

# *Real* Philosophy, Metaphilosophy, and Metametaphilosophy

On the Plight of Latin American Philosophy

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## 1. A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING LATIN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

My aim here is to argue for the thesis that there are profound barriers to the systematic integration of Latin American philosophy with the mainstream of philosophy as practiced in the English-speaking world. In particular, I am concerned with a set of difficulties rooted in some elements of Latin American philosophy itself, apart from somewhat more familiar sociological barriers concerning language, intellectual pedigree, and so on (Gracia 2000, 159–92). My present focus is on hurdles rooted in the form and content of Latin American philosophical production. That is, I will focus on problems with the *philosophical* nature of Latin American philosophy. The *effects* of

those problems are primarily sociological. Still, the problems I attend to are problems tied to the very constitution of Latin American philosophy, and it is for precisely that reason that they merit special attention.

I have mentioned the idea of integration with mainstream Anglophone philosophy. By “integration” I mean the coming into existence of a shared community of discourse, where the conceptual resources of each currently independent intellectual network are easily available and accessed in both directions with some frequency. Consider, for example, the Anglophone philosophical subfields of philosophy of mind and philosophy of language. They are tightly integrated in my sense: the philosophical resources and developments in one field are readily available to the other, and subject to interaction with some frequency. Other fields have greater and lesser degrees of interaction with one another, and are thus integrated to lesser and greater degrees. In emphasizing integration, I do not mean to suggest that it cannot be compatible with asymmetries of influence. So, for example, currently metaphysics has some impact on ethics via metaethics, at least more so than ethics has on metaphysics. Nevertheless, there is an important degree of integration between these fields. What integration requires is a shared community of discourse, shared philosophical resources, and so on. My claim is that, in the case of Latin American philosophy, the prospects for any significant degree of integration are dim, at best.<sup>1</sup>

There are many barriers to the integration of which I speak. My focus concerns a family of barriers rooted in the nature of Latin American philosophy and how the discipline of philosophy, at least in the United States, tends to conceive of itself. By “the nature of Latin American philosophy” I do not mean to presuppose an essentializing characterization of some unified and monolithic approach to philosophy. I am skeptical that there is anything interesting that unifies the various things that might appropriately be labeled “Latin American philosophy.” Instead, what I mean to refer to by “the nature of Latin American philosophy” is a motley, a variegated cluster of non-essential, contingently-had characteristics within a diverse set of philosophical discourses and practices that are, nevertheless, widespread within in the philosophical networks in Latin America and present in the philosophy produced by those networks.

It seems to me that the correct descriptive account of Latin American philosophy will be an institutional one: Latin American philosophy is whatever it is that people who take themselves to be working on Latin American philosophy treat as Latin American philosophy. Triviality threatens any account of this sort, as it tells us nothing about what the relevant group of scholars take themselves to be studying. So, a bit of stipulation is in order: for present purposes I will assume that Latin American philosophy is (1) philosophy done by people in Latin America, or (2) work that engages with philosophical discussion that occurred or is occurring in Latin America. As a description, this account is surely too permissive and perhaps, in various ways, not permissive enough. As a piece of stipulative labeling, though, it is adequate to the present task.

Similar remarks are in order for philosophy, more generally. I doubt we can provide any interesting account of the essential features of philosophy, beyond an institutional definition. What we can do is to roughly characterize the kinds of things that occupy philosophers who take themselves to be doing philosophy. Here, I am inclined to think that one dominant strand of contemporary philosophical work, understood in the institutional way I have suggested, can be characterized as the attempt to determine probable truths in domains where we lack methods that are widely agreed to be reliable for determining what truths there are.

So, for present purposes, Latin American philosophy just is the attempt to determine probable truths in domains where we lack methods that are widely agreed to be reliable for determining what truths there are, where this endeavor of probable truth-seeking is done by people in Latin America, or by philosophers concerned either with participating in philosophical discussions with Latin American philosophers or with engaging with philosophical works produced in Latin America.

So, to repeat, my claim is that there are profound hurdles to the systematic integration of Latin American philosophy within the mainstream of philosophy done in the English-speaking world. I'll try to explain in some detail exactly what this comes to and why I think it is true. I will build my case in discreet parts. First, I will focus on the tradition of metaphilosophical writing in Latin America, and I'll make some remarks on it as a genre.

Next, I say a bit about what makes something “real” or “core” philosophy by the lights of one important strand of Anglophone philosophy. I’ll then argue that all of this illuminates something about the position of Latin American philosophy with respect to the possibility of its integration with Anglophone philosophy. Lastly, I will talk about what difference this might make.

## 2. TRADITION! OR, THE ETERNAL RETURN OF THE SAME

The significance of genre for understanding the content and implications of philosophical works has received compelling articulation in a number of places, and I will simply assume its scholarly respectability (e.g., Rorty 1986, 1–20). My focus is on the metaphilosophical essay. As the Latin American metaphilosophical essay is comparatively alien to most Anglophone philosophers, I will begin by articulating some of the standard forms of the genre and, in particular, the way these forms structure the possibility of subsequent contributions to the genre.<sup>2</sup>

A key feature of the Latin American metaphilosophical essay is that it requires that the philosopher argue for a variant of one of three major metaphilosophical positions.

Position 1: Latin American philosophy exists. (The usual corollary: And yes, we should study it and its history.)

Position 2: No, Latin American philosophy does not (yet) exist. This is because all philosophy thus far produced in Latin America is inauthentic, immature, unrigorous, ideological, or merely watered-down versions of philosophy produced elsewhere. (Corollary: There *should* be a genuine Latin American philosophy, and that it is shame that it does not exist.)

Position 3: Latin American philosophy has not existed, at least not up until the essay articulating this shortcoming (or more generously, until the advent of the philosophical program favored by the essay’s author), but now it is here. (Corollary: We should be thankful the long-heralded moment has finally arrived.)

The conclusion of any such essay must then involve some declaration that the subject matter of Latin American philosophy, its singularity, and its existence has now been addressed.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, any further investigations into the matter are presumed to be tedious and uninteresting, the sort of thing that attracts only lesser minds. Indeed, the author might say, further focus on the subject matter suggests a kind of philosophical failing akin to the one Nietzsche described as responsible for the ongoing interest in the problem of free will: again and again philosophers feel themselves strong enough to disprove what has already been disproved (Nietzsche, 1966 [1886], §18).

It is a remarkable feature about all three positions that they conclude in essentially the same way. The moral of the story is always that we should abandon these higher-order questions and focus solely on a real, genuine, first-order pursuit of philosophy. So, if Latin American philosophy does exist, we needn't worry too much about it and we can go on with the business of producing and studying philosophy *como filosofía sin más*, as we might say.<sup>4</sup> However, if Latin American philosophy has not yet existed because of some failure of authenticity, rigor, or so on, then the solution is still that we must get to the business of producing said philosophy. Alternately, if we have now—at last—solved the problem of whether there is genuine Latin American philosophy, then we should get on with doing it, and doing it right.

Despite the univocality of the conclusion, the Latin American philosopher might make his or her original contribution to this metaphilosophical literature in several ways. The first is the relatively pedestrian approach of what passes for “normal science” of the metaphilosophical variety: simply propose some definition of Latin American philosophy and its significance for philosophical work in Latin America, and then argue along some version of the three positions I outlined above. In doing so, one would join with the mainline of the metaphilosophical tradition in Latin America.

A somewhat more ambitious strategy would be to carve out an alternative to the three positions I have highlighted by rearranging the value attached to one or another piece of the standard views. So, for example, we might argue that Latin American philosophy has not yet existed, but that this is a good thing. Or we might argue that it does now exist, but that it is a shame, or

that its history ought not be studied. There are surely less radical alternatives available to those inclined to reject the three traditional positions, but radical or not, any contribution to the literature that breaks some new ground on the issue of basic positions in the genre will be of at least mild interest for just that reason.

Perhaps the most ambitious approach would be to make an innovation to the genre itself, something distinct from rearranging the existing value assignments to the familiar positions in the genre. The trick is that the innovation cannot be so radical that it ceases to be recognizable as an instance of the genre. If pushed too far, a departure from the genre becomes a break from the genre, and thus, no contribution to the tradition of that genre or literature. This is true even if the break spawns fruitful questions. In this spirit, one important innovation in higher-order philosophical reflection in Latin American philosophy has been the turn to higher-order questions about *why* metaphilosophical questions are important in the Latin American context (e.g., Castro-Gomez 2003, 68–80). This development might be called *metametaphilosophy*. It has two crucial features: it is interestingly innovative, yet still clearly part of the tradition of higher-order reflection on Latin American philosophy.

Now, though, a disconcerting possibility opens up: one might go up yet another level, to *metametametaphilosophy*. That is, we might endeavor to understand the conditions that give rise to *metametaphilosophy*, and to provide an account of the forces that drive it and the consequences of it. Ever higher regresses threaten.

Might we sidestep the threat of perpetual regress? I think we might, if we can provide a general account of the dynamics that drive the move to ever-higher levels. Such an account might stymie the hyper-reflexiveness of the genre. In essence, by exhausting what is of interest in the ever-meta mode of inquiry, at least for this genre, we might bring interest in this pursuit to its end. In doing so, we would have rendered further higher-order reflection uninteresting and fruitless. And to do that would be to bring an end to Latin American metaphilosophy, but in a way that remains true to the spirit of the genre and its aims. This is my task in the remainder of the paper.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. REAL PHILOSOPHY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

#### *3.1 Taking Philosophy to the Next Level ... and the Level After Next*

Consider the distinction between first-order philosophy and higher-order philosophy. First-order philosophy is the sort of thing with which professional philosophers are familiar: accounts of, for example, the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. David Lewis's account of possible worlds, Levinas's discussion of alterity, and Vasconcelos's articulation of his aesthetic monism each constitute a kind of first-order philosophical work. However, we might raise higher-order questions about these things. Second-order philosophical questions—metaphilosophy—might involve any number of questions, but the subject matter is philosophy itself: What is philosophy? What are its circumstances of production? What do particular conceptual schemes presuppose? What makes philosophy original? Metaphilosophical discussions have been comparatively rare in mainstream Anglophone philosophy over the past 30 years. In contrast, one might be forgiven for thinking that metaphilosophical musings just are the entire original content of philosophy in Latin America.

As we have already seen, where there are second-order questions, a question about the third-order is sure to arise. However, the higher we ascend up the hierarchy, the more pronounced worries become about whether we are doing genuinely philosophical work. There are at least two sources of this concern. First, the higher one ascends in the hierarchy, the more one becomes removed from the issues that are familiar to the historical tradition. Second, the further one ascends up the hierarchy, the more it appears that we have recourse to nonphilosophical methods for determining what truths there are. That is, sociological, psychological, economic, and other sorts of explanations appear to become decidedly more relevant to the higher-order questions. We can characterize the point this way: as one ascends the hierarchy, there is some temptation to shift disciplinary approaches to the problem. In doing so, we should expect that questions will arise about whether what is being done should constitute philosophy.

Consider the work of figures like Bruno Latour (Latour and Woolgar 1983) and Randall Collins (Collins 1998). Latour is ostensibly interested in the philosophy and history of science. However, his work is prominent and controversial at least in part because of the sociological perspective he takes to understanding the how and why of first-order scientific change. The sociological bent in Collins's work is even clearer—he is very explicitly interested in bringing sociological resources to the study of philosophy and, in particular, to the study of how philosophical ideas gain and lose their currency. As one might expect from a sociologist, the account is at some remove from the kinds of questions that philosophers recognize as their own, but it is also recognizably a piece of metaphilosophical work in its scope and conception.

None of this is to deny that the boundaries between philosophy and other disciplines are vague. Nor do I wish to deny some arbitrariness in the demarcation of disciplines. For that matter, I do not mean to condemn any shift in disciplinary orientation that may arise when pursuing higher-order philosophical questions—although I think we should not lose track of the pressure for a shift of disciplinary approach that may arise at the higher level. My point here is just that, given the going conceptions of disciplines and disciplinary approaches, it is not unusual for higher-order philosophical work to shade into methods and subject matters that look remote to the core of the discipline. What this means, though, is that any such work that adopts higher-order questions as its subject matter, especially if it is marked by a shift in disciplinary approach or content, invites marginalization of that work in the eyes of the core of the discipline of philosophy. Indeed, this is surely true of this very paper.

A different sort of worry about the move to higher-order questions arises from the perceived difference between *doing* philosophy and commenting on the limits or conditions of philosophy. Consider similar concerns in another discipline. In “The Literature of Exhaustion,” John Barth famously contended that particular forms of what were oftentimes regarded as art were less instances of art and more a kind of commentary on the limits of a genre, media, or mode of artistic production (Barth 1967, 29–34). Barth's suggestion for a principle to distinguish between commentary on the limits



of art and the production of art itself, or perhaps less generously, between candidates for good and bad art, appealed to a requirement of a high degree of skill and sophistication in technique. Whereas commenting on the limits of genre or some medium of art might take little in the way of technique—all it really took was some insight into the limits of the endeavor as widely practiced—production of *real* art or (to shift fields) *good* literature takes a kind of sophistication in technique or a high level skill.

Serendipitously, Barth's principal literary example of someone who is able to comment on the limits of genre and form while remaining firmly in the tradition of doing first-order work is Jorge Luis Borges, the fantastic (and philosophically minded) Argentine writer. Barth did not doubt that numerous artists and writers from the 1920s to the mid-1960s could point out and bemoan the limits of conventional storytelling. However, what Borges did required skills of an altogether different order. Where many were content to comment (indeed, most could do no more than that) on those limits, Borges made wonderful, interesting stories that succeeded both as commentaries on the limits of conventional storytelling and as stories on their own. His *Ficciones*, such as "The Library of Babel," "The Garden of Forking Paths," or "The Book of Sand" (1999), illuminate something about the widely held sense that all possible stories have already been told, but Borges was able to do that in an original way without disobeying the principle imperative of the storyteller, to tell a compelling story. That was Borges's achievement: he made flat-out good stories about the limits and nature of storytelling.

The parallel with higher-order philosophical questions should be clear. Merely ordinary reflections on meta- or metametaphilosophical questions can invite the worry that its products might be interesting discussions on the limits of philosophy without constituting *real* or *good* philosophy. What would be needed is for the higher-order philosophical work also to succeed as a piece of first-order philosophy. It is not obvious how this might be accomplished. Whatever the merits of Barth's proposal for distinguishing between good and bad literature, it is not clear that his standard—distinguishing between work that requires a high degree of skill and sophistication versus work that does not—will gain us any traction on this issue in the case of philosophy. Many, although certainly not all, of the meta-moves are sophisticated in their own

way. I think it is plausible that much of this work (e.g., Castro-Gomez 2003) requires sophistication and skill that is not commonly had.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the principle of division between good and bad work is to be found in whether or not we regard the meta-work as a compelling piece of philosophy in its own right. It is hard to say what this comes to, but we can point to at least some arguable cases of its success: Descartes, Hume, and Kant, for example, all offer new ways to *do* philosophy in the context of also exploring and demarcating the limits of philosophical work. So, perhaps, the problem of higher-order questions is to simply produce the next great revolution in philosophy. Like the Aristotelian conception of virtue, this may require that external conditions of the world cooperate in particular ways, but it points to at least the possibility of a philosophy that succeeds at both the first- and higher orders. There is an important lesson here: short of a revolutionary achievement on the order of Kant et al., higher-order philosophical theorizing will threaten to provide the resources for its own marginalization in philosophy. This problem will be compounded when nonrevolutionary higher-order reflection is accompanied by a shift in apparent disciplinary approach, as in the work of Latour and Collins. Whatever its virtues, the core of the discipline will say, it does not have *our* virtues.

Let me be clear that any nominally philosophical undertaking that begins to manifest the virtues of another discipline invariably will be suspect, at least in some quarters. Consider the recent case of so-called “experimental philosophy.” In the past few years, there has been rapid development of interest in and productivity of philosophers interested in the ways in which quantitative and/or experimental methods might be used to inform philosophical work (e.g., Doris and Stich 2005; Machery et al. 2004). The development and products of experimental philosophy have been unusually contentious, even for philosophers. Some have decried this work as not really philosophy, as uninteresting, or as removed from philosophical concerns. Others have thought that this work holds the key to understanding a number of long-running philosophical debates.<sup>7</sup>

Resolution of these debates is not my present concern. Instead, the structures and forces at work in them are worth understanding for the way they illuminate something about the Latin American case.

### 3.2 *Entre ser y estar*: A Typology

Debates about what constitutes real philosophy are marked by a dynamic between two opposed complexes of attitudes. On the one hand, we have people who (for whatever the reason) care about whether something falls within the domain of their discipline. Call these people *Border Patrollers*. On the other hand, we have people who don't care about disciplinary borders. Indeed, some of these people are interested in pursuing research projects wherever they may lead, be it in philosophy or outside of it. We can call these scholars *Disciplinary Migrants*. Sometimes the pursuit of their work takes them across the disciplinary borders of philosophy and sometimes it does not. For Disciplinary Migrants, the borders of philosophy are, at worst, merely practical barriers to the pursuit of their labors. To be sure, the presence of active, aggressive enforcement of disciplinary borders may make their work harder to pursue. Journals in one discipline may reject submissions that are not suitably credentialed or that do not respect the disciplinary norms to an appropriate degree. Beyond such practical matters, though, Disciplinary Migrants do not see any special reason to care about disciplinary borders.<sup>8</sup>

This typology gives us a useful tool for understanding the dynamics of disputes over what constitutes real philosophy, one compatible with a range of explanatory frameworks. And, it is a tool that can be deployed within a variety of disciplinary frameworks. For example, one might adopt a social-psychological explanation of disciplinary Border Patrolling. Consider again the example of recent debates about experimental philosophy. We could endeavor to explain the appeal of experimental philosophy to its proponents in terms of what happens to philosophers who are ambitious but not particularly good at the kind of skills required for doing conventional philosophy. In such circumstances, these philosophers will compensate by seeking out an endeavor that requires a different skill set and a different body of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> On this account, one thing that explains the success of experimental philosophy, at least to the extent to which it has been successful, is that there is a critical mass of philosophers to whom this characterization applies, but who are also suitably situated in the social and intellectual networks of the profession so as not to be completely excluded from the discipline. When combined

with the epistemic credentials that much of mainstream philosophy affords scientific and quantitative work, we have a route whereby such philosophers, who might otherwise be relegated to low-status positions in the profession, might be afforded the opportunity to carve out a kind of status in the profession at large. These scholars become Disciplinary Migrants, but ones with some investment in residing within the borders of philosophy.

A different sort of explanation is available for the origins of Border Patrollers. Again keeping in mind the case of experimental philosophy, perhaps what drives Border Patrollers are fears about the usurpation of conventional philosophical techniques, and the usurpation of discourses that had previously been constructed from little more than one's own ruminations. Given that the usurpers are using methods and tools that are ordinarily regarded with respect when applied outside of the discipline, but that are largely alien to the traditional core of the profession, a sense of threat is perhaps inevitable. No one likes to lose the attention of the room because someone younger and more attractive has just made a grand entrance. And few are willing to stomach a loss of status and prestige to those who are not sufficiently pedigreed and accomplished in the skills that secured the high status of members in the old regime. Fears like these might contribute to the development of Border Patrollers.

These stories are hardly the only ones available to us. We might, for example, explain away the dynamics of Border Patrollers and Disciplinary Migrants in terms of institutional economics. Perhaps what is at stake is a peculiar dynamic concerning faculty lines, concentration of research agendas and resources, and the profile of graduate students attracted to philosophical programs. Alternately, we might explain things in terms of cultural conflict over what should constitute an authority on philosophical subject matters. On this account, Disciplinary Migrants such as experimental philosophers present a difficult challenge for the dominant philosophical culture's conception of method and authority. Indeed, with a bit of imagination, we could muster any number of other meta-analyses. For example, perhaps the dynamic is better explained by the trajectory of the history of the discipline, or perhaps by history itself, or perhaps by a kind of class struggle, or perhaps by the dynamics of world economic or political systems. I do not wish to endorse any particular account of the forces that give rise to the typology of Disciplinary

Migrants and Border Patrollers. Instead, I hope to characterize two salient complexes of attitudes that play important roles in the context of philosophy, given the disciplinary dynamics I will outline in the next section.

### 3.3 Dynamics

The typologies I have discussed are the expressions of complex forces operating in a range of academic fields. However, there is a discipline-specific dynamic concerning what constitutes real philosophy, a dynamic that shapes the context of conflict between Border Patrollers and Disciplinary Migrants. This dynamic concerns the conditions under which any subject matter is regarded as “core” philosophy or not. Importantly, what the estimation of “core” or not comes to does not turn on some positive conception of philosophy. Philosophers are too diverse in their conceptions of what constitutes philosophy for a positive characterization to do much work for the profession as a whole, or even for the core of the profession.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the question of whether something is regarded as part of the core of the discipline or as something peripheral usually turns on a negative standard, one that focuses on what is sufficient to be *not* centrally philosophy. All other things equal, it is sufficient to ask whether the candidate piece of philosophy or the area of purportedly philosophical interest could be an instance of scholarly activities in some other discipline. If so, it is, to that extent, not philosophy. In contrast, core philosophy, *real* philosophy, is implicitly conceived of as something that cannot be seriously pursued anywhere besides philosophy, even if we do not agree on what philosophy is.<sup>11</sup>

The measure of what gets counted as real philosophy explains the comparative poverty of disciplinary status of the subfield of ethics, and relatedly, of social and political philosophy. Inasmuch as these subfields interact with and must rely upon subjects, data, and developments outside of philosophy, they will strike some of the most adamant proponents of mainstream or core philosophy as less central to philosophical activity, or minimally, as less serious or important parts of philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

If this account is largely correct, we have a useful standard for estimating whether something should count as within the core of the mainstream of the discipline, and if not, its approximate remoteness from that core.

We might wonder why this standard, if it is the standard, is the one that governs assessment of what is philosophically central to mainstream Anglophone philosophy. I suspect that part of the story involves the sense that philosophy does not have its own subject matter. If my characterization of philosophy at the start of the paper is broadly correct—that is, if philosophy is simply the study of the things studied by people who call themselves philosophers, whereby what that currently means is something like “questions where we have no widely agreed-upon method for reliably determining the truths of some domain of inquiry”—then, the pressure to remain “pure” or uncontaminated by other disciplines will be particularly high. In a landscape of shifting terrain, the most effective way of marking out one’s terrain may simply be the judgment that one’s own terrain is not *that*.

One might object to the account thus far on grounds that there are several clear counterexamples. The counterexamples include the philosophy of science (especially in its more historical forms) and the predominantly formal branches of philosophy such as logic, philosophy of logic, and the philosophy of mathematics. One might think that some or all of these subjects could be undertaken in the professional activities of other disciplines—even if they are, in fact, seldom taken up in those other disciplines.

I think the counterexamples can be adequately dealt with in the framework of the account I offer. Bear in mind that the core test I have offered assumes that other things are equal. But, in the case of philosophy of science and the formal branches of philosophy, the *ceteris paribus* clause is not satisfied. As I have already noted, at least among analytic philosophers, there is a long-standing tradition of positive regard for the epistemic credentials of science. So, what philosophy of science has going for it is the patina of worth that is given by the epistemic credentials of its subject matter. Note, though, that even within the philosophy of science there are divisions between those who work on contemporary philosophy of science (high status) and those who work on the history of philosophy of science (somewhat lower status, unless one is able to draw out implications for contemporary science or philosophy of science), and strands of philosophy of science that turn to more social or historical explanations of what happens (lowest status, at

least among the mainstream of the English-speaking philosophical world). Value-oriented philosophy of science (e.g., so-called “feminist philosophy of science”; see Longino 1990) falls somewhere in the middle. So, although there is something distinctive about the case of philosophy of science as a whole, internal to the field, it manifests the precise dynamic I have been describing.

Similar things might be said for the regard in which formal work is held among the core of Anglophone philosophy. Here, it is not so much the epistemic credentials that do the work, but rather it is the promise of that work for expanding the explanatory powers of other aspects of philosophy.

Still, we must be mindful of the potential for shifts in the status of what is deemed important internal to these subfields and mindful also of shifts in the discipline’s attitude toward these subfields. As philosophy is a field with no fixed essence, there is no guarantee that estimations of privilege and centrality will persist from one era to the next. The varying stock of epistemology, logic, and philosophy of language over the past 100 years tells a complex story about these issues.

Let us take stock. I have been developing an account of the forces that drive the distinction between real or core philosophy and more marginal varieties of philosophy, at least with respect to the mainstream of the Anglophone discipline of philosophy. Thus far, I have argued that (1) moves to higher-order questions in philosophy invite objections that such work is not really philosophy, (2) short of a philosophical revolution, such work will look to many philosophers like, at best, a kind of commentary on philosophy but not an instance of philosophy, and (3) this situation can be understood in terms of a typology and a discipline-specific dynamic arising from the lack of widespread consensus about what, exactly, philosophy amounts to. One consequence of this situation is that anyone interested in metaphilosophical reflections or prone to disciplinary migrancy will, other things equal, be regarded as marginal to the extent to which these metaphilosophical or disciplinary migrations are prominent in the perception of the work. We might imagine the situation will be particularly dire for Disciplinary Migrants interested in higher-order questions about philosophy.

#### 4. ON THE PERPETUITY OF LATIN AMERICA'S PHILOSOPHICAL MARGINALITY

If we accept the characterization of at least one prominent, canonical thread of the Latin American tradition as metaphilosophical, and if we accept my analysis of the dynamics at play in higher-order philosophical questions, then we are in a position to make principled predictions about a range of things concerning the future of Latin American philosophy in the Anglophone philosophical world.

It is no accident that, to the extent to which Latin American philosophy has penetrated into the Anglophone philosophical world, it has done so at the periphery of it, in places friendly to marginalized branches and methods (Vargas 2005). However, should Latin American philosophy ever achieve critical mass or sufficient disciplinary visibility to elicit a reaction from philosophers in the core of the mainstream of the profession, the nature of the reaction will depend on a number of things. It will depend in part on whether future changes in the conception of what-philosophy-*is-not* have among their consequences the idea that Latin American philosophy can be undertaken outside of the discipline of philosophy. There is little reason for optimism. As I remarked at the outset, Latin American philosophy has been gripped by metaphilosophical problems. Not all of it, of course, but a good number of the canonical texts engage with this worry, dating back to Alberdi, Bilbao, and Bello through the Salazar-Bondy/Zea debate (these can all be found in Zea 1993), through contemporary work on these subjects, such as Castro-Gomez's, and indeed, this very discussion. Work in this mode does not help Latin American philosophy's prospects for being regarded as anything of more than marginal.

The problem, however, is not limited to Latin American philosophy's tradition of metaphilosophical reflection, although that is part of it. Recall the comparative status disadvantage of philosophers working in value theory, even among those otherwise fully in the mainstream of Anglophone philosophy. This problem exists in spades for Latin American philosophy. For much of its history, first philosophy in Latin America was just social and political philosophy. Metaphysics and epistemology have been distant seconds



in local cultural importance, and things like the philosophy of language and mind were usually not even subjects seriously taken up by significant communities of scholars. If I am right about the current *de facto* standard for being regarded as not-centrally-philosophy (“Is it conceivable that the subject could be studied outside of the discipline of philosophy?”), then the importance of social and political philosophy, the kinds of things that might be taught in departments of political science or in an intellectual history course, further contribute to the perception that Latin American philosophy is, in its content, distant from core or central philosophical work in the Anglophone philosophical community’s eyes.

We might even map out degrees of marginality: surely one of the worst of all possible subject matters would be the history of race in Latin American philosophy. This would provide us with a social-political subject matter, and even better, one where the referent is arguably fictional, not in the North Atlantic, in context where the literature isn’t in English or the Big Four languages of philosophy (that is, Greek, Latin, German, and French), and where the concern is also historical. But maybe there are worse subject matters. Perhaps studying the influence of Buddhist ethical thought on the history of Vasconcelos’s theory of race would be even worse. The multiplication of marginalities that occurs in the case of Latin American philosophy—and really, any purportedly philosophical tradition that emphasizes its history and its social and political dimensions—should be clear.<sup>13</sup>

If we accept that philosophy is significantly populated by Border Patrolers, and we accept that that Latin American philosophy will fail the test of being core philosophy, then we must also recognize the disciplinary stigma that will attach to the study of Latin American philosophy. This stigma partly explains the remarkable absence of status-seeking departments of philosophy in their hiring of philosophers who work on Latin American thought: at best, such a hire would do nothing to increase prestige. At worst, it would suggest that the department is moving away from doing real philosophy. (There are, of course, a range of important factors here, including but not limited to ignorance about the field and the comparatively small numbers of philosophers working in Latin American philosophy who are pedigreed in the departments from which status-seeking departments hire their assistant

professors.) As I said at the start, though, my focus here is on how features of Latin American philosophy itself bring about its marginality. The situation is, of course, different in departments where disciplinary prestige and all that follows are not at stake. Thus, it is no surprise that, at least in recent years, there is comparatively ready employment to be found for people working in Latin American philosophy among universities principally concerned with teaching and responding to the fact of demographic shifts in the makeup of their student populations.

If I am right, the prospects for the integration of the study of Latin American philosophy with Anglophone philosophy remain very grim: the nature of philosophy, the fact of Border Patrollers, and the nature of Latin American philosophy all conspire against its success.

##### 5. ON THE VALUE OF LATIN AMERICAN THOUGHT

Attentive readers may have noticed that an important part of the argument is missing. Even if the prospects for integration of Anglophone and Latin American philosophy remain dim, we do not have any reason to suppose that this state of affairs *matters*. After all, if Latin American philosophy is conceptually impoverished or merely an inferior version of what already is available to the Anglophone philosophical community, there is little reason (from the standpoint of the philosophical interests of Anglophone philosophers, anyway) to be worried about the lack of integration with Latin American philosophy.

Alternately, one might ask from the perspective of Latin American philosophy why one should care about integration with Anglophone philosophy. I'll start with this latter question. First, I think it is clear that the Anglophone philosophical world contains a substantial body of conceptual resources. Therefore, it is plausible that integration with that philosophical network will bring access to the conceptual resources deployed within that network. And, inasmuch as those conceptual resources might have utility in the Latin American philosophical context, we have all we need to justify interest from the Latin American side of the equation. Second, one strand of Latin American philosophy emphasizes the importance of fighting oppression and the global systems that permit and facilitate it. Elsewhere, I have argued that this

aim is better pursued internal to the conceptual and linguistic frameworks predominant in mainstream Anglophone philosophy (Vargas 2005).

Consider now the concern that none of the foregoing provides reason for the Anglophone philosophical world to care about integration with Latin American philosophy. What is needed is an argument that there is distinctive, valuable content to Latin American philosophy, content that would justify Anglophone interest in integration with Latin American philosophy. Is there such content? My reply is yes, but not necessarily because it is Latin American, *per se*, rather because there is a body of useful conceptual moves and philosophical resources that have some currency in the history and present of Latin American philosophical work. Perhaps these ideas gained widespread currency in Latin America when they did because of the particularities of its intellectual and social history. And, perhaps such ideas could or did develop elsewhere under different conditions. My point is simply that there are useful philosophical resources to be found in Latin American philosophy, and that such resources would be useful in mainstream Anglophone philosophical theorizing.

Why think this? There are two arguments. The first is historical, the second is contemporary.

Here, I do not have the space or time to more than gesture at these arguments. I will offer a more sustained version of the historical argument elsewhere (Vargas, in progress [a]). The basic idea, though, is that there are at least three demonstrable cases where important ideas in the Anglophone philosophical world were anticipated in the Latin American philosophical context. In particular, the idea that social expectations can structure real capacities is anticipated in the work of Sor Juana; that practical, normative considerations have an appropriate role to play in scientific theorizing was anticipated by José Vasconcelos; and the idea that any adequate philosophical picture of moral psychology will need to systematically engage with scientific psychology is anticipated by Samuel Ramos. There are, I think, others, but these examples provide justification for thinking that Latin American philosophy has at least a history of achieving important conceptual resources that, were Latin American philosophy integrated with the Anglophone philosophical world, would have been available to the latter sooner.

The other argument, for the value of *current* work in Latin American philosophy, is harder to make because of the nature of the argument it demands. For any such argument to be compelling, it would need to convince its audience that an unfamiliar idea is significant, even if one rejects the substantive claim. This is no easy task. At least in the historical case, we can acknowledge that even if we do not have truck with one or another idea, it can be a significant one for the profession. Publications, debate, and so on can attest to the importance of some idea with which one disagrees. In contrast, it is much harder to acknowledge the importance of an idea one disagrees with if it has not yet been the subject of sustained critical discussion. So, with respect to the conceptual fecundity of contemporary Latin American philosophy, it is much harder for those outside of it to acknowledge that some original product of it is both original and worthwhile.

Still, I am convinced that such a case can be made. Again, space constraints preclude a fully adequate defense, but if I can be forgiven for introducing first-person anecdotal data, I can say this: my own work in the Anglo-American tradition on responsible agency is indebted to an idea I first learned when doing research on Latin American philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Anecdotal story aside, the overarching argument should be plausible enough: there are paths by which one might make the case that Latin American philosophy has something worthwhile to bring to the table, were it integrated with Anglophone philosophy.

## 6. A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE GOURMET REPORT

I have thus far argued that Latin American philosophy is, due to some of its salient features, likely to remain unintegrated with Anglophone philosophy. I have also contended that this is unfortunate because there are genuinely useful philosophical resources internal to both Latin American and Anglophone philosophy that would justify their integration. By way of conclusion I will remark on the practical significance of this predicament.

It is important to recognize that the same features that make Latin American philosophy marginalized, that is, its focus on higher order questions, its

preoccupation with social and political issues, its attention to philosophical anthropology and so on, make this work ripe and promising outside of philosophy. It is no secret that the core of contemporary English-speaking philosophy is regarded by much of the rest of the academy as insular. But this is not true of many of the marginalized subfields within philosophy—e.g., race, gender, applied political issues, and so on. Indeed, philosophical work on these subjects oftentimes carries a prestige and influence in other disciplines, even if it lacks it in philosophy.

These considerations sometimes drive philosophers to leave philosophy departments for greener pastures. Such appointments can be gateways to flourishing careers in the humanities at large, even if the result is a diminution of status internal to the profession of philosophy. There is a powerful temptation here: we all like to be surrounded by people who admire us, and if we aren't getting approval from our current peers, we will oftentimes gravitate to groups where we are more successful at eliciting the feedback we inevitably feel (secretly or otherwise) that we deserve (Collins 1998, 45–46). Still, leaving philosophy for other academic quarters has some significant consequences in light of the situation I have described. It makes it easier for the profession to regard Latin American philosophy as not really philosophy, as the kind of thing that can be pursued in other disciplines or that can be supported by other departments, precisely because its practitioners have moved to another field.

So, what should we do, as philosophers interested in or working on Latin American philosophy? Well, if we somehow get our numbers large enough, we can aspire to our own ghetto. We can throw our own conferences, form our own professional organizations, and maybe even someday create our own departments that regard non-Latin American philosophy as an anathema, philosophically bankrupt, morally corrupt, and intellectually vapid.

Or, we can instead doggedly insist on moving into neighborhoods that might not want us. If we opt for this alternative, our best hope might be to do as the good bishop Chiapas Bartolomé de las Casas recommended: to try and convert them by example. Las Casas wasn't particularly successful at persuading the Spanish crown to adopt his approach, but others have been successful at bringing once-marginalized fields closer to the core. Indeed,

the rise of Rawlsian and, to a lesser extent, virtue theoretic approaches to normative questions constitute proof that such disciplinary changes can happen when the right pieces are in place.

However, if we do want Latin American philosophical work to have some integration, recognition, currency, or even basic dialogue with the core of philosophy in the English speaking world, some changes will have to happen. One route might be to purge large parts of the tradition as we construct it in the English-speaking world. If the salience of metaphilosophical debates in the Latin American canon works to the disadvantage of the study of the field, then perhaps the canon should be reformed. By foregrounding these issues, by admitting texts that focus on them into our canon, we weaken the possibility of acceptance outside of Latin American philosophy's borders. So, perhaps, the solution is to purge our tradition of the study of some of the best-known texts, or at least those with metaphilosophical focus, by Alberdi, Mariateguá, Salazar-Bondy, Zea, Frondizi, Castro-Gomez, and so on.

I believe that this drastic approach would be profoundly problematic. For starters, it would purge our tradition of some of its most interesting and vibrant work. Second, for it to be effective, we would also have to purge the sociopolitical strand of Latin American philosophical work. What would be left to integrate with Anglophone philosophy would be only the grotesquely eviscerated remnants of the Latin American corpus.

It seems to me that there are at least two alternatives more palatable than the one just mentioned. One alternative is simply to do rigorous, creative first-order philosophical work. Then, we would need to push what is excellent about such work to the forefront of how we teach the subject matter, how we talk about it, and what we study and pursue. Notoriously, this is easier said than done. All the same, the doing remains important as a kind of condition on the possibility of philosophical integration.

The second alternative is more ambitious. We might aim even higher than excellent first-order work and instead seek to do discipline-shaping work of the sort that Descartes, Kant, and other giants of philosophy have done. The trouble with this approach is obvious: such aspirations everywhere outstrip execution. Moreover, it is hardly clear that an achievement of that caliber would be recognized in the Anglophone world anyway. Even if extraordinary

philosophical work were being done in Spanish or Portuguese right now, or in the recent past, the Anglophone philosophical community would be unlikely to be aware of its existence. Without some integration with the tradition it is unlikely that significant works in the Latin American context would be recognizable as such by exclusively Anglophone-trained philosophers. Of course, were integration achieved by other means, this kind of discipline-shaping work would cement the long-term viability of philosophical integration between Anglophone and Latin American philosophy. However, its achievement alone would be unlikely to overcoming any serious sociological barriers to the study of Latin American philosophy.

Indeed, if I am right that Latin American philosophy suffers from a form of perceived contamination in light of its concern for metaphilosophy and social and political philosophy, it is not clear how either excellent first-order philosophical work or even potentially discipline-reconfiguring work might change the basic disciplinary situation. Here, though, we might pause to consider whether feminist scholarship provides a useful model. It too retains a kind of stigma in philosophy, but it has a place at the table that Latin American philosophers *qua* Latin American philosophers can barely conceive of having. Part of philosophical feminism's success, such as it is, has been found in a tradition of scholars who did well-regarded, "core" work in their respective disciplines and subfields, but also pursued lively research projects motivated by feminist concerns. This dual-track approach seems to have been part of the formula for feminism's comparative success in the academy (Nussbaum 1997). I am inclined to think this is perhaps the most viable path, in the long term, for the institutionalization of Latin American philosophy. It has the virtue of offering a social bypass to the problem of marginalization by content, and it may therefore be the only feasible path to integration.

Although the situation is dire and the opportunities for its satisfactory resolution are few, we must remember that some of the issues here—for example, whether we move into a disciplinary ghetto or proselitize by example—have very real-world effects. They affect how we teach our students. They affect where we send them, and what we encourage them to study. They also affect us in less obvious ways: where we publish, where we expect our

colleagues to publish if they are serious scholars, and the audience we seek to address when we publish. They can affect the kinds of jobs we decide to take and what else we do when we aren't working on Latin American philosophy. The question we face is this: Do we want to live in a disciplinary ghetto, or do we want to suffer the trials of trying to move into a higher-status neighborhood? If we want the bigger home, the larger paycheck, and the social prestige that comes with it, or if we merely want integrated neighborhoods, are we willing to do the work and to tolerate the costs that are involved in making the move, knowing that the deck is stacked against us in various ways?<sup>15</sup>

Of course, there are other normative issues lurking here, both concrete in the current sociohistorical circumstances and metaphilosophical in their import. Should one try to shape one's research in light of the current disciplinary dynamics? Does this contaminate the pursuit of philosophy, or one's willingness to participate in the discipline or its activities? These are hard questions. But felicitously, they are exactly the kinds of questions that Latin American philosophers may be best equipped to address, as they combine the reality of concrete conditions of inequality with questions about normativity and the nature and value of philosophy itself. Let's have at it.<sup>16</sup>



#### NOTES

1. I wish to acknowledge at the outset that integration has its hazards, and that we need not presume that it is necessarily a good thing. However, for the moment I will assume, in the case of Latin American philosophy and mainstream Anglophone philosophy, that integration would be, on balance, a good thing. I say a bit more about this assumption in section 5.
2. Whatever one thinks of this kind of work, one can hardly hope to be taken seriously as a Latin American philosopher unless one has written on the subject of whether or not there is Latin American philosophy, and if so, what it comes to. This essay thus constitutes something of a traditionally necessary (w)rite of passage, governed by the norms of the form. Thus, I will consider a range of definitional and existential issues surrounding Latin American philosophy, and I will suggest that (as the tradition decrees) we should get on with the business of producing Latin American philosophy of the first order.
3. Position 1 is suggested by the work of Leopoldo Zea, Position 2 by the work of Salazar



Bondy, and Position 3 by perhaps the early work of Enrique Dussel. I do not mean to suggest that any of these authors have argued precisely along the lines I have suggested, or that their views have not or did not shift over time (this seems to be especially true in the case of Dussel's work). Rather, my caricature of the options is just that—a caricature of some general strains of thought that characterize the shape of the literature.

4. I acknowledge the failed linguistic counterimperialism of the just-mentioned phrase in Spanish. What makes it a failure is that, *prima facie*, it is off-putting in its pretension, even supposing a readership of highly educated English-speaking professors. After all, the phrase might just as well have been rendered in English as “philosophy, considered as such,” or perhaps as “philosophy in and of itself,” without any critical loss of meaning or significance. Moreover, the obvious element of Latin American intertextual philosophy reference to the well-known philosophical work by the same title could be satisfactorily addressed in a less self-reflexive footnote.

Still, here's something we should not too easily forget: if this bit of foreign phrasing had been in German, French, Latin, or perhaps even Greek, the expectation would be that a well-educated, philosophical reader would understand the phrase and any intertextuality implied. Its presence in the text would, minimally, reflect a cosmopolitan literary panache. Indeed, a suitably *de riguer* phrase of foreign origin might not even need to suffer the attention of italicization in the text. Here, though, its language of origin is a barrier. In the present context it does not mark out sophistication on the part of the author and an expectation of similar sophistication in the author's audience. Instead, the *de facto* connotation is one that points to the narrowness of the subject matter and the insularity of the author's audience. Indeed, in the present context, the only possible route by which one might successfully engage in a form of linguistic counterimperialism on behalf of Spanish-as-a-philosophical-language is to utilize some turn of philosophical phrase that robustly resists any helpful translation into English. Can it be done? And what is the significance of being able to do so, or not? Are meditations such as these—buried in footnotes, no less—the kind of thing that undermines the philosophical credentials of the essay? Would it undermine the philosophical credentials of the essay as piece of work in Latin American philosophy, or in any philosophical context, as such?

5. Perhaps the end of Latin American metaphilosophy would, in time, provide resources to properly understand the various ends of Western metaphysics. This possibility is beyond the scope of this paper to pursue, and anyway, it would constitute a break from the philosophical tradition with which the paper is invested.
6. Indeed, the sophistication and skill condition may be particularly problematic in the Latin American context. One might, with some justification, worry that the first-order Latin American philosophical work has less sophistication and displays less talent than some of the higher-order work.
7. Particularly telling was the discussion on these issues that surfaced in philosophy blogs in light of a magazine article on about experimental philosophy. See, for example, the discussion and links at Leiter (2006). For wide-ranging discussions of some of the issues, see many of the papers in Ramsey and DePaul's (1998) early collection on some of these

issues. For a compact discussion of some of these issues from a critical standpoint, see Sosa (2007).

8. I leave it as an exercise to the reader to render much of what follows in the language of two distinct forms of being (*ser, estar*) and their relationship to stable and nonstable conceptions of philosophy as held by Border Patrollers and Disciplinary Migrants, with the former invested in the nature of philosophy being fixed and the latter with an investment in conceiving of philosophy as lacking in essential properties, as much becoming as being.
9. I do not think that this story, if true, is restricted to philosophy.
10. It is a truism in philosophy that there are as many definitions of philosophy as there are philosophers. Steve Pyke's *Philosophers* (1993) testifies to the bewildering diversity of conceptions that are internal to the core of the profession.
11. To be clear, I am thinking of the negative standard (something that can be seriously undertaken in another discipline is not philosophy or only marginally philosophy) as a necessary condition for being *not* core philosophy. It is this "not pure philosophy" judgment that is the important thing in the ordinary case, even if the standard is a construal of philosophy. This standard is not intended as a sufficient condition for being philosophy—presumably there are things that fail to be treatable in other disciplines but that would nevertheless fail to count as philosophy (e.g., astrology). Similar remarks hold for what counts as core philosophy; we could perhaps provide conditions that approximate necessary conditions for counting as core philosophy, but I think this would miss the essentially negative conception of philosophy that marks out *de facto* border-patrolling behavior. So, this last sentence of the main text may mislead. Thanks to Dan Speak for calling my attention to this point.
12. My point is not that ethics and political philosophy have no social status in the profession—they surely do. Moreover, the status of normative work in philosophy has clearly gone up since Rawls, Anscombe, and Foot made work in these areas respectable in the post-positivist English-speaking world. My point here is only that these fields persist in being comparatively lower status, less centrally "real" philosophy, than many other areas, areas that are sometimes tellingly called "core" philosophy. For data about the comparative lack of status in the profession for work in ethics and sociopolitical philosophy, see Kieran Healy's (2005) work on what boosts departmental prestige in philosophy.
13. I wish to acknowledge that we may be doing a disservice to ourselves and our understanding of Latin American philosophy by not thinking about its history and structure in light of some knowledge about comparative philosophy more generally. To some extent, reflecting on these issues and engaging in the ordinarily ensuing research activities (such as holding conferences, publishing papers, and so on) will surely exaggerate the difficulties that arise from doing higher-order reflection on philosophical problems. However, to the extent to which we are already committed to metaphilosophy and metametaphilosophy, it may behoove us to think more carefully about Latin American philosophy as a member of a more variegated group of marginalized (relative to the core part of the English-speaking philosophical world) families of philosophical networks,

networks we might identify by labels such as “Asian philosophy,” “African philosophy,” “Native American philosophy,” and so on. I suspect we have much to learn about what is similar and different in our endeavor to mainstream the study of our respective traditions.

14. The idea is one that is usually credited to the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, but that has been filtered through and developed in various ways by Leopoldo Zea and his students. The basic idea is captured by the slogan that “Man is himself and his circumstances.” On my account of these things, the idea is that we should think of agents, and in particular, the powers of agents, as structured in important ways by contexts (Vargas, in progress [b]). An implicit assumption (and a false one, in my view) of nearly all the contemporary literature on responsible agency is that we can appropriately understand the powers of responsible agents simply in terms of the intrinsic powers or features of agents. So, on this view, if we are to think about free will and to characterize it properly, we can do so largely in absence of a discussion of the contexts in which agents operate. We can only focus on describing agents in a kind of idealized vacuum: to have free will is, for example, to have the ability to be akin to an unmoved mover, or to be reasons-responsive, or to identify with one’s higher-order desires, and so on.

In contrast, the account I have been developing, partly inspired by the Latin American tradition, operates a bit differently. In my account, we are better off thinking about the powers of responsible agents as products of agents in circumstances, where those powers are also partly functions of the practical interests and justified norms that govern our responsibility practices. There is, of course, much more to say about this. My point, though, is that at least I find this line of thought fruitful and promising, that it is something I have inherited from the Latin American philosophical tradition, and this basic framework has very limited currency in the contemporary Anglophone literature on free will and moral responsibility. Whether it proves to be significant remains to be seen.

15. There is some reason to think that the deck is not stacked against the study of Latin American philosophy purely in terms of its subject matter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, especially at this stage, an overwhelming percentage of philosophers working on or interested in Latin American philosophy are of Latin American descent. This may raise problems of its own in the cultural context of contemporary philosophy (see also Gracia 2000).
16. This paper arose from a characteristically rewarding conversation I had with Eduardo Mendieta a few years ago, although this paper is perhaps the evil twin of one he has written on related issues. That is, my paper shares a similar mother but unlike his, it comes to a bad end. At any rate, he has my thanks, as usual. Thanks also to Dan Speak for a helpful conversation about part of this paper, and to the audience at the “Singularities of Latin American Philosophy” conference, held at the University at Buffalo in 2007, for their probing questions.

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