On Mexican-American Philosophy and the Value Conferred by Concerns and Intuitions

Abstract

If Mexican-American philosophy has a value distinct from other strains of philosophy, it calls for an explanation of why this is the case. One such explanation is proposed by Lori and Francisco Gallegos: the distinct value of Mexican American philosophy can be appreciated when it is conceptualized in terms of the set of concerns and intuitions that it proceeds from. While it is a promising strategy for conceptualizing Mexican-American philosophy, this approach faces significant challenges - particularly in explaining how philosophy produced from a distinct epistemic standpoint generates distinct value, and why it confers value upon the category generally and not merely on work that is about the epistemic standpoint.

1. Introduction

Attempts have been made to identify, or at least approximate, what it is that makes Mexican-American philosophy valuable in ways that robustly distinguish it from other sources of philosophizing. One such proposal has been put forth by Lori and Francisco Gallegos.¹ Their account states that certain strains of experiences that

Mexican-Americans largely share in common result in a vague set of concerns and intuitions which are sufficient to explain the distinctive value of this strain of philosophy. This is because the set of concerns and intuitions result in a distinct approach that can yield valuable philosophy.

In this paper I will argue that the Concerns and Intuitions Account fails to explain what it is that makes Mexican-American (MA) philosophy distinctly valuable. This will involve arguing that concerns and intuitions will only confer distinct value to philosophy written by MAs when the topic is one where credibility on the topic calls for those with direct experience of being an MA. This is much weaker than intended by the CI account as it is meant to explain the distinct value of MA philosophy generally.

2. Explanations for a Distinctively Valuable Mexican-American Philosophy

Gallegos and Gallegos consider alternative approaches to capturing what it is that makes MA philosophy distinctively valuable and dismiss them in turn. I’ll mention them briefly to give a sense of the terrain.

First, what may define MA philosophy and make it distinctively valuable is simply that it is produced by an MA. José-Antonio Orosco and Jorge Gracia describe MAs as forming an ‘ethnos’ and MA philosophy as simply the philosophical work produced by that group of people.² If this is the case, the value present in the work stems from the

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fact that it was produced by MAs and this is implausible for obvious reasons: why should we think that something produced by MAs must be valuable merely in virtue of it being produced by MAs. Perhaps a better way to understand this approach is in the attribution of inherent value to the diversity of perspectives. However, this appears to ignore the task of delineating what it is that makes MA philosophy distinctly valuable, and why this value doesn’t simply source from individuals and not to the vague social groups they compose.

Second, we may think that what would make MA philosophy distinctly valuable is that it is about and expresses the MA experience, which is likely something that can be most effectively done by MAs themselves. As Gallegos and Gallegos note, presumably, the end here is to specify the special contribution that MAs can make to the field generally. The end is not, what appears to be, at best, a minute subset of the field or, at worst, sociology or anthropology.

Another approach is to frame the value of contributions by MAs in terms of the worldview that is used to produce it. As Gallegos and Gallegos put it:

Furthermore, what makes them cohesive kinds of philosophy is not simply that they are carried out by Aztecs or Buddhists, but, rather, that each kind of philosophy articulates and defends the metaphysical, ethical, and political ideas that constitute the worldview of the Aztec people or communities of practicing Buddhists and which guide and reflect


Orosco (2015) defines ‘ethnos’ as a group of people that was formed by historical events.

their common way of life. In a similar manner, then, one might suggest that Mexican American philosophy is an articulation of a distinctive kind of worldview, one that could be located within the pantheon of “world philosophies” alongside Aztec philosophy and Buddhist philosophy.⁴

They reject this approach because it appears to be committed to there being one worldview that MAs share in common and this is plainly false. One need only look to a pair of MAs to discover that their ‘worldview’ varies significantly.

Gallegos and Gallegos propose the Concerns and Intuitions Account (CI) as an alternative to the theses above.⁵ The CI account starts with the assumption that MAs produce a distinctively valuable philosophy. Crucially, the CI then proposes that the explanation for this is that MAs largely share a set of experiences. Experiences in people tend to have particular psychological effects, and these are compounded and influenced by other experiences. Since there is a (somewhat vague) set of experiences that social groups like MAs share, we should expect them to reliably produce a common set of psychological effects. The psychological effects relevant to Gallegos and Gallegos’ are what they refer to as concerns and intuitions. Roughly, these concerns and intuitions are the sorts of psychological entities that influence the approaches and starting points from which intellectual projects like philosophy proceed. Since they are quite often shared by MAs (through common experiences but also by dissemination within the social group),

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⁴ Ibid, pp. 27.

⁵ Gallegos and Gallegos do not call it the “Concerns and Intuitions Account”, but I will use it for the remainder of the paper.
reference to them explains what sort of special contributions this social group can provide and why their work is distinctly valuable to other approaches in philosophy.

It is important to understand that Gallegos and Gallegos do not appear to commit themselves to a denial of universalism - the thesis that philosophical inquiry proceeds independent of cultural or historical contexts and that whether or not a particular piece of philosophy is true is independent of social location.⁶ They could consistently hold universalism while arguing that factors such as experientially derived concerns and intuitions affect the sort of philosophy that an individual may choose to produce.

Gallegos and Gallegos provide examples of how CIs may influence approaches in philosophy:

Our position, though, is that starting from the intuitions described above can generate important considerations regarding the ethics of linguistic assimilation, generally, and the notion of civic trust, specifically. For example, the intuition that existing social and political arrangements in the U.S. reflect a colonial history brings to light the ways in which any demands for linguistic assimilation may be part of a centuries-long legacy of cultural imperialism within the Americas.⁷

These considerations, whose origin is in CIs, would be reflected in the sort of philosophy written about the topic by those who own these psychological entities. In their example, what seems to be doing the work of generating distinct value is that the work produced would probably not exist otherwise. They provide examples where specific concerns and

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⁷ Gallegos and Gallegos (2018), pp. 34.
intuitions bring about particular intellectual pathways which produce unique philosophy. This can mean at least two things for the value of this philosophy: (i) that the distinct value is generated by the uniqueness of the philosophy produced, or (ii) that the distinct value is generated by the fact that this philosophy begins from a specific set of concerns and intuitions only found in the world of MAs, more or less independent of the end product. (i) seems unlikely to represent the spirit of the CI account given that it is easily rebutted: there is little reason to think that a non-MA can’t produce identical pieces of philosophy given some easily satisfied psychological conditions. If (i) does represent what the CI is committed to, it would have to also be committed to it being the case that it is a necessary condition on being able to write a specific piece of philosophy, that one have a particular set of CIs.

Note that (ii) does not mean that, for any specific piece of philosophy produced by an MA, it is a necessary condition on having the ability to write it that it began from that particular set of CIs. In other words, it can be the case that a non-MA philosopher with a different set of CIs produce the same piece of philosophy. If (ii) describes the CI account, then what generates distinct value is simply that MA philosophy starts from a distinct set of CIs. It seems likely that non-MAs can produce the same philosophy, and that they can, by means other than living as an MA, even acquire a set of CIs identical to the MA set (or

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8 Gallegos and Gallegos do not go into this level of detail on what their thesis is supposed to mean or entail about distinctness or value. I think that this warrants exploration given that the results can render the CI account undesirable and I do argue for this in the next section.

9 Here I mean that it seems entirely plausible that a non-MA produce an article similar enough to one produced by an MA without the MA set of CIs. They could have learned about the injustices faced by immigrant communities like MAs through testimony and research, and similarly acquired whatever information, beliefs, or knowledge required to write that particular piece of philosophy.
at least one close enough to produce similar philosophy), so this prompts the question: how exactly can a particular set of CIs distinguish MA philosophy and establish its distinct value if non-MAs can acquire it and the exact same philosophy can be produced independent of it?

3. Why the CI Approach Fails

What could it mean for a philosophy or approach to be distinctly valuable? This question is difficult to answer unless we first know what makes any philosophy valuable. It seems plausible that if anything makes philosophy valuable, it is that it attempts to contribute to the knowledge base of humanity, and possibly, that it can offer practical knowledge that informs our judgments, actions, and policies. More specifically, Orosco proposes that the value of what he calls ‘ethnic philosophy’, like that produced by MAs, may stem from its analysis of the group’s experiences for the purpose of developing strategies for understanding and combating oppression.¹⁰ Perhaps then, what would make a category of philosophy distinctively valuable is something like (i) in Section 2: that the category is different to existing categories of philosophy and therefore it produces content that would otherwise not exist. Philosophy produced by MAs could be produced by others but it hasn’t, simply because others haven’t had the same set of concerns and intuitions - but they could have had them and they could have them independently and simultaneous with MAs.

If we characterize distinct value in these terms, it becomes difficult to defend the thesis that a set of concerns and intuitions are what make or explain why MA philosophy is distinctly valuable. As we’ve noted, so far the CI account would not rule out the possibility that anyone can access these sorts of cognitive preconditions and produce the same sort of philosophy that MAs produce. If this is true, it seems that the CI requires a stronger conception of what it is that makes a sort of philosophy distinctly valuable.

A stronger claim would be that some experiences produce a set of concerns and intuitions that grant a special epistemic status. This can be made even stronger with respect to establishing distinct value if it is posited that those CIs are necessary intellectual conditions for cognition to be about the sort of philosophy that MAs can produce. The thought here would be that the experiences common to MAs bestow special concerns and intuitions that can have the proper cognitive effects only if they have been had directly by an agent. This is akin to some strains of feminist stand-point theory that ties epistemic status to identity.\(^1\) A consequence of this interpretation is that an agent cannot gain these concerns and intuitions by methods such as testimony - they only have the right influence on the philosophical approach of an agent when they are had directly and by the right person. This conception of distinct value is strong enough to explain how a set of concerns of intuitions could catalyze philosophy of distinct value. An alternative consequence may be that there is a precondition of an agent’s identity to

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having those experiences which then affect the CI of the agent. This is an interesting proposal but there are limits to what can be done with this that I will mention shortly.

Gallegos and Gallegos’ point appears to be weaker. A particular set of concerns and intuitions makes it likelier that you’ll produce certain types of arguments and philosophies. To reject the CI account, one need not reject stand-point theory generally. One can grant that experiences shared by groups like MAs could provide some unique epistemic insights - particularly when writing philosophy that is about the experience of being MA. It is a much stronger and less plausible claim that the experiences associated with being MA translate to special insights that can produce distinctive philosophy in a general sense not limited to philosophy about the MA experience. The list of topics that MAs may write about where their epistemic standpoint could plausibly distinguish their work as particularly valuable over those without that standpoint include those about the experience of being an MA and surrounding topics. But the purpose of the CI account, as expressed by Gallegos and Gallegos, is meant to be much broader than that. It is meant to explain why MA philosophy, generally, is distinctly valuable; it is not meant to be restricted to philosophy about the MA experience.¹²

There does not seem to be any reason why we should think that the sort of concerns and intuitions that Gallegos and Gallegos provide are either unattainable by non-MAs or that the reasoning used in the resultant philosophy would otherwise not be grasped or put forth independent of MA philosophers. Non-MAs can be sensitive to and even produce any reason why we may accept or reject the ‘civic trust argument’. A

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non-MA philosopher surely has the potential to gain concerns about the plights and perspectives of immigrants and how linguistic assimilation may negatively affect them. There is no impenetrable psychological barrier in the minds of non-MA philosophers that would prevent them from understanding how existing social and political structures may reflect cultural imperialism.

There is a further important question about the role of intuition in cognition. In defense of the CI account, we might suppose that there are certain mental pathways that require the ownership of particular intuitions and that without them, such cognition is either extremely unlikely, or outright impossible. Suppose, for example, that due to some cultural factors, Vietnamese people and Americans have different intuitions about the nature of time. It is quite natural for Americans to think that time has a directional flow of backward to forward. To the Vietnamese, the natural axis of time is upward to downward. Where an American person would think of movement through time as moving forward, a Vietnamese person would conceptualize it as moving downward in time. It is likely that an American finds it quite strange to think of time as the Vietnamese do, and it is also likely that without having heard of it first, they would probably never think of adjusting their conception and would therefore not adjust their theory of time according to the theoretical pathways prompted by the change.

But notice that whether or not they are present in the mind in the form of intuitions, there is little preventing the philosophical use of their content as a different category of mental entity - an acquired concept perhaps. Once the concept is acquired, by whatever means, it becomes mentally salient and the theoretical consequences of the
change become cognitively available (as much as the acquisition of any philosophical concept opens up its consequences to a philosopher).\textsuperscript{13} This is even more evident for the category of concerns. Anyone can have a particular concern or set of concerns. Their availability to non-MAs is even better if concern about the content is well-justified and if its use leads to good reasons in the philosophy produced - for good reasons (to be concerned and to be compelled) should, in principle, be intellectually accessible to any reasonable person.\textsuperscript{14}

If it is true that the intellectual considerations that produce certain types of approaches to philosophy are accessible to everyone, then it is problematic to use them as the explanation of why MA philosophy is distinctly valuable and not just generally valuable. Consider the possibility of a large influx of Nigerian immigrants to the American southwest. They may arrive to settle in the same neighborhoods where MA culture is dominant and, in an effort to assimilate to their immediate surroundings, they rigorously adopt that culture and are accepted into it. After about a generation, Nigerian-Americans might share most of their concerns and intuitions with MAs - they are similarly born of immigrant parents, they may face the same sort of hardships, and they share in the subtleties of the MA culture.

Note that what appears to make MA philosophy distinctly valuable, according to Gallegos and Gallegos, is that it proceeds from a unique set of concerns and intuitions and these produce philosophy that may otherwise not be created independent of the MA

\textsuperscript{13} The acquisition of some mental entity may not be sufficient for a philosopher to see where the thought leads but it may be a necessary pre-condition.

\textsuperscript{14} If a set of reasons is graspable at all, then there is no reason to suppose that others can’t also grasp them.
social group. Philosophy produced by Nigerian-Americans in the above thought experiment would proceed from the same set of concerns and intuitions had by MAs but it would not make it MA philosophy - presumably, because it is not produced by MAs. So what this point demonstrates is that, at the very least, if MA philosophy is distinctly valuable, more is required to conceptualize it (and assist in the appreciation of its distinct value) than merely a set of concerns and intuitions.

4. Conclusion

Mexican-American and Latin-American contributions to philosophy can be valuable. But, as I have argued, if our account presupposes that it is distinctly valuable and that the explanation for it is that it proceeds from a unique set of concerns and intuitions, many problems present themselves and must be answered if it is to be a viable account. The Concerns and Intuitions Account provides some conditions under which Mexican-American philosophy could be thought to be distinctly valuable. However, once we flesh out the conditions, the value conferred applies only to restricted domains where direct cultural knowledge lends greater credibility. This result is disappointing, seeing as the project is meant to explain the distinct value of Mexican-American philosophy generally.

References

