

Reflections on Professor Susana Nuccetelli's book: *An Introduction to Latin America Philosophy*

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I am honored to have been invited to participate in this panel discussing Professor Susana Nuccetelli's book, *Introduction to Latin American Philosophy*. By exploring most of the significant issues present in debates on and about Latin American philosophy, I find Professor Nuccetelli's book not only philosophically rigorous but also illuminating.

Since I am sympathetic to Professor Nuccetelli's analytic approach, I will focus on some issues that might enrich conversations and narratives on and about Latin American philosophy regardless of people's ideological commitments. For example, for skeptics about the possibility of an indigenous Latin American philosophy, one can offer as evidence of its existence the long historical meta-philosophical debate exploring such a possibility. This debate is a meaningful philosophical issue peculiar to Latin America. More importantly, the existence of this debate is an important contribution to Western philosophy, despite critics who might not consider it an "authentic" philosophical contribution. This is a unique and genuine philosophical conversation whose origin and longevity are nowhere else to be found. People in Latin America, including Brazil, have been deliberating on and about this issue for over 180 years, if we take Juan Bautista Alberdi's lectures, "Ideas," in 1842 as the starting point of the conversation. One might argue that this conversation/debate reached its apex in the 1960s in two classic works: Leopoldo Zea, *La filosofía Americana como filosofía sin más*, and Augusto Salazar Bondy, *¿Existe una filosofía*

*de nuestra América?* As Professor Nuccetelli aptly explains in her book, nowadays practitioners of Latin American philosophy have shifted their attention to issues about culture, race, and feminism, to mention only a few.

I agree with Professor Nuccetelli's argument in favor of conceiving the notion of Latin American philosophy as a type of applied philosophy but not necessarily reducible only to it. Similarly, one might conceive of American Pragmatism as a form of applied philosophy, but it is also more than that. Some scholars might contend that issues related to applied philosophy are not as rigorous as traditional issues in metaphysics or epistemology as found in analytic circles. However, that is more a prejudice than an argument because one can do rigorous philosophy regardless of the subject matter in question. In any case, the notion of what constitutes rigorous philosophy is as contestable as the nature of philosophy itself because it is mostly related to methodology rather than to the issues being discussed.

One of the objections raised against the originality or authenticity of Latin American philosophers is that they have not deliberately participated in system building à la Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl or what have you. And yet, I think that is a virtue rather than a vice of Latin American philosophers, with the exceptions of those who try to imitate European system builders, while arguing against such an approach.

Since one cannot expect that an introductory text will cover all relevant issues, the following is an observation rather than a criticism of Professor Nuccetelli's work. I would like to underscore the significant role that eclecticism has played in the development of philosophy in Latin America. The eclecticism that I have in mind is the one espoused and developed by Victor Cousin (1792-1867). Cousin was an influential French philosopher and pedagogue at the Ecole Normal in Paris who was a pioneer in the history of philosophy, philosophy of history, and

German Idealism. He also translated Plato's works and edited the works of René Descartes. Cousin grounds his eclecticism on two commitments: his objections to arguments that solely appeal to authority as practiced by late scholastic philosophers when using the so-called *magister dixit*, and his attempt to find a *just-milieu* among different philosophical and political views. While some Latin American philosophers, such as José de la Luz y Caballero (1800-1862), objected to Cousin's eclecticism for being too politically conservative, other Latin American philosophers, such as Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810-1884) and Andrés Bello (1781-1865), embraced Cousin's eclecticism to argue against the authoritarian component found in late scholastic philosophy as practiced in Latin America.<sup>1</sup>

Next, I would like to address issues of liberation within a Latin American context. When scholars discuss "philosophy of liberation" in Latin America, it is important to note that many Latin American philosophers tried to liberate, namely, to free us from the shackles of late scholasticism and its authoritarian practice. This aspect of Latin American philosophy tends to be overlooked in favor of the new liberationism. However, I think that, while Professor Nuccetelli does not explore the role that eclecticism played in liberating philosophy in Latin America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century from the authoritarian practice of late scholastic philosophy, the spirit of her work is precisely to liberate the practice of contemporary Latin America philosophy from the new shackles of liberationism. Discourses on and about liberation frequently go hand in hand with discourses of coloniality where decoloniality is understood as advocating liberation from the presuppositions of Western philosophy idiosyncratically understood to accomplish a given social, economic, or political goal.

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<sup>1</sup> Vicente Medina, "The Philosophical Polemic in Havana Revisited," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 4, Issue 1, pp. 35-52, especially pp. 37-38.

Latin American philosophers have displayed another virtue that oftentimes has been ignored. Like American Pragmatists, but even before them, some Latin American philosophers have tried to apply their philosophical skills to address important social, racial, economic, and political challenges. That is not to say, as Professor Nuccetelli incisively argues, that all of them succeed in offering compelling arguments for their positions. There are many dubious claims and arguments that practitioners of philosophy in Latin America have proposed from Bolivar's questionable republicanism, Rodo's elitism, and Vasconcelos's theory of mestizaje in his *Cosmic Race*, to supporters of contemporary liberation philosophy and decoloniality. The latter assumes that those who practice, for example, analytic philosophy broadly conceived cannot offer cogent and compelling arguments in favor of worthwhile social, economic, or political goals. Such an assumption, however, is not warranted. Like in any other field, there is a division of labor in philosophy where no privilege point of view exists. It does not matter who is proposing the argument or where it is coming from, what matters is their cogency and how strong the evidence supporting them is.

An earlier precursor to the pragmatic approach in the way that philosophy was practiced in Latin America, even prior to William James's lectures on Pragmatism, was the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cuban presbyter Félix Varela y Morales (1788-1853), who by the way spent the last twenty-five years of his life in the US as a political exile, dying in St. Augustine, Florida in 1853. By favoring the inductive method of modern science over the traditional deductive method as practiced in late medieval philosophy, he argued that no one should bother with explanations of state of affairs whose possible truth or falsity might have no practical results in science. If that were to be the case, the issue in question would be idle or just a philosophical curiosity. He did not deny that

philosophical curiosity is valuable, but rather that scientific research, as Pragmatists would later argue, should be gauged by its results rather than by claims on truth.<sup>2</sup>

Next and last, I would like to address a philosophical puzzle Professor Nuccetelli brings to our attention by questioning the coherence of some of the arguments that practitioners of liberation philosophy offer. One can frame the issue as follows. The liberationists are trying to liberate x from y (where y is placeholder for any unjust state of affairs broadly construed as political, moral, or economic). And yet, the liberationists are self-appointed liberators, since no one has chosen them for this job. Also, the so-called liberators are trying to restrict the practice of philosophy to their own liberationist agenda disqualifying other philosophical approaches by offering at times strawman rather than compelling arguments, such as reducing modern epistemology to Cartesian foundationalism or making sweeping generalizations about colonial genocide in Latin America.

Apparently, liberationists, but not only they, seem committed to the fallacy of appeal to authority—the same fallacy that many 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin American philosophers combated when they tried to dethrone the old scholasticism. It seems that paradoxically 20<sup>th</sup> century liberationists embrace a new kind of dogmatic scholasticism. The bottom line is that there are no sacred beliefs in philosophy, including the one just stated. There are better or worse arguments. To those who question: who determines the quality of arguments? The answer since Socrates and prior to him has been and is an appeal to reason. And to those who ask again who defines “reason”? One might plausibly reply, those who can enjoy the freedom to engage in philosophical speculation for the sake of knowledge rather than for the sake of promoting social and political goals.

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<sup>2</sup> Vicente Medina, “Félix Varela en la antesala de la modernidad: filosofía, eclecticismo y utilidad,” *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 11, Issue, pp. 17-34, especially pp. 22-23.