

On the Value of Philosophy: The Latin American Case

Manuel Vargas
University of San Francisco
unfilosofo@gmail.com

Abstract

There is very little study of Latin American Philosophy in the English-speaking philosophical world. This can sometimes lead to the impression that there is nothing of philosophical worth in Latin American philosophy or its history. The present article offers some reasons for thinking that this impression is mistaken, and indeed, that we ought to have more study of Latin American philosophy than currently exists in the English-speaking philosophical world. In particular, the article argues for three things: (1) an account of cultural resources that is useful for illuminating the fact of cultural differences and variations in cultural complexity, (2) a framework for understanding the value of philosophy, and (3) the conclusion that there is demonstrable value to Latin American philosophy and its study.

I. Philosophy's culture of silence about culture

At least in the United States, there are not many philosophers in the “analytic” core of the profession who make it their task to write about the nature, status, and direction of culture. What work there is tends to be about the implications of culture, its social construction and its effects. Almost nothing is done at the level of offering a fundamental ontology of culture. There are a number of reasons why this might be so. Perhaps there is a sense that culture is too amorphous a thing for serious, rigorous philosophical reflection. Perhaps many philosophers simply prefer to avoid running the risks that are endemic to reflection on culture. Philosophical writing on cultural differences has been plagued by an unflattering collection of vices—racism, sexism, Eurocentrism, and so on—so, maybe we are better off passing over these topics in silence.

Nonetheless, there are things to be said about culture. My aim here is to examine the relationship of culture to philosophy, and in particular to explore some consequences of thinking about philosophy in terms of something I call *cultural resources*. This account is not intended to provide anything like an all-encompassing picture of the fundamental ontology of culture. At best, it is a very small contribution to a part of that much larger task. All I hope to show is that thinking in terms of cultural resources can help us make sense of a range of different phenomena, including one of several values in philosophical work, and the value of doing the history of philosophy. I go on to extend this account to the somewhat peculiar case of philosophy done in Latin America, and the issue of whether we ought to treat it as a significant or relevant part of the study of philosophy in the United States. I will argue that —contrary to what many might assume— it is plausible that philosophy here in the United States would have benefited if we had been allocating some resources to the study of Latin American philosophy all along. So, really, I aim to argue for three things: (1) the utility of my account of cultural resources for illuminating the fact of cultural differences and the existence of differences in cultural complexity, (2) a framework for understanding the value of philosophy, and (3) the conclusion that there is demonstrable value in the study of Latin American philosophy. But first—some preliminaries.

2. Some truisms and over-simplifications about culture

In what follows, I will assume the truth of the following two claims:

1. There are cultural differences.
- and
2. Cultural differences can have consequences.

Regarding the first claim — that there are cultural differences — I take it that this much is obvious. Any doubts you might have about this will go away very rapidly if you do much traveling.¹ Even though it is easy to get consensus about the fact of cultural differences, it is remarkably difficult to say philosophically illuminating things about these differences. Demarcating differences and similarities is no easy task. It is notoriously difficult to describe cultural differences without building in biased or otherwise partial assessments of what is being described. But even so, those differences are there. There are, of course, all the obvious differences we point to in our varied cultural celebrations — food, music, dance, language — but there are also the harder to specify differences of implicit values, social organization, and what we might somewhat romantically call “the rhythms of life.” To a greater and lesser extent all of these differences, both obvious and subtle, are the domains of various disciplines— cultural anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and so on. But it is notable that most Anglophone philosophers have had little interaction with these various fields.²

The second claim, that cultural differences have consequences should be obvious as well. Empirical work speaks to this claim, but if you accept that there are cultural differences (which you should), then it would be very difficult to

¹ One does not have to leave one’s home country for this to happen. I was born and raised in the U.S. However, I experienced some culture shock when I moved from the Central Valley of California to Northern Indiana. What made it especially shocking was that I had recently returned from a trip to Mexico City, and in comparison, Indiana was considerably more foreign to me than Mexico City was. I (naively) never expected to undergo culture shock in my own country, much less *more* culture shock than when visiting a different country.

² On this matter, things are somewhat better in the ostensibly “Continental” parts of the profession. But my aim here is to offer a philosophical framework for understanding some culturally complex matters for those parts of the profession not already enriched by systematic reflection on culture. So, consider this a tentative first step at establishing one kind of bridge between those parts of the profession invested in reflections on culture and that large part of the profession detached from reflections about culture as such.

argue that those differences do not have consequences. Indeed, it is difficult to see how cultural differences could be obvious and detectable if they did not have consequences.

3. Some troubles about cultural differences

So, I will assume the truth of these two ideas: that there are cultural differences, and that these differences make a difference. This is where the trouble starts, though. Once we admit that cultural differences can make a difference, it looks like (at least in principle) there is no reason why the differences made by culture are always positive. We tend to emphasize the benefits of cultural diversity. We tend to celebrate the various advantages that multiple cultural affiliations can bring to an organization or to the life of individuals. But if cultural differences can bring with them various advantages, there is no obvious reason why they cannot bring with them various disadvantages. And, this makes cultural differences problematic in a number of ways. It raises troubling questions about what sorts of cultures individuals, groups, or populations are better off having. It makes us wonder about both the costs and benefits of cultural changes. It raises worries about group identity and autonomy. It also raises worries about whether cultural change is threatening to group identity. But perhaps most troubling is what happens when the varied benefits and costs of a culture interact with what Nietzsche called “the instinct for rank.” If cultural differences can make better and worse differences, you might start to wonder whether there are better and worse cultures. You might even go on to say things like this:

The fact that, out of the many cultures which have appeared in history, only three survive — the Indian, the Chinese, and the Western — seems to suggest that these three possess some particular advantage over the others. In my judgment, this superiority consists in the fact that the three, in contrast to all the others, contain an answer (each a radically different one, of course) to the most profound and permanent questions and needs of man But while others were unable to supply more than myths, which in the course of time wear out and lose their charm, or halfway goals that proved unsatisfactory, the three mentioned above have each found a great clue or goal which has determined their organization.³

³ I've substituted 'Western' for the translation's 'Occidental'. The original text is (Romero 1949, 403).

That is a passage from a 1949 essay “Man and Culture” by Francisco Romero, perhaps the most influential Argentinean philosopher of the 20th century. It is, I think, clearly problematic in a number of ways. Among the problems are these: (1) Romero simply assumes that it is obvious what culture is—but it is not; (2) he gives us no way to make sense of cultural identity over time: that is, how to understand the idea that we are talking about the same Western culture from 10AD Athens, Greece to 2009 upstate New York; (3) He seems to assume that the survival of a culture is straightforwardly a matter of a culture’s response to issues of meaning and “permanent questions” and not, for example, a function of accidents of history, technology, geographic location, and so on; (4) He ignores the fact that there are plenty of cultures that have survived for considerable time (or that are currently existing) that are not obviously Western, Chinese, or Indian. For example, there are several varieties of African cultures, various cultures throughout what we call “The Middle East”, Japan and other parts of the world, that have had or continue to have considerable longevity; (5) He does nothing to justify the obviously problematic reduction to umbrella categories what are, at best, webs of distinct cultures *internal* to the West, China, or India; (6) Finally, Romero seems blind to the possibility of cultures that might survive in various unobvious ways, as in the case of crypto-Judaism, or in Bonfil Batalla’s idea that lurking under contemporary Mexico there is a *México profundo* that is the cultural legacy of an older Mesoamerican civilization.

So, there are a number of troubling aspects to this passage. Still, we should be careful not to overclaim what is objectionable about it. Susana Nuccetelli has maintained “[Romero’s] assertion plainly implies that the cultures of the indigenous peoples of Latin America, among others, were inferior compared to the Indian, the Chinese, and the Western cultures. If Romero is right, the consequence would indeed be unfortunate, for then the pervasive neglect of indigenous Latin American cultures would be entirely justified” (Nuccetelli 2002, 83). This diagnosis is erroneous or misleading on several accounts.

First, we should not be misled about the inferiority/superiority distinction used by Romero. In this passage, Romero makes it clear that the sense in which he is evaluating a culture as superior or inferior simply has to do with its survival.⁴ Cultures that survive for longer (or perhaps, at until the present) are *at*

⁴ This is also consistent with his usage of these ideas in the rest of the chapter from which this passage is taken.

least with respect to survival superior to those that do not survive as long (or, perhaps that do not currently survive). This entails nothing about superiority in some overarching sense, and it entails nothing about the intrinsic value (or possible lack there of) of these or any other cultures, including those that have not survived, or have not survived for very long. It is entirely consistent with what Romero claims in this passage that a culture might have a high intrinsic value but be inferior with respect to the issue of survival. And, it is entirely consistent with this that the indigenous people of Latin America might have had cultures that were superior to Indian, Chinese, and Western cultures with respect to some standard other than survival.

Second, contrary to what Nuccetelli suggests, nothing in the quotation from Romero speaks to whether “the pervasive neglect of indigenous Latin American cultures is justified.” Judgments about the longevity of a culture do not entail that shorter-lived cultures are not worth studying. Nor would this be entailed by something like a judgment of the all-things-considered superiority of Indian, Chinese, and Western cultures. That I think Chrysippus is superior to Leibniz does not mean that I have to think Leibniz isn’t worth studying, or that we would be justified in neglecting his work. Similarly, even if Romero were saying that Indian, Chinese, and Western cultures are all things considered superior cultures, it does not follow that we are justified in neglecting other cultures. Or, to put the point differently, the justification for studying a culture need not flow from (i) whether the considered culture is long-lived, (ii) whether it is excellent at answering what Romero calls the “profound and permanent questions and needs of mankind” or (iii) whether it is superior in some all-in sense. We might have a fully adequate justification for studying a culture if we have something to learn from it, or if we simply find it interesting. We need not draw the conclusion that a view like Romero’s requires that we dismiss indigenous thinking, or for that matter, the study of Latin American thought more generally.

Although there is still plenty that is problematic about Romero’s remarks, I do think there are provocative kernels of truth in them: cultures do vary, cultures provide resources for individuals and societies, those resources may vary from culture to culture, and there might be a way to think comparatively about the cultural resources had by societies. What I’d like to do now is to think about one way of making sense of these ideas in a fairly systematic way, and to explore what some of the consequences of these ideas might be for the value of philosophy.

4. Sketch of a theory of cultural resources

The fundamental nature of culture, the theoretical work of the category, and the ontological commitments of talk about culture are all subjects of contention across a variety of disciplines. Fortunately, I am not going to try to say anything interesting about culture *per se*. For present purposes, we can define culture as a pattern of learned, shared norms and attendant behaviors, judgments, and affective responses. One can surely quibble with aspects of this construal of culture, but nothing much depends on its particulars. Instead, my focus is on something I will call a *cultural resource*.

A cultural resource is, in the characteristic case, any entity, practice, pattern of judgment, or collection thereof whose nature and origin depend at least in part on the shared norms of a community of intentional agents.⁵ To some ears, this may sound very mysterious. The reality of such objects, however, is completely familiar. When I speak of cultural resources, I speak of ideas or practices with a kind of significance that depends on the fact of our being intentional, norm-using creatures. So, objects as diverse as novels, wedding ceremonies, philosophy lectures, *telenovelas*, birthdays, felonies, and handshakes all count as cultural resources in my sense. These objects may be in some sense physical, but their reality is importantly dependent on our collective mental life; their currency is ideational or symbolic, and their structure is at least partly given by the cognitive, affective, and behavioral norms in virtue of which the objects or products are apprehended. The ontology of cultural resources thus has less to do with the arrangement of physical objects and more to do with the arrangement of new norms or the reconfiguration of old norms, whatever that comes to.

We might say that cultural resources are the result of the operations of sophisticated forms of agency in the world. Some cultural resources arise as happy accidents arising inadvertently. Other times, the development of cultural

⁵ This is not intended to be anything like necessary and sufficient conditions for what constitutes a cultural resource. Instead, my hope is to characterize some of the typical features and functions of cultural resources, recognizing that there will surely be degenerate cases, cases that only partially or incompletely manifest the functions and properties I am about to outline. As I use the term, *cultural resources* is a broader category than *meme* (e.g., Dawkins) or *cultural capital* (Bourdieu). Some sociologists use a notion of cultural resources to track something like Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. As will be clear in a bit, if it isn't already, I have a somewhat different notion at work in my account.

resources is the principal aim of an activity. In either case, cultural resources tend to have *cultural utility*. Cultural utility is anything that assists in the flourishing, survival, or perpetuation of a given culture, understood in very broad ways. So, for example, a way of greeting ones neighbor might have the cultural utility of perpetuating certain kinds of social relations that are in turn part of a web of practices that jointly contribute to the survival, flourishing, or perpetuating of a people or culture. Depending on the cultural resource, cultural utility will frequently overlap with other kinds of utility, for example: economic, practical, or hedonic utility. However, connections between cultural and other kinds of utility will typically be contingent and historically bounded.

Cultural production is just that— the production, by whatever means, of cultural resources. Sometimes this production is original and other times it is reproductive (that is, reproducing an already existing cultural resource). Cultural resources can also be renewable resources. That is, a given cultural resource can be repeatedly used as a source of new or reproductive cultural production. For example, part of a song might be sampled for a newer musical composition, and in turn that newer composition (including the sample) might be sampled and transformed for the purposes of a newer instance of music.⁶

Importantly, cultural resources can range from *simple* to *complex*. That is, cultural resources exist on a continuum of complexity where some resources contain features that are more complex than others. It is hard to give any well-defined account of these things, but the idea should be intuitive enough— other things being equal, a symphony is more complex than a single note, a painting is

⁶ An example: consider the rhythm line used in Missy Elliott’s track “Get Ur Freak On.” It was subsequently sampled, and played backwards as a rhythm line in Bubba Sparxx’s “Ugly.” Part of what makes this an innovative instance of cultural resource recycling has to do with the contrasting content of the songs and the nature of the performer— Missy Elliott is an African American woman touting her sex appeal (“I look like a Halle Berry poster”) and exhorting listeners to sexual activity whereas Bubba Sparxx’s song is about, among other things, his resignation to the fact that he and his friends’ sexual appeal is limited (“let’s face it, none of us will ever date a model . . . it’s getting ugly”). The significance of context for cultural recycling can extend out quite broadly from the particulars of a given case. Cultural recycling can be cultural appropriation, and the mainstreaming of “black” music has historically worked through the redeployment of black musical forms by non-black performers. In this case, though, Missy Elliott was working with considerable success in an already mainstreamed music genre, whereas the less famous Bubba Sparxx (presumably perceived as something of an outsider to the genre even after it became mainstream) explicitly acknowledges his piggybacking on a version of Missy Elliott’s beat—albeit while noting her insistence that her music is “copywritten, so don’t copy me.” In short, context can play a large and complex role in determining the content and significance of a recycled cultural resource.

more complex than a single daub of color, an epic poem is more complex than a single word.

The distinction between simple and complex cultural resources does not track a distinction between “high” and “low” culture. Something we learned from both Shakespeare and Jazz is that *low culture* resources can turn out to be as complex as any *high culture* resource. Moreover, that there is a distinction between simple and complex cultural resources does not mean that we have perfect epistemic access to every instance of that distinction. We can be insensitive to complexity for a variety of reasons. For instance, features of our own culture, or a lack of the right kind of acculturation, may prevent us from recognizing a complex cultural resource. A striking example of this kind of imperfect epistemic access comes out in Gunther Schuller’s *Early Jazz* (as quoted in Nussbaum 1997, 163):

Schuller describes the difficulty Western musicologists had in even notating African music, when they first began to do fieldwork in Africa. Before the fieldwork of Jones (an Englishman who had lived most of his life in Africa), the expectation of visiting scholars was that they would encounter ‘primitive’ musical forms. But European-trained musical ears, accustomed to hearing all voices strike together on a downbeat, proved unable to notate correctly the complicated polyphonies of African ensemble music, in which often each of twelve or more voices will go its separate way, weaving and interweaving. Reconstructions based on the flawed notation seemed to Africans laughably crude, in the way in which a child’s copy of complex artwork would seem crude. Nor could European ears catch the small rhythmic differences that were crucial to the correct notation of African song, as intervals of a twelfth of a second or less were routinely deployed by the African performer. European music simply did not operate with such small rhythmic intervals, so European-trained notators made errors.

This example is remarkable for several reasons. First, it illustrates the difficulty of recognizing cultural complexity even when presented with it. European musicologists were not equipped to recognize or detect the complexity that was actually there. In particular, being familiar with one species of complexity in a domain of culture—for example, European symphonies—is no guarantee of accurate detection, and in fact might be a hurdle to it, when dealing with a different species of complexity in the very same general cultural domain. Second, the example illustrates that cultural complexity is hardly uniform internal to a culture. That a group of people might have complex cultural resources in one domain (e.g., symphonic music) does not mean that it

possesses all the possible complex cultural resources in the more general domain (music). And, that one has complex cultural resources in music tells us nothing about whether that group of people has similarly complex cultural resources in other domains. As the music example reminds us, the possession of economic and technological power is no guarantee or even an indicator of complex cultural resources in the myriad of domains of human concern. Writ large, this means that we should not expect that our society — immensely complex in some economic and technological ways — is complex in other ways, or even in all ways economic and technological. Similarly, we should not expect that societies with comparatively simple technological and economic resources are comparatively simple in most or all domains.

Complex cultural resources provide a distinctive opportunity for reuse. A simple object usually permits a wide variety of reuses, but a complex cultural resource is partitionable to a degree unavailable to simples. On one level, a complex cultural resource typically involves a range of more basic cultural resources, so in some sense it has the potential utility of whatever its constitutive resources might possess. More importantly, however, complex cultural resources typically involve an arrangement of relations among more basic cultural resources that is oftentimes novel, useful, or illuminating.⁷ At least in the typical case (and there are doubtlessly atypical cases), the greater the complexity, the more ways in which it is likely to have some kind of usefulness, both as a matter of decomposition into its more basic resources but also in terms of the relations it suggests or makes possible. Consider, for example, the *Iliad*. Without the *Iliad*, there would be no *Aeneid*, without which there would be no *Inferno*, without which there would be no *Paradise Lost*, and so on, right up to *O Brother Where Art Thou*. One need not appreciate all the resultant products to appreciate that the cultural utility produced by the *Iliad* is vast. It is something that was made possible, if I am right, in substantial part because of the complexity of the work.

Of course, it isn't *just* complexity that accounts for the *Iliad's* fecundity. Partly it is a matter of how accessible it is to audiences. But this is just to return to the epistemic point— different objects are differently accessible, and

⁷ It is possible that a simple cultural resource might turn out to be more valuable in the long run than a complex cultural resource. One never knows what the vagaries of history will make true. But it does seem to be safer to bet on the long-standing value of a cultural resource with great complexity (like the *Iliad*, for instance) than one without a great deal of complexity (a Coca-Cola advertisement, say). Though, as Andy Warhol taught us, even a Coke ad can turn out to have some potential for cultural re-use.

accessibility is a function of object, context, and perceivers. But that we have imperfect access to complexity does not mean that it isn't there.

In sum, then: (1) the complexity of a cultural resource can be independent of the knowing powers of any particular individual (2) a resources' complexity may have nothing to do with the ethnic or social-economic status of its producer, (3) and *ceteris paribus*, complex cultural resources typically provide more long term cultural utility than simple cultural resources.

What these points allow us to see is how those kernels of truth in Romero's reflections on culture need not be as problematic as they might initially seem. While we might acknowledge that there may be differences between the number of complex cultural resources had by a culture or society, these differences need not be connected to the actual survival of a culture, or its technological or world-historical status. However, the difference-making elements (the number of complex cultural resources) will be often be invisible to cultural outsiders. Indeed, as a matter of our actual epistemic circumstances, it may *never* be possible to make reliable judgments about comparative cultural sophistication. But this does not deny that there are genuine cultural differences, and that differences can and do have real consequences.

5. New work for a theory of cultural resources

One upshot of my account is that it provides one explanation of why humanities departments in U.S. universities are vital to the production and preservation of culture. In our society, universities are one of the primary institutions responsible for the discovery, development and propagation of complex cultural resources. Of course, universities have other functions as well. And, other institutions have functions that overlap with these aspects of a university (e.g., libraries and museums). But a crucial justification of the university system is its unique role in the traffic of cultural utility. By preserving, producing, and propagating complex cultural resources, the university contributes in a profound and systematic way to the attainment of cultural utility— something that often overlaps with other more familiar forms of utility.

It goes without saying that these functions do not operate in a vacuum. The relationship of a university system to the other parts of society is also important for how well a university does with respect to the aims of protecting and producing those resources with cultural utility. But in the contemporary context an effective university system will be involved in a complex exchange of

cultural resources both internal and external to the academic world. Individuals and institutions take cultural resources discovered or propagated internal to an academic context and transform them, in turn creating new cultural resources (movies, music, literature, tennis shoes, sports, etc.) which feed back into the academic system.

The humanities, those oft-unappreciated disciplines in the university system, are deeply involved in the production and preservation of complex cultural resources. The discipline of philosophy is a species of this more general project of producing and preserving complex cultural resources. Philosophy shares with other disciplines the general task of discovering, constructing, and preserving complex ideas with a wide degree of cultural utility. What is, I think, distinctive about philosophy is that it is concerned with, roughly, the development and preservation of complex cultural resources in domains where we have no reliable method for determining truths. This is why the scope of philosophy is so broad, and at the same time, it is why, if we focus on identifiable, demonstrable truths that it has produced, those achievements can fade to invisibility. On the model I am suggesting, philosophy is, roughly, our collective attempt to puzzle out issues in just those contexts where we have no reliable method for determining what is probably true. When we do determine a methodology that is reliable in some domain, and we can point to markers of its success, we tend to regard it as something other than philosophy in the strict and proper sense (Vargas 2007, 64). But this is only to say that the barrenness of philosophy is only apparent. If, instead, we conceive of it as a field that specializes in generating tools and ideas for precisely those places where we have impoverished ways of understanding things, philosophy's contribution becomes more visible. Indeed, by this measure, the body of complex cultural resources produced by philosophers likely outstrips most known disciplines.

(Please note that this story does not exclude the possibility of other accounts of the value of the humanities, philosophy, and so on! I believe that there are other, non-mutually-exclusive accounts of the value of these things, but the present argument shall just make use of this particular conception of the value of these things.)

This also goes some distance towards explaining why the study of the history of philosophy should have an important place in the profession and teaching of philosophy. The history of philosophy is the history of a succession of immensely complex cultural resources, by some of our best minds. Although our current beliefs differ significantly, and in some cases differ radically from the presuppositions of many historical figures, we cannot say in

advance which historical ideas will turn out to have utility in the future. We cannot anticipate when some conceptual innovation, some idea, or some turn of argument will yield a new framework for understanding ourselves, or the universe. However, one effective way of aiding this process is to not lose track of those innovations, ideas, and arguments that we have already developed. The only way to preserve our access to those resources, then, is to ensure that our community of scholars includes those whose business it is to study the history of philosophy. Only then can we have some hope of not losing the resources that are already ours. This task requires genuine, dedicated scholars. It is not a simple matter to study resources created in a context remote from our own. Recall those African musicians whose music was so badly reproduced by early European musicologists.

Thus far, my account has been operating at a fairly abstract level of description. It may help to think about a handful of concrete cases of what are at least *prima facie* examples of the sort of complex cultural resources developed, discovered, and/or propagated by the discipline of philosophy. Here are three examples:

Social expectations and the construction of individual capacities

An important recurrent theme in foundational philosophical work on gender and race has been the idea that social expectations can construct the kinds of capacities that people have. So, for example, Dubois argued that social expectations concerning “Negroes” structured the actual capacities they came to have. And, perhaps even more famously, John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft each argued that social expectations about women structured the kinds of capacities that women have (Mill 1869). If you don’t believe that women are capable of scientific achievement, then you won’t bother to provide them with the sort of education required for scientific achievement. As a result, in societies with those expectations, few if any women will have the requirements for producing scientific achievements, which in turn vindicates the view that women lack the capacity for serious scientific work.

Values and theory underdetermination

Over the past few decades there has been an interesting discussion in the philosophy of science on the appropriate role of values and social and political ends in the interpretation of scientific data (Anderson 1995, 27-58). An important development in this literature was the argument, advanced by some feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science, that value-laden aims (e.g.,

the aim of gender equity) play an appropriate role in theory selection in cases where the evidence underdetermines what scientific theory we should accept. And, since the evidence at least very frequently is consistent with a range of possible scientific theories, value-laden selection of theories may be frequently permissible. Although this remains a subject of dispute, it is clear that reflections on these issues have constituted a general contribution to philosophical reflections on knowledge and scientific theorizing.

The relevance of psychology for ethics and political philosophy.

In her landmark 1958 paper, “Modern Moral Philosophy” G.E.M. Anscombe argued that we cannot profitably engage in normative ethics without having a better grasp of a range of psychological issues (Anscombe 1981, 26-42). This is an idea that is picked up and developed by a number of influential figures in moral political philosophy, including Richard Brandt and even (surprisingly enough) John Rawls. In his essay “The Independence of Moral Theory” Rawls writes that:

the further advance of moral philosophy depends upon a deeper understanding of the structure of moral conceptions and of their connections with human sensibility . . . We must not turn away from this task because much of it may appear to belong to psychology or social theory and not to philosophy. For the fact is that others are not prompted by philosophical inclination to pursue moral theory; yet this motivation is essential for without it the inquiry has the wrong focus” (Rawls 1999, 302).

Only recently have philosophers begun to make good on these calls to action, attempting to incorporate work in the various sciences of the mind with philosophical work in ethics and normative theory (Doris and Stich 2005). Though this project is still young, it is clearly bearing important fruit. Empirically informed work on philosophical intuitions, character traits, the nature of rationality, moral motivation, and so on, are increasingly important for some branches of normative philosophy.

This trio of ideas (or collections of ideas) are instances of complex cultural resources. These ideas have considerable utility, or at least promise of utility, and they are the kinds of things with a wide range of re-application and downstream fecundity. And, I think, the development and propagation of these resources constitute a cultural achievement that philosophy can rightly claim as its own.

6. The value of philosophy: the Latin American Case

Suppose you accept my account of complex cultural resources, and suppose you accept the global account of what the humanities (and philosophy) are engaged in. Additionally, let us suppose you accept that the examples I have offered constitute *prima facie* good cases for a complex cultural resource of the sort that philosophy is appropriately concerned with. Now let us turn to the Latin American case. Is there any reason to think that Latin American philosophy might have similar value, from the perspective of a concern for complex cultural resources? I believe that a compelling case can be made for the conclusion that there are valuable complex cultural resources in Latin American philosophy, and consequently, that it merits sustained scholarly attention in the United States.⁸

Note, though, that even if we *currently* have no reason for thinking that the study of Latin American philosophy will yield the discovery, production, or preservation of complex cultural resources, the general philosophical community in the United States simply isn't in a position to make a negative assessment about the value of Latin American philosophy as a field of study. Given the fact that there is little or no systematic study of Latin American philosophy in the United States, it would surely be premature to draw a negative conclusion on the basis of a failure to gather evidence. This would be akin to deciding that a particular person has nothing valuable to say — without having ever bothered to speak to that person, without having read anything that person has written, and without learning anything at all about that person. So, to be in a position to make a negative assessment we would first have to learn something about Latin American philosophy.

Conveniently enough, however, there is excellent evidence that Latin American philosophy can and has made contributions of complex cultural resources comparable to the ones I've cited above. Consider the following passage from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (de la Cruz 2004, 59-60):

You foolish and unreasoning men
Who cast all blame on women,
Not seeing you yourselves are cause
Of the same faults you accuse

⁸ None of what follows precludes the possibility that Latin American philosophy is valuable on other grounds. I am sure that it is. However, what follows is an argument for why given the present account of cultural resources, it is plausible to think that Latin American philosophy is valuable and worth studying.

... You combat their firm resistance,
 And then solemnly pronounce
 that what you've won through diligence
 is proof of women's flightiness

... Why then are you so alarmed
 by the fault that is your own?
 Wish women to be what you make them,
 Or make them what you wish they were.⁹

The poem from which this is taken, as well as a letter written in defense of her pursuit of education in the late 1600s, are well-established texts in the canon of Latin American philosophical texts, and familiar to some readers versed in the history of feminism. Part of their importance centers on the issue she gives expression to in the above passages: social expectations and social context structure the capacities and dispositions of people of her time, and in particular, a strongly patriarchal social structure is what made women the kinds of persons (flighty, unlearned, etc.) faulted by the men of that time. This is, of course, to make the point that social expectations can play an essential role in the construction of capacities in people. And it is a point that was made by a woman philosopher—a Mexican nun—, in a philosophical context, literally centuries before similar claims by John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, and W.E.B. Dubois. So, a complex cultural resource like the idea that social expectations can structure capacities of individuals and groups not only can be developed in the Latin American philosophical context—it was developed there, and earlier at that.¹⁰

I now want to turn to briefly consider the work of a more recent Latin American philosopher, José Vasconcelos. Though he wrote extensive treatises on metaphysics, aesthetics, and the history of philosophy, in the United States Vasconcelos is principally known (if he is known at all) for his work, especially

⁹ In Gracia and Millán-Zaibert, eds. *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004, pp. 59-60.

¹⁰ Notice that the success or failure of the argument does not directly hinge on chronology. I mention chronology for two reasons, though. First, the earlier advent of these ideas in Latin America makes it clear that their development in Latin America weren't simply later appropriations of the more familiar examples known to Anglophone philosophers. Second, the development of a valuable notion elsewhere can suggest the possibility that the utility of that idea might have become available to us (in the Anglophone world) sooner if we had been paying closer attention to philosophical work in Latin America. I return to this idea and its limitations later in the article.

in *The Cosmic Race*, on philosophical issues about race, and in particular, his promotion of race mixing in Latin America. However, some of his best work is in a neglected essay from *Aspects of Mexican Civilization*. There, he concludes that the scientific evidence about the benefits and costs of race mixing are unclear. The available biological, genetic, and cultural data of his time did not, in his judgment, settle whether race mixing is generally positive, or even what its principle effects might be. What is interesting, though, is what he goes on to argue. Vasconcelos maintains that practical or normative considerations can play an appropriate role in theory selection, especially in light of the particular cultural role played by theories of mixed race. As he puts it “If all nations then build theories to justify their policies or to strengthen their deeds, let us develop in Mexico our own theories; or, at least, let us be certain, that we choose among the foreign theories of thought that stimulate our growth, rather than restrain it” (Vasconcelos 1926, 96).¹¹ His view is not just that we can pick any scientific theory we like. We are appropriately constrained by what the available empirical data shows. However, in cases where the data does not favor one particular theory over another, and given that the issue is something we have reason to settle, then consideration of things like cultural uplift, national development, and so on, can provide adequate reason to favor one view over another. And, as he observes, these value-laden considerations drive theory construction in a good number of cases.

Vasconcelos’ move is, of course, the kind of thing that has been said in recent debates in the philosophy of science and in epistemology. And, notably, Vasconcelos’ explicit use of this idea antedates by half a century the deployment of these ideas in the context of Anglo-American epistemology and philosophy of science.¹²

I want to conclude by briefly considering the work of one more philosopher in the Latin American canon. In 1934, the Mexican philosopher Samuel Ramos published an extremely influential book, *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* (Ramos 1962). In that work, he endeavored to describe the character flaws and attendant cultural defects of then-contemporary Mexicans. Though the book

¹¹ These remarks are echoed in *La raza cósmica*, where it is clearer the way in which this sort of view is of a piece with views about metaphysics and epistemology (Vasconcelos 1997).

¹² It is also worth recognizing that Vasconcelos’ deployment of underdetermination is also comparatively early in the history of this idea. While versions of it show up prior to Vasconcelos’ work (e.g., the late 19th century), his use of this idea nevertheless antedates (for example), Quine’s famous discussion of theory underdetermination.

was part of an already existing tradition of Latin American speculation about what was flawed or problematic about various national or regional characters¹³, Ramos' book spawned several generations of competing and counter-diagnoses of widely variable philosophical sophistication, the most prominent of which is Octavio Paz's *Labyrinth of Solitude*. What is remarkable about Ramos' text is his insistence that the key to understanding the moral and cultural defects of Mexicans is to be found in the careful deployment of scientific psychology, particularly the work of Alfred Adler. On Ramos' model, moral psychology is subject to regional variation, and variations can only be illuminatingly studied against the backdrop of an empirically informed investigation in to the psychological mechanisms that underpin moral, social, and political phenomena. Similarly, any normative theory about how Mexicans *ought* to be, whether morally, culturally, or politically, would have to be similarly sensitive to the best going accounts of psychology (especially what we would now call social psychology). Of course, Ramos's vision of these things, and his use of Adler are importantly at odds with what we would recognize as the best current accounts of human psychology. But that is not the point. The point is that as early as 1934, there were philosophers who thought that normative theory needed to be informed by empirically adequate pictures of human beings.¹⁴ In other words, this too constitutes *prima facie* evidence that there are complex cultural objects to be found in Latin American philosophical work that antedates similar achievements in the Anglo-American context.

These examples all derive from philosophical work on race, identity, and gender in Latin America. To those familiar with the history of Latin American

¹³ This tradition extends well back to the origins of Western philosophical and proto-philosophical reflection in and about Latin America— including early figures such as Sepulveda, Vitoria, and Garcilaso de la Vega.

¹⁴ One might reply that something true has been going on for much longer in the Anglo-American tradition. One might cite Herbert Spencer, for instance. But Latin American positivists (inspired by Comte) were committed to scientific approaches to the study of moral and social theory around the same period. And if you really want to push dates, one might construe the position of Las Casas in the famous debate at Valladolid (in the 1600s) as hinging, in part, on the idea that natural slave theory and the resultant political theory presumed an empirically irresponsible picture of human motivation and practices. One might reply by finding an even earlier figure who thought that normative theory in one or another domain could not fruitfully proceed without getting some of the empirical facts straight. Irrespective of how all of this all turns out, it should be clear that there is an interesting discussion to be had about these things. Perhaps the figures we typically celebrate as having sparked this development might well have been unneeded had we had a philosophical community familiar with ideas produced in Latin America.

philosophy, this will be no surprise at all. Social and political philosophy, of which discussions about culture, ethnicity, race, and gender all play a part, has been something of first philosophy in much of the various strands of Latin American philosophy. So, if there were something of value to be found in the context of Latin American philosophy, it would likely be found in these areas, areas where Latin American philosophical traditions are complex and long-standing

Still, it is plausible that with more detailed scholarship, we might successfully challenge whether one or more of the examples really do constitute an instance of anticipating ideas well known and celebrated in the Anglo-American tradition. Or perhaps there are genre considerations that might incline us to throw out one of these works. For what it is worth, I think these examples will hold up well to extended scrutiny. And, we would do well to remember that the history of philosophy is littered with instances where recognizably philosophical works were produced in genres other than those we currently favor.¹⁵ But all this would be to miss the point. My aim is not to convince you that these cases really do constitute important anticipations of the Anglo-American tradition. Rather, my point is that we have good *prima facie* evidence for thinking that if genuinely complex cultural resources are to be found in philosophy they can be found in Latin American philosophy.

7. Further objections and replies

What might a determined critic say in reply to the general line of argument I have been developing thus far? I find it remarkable that the most common reply is not one that rejects the substance of the argument, or one that takes issue with my account of the worth of philosophy and Latin American philosophy's similar worth. Instead, the most common reply is, as best as I can make out, one that insists on moving the goalposts. So, I am told, even though the argument may work as far as it goes, before we bother with the business of Latin American philosophy what we really need is proof that there is some worthwhile idea in it *now*, some idea that does not already have currency in Anglophone

¹⁵ For example, if we are to judge as "not philosophical" any work done in the genre of poetry, we would have to dismiss many works by pre-Socratics, as well as important texts such as Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. It would certainly have come as a surprise to many figures in the post-Hellenic period of philosophy to learn that Lucretius' work did not count as philosophy.

philosophy. This, I am told, is the kind of evidence we need before we invest resources into the study of Latin American philosophy.

I am convinced this demand can be met, but I remain skeptical that were I to meet it, the goalposts wouldn't move once again. If showing that 20th century Anglophone philosophy would have benefited from attention to the history of Latin American philosophy up through the 1940s is not sufficient to make the case for its worth, then I doubt that making the case of 21st century Latin American philosophy will suddenly unleash a torrent of support among my Anglophone philosophical brethren. And why should it? Anything I would cite as a novel case of innovation that doesn't have a track record in the Anglophone philosophical community could be dismissed *precisely because it lacks that track record*.

On the one hand, unless the critic already shares a conviction expressed in the purported innovation or idea, the purported innovation can be readily dismissed as insufficiently innovative, mistaken, or otherwise unpromising precisely because its features are not accepted by the critic, because the intellectual context that make it plausible is unfamiliar, or because there is no track record of esteem in which the idea is held by those the critic holds in high regard. On the other hand, if the critic already shares a conviction expressed in the purported innovation, then here too the example will fail to persuade. After all, it is no innovation to highlight an idea already had by the critic. So, the situation is dire.

Of course, a critic *might* be satisfied *if* I produced evidence of the philosophical worth of contemporary Latin American philosophy. And, for the record, I think I have provided such evidence, elsewhere (Vargas 2007, 77 n.14). Still, my sense is that philosophers of good will will not need a further argument from the fecundity of contemporary Latin American philosophy, and any critic insufficiently moved by what I have already offered could, without much effort, manufacture some further reason for ongoing dissatisfaction with the new examples I would adduce.¹⁶

A different objection challenges the very idea of there being a significant problem with the ongoing failure of philosophers in the Anglophone world to study and teach philosophy produced in Latin America. There are different strands of this argument. One strand focuses on the very idea of Latin American philosophy, and argues that it is a red herring, as there is properly

¹⁶ For a lengthier discussion of the barriers facing the acceptance of Latin American philosophy, see Vargas 2007, and for potential cultural barriers, see also Gracia 2000.

only philosophy. Regional or cultural locations are irrelevant to considerations of philosophical worth and whether the work merits attention. A second strand is content to accept that it may make sense to speak of regional, national, or linguistic groupings of philosophy, but goes on to deny that there is any real barrier to the study of these things because we never criticize philosophical work for being Latin American or otherwise. We criticize philosophical work for being bad, unrigorous, ill-conceived, or wrong.

Regarding the first strand, the denial of the relevance of regional philosophy, the matter is surprisingly complicated. First of all, it is not clear that we never think about philosophy in terms of regional, national, or linguistic clusterings. When we speak of American philosophy, it is generally understood that this refers to philosophers working in the U.S. in various frameworks of conviction (e.g., pragmatism, transcendentalism) prior to the arrival of logical positivists fleeing wartime Europe. Similarly, I trust that it is recognizable what one has in mind, more or less, when we speak of French philosophy, African philosophy, and Chinese philosophy. Second, it is worth noting that there has been a lively debate (especially within Latin American philosophy) about whether it makes sense to think of regional or local philosophy. Third, and most importantly, even if we put aside current practice and accept the view that philosophy is either just philosophy or it is not philosophy, the basic argument goes through. We can say that there is a body of “just” philosophy (i.e., philosophy without reference to some regional moniker) that happens to be almost entirely produced in Latin America and that through sheer happenstance tends to be principally written in a language that is neither written in English nor one of the Big Four “philosophical” languages (i.e., French, German, Greek, or Latin), and that as a matter of unremarkable historical contingency is virtually never studied or taught in the core of the discipline in the United States. Fine. At that point, the present argument is simply this: given that this body of philosophical work (label it however you like) has some valuable cultural resources in it, resources that are worth studying, then we should study it. Since we largely do not, we should do things differently than we are doing them.¹⁷

¹⁷ There is sometimes a different aspect to the first strand (or depending on how one individuates these things, perhaps a further strand) that may bear some mention. The complaint I have in mind goes something like this: for all I have said, I haven’t shown what is special about Latin American philosophy. In reply: it is special in the only way that matters to this argument: it is valuable and ignored. Nothing turns on it being special in the sense of being radically different, laden with privileged insights, different from all other philosophical work, or the like. Rather, the point is that

The second thread of the “there is no problem here” objection, (i.e., that there is no barrier to the study because Latin American-ness is never grounds for criticism of philosophical work) is unduly optimistic. Suppose it is true that Latin American-ness is never grounds for criticizing philosophical work, even indirectly. Even so, there would remain significant institutional and practical barriers to the study of Latin American philosophy. For graduate programs with foreign language requirements, students virtually never need to offer justification or demonstration of the utility of the Big Four languages for the study of philosophy. Anecdotally, the situation is not the same for Spanish and Portuguese. Moreover, for students interested in writing a dissertation in Latin American philosophy, there is virtually no top-30 graduate program in philosophy where one can go and expect to have an advisor competent enough to direct such a dissertation.¹⁸ This generates a double burden on students interested in Latin American philosophy: if they wish to have access to the best education and the best subsequent opportunities in the profession, they will have to work in at least two fields—something that already has currency and representation among influential Anglophone Ph.D.-granting departments—while effectively committing themselves to the life of an autodidact in Latin American philosophy. Perhaps that is just the kind of cost that will need to be paid in the growth and study of the field. I mention these things, though, because the mere fact (if that is what it is) that Latin American-ness is never a barrier to the study of Latin American philosophy, does nothing to mitigate the very limited and impoverished paths of access to what valuable complex cultural resources there are to be found in Latin American philosophy. So, again, I think the basic structure of the argument remains: there is something

it is philosophy—in an uncontroversially Western, full-blooded sense of the term—and for whatever reason(s) it is not studied in any of the most influential parts of the field. The present article is one argument among many possible arguments for why we should try to change that fact.

¹⁸ In speaking “top-30” departments, I am thinking of the Philosophical Gourmet Report. Rankings of philosophy Ph.D. programs is a notoriously controversial matter, and I do not mean to here take a stand on the whether and how of ranking graduate programs. A different measure of the strength of graduate programs in philosophy might generate a different story—perhaps as many as two graduate programs in a different top-30 would have a scholar who works on Latin American philosophy. The basic point, though, would remain the same: even if there is no criticism of Latin American philosophy and philosophers on grounds of being Latin American, this does not mean that students of philosophy can undertake the study of works in Latin American philosophy with the same ease, seriousness, and professional promise with which they might study the work or ideas of Descartes, Nietzsche, or David Lewis.

valuable here, we would do well to study it, but doing that would be something different than what we are in fact doing.

Let us therefore return to the main line of argument. As to the question of whether or not there is reason to believe that there is value to be had in studying Latin American philosophy the answer is clearly yes. Given that we are (or ought to be) committed to the value of complex cultural resources, Latin American philosophy clearly satisfies the test of meriting sustained scholarly attention in the United States. Indeed, if we had always had a tradition of scholarship on Latin American thought, already internal to the discipline of philosophy within the United States, these ideas (expectations constructing abilities, theory underdetermination, and the importance of empirical psychology) — which are widely regarded as important developments¹⁹ in the United States — would have been ideas to which we already had access. These cultural achievements would have become resources that were available to us to deploy decades and even centuries earlier than they were developed in the Anglo-American context. Failing this, even concurrent or after-the-fact awareness of similar ideas in a different context might prove to be interestingly valuable: the fact of a different deployment or circumstance of development of some idea might itself be illuminating about the considered idea or phenomenon. This is not to say that these benefits will always obtain, or that a given idea would have had the same effect in one time as at an earlier time (perhaps they would have had different, and perhaps differently valuable effects, or none whatsoever). However, inasmuch as it is *prima facie* valuable to have a wide storehouse of complex cultural resources at our disposal, it behooves us to be interested in acquiring those resources that have been developed in the Latin American tradition.

Of course, similar arguments might well be made about Indian, Chinese, and perhaps African philosophy. There are various analogies and disanalogies that hold between these cases. For example, among these, only Latin American philosophy is clearly a part of the Western philosophical tradition and clearly concerned with similar issues, figures, and methods. But if similar arguments can be given to favor these other families of philosophy, and these traditions show

¹⁹ Of course, that something is an important development does not mean that one thinks that the development gets the facts of the matter right. You needn't think they get things right to believe that they are valuable, important, or worth studying. But, in virtue of being complex and worth engagement, they might, after all, spark more accurate proposals by way of refutation of these ideas. Either way, we are likely better off with these ideas.

a promise of similar fecundity, then there should be space at the academic table for research in these fields, too.

Even so, we should not downplay real-world constraints on expanding the contents of a discipline without expanding the numbers of philosophers. Moreover, there is also an issue of diminishing utility to one's own work that comes from being in a context in which everyone is working on significantly different research programs. These things will constrain the resources we pour in to the study of any field, and there are surely no hard and fast principles governing how these resources should be allocated. Nevertheless, Latin American philosophy merits more attention than it has thus far received.

Acknowledgements

Predecessors of this paper were given at the University of California at Riverside, Cosumnes River College, San José State University, the University of North Florida, and Marist College. I'm grateful to the many audience members whose questions, comments, and subsequent discussions contributed to my understanding of these issues, and I hope, to the paper. Thanks also to the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study and the McCoy Center for Ethics in Society at Stanford University, where I worked on parts of this paper. Thanks, too, to the editor of this journal, to two anonymous referees, and to Kristin Drake for helpful comments.

References

- Anderson, E. (1995) Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology. *Philosophical Topics*, 23, 27-58.
- Anscombe, G.E.M. (1981) *Collected Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1981 [1958], pp. 26-42.
- de la Cruz, J.I. (2004) "Philosophical Satire" in Jorge Gracia and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (eds.) *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus, pp. 59-60.
- Doris, J. & Stich, S. (2005) As a Matter of Fact: Empirical Perspectives on Ethics. In *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy*, (Eds, Jackson, F. & Smith, M.) Oxford, Oxford, 114-152.
- Gracia, J.J.E. (2000) *Hispanic/Latino identity: A Philosophical Perspective*. Blackwell Publishers, Malden, Mass.
- Mill, J.S. (2000) [1869]. *The Subjection of Women*. Orchard Park, NY: Broadview.
- Nuccetelli, S. (2002) *Latin American Thought: Philosophical Problems and Arguments*. Westview Press, Boulder, CO.
- Nussbaum, M. (1997) *Cultivating Humanity*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Ramos, S. (1962) *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.
- Rawls, J. (1999) *Collected Papers*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London.
- Romero, F. (1949) "Man and Culture" In F.S.C. Northrop, ed. *Ideological Differences and World Order*. New Haven: Yale University Press, pp. 385-406.
- Vargas, M. (2007) Real Philosophy, Metaphilosophy, and Metametaphilosophy. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 7, 51-78.
- Vasconcelos, J. & Gamio, M. (1926) *Aspects of Mexican civilization*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill.
- Vasconcelos, J. (1997) *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Md.