as a multi-purpose escape valve to ease all kinds of social, political, economic, and even cultural and religious tensions, and acting as a seemingly limitless catalytic for demographic and economic growth. And, still, no amount of new land could prevent the short-term advantages of slavery for the new republic to turn into its most lingering long-term problem, eventually leading, in part, to the American Civil War of the 1860s. But no amount of vision could allow Bolívar to foresee this outcome awaiting the United States almost fifty years later. Nonetheless, to his credit, his political principles implied it. One could read the writing on the wall, if one read between the lines.

V. The Long Differential March of History

Like the good student of the naturalist Baron Alexander von Humboldt that he was, drawing from his own observations about comparative politics and subscribing to his own version of an Enlightenment era progressive philosophy of history, Bolívar realizes that although the ultimate political goal for the region might be the establishment of a federation of democratic republics, this goal is far away in the future. For the time being, however, a sensible approach to the governance of the region is to understand the sub-regional differences and, following the advice of Montesquieu, to tailor laws for the political functioning of these sub-regions to each region's particular nature rather than attempt to force every region to follow a single, universal, predetermined model of political organization. Given Bolívar's progressivist metanarrative of history, the end of history might very well be one and the same for the entire world, although he does seem to leave open the possibility that this might end up not being the case. But, however this might turn out to be, each country is at every moment moving at its own speed and with its own rhythm, due to all of the contingencies of its previous history and its given geography. If one does not consider and respect these differences, one will not succeed in enabling each and every place to continue down a steady path toward further political development.

Bolívar analyzes the sub-regional differences of the whole region. Each sub-region occupies a position in a continuous spectrum bounded by what Bolívar takes to be the extreme cases of Perú and Chile. The opposite ends of the spectrum are defined by the political organizing principles of dictatorship and democracy, respectively. For Bolívar, Perú's continuing history of gold, slaves, strong and long connections to the Spanish colonial rule, a great mass of impoverished Indians, and a small, very rich *criollo* elite makes it almost categorically unfit for freedom. And, certainly for the foreseeable future, he thought, a dictatorship might be the only adequate political option for Perú. Chile, contrary to Perú, has few natural riches, it is relatively small, it is geographically isolated from the rest of the region and out of the way, it had slight contact with Spanish colonial rule, being little more than a military garrison for Spain, it has a uniform population with similar political and religious ideas and virtuous customs, and it has always had the good example of its neighbors, the indomitable, freedom-loving Araucanos. Chile, according to Bolívar, seems destined for republican freedom from the moment of its independence.

Bolívar seems to think that if countries respect their uniqueness and establish political arrangements that are congenial to their own particularities, these countries will thrive socially and economically, in peace and stability. And, perhaps,

if all countries follow their own path at their own speed, they will eventually meet as peaceful, politically stable, well-developed, and wealthy republican nations, who then will be in a position to unite in a comprehensive federation united by a common origin and language, similar customs, and one religion. In the meantime, the region will have to make do with smaller, more modest, maybe temporary, sub-regional allegiances to aid the different sub-regions develop themselves.

VI. The Greatness of Bolívar

Bolívar's greatness as a political-military leader is obvious to everyone. But his greatness as a political thinker is a different story. Here, his greatness lies not so much in the originality of his theoretical positions as in the fact that he saw more deeply and clearly, further and earlier than anybody else the formidable, deep-seated challenges of the Latin American continent in his time and well into the future. His diagnosis and prescription ring as fresh, relevant, timely, and true now as they did almost two hundred years ago, the reach of his visionary scope extending all the way to the present. His greatness is linked to a timeless quality about his thought that is connected to an unfinished historical task. Bolívar is still relevant because his political task is still Latin America's task. We cannot forget Bolívar as long as we have not caught up with him.

Sarmiento's *Facundo: Thoughts on Colonialism and Independence*

Maria H. Morales

Florida State University

Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1811-1888) was a prominent nineteenth-century Argentinian thinker, writer, educator, and politician. During the 1830s and 1840s, he lived in exile in Chile, where he wrote his best-known work, Facundo: Civilizacion y Barbarie (1845), which first appeared as a newspaper serial in Santiago de Chile's El Progreso. He was a tireless and progressive social reformer, concerned especially with improving national education. As president of Argentina (1868-74), he tripled the number of students enrolled in public schools, created the first educational institution devoted to training teachers, and built about one hundred and forty public libraries across the country. Throughout his life, Sarmiento was engaged with other leading Latin American intellectuals, including the legal thinker and constitutional reformer Juan Bautista Alberdi (a fellow Argentinian) and the great Cuban poet, political thinker, and committed liberator Jose Marti.

Sarmiento's chief concern in *Facundo* is with the struggle between despotism and freedom in postcolonial, postrevolutionary Hispanoamerica.¹ He fears that, in the process of building independent nation-states and establishing their own identities, Hispanoamerican peoples will replace colonial tyranny with local tyrannies; that, hence, the conditions for genuine national unity—notably the democratization of education and politico-economic development—will fail to be realized; and that, consequently, the destiny of Hispanoamerican countries is to remain internally divided and, because of this, chaotic, nations kept “backward” and subjected. Sarmiento provides in *Facundo* an analysis of the complex tensions among the colonial past, the independent present, and the possibility of a liberated future. This analysis is grounded on his conviction that to govern well is to educate for freedom and that educating for freedom, in turn, requires

wiping out all vestiges of colonialism—both its institutional forms and its “ethic,” which, in his view, have survived the movements for political independence. In *Facundo*, Sarmiento is grappling with a critical challenge confronting nineteenth-century Hispanoamerican nation-builders: how to create a new foundation for legitimate political authority in the wake of the colonial political system’s crumbling. This preoccupation drives Sarmiento’s arguments for a complete break with the colonial past, which depend on his interpretation of the nature of colonial despotism.

In what follows, I examine Sarmiento’s diagnosis of the tensions between colonialism and independence in *Facundo*. This text rightfully has been called “tumultuous, belligerent, and uneven.”² It is a powerful polemic that aims both to describe what Sarmiento deems to be a bankrupt, slavish way of life, and to prescribe a liberating alternative. In *Facundo*, we find a provocative examination of the effects of colonialism on the organization of life, including the character of a colonized people, its outlook on life, and its possibilities.³ Sarmiento argues that the survival of the colonial past in the way of life of a people—political, social, and/or moral—is an impediment to liberation in order to underscore the need for its destruction. A *real* liberatory revolution—as opposed to a revolution for political independence—must transform not only political institutions but values. Especially important in the young postcolonial historical moment are people’s attitudes toward authority and their capacity to arrive at a consensus on their constitution as a new people. Such consensus, Sarmiento believes, cannot be built on the past, especially not on the feudal⁴ and religious authoritarian aspects of Spanish colonial rule, still embedded in the mind and spirit of peoples who have known nothing but subjection and, thus, have no idea how to become free—what *freedom*, as opposed to *anarchic license*, really means. For Sarmiento, reflection on the phenomenon of mental colonialism⁵ in particular effectively highlights the kind and extent of the freedom necessary fully to overcome the destructive influence of the colonial past.

In the Introduction to *Facundo*, Sarmiento invokes the “terrible shadow of Facundo” and exhorts it to explain “the secret life and internal convulsions that tear the insides of a noble people.”⁶ The provincial tyrant Juan Facundo Quiroga is the archetype of American absolutism (*absolutismo Americano*) premised on the cult of personality. The *caudillo* is such personality: a charismatic, “popular,” leader who is both autocratic and violent in his rule. He represents a dangerous tendency toward authoritarianism in government leaders, which was immanent in the colonial system and, Sarmiento maintains, has survived in the rural way of life. In Argentina, in particular, *caudillos* are local leaders, demagogic and ruthless, who use the people (other *gauchos*⁷ in particular) for their own power-seeking purposes and employ whatever means they think necessary to sustain their rule, including violence and terror. Sarmiento contends that General Manuel Rosas, then dictator of Argentina, is the incarnation of Facundo’s vices, which have moved from the provinces to the city (Buenos Aires) and, hence, destroyed the only hope for building a culture of freedom. Sarmiento worries that Facundo’s “soul has passed into a more finished, more perfect mold; and what was only instinct, initiation, tendency, has become in Rosas system, effect, and end.” The *caudillo* culture has, in effect, metamorphosed into “art, system, and regular politics.” It is now institutionalized and, hence, has come to have an unjustifiable aura of legitimacy—unjustifiable because it is nothing other than Machiavellian “organized despotism,” a form of polity that represents a false, cold, calculating “man” as the embodiment of “the way of being of a people.” *Caudillos* portray themselves as autochthonous leaders ready to govern

in the interest of the people, when, in fact, they are narrow-minded despots who have replaced colonial rule with their own and for their own self-serving purposes. Sarmiento views the phenomenon of *caudillismo* in politics, then, as revealing the inner logic of power and subjection in postcolonial, postrevolutionary Hispanoamerica.

According to Sarmiento, the “eternal struggle of Hispanoamerican peoples” (a subject both for history and for philosophy) is to find the *unity* that alone makes possible the formation of national identities, itself a precondition for interamerican solidarity. Sarmiento, like many other Hispanoamerican political thinkers throughout the nineteenth century, was deeply preoccupied with the need to impose unity and “order” in emergent nations facing “the chaos of independence.”⁸ Sarmiento credits Bolivar with the insight that internal divisions and rivalries are vestiges of colonialism, which imposed on our lands a hierarchical social world still largely untouched by republican institutions because of the destructive, divisive *caudillista* politics. For Sarmiento, this world is, in fact, *two worlds* within a single geographical territory, representing two different civilizations; actually, it is *two different centuries* coexisting uncomfortably and in tension with one another. Sarmiento construes the two-world metaphor in terms of his famous distinction between “barbarism” (the XVII century) and “civilization” (the XIX century) as themselves representing archetypal forms of life.⁹

The world of “barbarism” is rural, poor, forgotten, and bound to contend with the untamed and brutal forces of nature (in Argentina represented by the *pampas*, which are a veritable “sea of land”). This world is also isolated and alienated from (and often resentful of) the urban world. Finally, it is “*Americano*” and common to all the peoples of America (*comun a todos los pueblos*¹⁰). In contrast, the world of “civilization” is urban, rich, educated, and economically and politically powerful. This world is also unresponsive to the plight of the rural world.¹¹ Finally, it is “*Europeo*”: it embodies the European way of life and culture. Sarmiento examines in detail the political, economic, and social organization of these different worlds. First, politically, the world of “barbarism” is characterized by the dissolution of society and political anarchy. There is no “*res publica*,” no social or political *community*. This world is rather like a Hobbesian state of nature: solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. In contrast, the world of “civilization” is political (in the Aristotelian sense) and, in principle, republican, that is, characterized by institutions organized around the principle of the constitutional rule of law.¹² Second, economically, the world of “barbarism” is feudal. In Argentina, it is the “leather civilization” (*civilización de cuero*), arising out of the cattle economy. The world of “civilization,” in contrast, is industrial. It is the “commercial civilization” (*civilización del comercio*), open and technical.¹³ Finally, socially, the world of “barbarism” is individualistic, uneducated, and primitive, that is, incapable of projecting itself into the future because of the necessities of dealing with the present and, for the same reason, incapable even of imagining a different future. It is a stagnant world, stuck in the past and resistant to change. In contrast, the world of “civilization” is social, cultured, and progressive. It is a dynamic, innovative, and forward-looking world.

To each of these socio-political types, there corresponds a *human type*: the barbarian (*un tipo de la barbarie primitiva*) and the civilized (*el hombre civilizado*).¹⁴ Each of these human types is constituted at least in part by its respective environment. Yet, I would not argue, as some commentators have, that Sarmiento is a strong determinist.¹⁵ He does believe (like Von Humboldt and other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century environmentalists) that human character is molded

by constraints and challenges imposed from the outside, so that human beings, in their infinite adaptive malleability, can survive in the environment in which they must live. However, “molded” (or, as he says, “influenced”) is not the same as “determined.” Sarmiento concentrates on the physical environment because, like Bolivar, he thought that the geography of many Hispanoamerican countries poses special challenges. But, if these challenges were insurmountable, as a strong determinist position would require, then Sarmiento’s whole project would be self-defeating (if not incoherent). Moreover, there is an important moral aspect to Sarmiento’s analysis of the “barbarian” environment. In fact, the “barbarian” character is his focus because he embodies what we might call “the vices of colonialism.” He is radically isolated and egoistic, wild and fatalistic, misunderstood and alienated, and, most importantly for Sarmiento, uneducated and materially dispossessed and, hence, entirely dependent. The “barbarian” character is formed in part by a physically demanding environment in which the chief virtues are physical strength (often violence), courage, and perseverance, mixed with Stoic acceptance of one’s “inferior” status *vis à vis* the indomitable immensity and power of nature.¹⁶ Yet neither the vices of colonialism nor the adaptive (and ambiguous) “virtues” of the “barbarian” character are exclusively the effects of the physical environment on psychological and moral constitution. Also critical in shaping a certain way of being are political and economic arrangements. Some such arrangements (those of “barbarism”) foster the submissive, apathetic attitude of the colonial subject, while others (those of “civilization”) encourage the development and exercise of the critical, active attitude of the independent citizen.

Sarmiento believes that the “barbarian” way of life and the “barbarian” character it *tends to* create can, and should, be destroyed. In fact, the political leaders of postcolonial Hispanoamerican peoples must overcome the two-world split, making one nation out of two and finding freedom in unity. This overcoming of separation and internal alienation represents, in Sarmiento’s view, the movement from dependence to freedom and from material dispossession to material prosperity. Sarmiento’s political thought is teleological, and the goal of theoretical speculation and practical action is freedom. Yet, freedom is always for the sake of improvement, whether personal or social, and improvement makes possible *a better life*. In this sense, Sarmiento’s concern is with the conditions that will enable emerging Hispanoamerican nations to develop and flourish as free societies. However, the independent present, tainted as it is by the colonial past, is proof that progress is not inevitable.¹⁷ So, the task of political leaders is to define the conditions necessary for propelling these new nations in the “right” direction—in the direction of the nineteenth century.

What, specifically, did Sarmiento believe is required for building a strong Hispanoamerican nation? The chief building blocks for freedom in unity are democratic educational institutions, economic development, and the development of a national culture.¹⁸ These building blocks are indeed critical because an uneducated people is a people *ripe for tyranny*, an economically weak people is a people *condemned to dependence*, and a people devoid of its own culture is a people *without an identity*. Sarmiento understood that the wheels of freedom must be greased from within a nation by an educated people united in its efforts actively to secure and to maintain anti-authoritarian political and economic institutions. Moreover, he was right to zero in on the need to build social and political community as a stronghold against chaos and tyranny. His description of the radical isolation and loneliness of the *pampas* is a *metaphor* for the asocial form of life and

the dissociated human being who, forced to adapt to the exigencies of a harsh and ungrateful environment, and to survive in the midst of deprivation and hopelessness, becomes indifferent and passive toward anything that is not an immediate object of concern. This character, by necessity, becomes self-focused in a way that is antithetical to the development of a culture of the common good. Such culture, Sarmiento appreciated, requires the shift from need-based socio-economic material conditions, with their concomitant (and, in the context of need, inevitable) egoism, to material prosperity, which would make possible the development of sociability and, hence, of a body politic. So, the movement from “barbarism” to “civilization” would bring about the transformation of loneliness, isolation, and self-regard into companionship in the form of social bonds, integration into a common life, and sociability as the cement of a social union. The image of the *gaucho* as confronting powers he cannot hope to control, as very humanly powerless in the face of *nature’s* power, is politically dangerous. If prescriptive, it would promote fatalism in the face of domination and authority, a sense of insignificance internalized as limitation, and the conviction that brute force is the primary and most effective, or even the only, way of overcoming challenges and solving conflicts. The *idealization* of the life and character of the *gaucho* can become a tool in the hands of leaders who want only to preserve the status quo for their own advantage and remain unresponsive to the suffering and needs of the people.

Facundo is always challenging but often neither compelling nor convincing. For example, Sarmiento seems to have thought that it is possible, in the Hispanoamerican context, to forge a nation and to create an authentic national identity by eradicating at once the colonial past and the rural present, both instantiations of “barbarism.” Unlike his younger contemporary Jose Marti,¹⁹ he distorted the insight that anticolonial education, development, and culture are necessary for liberation with his deeply problematic conviction that this project is consistent with the eradication of all native (“natural”) national elements—including ways of life *and* people.²⁰ At best, he was naïve to think that, somehow, a “nation” and a “national character” would rise, phoenix-like, out of the ashes of external and internal colonialism. Even if this feat were possible, the question would arise whether the resulting nation and character could be called *American* and, hence, ultimately, genuinely *free*. Of course, this question presupposes that there is indeed a way to forge nations completely free of colonial influences *as they emerge from colonial rule*. Sarmiento seems to have been optimistic about the long-term prospects of overcoming colonialism, political and mental. This optimism is premised on his boundless faith in the power of education to combat, and eventually to tear down, the complex edifice of colonialism and on his tenacious belief in the possibility of progress as itself a liberatory force.

Yet, Sarmiento’s optimism led him to oversimplification. He proposed to eradicate the colonial world, which presupposes the naïve conviction that one *can* forge a future from scratch and despite one’s past. This belief seems no more plausible for societies than for individuals. To a large extent, we are the products of our histories, and any change, whether more or less radical, must take both history and product at least as a starting point for moving in a new direction. I am not claiming that we are overdetermined by our past. However, understanding our past, whether collective or individual, is critical for moving into the future wisely, equipped with the knowledge with which experience provides us, as well as with the tools appropriate, given the particular context, to the task of recreating ourselves. A commitment to the possibility of radical self-creation is problematic at least

because it requires us to abstract from our fundamental situatedness as social beings. “Solutions” to the problem of redefinition premised on this commitment would, thus, be largely irrelevant to our particular plights as societies (or as individuals) and, at least for that reason, might be doomed to failure. Moreover, such “solutions” might be dangerous, especially at the collective level: they might lead us to adopt policies that are harmful to our own interests, and even to endorse genocidal practices (as Sarmiento himself did). Thus, this type of ahistorical stance runs the risk of being fundamentally misguided and even of becoming morally abhorrent.

Sarmiento is a contradictory figure. His impassioned advocacy of anti-feudal and secular values as responses to colonialism, and his vision of unified, educated, and, hence, democratic Hispanoamerican nations coexist with his odious ideological racism and a tendency to idealize certain “civilizing” aspects of some European and North American models for social, economic, and political life as consistent with building independent nations, and even with “*Americanismo*.” Yet, *Facundo* still provokes. Its enduring relevance lies at least in part in Sarmiento’s profound concern as a political thinker and actor with the freedom of peoples who, emerging from colonialism, are faced with the awesome task of self-definition. In this sense, his concern with “barbarism” can be construed constructively, as a concern with “the colonial world”—its institutions, its morality, and its harmful effects on the lives, outer and inner, of colonized peoples.

Thus read, *Facundo* leaves us with valuable questions. First, given our colonial history, how can we prevent despotism from infecting our bodies politic and contaminating our minds, thus deceiving us into thinking that we have become free when, in fact, still chained, if no longer politically, then still spiritually and culturally? Second, can we educate people for freedom? What form should such education take? Third, what role does economic development play in the liberation of Hispanoamerican nations? In what ways can we achieve economic development consistent with independence from foreign powers? Finally, but no less importantly, what kind of polity is best for us as nations and as *American* nations? And who within the polity can undertake the task of governing our peoples for freedom? That these questions continue to be relevant to the struggles of many Hispanoamerican nations reveals the depth of our debt to nineteenth-century pioneers like Sarmiento who, engaged with the daunting challenges of independence, opened theoretical and practical paths still worth traveling.

Endnotes

1. Throughout this paper, I shall use the terms “Hispanoamerica” and “Hispanoamerican” to maintain agreement with Sarmiento’s terminology.
2. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. *Facundo: Civilization y Barbarie*, edited with Introduction by R. Lazo. xxiv (Editor’s Essay). (Mexico: Editorial Porrua, 1991). Translations are mine; I will, however, include chapter references. For the text in English, see *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*, translated by K. Ross. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
3. I have used the terms “polemic” and “provocative” for a reason. *Facundo* is replete with confrontational language, and Sarmiento resorts to emotional (and aesthetic) appeals in order to highlight certain aspects of his analysis. Literal readings of the text will fail to capture the subtleties (and the irony) in Sarmiento’s arguments and even to appreciate that there *are* arguments. In *Facundo*, Sarmiento challenges the

reader both with content and with form—and the latter to bolster the former. Unfortunately, I cannot develop this point further in this paper.

4. I understand that there is a debate about the appropriateness of calling the economic arrangements characteristic of colonial and early postcolonial Hispanoamerican nations-in-the-making as “feudal.” Here, I will assume its appropriateness given that, in *Facundo*, Sarmiento uses this term to refer to the “culture” of barbarism and in spite of inconsistencies arising from his claims that the *gauchos* are the rural “proletariat” (*Facundo*, 14; Part I, chapter I).
5. I use the phrase “mental colonialism” to refer to the noninstitutional aspects of colonization, notably to the manner in which colonialism can shape the character, spiritual and moral, of a colonized people. This sort of colonialism is more subtle and, arguably, more insidious, than institutional colonialism. Throughout the nineteenth century, thinkers concerned with nation-building in the wake of political independence expressed serious worries about the need to shed this form of subjection if true freedom was to become a reality for Hispanoamerican peoples. Much more needs to be said about this phenomenon, but I cannot do so in this paper.
6. *Facundo*, 1; Part I, chapter I.
7. The *gaucho* is the inhabitant of the Argentinian *pampas*, subject to a harsh, nomadic (and, hence, rootless) existence, and constituting the rural proletariat in a cattle economy. Sarmiento himself calls *gauchos* “the Argentinian proletariat” (*el proletario argentino*) (14; Part I, chapter I). In Hernandez’s famous *Martin Fierro*, this character is said to represent “a function” (*una función*) rather than (or perhaps in addition to) a person. Arguably, in *Facundo*, the *gaucho* functions as a symbol not only of the Argentinian but also of the Hispanoamerican colonial self.
8. This wonderful phrase is Ivan Jaksic’s, the renowned Chilean historian who enriched our Institute with his erudition and insights into the dynamics of nineteenth-century Latin American political thought.
9. Sarmiento writes: “In the Argentine Republic one sees at the same time two distinct civilizations in the same soil: an emergent one, which not knowing what it has on its head, is remedying the ingenuous and popular efforts of the Middle Ages; another one, which not caring for what it has at its feet, tries to realize the latest results of European civilization. The XIX and the XVII centuries live together: the one inside the cities, the other in the countryside” (*Facundo*, 28; Part I, chapter II). Sarmiento also refers to city and countryside as “two different, rival, and incompatible *societies*” and “two different ways of being of a people” (33; Part I, chapter III, my emphasis).
10. *Facundo*, 16; Part I, chapter I.
11. Sarmiento writes: “In vain have the provinces asked [the city] to let them have a bit of civilization, of industry and European civilization; a stupid and colonial politics made itself deaf to these clamors” (*Facundo*, 13; Part I, chapter I).
12. *Facundo*, 18; Part I, chapter I. Sarmiento emphasizes this point throughout the first few chapters of *Facundo*. He calls the apolitical structure of the “barbarian” world *arbitrary* in contrast with the *constitutional* organization of “civilization” (70; Part II,

chapter III). This distinction underscores the lack of legitimate civil and political (in the broad sense) order in the former world, where “society has completely disappeared” (17; Part I, chapter I). Here, Sarmiento focuses on the anarchic and, in his words, “feudal” aspects of the only “society” there is, the family, whose structure is analogously tyrannical.

13. See, for example, *Facundo*, 17-18, Part I, chapter I, where Sarmiento characterizes the socioeconomic organization of “barbarism” as “similar to the feudalism of the Middle Ages” but without barons and castles.
14. Facundo Quiroga is, for Sarmiento, the incarnation of the primitive barbarian type (see, for example, *Facundo*, 51; Part II, chapter I). He is “the natural man who has not yet learned to control or disguise his passions; who displays them in all their energy, giving himself to its impetuosity.” He is lawless and hateful of authority, hard-hearted and “dominated by rage.” Later on in *Facundo*, however, Sarmiento tempers his judgment: he claims that Quiroga was not cruel or bloodthirsty but rather simply “the barbarian” (*el barbaro*) who knows not how to restrain his passions and who, upon having his passions aroused, knows not how to measure his responses to them. But he proceeds to call him a “terrorist” (*el terrorista*), who, upon entering a city, executes (*fusila*) some and assaults (*azota*) the other, brutalizing women and humiliating citizens. Here is an example of why Sarmiento has been called “the essence of contradiction”! Perhaps, in this context, it is better to think of his judgment as reflecting his *ambiguity* toward the figure of the *gaucho* and even of the *gaucho* turned *caudillo*. He does seem to have *some* respect for this character, to the extent that he is self-assured, brave, vital, and *free*. The problem is that these traits *in barbarians* are feral and uncontrolled.
15. I would argue that Sarmiento is an environmentalist but not a determinist. First, his language when referring to the relationship between environment and character supports a weak determinism at best (see, for example, *Facundo*, 16, Part I, chapter I, where he says that the way of life of the countryside is what “influences” [*influye*] the formation of the “barbarian” character and spirit). In the same chapter, Sarmiento examines *other* factors that contribute to the formation of the “barbarian” spirit, notably the social (or, rather, asocial) organization of life and the feudal economic organization (see also the Introduction, where Sarmiento contends that both “colonialism” and the peculiarities of the geographical environment are responsible for shaping the “barbarian” character). So, I would argue that geographical environment, for Sarmiento, is a *contributing* cause but does not overdetermine the formation of character. Second, Sarmiento’s whole project of “civilizing” the “barbarian” world would be self-defeating in the extreme if he believed that environment alone determines one’s character. The *geography* will not ever change, but the ways of organizing life, *given* geography, can be changed so that the unity of the nation through civilization can become a reality. Similarly, Sarmiento’s almost obsessive concern with education would be pointless if he were a strong determinist because if character is wholly formed by nature, then there is nothing that education can do to change and improve it. I am aware that this issue is larger and more complex than these brief arguments

can address, but, again, space constrains what I can do in this paper. For an argument that Sarmiento is a strong determinist, see Susana Nuccetelli. *Latin American Thought: Philosophical Problems and Arguments* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 166-73.

16. At times, Sarmiento portrays the “barbarian” (*gaucho* or *caudillo*) as inflamed by a sense of “superiority.” But this superiority is spurious and, he suggests, simply a very human response to the need not to feel completely helpless in the face of the stringent demands of the environment. Interestingly, the “symbols” of this “superiority” are themselves “barbarian” and what render this character an object of *fear* rather than admiration: the knife, the *bolas*, and the physical prowess and endurance demonstrated through command of the horse. These symbols represent the potential *violence* of “barbarism” as the rule of brute force.
17. Sarmiento has faith in the possibility of progress, but not the unlimited faith of nineteenth-century positivists who viewed progress as inevitable. In fact, for Sarmiento, General Rosas and his “barbarian” rule is *proof* that regression is a very real possibility in the life of Hispanoamerican nations. In this sense, *Facundo* is a *warning*: tyranny will become a permanent reality in the life of the new nations unless combated actively with the “instruments” of progress, notably the constitutional rule of law and policies aimed at mental and material development (viz., education, immigration, the development of technological structure and industry/commerce, and so on).
18. For illuminating discussions of various aspects of Sarmiento’s “program” of social reform, see the excellent collection of articles in *Sarmiento: Author of A Nation*, edited by T. Halperin Donghi, I. Jaksic, G. Kirkpatrick, and F. Masiello (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
19. See, for example, “Our America.” In *Jose Marti: Selected Writings*, edited by E. Allen, with Introduction by R. Gonzalez Echevarria (New York: Penguin, 2002).
20. For a discussion of Sarmiento’s views on this issue, see, for example, William Katra, “Rereading *Viajes*: Race, Identity, and National Destiny,” and Natalio Botana, “Sarmiento and Political Order: Liberty, Power, and Virtue,” both in *Sarmiento: Author of a Nation*, 73-100 and 101-13, respectively.

For both invaluable discussion and comments on a draft of this paper, I thank James Cane-Carrasco and Michael Monahan.

On the Question of Latin American Philosophy

Michael J. Monahan
Marquette University

The intellectual history of Latin America is replete with attempts to address the question of whether there is, or can be, Latin American philosophy. While there have been numerous and varied answers to the question from a wide range of gifted thinkers, there has been relatively little engagement with the question *as such*. José Mariátegui,

Leopoldo Zea, and Risieri Frondizi, just to name a few, have provided their respective answers to the question, but they have not questioned the question itself.¹ What are the reasons behind it? Why is it important? What are the conditions under which we understand it to be a legitimate question in the first place? In short, what motivates the question and gives it force?

On its face, the question “Is there Latin American philosophy” can be understood in two distinct, though interrelated, ways. The first is a relatively empirical question, concerned with the presence (or lack thereof) of philosophical production in Latin America and/or by Latin Americans. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to have some clear concept of the geographical borders of Latin America, and/or the constitution of the *group* of Latin Americans. To be sure, neither of these concepts have been settled definitively, and, what is more, one would need some working definition of philosophy, which can itself be quite a chore. Nevertheless, once one has settled on some use for the terms “Latin American” and “philosophy,” the first interpretation of the question “Is there Latin American philosophy” becomes strictly empirical.

This will be true whether one is a universalist about philosophy or not. If one holds the universalist position that all philosophical endeavor is the same in some foundational sense, then one need only ask whether the intellectual product in question *really* is philosophy, and, if so, whether it was produced by a Latin American (understood either in the strictly geographical sense of being a person in or from Latin America, or, perhaps, understood in an *ethnic* sense). If the answer to both these questions is “yes,” then there is Latin American philosophy, at least in this particular case. At the same time, if one rejects the universalist position and holds that philosophy is, in some deep sense, historical, or culturally relevant, or some other variation on this theme, then the basic method remains the same. The only real difference will be that the nonuniversalist will hold that Latin American philosophy might not look exactly the same as British, French, or North American philosophy.

The nonuniversalist position leads into the second interpretation of the question of Latin American philosophy. Instead of asking the empirical question of the *production* of philosophy in Latin America and/or by Latin Americans, the question can be interpreted to ask whether there is or can be philosophy that is *peculiarly* Latin American. This is clearly a more compelling question for nonuniversalists, who would allow for the existence of a culturally specific philosophy. If one is a strict universalist, the answer to the question becomes obvious, as there can only be philosophy *simpliciter*—it is meaningless to ask whether there is a specifically Latin American philosophy if one is a strict universalist. Nevertheless, there could be a variety of universalist for whom this could remain a viable question. One might be a “weak universalist” and hold that, while the fundamental concepts and questions (and probably methodology) of philosophy are universal, there are culturally specific differences of style and content. All philosophy, from this perspective, is the same at its root, but there are important culturally relative flourishes and more “superficial” distinctions that allow for a kind of culturally specific philosophy even within a more broadly “universalist” framework.

In either case, part of the question, on this interpretation, is whether there is anything *distinctive* about the philosophy generated in Latin America (or by Latin Americans) *vis-à-vis* Europe and North America. Indeed, much of the concern in the historical literature on the question has to do with the extent to which philosophy in Latin America is or is not derivative of European philosophy. Any affirmative answer to

the question of Latin American philosophy, in this latter sense of cultural specificity, must, therefore, be understood to entail some relevant differences between Latin American philosophy on the one hand and European/North American philosophy on the other.

Furthermore, there is a counterfactual concern for both interpretations of the basic question. That is, even if the immediate answer is that there is no Latin American philosophy at present (perhaps because it is derivative of European philosophy, or because intellectual production in Latin America is not yet properly philosophical, etc.), there remains the question of whether there *could be* Latin American philosophy in the future. Here, the issue of distinctiveness *from* Europe remains critical even if there is no such distinctiveness at present.

What interests me most, however, is what lurks *behind* the question of Latin American philosophy. One way to approach this is by asking why there *wasn't* a corresponding concern in nineteenth-century North America. That is, why weren't there massive amounts of journalistic and philosophical essays, congresses, conferences, and so on, dedicated to putting to rest once and for all “the question of North American philosophy?” The immediate response to this latter question is to point out that there was no *question* of North American philosophy in the same way that Latin American philosophy has been presented as a question. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Sanders Pierce, and William James were all convinced that they were doing something distinctive and unorthodox. They also understood themselves to be citizens of the United States, which, in turn, made their distinctive philosophy “American.” Thus, there was some sense in which they understood their philosophy to be American, but this was not understood by them, or by the intellectual community at large, to be an earth-shattering revelation. It did not reveal the full promise of North American peoples nor did it establish the legitimacy of intellectual endeavor in the United States. It was a curiosity—a new and novel approach to philosophy that took root in the United States, nothing more or less.

From this history, a new question emerges. Why is Latin American philosophy understood to be a *question* in the first place? I have two interrelated approaches to this problem, both of which are offered more as invitations to further discussion than as definitive answers.² First, in Latin America, for numerous reasons, there was a concerted effort (though, certainly, this effort was stronger and more successful at different times and in different places) to expunge Spanish and/or European intellectual, cultural, and political influence. In the United States, on the other hand, the concern was to avoid the political influence and control of Britain, but North Americans were perfectly happy to preserve much of British culture, including its philosophical tradition. Thus, raising the “question” of Latin American philosophy might be part of an effort to establish a radical break with Spain (and by extension, Europe) by creating a distinct and original intellectual tradition over and against Spain/Europe. “To the extent that our philosophy remains European, we remain intellectually colonized,” the argument might go. “And if our philosophy is distinctively Latin American, that signals the breaking of those mental fetters.”

Another possible motive behind the question of Latin American philosophy has to do with *mestizaje* and the politics of race. In North America, there was not the same *degree* of *mestizaje*. The indigenous peoples were either exterminated or confined to reservations, and the African population likewise remained (relatively) distinct. As a consequence, it was much easier for North Americans to see themselves, and be seen by

Europe, as culturally, intellectually, and racially European. For Europeans, North America might have been a distant backwater, and its inhabitants might have been poor relations, but they were still relations. Because of the extent of *mestizaje*, the same could not be said for Latin America. The inhabitants of Latin America, even the *Criollo* elite, were understood (by Europeans, and, perhaps equally importantly, by North Americans) to be culturally and racially distinct from Europe/Spain. Within this racialized framework, the intellectual capacity—the *rationality*—of the non-European is understood to be always already in question. In this situation, one way to establish one's legitimacy as a rational agent is to produce what is incontrovertibly philosophy. This can be done either in the same tradition as Europe (thereby showing that the racial classification as nonrational is mistaken), or as something completely new (thereby establishing racial equivalence, or even superiority, á la José Vasconcelos). Either way, it becomes crucial that the intellectual prowess of those whose capacity is in doubt (within a racialized framework) be proven on the philosophical field of battle.

What all of this points toward is the extent to which the *purpose* behind the question of Latin American philosophy is so crucial to positing any answer to that question. "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" is a way of asking whether there is anything *distinctive* about Latin America. It is a way of asking whether there is any coherence to the notion of Latin America itself, and it is a way of asking about the *identity* of Latin American peoples. If we think of British philosophy, for example, we can see all of these functions at play. British philosophy, provided one understands it to be in any way culturally specific (either as a "weak" universalist, or as an historicist), has to be more than simply the philosophy produced by citizens of the British Isles. Describing a particular philosopher (John Locke) or a particular philosophy (Utilitarianism) as "British" is a way of establishing something distinctively British about that philosopher or philosophy. Pointing out their shared British-ness, likewise, is a way of pointing out the coherence of Britain itself. And British philosophers and philosophy both inform British identity and are, in turn, informed by it.

The same exercise can be performed in relation to European philosophy generally. What becomes particularly clear in this context, however, is the extent to which much of the unity and coherence of European philosophy arises not exclusively out of any similarities as such but as much, if not more, out of a distinction *from* the non-European. Just as the notion of Europe itself resulted from the encounter with Africa and the "New World" (the radically non-European), we can see how particular varieties of European philosophy (German, British, French) are understood *as such* in part as an effort to establish *difference from* some other variety(ies). In other words, what makes European philosophy coherently European is in large part its *difference from* Asian philosophy, African philosophy, and so on.

In the Latin American context, much of the reason the question of Latin American philosophy took on such importance was because it was a way not only to establish Latin American *rationality* but also Latin American *identity*. "Is there a Latin American philosophy?" is a way of drawing a distinction between what is Latin American and what is *not*. It is an attempt to draw some coherent whole *in relation to* some relevant *other* (Spain, Europe, North America, etc.). Thus, it may very well be that if we are even asking the question of Latin American philosophy, we already have some notion of what it *isn't*, and we are really just negotiating what we *want* it to be.

Thus, much of the shape of Latin American philosophy is determined by the way in which this question is *asked*. In raising the question itself, one is shaping philosophical endeavor in Latin America. Just as our understanding of British philosophy emerges out of the *practice* of philosophy in Britain, Latin American philosophy can only *emerge* in a similar way. The answer to the question is, in effect, dictated by the prior notions of philosophy, of Latin America itself, and of its distinctiveness (or lack thereof) from Europe and North America that we bring with us. Thus, it is only in investigating the motives behind the question that we can ever make progress on the question itself. And, what is more, in asking these deeper questions about motive, and the nature of philosophy, and the ontological status of Latin America and Latin Americans, we are most certainly asking philosophical questions. So it may very well be that the question provides its own answer in the course of being asked.

Endnotes

1. José Mariátegui. "Is There Such a Thing as Hispanic-American Thought?" In *The Heroic and Creative meaning of Socialism: Selected Essays of José Carlos Mariátegui*, edited by M. Peralman (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996); Leopoldo Zea. "The Actual Function of Philosophy in Latin America." In *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century: The Human Condition, Values, and the Search for Identity*, edited by Jorge J. E. Gracia and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 2004), 357-68; and Risieri Frondizi. "Is There an Ibero-American Philosophy?" In *Latin American Philosophy: An Introduction with Readings*, edited by Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004) 294-301.
2. What follows came about as a result of discussions with William Cooper and Maria Morales at the NEH Summer Institute on Latin American Philosophy in June of 2005. Any mistakes, misrepresentations, or other failings are solely my responsibility.

DISCUSSION

On the Advantage and Disadvantage of the History of Philosophy for Latin American Philosophers

Renzo Llorente

Saint Louis University, Madrid Campus

I.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Latin American philosophy is still by and large viewed with indifference by professional philosophers. Worse still, in the opinion of many who are well acquainted with the work of Latin American philosophers, the pervasive indifference toward Latin American philosophy is not unwarranted, for this tradition is characterized by thought that is, on the whole, derivative and unoriginal. As Jorge J. E. Gracia, a philosopher who has written extensively on Latin American philosophy, puts it,

...the view that Latin American philosophy generally lacks originality is a common place. It is expressed by Latin American philosophers of very different persuasions, and with reason. Latin American philosophy has not, for the most part, moved beyond the repetition of philosophical views and positions developed elsewhere, primarily in Europe, but more recently in the United States as well (Gracia, 2005, 21).

Yet if the unoriginality of Latin American philosophy is widely acknowledged—and notice that this perception is, according to Gracia, widespread even among Latin American philosophers themselves—the same cannot be said about the very *paradoxical* character of this state of affairs (i.e., Latin Americans' failure to produce much in the way of original philosophy). After all, the practice of philosophy does not require the sort of resources needed to yield significant advances in, say, science and technology, and thus the severe economic and infrastructural constraints that limit Latin American accomplishments in those areas should not necessarily represent an impediment to original work in philosophy.¹ On the other hand, it is undeniable that Latin Americans can claim many outstanding contributions to other fields in the humanities and social sciences (a fact that serves to bear out the previous point). It suffices to recall Latin American thinkers' contribution to dependency theory in economics and sociology, to the creation of liberation theology, or to the development of critical education theory (e.g., the work of Freire). And this is to say nothing of Latin Americans' spectacular achievements in literature and the arts. How, then, to explain the relative insignificance, and inconsequential results, of Latin American philosophy? How, in other words, are we to make sense of the marked *underdevelopment* of Latin American philosophy?

In a stimulating and valuable new book, *The Role of History in Latin American Philosophy*, editors Arleen Salles and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert have brought together several essays that address these very questions. While all of the essays in the volume—which includes pieces on the thought of Sor Juana, the history of philosophy in colonial Mexico, and Latin American contributions to the philosophical analysis of multiculturalism²—explore the relationship between history, philosophy, and the history of philosophy in Latin America, three of the chapters in Part One, “Successful and Unsuccessful Models for Establishing a History of Latin American Philosophy,”³ probe this relationship specifically with a view to explaining the disappointing results of Latin American philosophy. Despite differences in perspective and emphasis, the essays by Carlos Pereda, Eduardo Rabossi, and Jorge J. E. Gracia all argue that, in Gracia's words, “the study of the history of philosophy” in Latin America has in some sense been “an obstacle to philosophy” (Gracia, 2005, 40).

In the following pages, I review the three writers' arguments in ascribing much of the underdevelopment of Latin American philosophy to the way that the history of philosophy is treated and appropriated in Latin America. While the authors are, in my view, right to draw our attention to the unfortunate influence that certain approaches to the history of philosophy have had on the evolution of philosophy in Latin America, their contention that these misguided approaches are the *principal* cause of the underdevelopment of Latin American philosophy is, I believe, ultimately unconvincing. Accordingly, in the last section of the essay I go on to discuss three other factors that, it seems to me, have been more decisive in hampering a robust development of philosophy within Latin America.

II.

According to Mexican philosopher Carlos Pereda in “Explanatory and Argumentative History of Philosophy,” it is important to distinguish two basic ways of practicing the history of philosophy. The first type is what Pereda calls “explanatory history of philosophy.” In an explanatory history, argues Pereda, “the explanation tends to limit itself to establishing the paternity of a thinker's ideas, by pointing to the most salient influences he has undergone both from his predecessors and from his contemporaries” (Pereda 2005, 43-44). What explanatory history of philosophy creates, in other words, is essentially an intellectual history, a narrative that aims to contextualize a thinker and her work; consequently, it will often result in a kind of cultural history of philosophy. It is for this reason that Pereda suggests that “an explanatory reading is an *oblique* reading; what the text says is not what matters the most. The reader takes what the text says as data for reconstructing a certain historical sequence, the rhetorical, personal or social origins of a discourse, or its role in a certain context” (44).

The second kind of history of philosophy identified by Pereda is what he calls “argumentative history of philosophy.” In an argumentative history of philosophy, “an author's arguments need not necessarily constitute archaeological remains to be recollected, observed, and explained. They can also be arguments to be used for the solution of our own problems” (45). Or, as he also puts it, “in an AH we do not face intellectual devices, personal testimonies, or social documents. We are confronted with arguments. Thus, the questions we must ask from the point of view of an AH of philosophy are the kinds of questions one asks in a philosophical discussion, and not those that the historian would ask” (Ibid.). Thus, if an explanatory history of philosophy constitutes an *oblique* reading, “an argumentative reading is a *direct reading*. ...In an argumentative reading we consider what the text directly affirms or denies” (45; his emphasis). In short, “in any argumentative reading, one reads the authors of the past *as if* they were contemporary authors” (55).

Now, while explanatory and argumentative histories of philosophy afford, or rather proceed from, different perspectives, different frameworks for the “orientation of our judgment” (52), Pereda insists that the two approaches should be used to complement each other. “When studying the great ideas of the past,” he writes, “we might wish to explain them historically and also to discuss and appraise their truth or value. The two tasks commonly flow together in the ordinary work of a researcher” (48). In reality, however, this is often not the case, either because the two types of history of philosophy are kept separate from one another, or because explanatory history is used as a substitute for argumentative history. When either of these errors occurs, the practice of philosophy suffers. In the former case, “the tendency to disconnect explanatory and argumentative history in Latin America *greatly impoverishes* explanatory history” (53); in the latter, the result is “a confusion between doing philosophy and doing history of philosophy, or, even worse, a confusion between philosophy and the history of ideas” (Ibid.). Both errors serve to inhibit progress in philosophy within Latin America.

Argentine philosopher Eduardo Rabossi also addresses the status of the history of philosophy in Latin America in his essay “History and Philosophy in the Latin American Setting.” Rabossi probes two questions in particular. The first of these concerns “the extraordinary appeal that the history of philosophy enjoys in the Latin American philosophical community” (Rabossi 2005, 70). One of the notable consequences of this penchant for the history of philosophy is the prominence of the history of philosophy within academia in Latin American countries (68). A less obvious yet equally

important—indeed, for Rabossi even more important—result of this attachment to the history of philosophy is “the conviction [among many Latin American philosophers]...that being a historian of philosophy is a way, perhaps even *the* way, of being a philosopher” (58). For Rabossi, the two phenomena are without doubt closely related: if the history of philosophy enjoys exceptional authority and prestige, then many students of philosophy will choose to become historians of philosophy; and if there is an abundance of historians of philosophy, and their interests dictate the content of the academic curriculum, then the history of philosophy will come to be reckoned very important indeed.

In any case, Rabossi observes that this commitment to the history of philosophy among Latin American philosophers rests, ultimately, on the view that an engagement with this history is essential to the very practice of philosophy; that is to say, “the philosophical relevance of the history of philosophy” (59) is presupposed. This latter consideration leads to the second issue addressed in Rabossi’s essay, namely, “the relation between the history of philosophy and philosophy” (58). In contrast to the great majority of his Latin American colleagues, Rabossi disputes the *philosophical* relevance of the history of philosophy to philosophy, arguing that there is no “convincing argument on which the philosophical relevance of the history of philosophy could be grounded” (64).

If Rabossi’s metaphilosophical thesis is correct, and the history of philosophy is not necessarily relevant to, or indispensable for, the practice of philosophy, then it follows that Latin American philosophers are wrong to attach so much importance to the history of philosophy and its prestige in Latin America is ultimately unjustified. Moreover, it suggests that, in certain cases, it may well be quite wrongheaded to adopt an historical perspective in examining certain problems. It also implies that philosophers are entitled to adopt what Rabossi calls the “anachronistic” (i.e., ahistorical) approach to philosophy, and this is in fact the approach that Rabossi himself endorses.

In “The History of Philosophy and Latin American Philosophy,” the Cuban-American philosopher Jorge J. E. Gracia likewise claims that many of the philosophical difficulties besetting Latin American philosophy can be traced to misguided approaches to the history of philosophy in Latin America. In Gracia’s opinion, “The reason that Latin American philosophy is not considered highly by philosophers goes beyond its quality; it is that the history of Latin American philosophy is also, like the history of philosophy in Latin America, done nonphilosophically” (Gracia 2005, 22). Gracia’s claim here is twofold. On the one hand, a nonphilosophical approach to the history of philosophy in general has meant that the study of this history in Latin America has inspired very little original philosophy. On the other hand, Latin American philosophers’ nonphilosophical approach to the history of their own philosophy has meant both that its development has been impeded and that its value is not and cannot be appreciated by others.

What does it mean to say that the history of philosophy and the history of Latin American philosophy are done non-philosophically in Latin America? Gracia outlines three ways of doing philosophy unphilosophically and suggests that in Latin America most work on both the history of philosophy and the history of Latin American philosophy can be seen as exemplifying one of these three “wrong approaches to the history of philosophy” (24). The three approaches are the “culturalist approach,” which “tries to understand the philosophical ideas from the past as expressions of the complex cultural matrix from which they germinated” (24); the “ideological approach,” favored by those who “use the history

of philosophy only for rhetorical reasons, that is, to convince an audience of what they themselves have already accepted” (28); and the “doxographical approach,” whose hallmark is “uncritical description” (Gracia 2005, 31), resembling as it does sheer philosophical reportage. As an alternative to these three approaches, Gracia advocates a method that he calls “the framework approach,” which involves, among other things, conceptual mapping of the historical issues to be investigated, careful definition and analysis of relevant concepts, consideration of different solutions to philosophical problems, arguments for and against the different solutions, and analysis of the criteria used to evaluate these solutions to philosophical problems.⁴ If Latin American philosophers were to “do” the history of philosophy in accordance with a method along the lines of the “framework approach,” Gracia argues, their engagement with the history of philosophy and treatment of the history of Latin American philosophy would prove much more fruitful, and Latin American philosophy would yield much more original work.

III.

As we have seen, for all three writers, certain (mis-)uses of the history of philosophy are to blame for the unoriginality of Latin American philosophy. Are they right? Has the history of philosophy been the main hindrance to the production of original philosophy in Latin America?

In my view, the three writers’ exclusive focus on the history of philosophy is misleading, given the existence of other factors that also plainly have had an adverse impact on the development of philosophy in Latin America. However, before discussing these other factors, it is important to stress that, even if their focus on the history of philosophy ultimately proves rather implausible, Pereda, Rabossi, and Gracia are to be commended for their attempts to offer *immanent* or *internal* explanations for the disappointing results of Latin American philosophy. In other words, instead of citing external causes (say, socio-economic considerations) by way of accounting for the underdevelopment of Latin American philosophy, all three authors, to their credit, direct their attention to the way that philosophy itself has been practiced, the methods and procedures that have been employed by Latin American philosophers themselves. While this might seem like an obvious way to approach the problem—given that, as noted earlier, philosophy is not, so to speak, a resource-intensive enterprise, and the fact that Latin Americans have made outstanding contributions to other fields in the humanities and social sciences—the truth is that many have been tempted to look solely at external factors in explaining the problems of Latin American philosophy.⁵

In any event, as I have said, I think it is a mistake to ascribe so central a role to the history of philosophy in explaining the disappointing results in Latin American philosophy. For one thing, it is doubtful that the history of philosophy has been treated any more “philosophically” (Gracia), or that the unity of “explanatory” and “argumentative” history has typically been better preserved (Pereda), in other philosophical traditions. Furthermore, if French philosophy, for example, has failed in both of these respects and nonetheless managed to generate substantial contributions to philosophy, then it seems implausible to hold that these failures have been the principal cause of the unoriginality that characterizes Latin American philosophy.

More important, Pereda, Rabossi, and Gracia ignore three other factors that have undoubtedly hindered the development of philosophy in Latin America. The first of these factors is the hegemony of continental philosophy as a paradigm for the practice of philosophy. (Analytic philosophy

is a relatively recent arrival in Latin America and still much less common than the continental model.) Why is continental philosophy likely to inhibit the development of original philosophy? The main reason, it seems to me, is that continental philosophy tends to foster a highly exegetical approach to philosophy, and, hence, an approach that is less apt than more “analytical” techniques to encourage and promote original work. (This is perhaps especially true in those countries that do not have the benefit of a strong philosophical tradition.) It is also true, of course, that certain varieties of continental philosophy tend to resemble cultural criticism as much as they do philosophy, and thus Latin American philosophers who adopt these models are likely to produce work whose *philosophical* merit and import will appear questionable.

The second factor neglected by Pereda, Rabossi, and Gracia is the baneful influence of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955).⁶ Although it may seem far-fetched to attribute such importance to one figure, the fact is that Ortega has, at least until relatively recently, exercised an extraordinary influence in Latin America, partly because he was the most eminent philosopher writing in Spanish during the first half of the twentieth century, and partly because so many of his disciples (e.g., the highly influential José Gaos) ended up teaching in Latin America upon being forced into exile after the Spanish Civil War.⁷ Now, although there have been numerous “Orteguianos” in Latin America, I think it fair to say that what Latin American philosophers took from Ortega was more a matter of style and attitude than substance. As for the question of style, it is perhaps most important to underscore that Ortega is a very *literary* philosopher who eschews technical language and seems to value stylistic brilliance as much as philosophical acumen.⁸ With regard to the question of philosophical “attitude,” on the other hand, it is especially worth noting Ortega’s well-known hostility toward *specialization*,⁹ a condition of progress in philosophy as well as in the natural sciences. At any rate, to the extent that Ortega’s conception of philosophical practice has been embraced by Latin American philosophers, the development of Latin American philosophy has been hindered.

Ortega y Gasset was nothing if not a *public intellectual*, as his copious journalistic production, frequent public appearances, and diverse political activities serve to remind us. This consideration leads to the third factor that I would like to underscore, namely, the fact that many Latin American philosophers have, to one degree or another, assumed the role of public intellectual,¹⁰ a condition that is typically inimical to the kind of professional discipline required to produce original work in philosophy. Thomas Nagel has captured this point well in reflecting on the successes of Anglo-American analytic philosophy:

A crucial determinant of the character of analytic philosophy—and a piece of luck as far as I am concerned—is the unimportance, in the English-speaking world, of the intellectual as a public figure. Fame doesn’t matter, and offering an opinion about practically everything is not part of the job. It is unnecessary for writers of philosophy to be more “of their time” than they want to be; they don’t have to write for the world but can pursue questions inside the subject, at whatever level of difficulty the questions demand (Nagel 1995, 8).

If the condition of being a public intellectual is as Nagel describes it, it is no wonder that Latin American philosophers who have become public intellectuals have failed to produce original work in philosophy.

My suggestion, then, is that these factors have been at least as decisive in hindering the development of Latin American philosophy as any tendency to misuse the history of philosophy. Accordingly, if many Latin American philosophers need to reconsider their use of the history of philosophy, they should also re-examine their commitment to the “continental” philosophical tradition, the abiding influence of Ortega y Gasset, and the ways in which being a public intellectual can adversely affect their work in philosophy.

By way of conclusion, I think it is important to point out that the fact that Latin American philosophers have failed to produce much original philosophy does not of itself explain the widespread neglect of Latin American philosophy. In other words, we should be careful not to assume that lack of originality alone, or poor quality more generally, determines the lack of interest in the work of Latin American philosophers; after all, philosophers enthusiastically read and comment on a good deal of unoriginal, relatively low-quality French and German philosophy. Rather, the neglect of Latin American philosophy can only be fully understood if we also bear in mind the scant prestige of Spanish and Portuguese as philosophical languages. But this is a topic for another occasion.

Endnotes

1. This is not to deny, of course, that Latin American philosophers typically work under extremely unfavorable conditions in comparison with, say, their American counterparts.
2. The essays, from Part Two, are “Philosophical Genealogies and Feminism in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz” by María Luisa Femenías, “The Study of Philosophy’s History in Mexico as a Foundation for Doing Mexican Philosophy” by Mauricio Beuchot, and “A Philosophical Debate Concerning Traditional Ethnic Groups in Latin America and the History of Philosophy” by León Olivé. The final essay in Part Two is “How and Why to Foster the History of Philosophy in Postcolonial Contexts” by Horacio Cerutti-Guldberg.
3. The fourth chapter in Part One is Oscar Martí’s “Breaking with the Past: Philosophy and Its History in Latin America.”
4. See pp. 35 ff in Gracia’s chapter for a fuller description and illustration of the “framework” approach.
5. My comment should not be construed as implying that the “internal” and “external” explanations are mutually exclusive. To the contrary, I believe that we need both sorts of explanation in order to make sense of the underdevelopment of Latin American philosophy. For a particularly interesting “external” explanation, see Salazar Bondy, 1988.
6. Surprisingly, Horacio Cerutti-Guldberg is the only contributor to *The Role of History in Latin American Philosophy* who discusses Ortega y Gasset. See pp. 198-99 in his chapter, “How and Why to Foster the History of Philosophy in Postcolonial Contexts.”
7. For a comprehensive study of the influence of Ortega in Latin America, see Medin, 1994.
8. See Gracia, 1988, 25, and notes 59 and 69 for commentary on this aspect of Ortega.
9. See, e.g., Ortega y Gasset, 1984, chapter twelve.
10. Indeed, I would suggest that the prominence of many Latin American philosophers as public intellectuals helps to explain the currency in Latin America of both “explanatory history of philosophy” (to use Pereda’s phrase) and “culturalist” history of philosophy (to use

Gracia's term). If a philosopher as public intellectual both creates and is a creation of his or her culture, then any study of the philosopher's work will be obliged to discuss the philosopher's cultural context, too.

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