

Essays in Philosophy

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Book Review

Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century: The Human Condition, Values, and the Search for Identity, Jorge J. E. Gracia and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, eds. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2004, 440 pp., ISBN 1-57392-978-6.

Latin American philosophy, until recently, was understudied due to inadequate funding for diverse areas of philosophy and the fact it did not become institutionalized as European and United States philosophy. However, increased funding by universities has led to a surge in the publication and study of Latin American philosophy. Jorge Gracia and Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert have presented some of the best of this philosophy in the continuation of Gracia's *Latin American Philosophy For the Twentieth Century*. This book unlike the first edition concentrates on the human condition and its historical scope goes beyond twentieth-century scholarship. The essays in this book are of high quality, and they are important for anyone interested in the study of Latin American philosophy or simply interested in Latin American culture.

Latin American Philosophy contains essays by twenty-two philosophers on four topics. This book also contains a general introduction as well as topic introductions and short biographies of each author. The essays focus on the human condition as a whole others focus on a particular country. The general introduction provides a useful overview of the main developments and the traditions in Latin America. The book also provides a general bibliography of works of Latin American philosophy that directs readers to more detailed treatments of the issues presented. In doing so, it provides an excellent sketch of the philosophical background, which is useful for situating Latin American philosophy within the European philosophical tradition to which the Latin American world was forged through colonization.

The first part, on colonial beginning and independence, includes essays from individuals not considered philosophers in the strict sense, such as Simón Bolívar and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. However, they show how this philosophy is used as a tool for social justice and the way the discussion of issues related to the human condition began. Bartolomé de Las Cases's "In Defense of Indians" discusses social injustice endured by Indians from Spaniards who he claims practice and argue that Indians must be conquered and subjugated before they can learn about Christianity. He argues this practice and argument abuses God's words, does violence to the Scriptures and is inconsistent with the decree of the bull of the Supreme Pontiff Alexander VI. Sor Juana's "Response to Sister Filotea" continues the discussion of social injustice as the topic changes to the plight of women. She argues that women should be able to obtain an education. To support her argument, she provides historical examples of knowledgeable women and argues that the fear of

women obtaining an education is unfounded since the possibility of women being taken advantage of by male teachers could be remedied by having older educated women become teachers.

While the second part of this book presents various approaches in philosophical anthropology. Among these approaches are positivistic, vitalistic, existentialist, and Marxist anthropologies. The editors argue that these approaches show the matter in which a question and the context in which it is raised affect the answers, though this fails to explain how Latin American philosophy is distinguishable from other philosophies. Francisco Miró Quesada's "Man Without Theory" supports this position when he rejects many classical philosophical positions which he claims will inevitably fail by characterizing the human experience as a metaphysical problem. He holds that humanity cannot live without theories since it needs to understand and control the world. Carlos Astrada's "Existentialism and the Crisis of Philosophy" distinguishes his approach by asserting that humanity is always in the state of becoming as it seeks to reach historical concretions and fulfillment of its *humanitas* that it can never fully realized. He justifies this conclusion by arguing that human essence, based on its temporal existence, is primarily a possibility rather than a reality.

The third part details subjective and objective arguments that address the issue of value. Like the earlier parts, the scholarship of these essays is excellent and provides a nice selection between the extremes of subjectivism and objectivism. In contrast, the fourth part, on the search for identity, presents two competing models of cultural identity. Here, the essays show that together the continental and the national approaches provide a thorough analysis of the social reality in Latin America which these approaches individually overlook. Alejandro Korn's "Philosophical Notes" and "Axiology" argues the subjectivist position by maintaining that value is the object of affirmative valuation. He undermines the objectivist position by pointing out that values are changing, relative, and historical. Carlos Vaz Ferreira's "Fermentary" agrees that there is a conflict in values, but suggests this is due to people increasing their ideals and rejecting others.

The following essays of part four address the character, themes, and history of Latin American philosophical analysis. This area of part four presents arguments on why Latin American philosophy must address issues related to Latin America and how it functions to resolve issues. For example, José Carlos Mariátegui's "The Problem of the Indian" explains that Peruvians must realize that the cause of their suffering is the land tenure system and feudal regime in order to improve their socioeconomic conditions. He argues that all other supposed solutions that do not recognize this are merely masking and distorting the problem. José Vasconcelos's "The Cosmic Race," however, argues that Latin America as a whole in the future will have a cosmic race, a mixture of races, that will emerge aspiring to engulf and to express humanity in terms of continuous advancement. He asserts this new race will be based on love and all the race, learning from the failures of their cultures, will act to realize the potential of Latin America.

There are three general observations that should be made about *Latin American Philosophy* which should not be considered as strictly negative criticism, though, they should be considered when reading this book. First, the essays presented are far less technical than other areas of philosophy since this philosophy was created in order to reach a mass audience. Hence, this philosophy may be more hospitable to promoting social justice and critical thinking than are United States and European philosophers appear willing to concede. Second, as noted in the book, it is problematic to lump together these philosophers as Latin Americans since their countries share little in common and there is little evidence, if any, that they all consider themselves as part of a cohesive culture.

The absence of precolonization philosophies combined with the heavy influence of European philosophy seems to show that this characterization is superficial. Third, there are a few grammatical errors in the book, though they do not distract from the high quality of the essays.

Latin American Philosophy is compact and provides an even-handed treatment of views and arguments of virtually the entire focus of this philosophy as related to the human condition. This book in its treatment of Latin American philosophy in English is more complete and authoritative on the subject of the human condition than other books, such as Jorge Gracia's *Hispanic/Latino Identity* and Guttorm Floistad's *Contemporary Philosophy*, which is evident when compared to other works. Consequently, this book clearly shows the valuable contribution that Latin American philosophy can make to a better understanding the world and that public deliberations of social issues may be worth the effort.

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