University at Buffalo Department of Philosophy

Nousletter Interview with Jorge Gracia

Jorge Gracia is a polymath. He works in metaphysics/ontology, philosophical historiography, philosophy of language/hermeneutics, ethnicity/race/nationality issues, Hispanic/Latino issues, medieval/scholastic philosophy, Cuban and Argentinian art, and Borges. Gracia's earliest work was in medieval philosophy. His more than three decades of contributions to medieval philosophy were recently recognized by his being named the winner of the most prestigious award in the field in 2011, the American Catholic Philosophical Association's Aquinas Medal. That put him in the ranks of Jacques Maritain, Etienne Gilson, Bernard Lonergan, Joseph Owens, G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Geach, Michael Dummett, John Finnis, Brian Davies, Anthony Kenny, Alisdair McIntyre and one Pope, Karol Wojtyla, and now one saint. Even after Gracia redirected some of his intellectual energies into other branches of philosophy, UB was still being ranked by the Philosophical Gourmet Report (PGR) as one of the best schools in medieval philosophy: 13th in 2006 and in the 15-20 range in 2008. If there were PGR rankings for Latin American philosophy or the philosophy of race and ethnicity, Jorge Gracia's work would have enabled us to be highly ranked in those fields, higher, I suspect, than UB is in any other philosophical specialization.

In the 2010 *Blackwell Companion to Latin American Philosophy*, Gracia was listed as one of the 40 most important figures in Latin American philosophy since the year 1500! Gracia is also one of the leaders in the emerging field of the philosophy of race and ethnicity. His scholarly contributions are comparable in their academic influence to those of better known public intellectuals, Anthony Appiah and Cornell West. But neither West or Appiah has Gracia's range or productivity. Gracia has written 19 books on topics that include Suarez's metaphysics of good and evil, identity and individuation, theories of textuality, the categorical foundations of knowledge, the nature of metaphysics, interpreting what God means, philosophical reflections on artworks about Borges' stories, and the philosophy of race and ethnicity. He has edited another 25 books. And last but not least, he has published 259 articles at the time I am writing these words, probably a half dozen more by the time you read them.

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#1 When did you decide to specialize in medieval philosophy and what led you to do so?

In my last year at Wheaton College. As you probably know, Wheaton is an interdenominational Evangelical college that puts a strong emphasis on religion. I had to take sixteen credit hours of biblical studies as part of the undergraduate curriculum. My religious background was mixed. My father was a free thinker, my mother had converted to Evangelical Christianity after my brother died in an automobile accident at twenty two, but I went to Catholic schools and became a practicing Catholic (everyone in my family was baptized). I ended up at

Wheaton because of my mother's connections, but when I got there I found myself immersed in a Protestant world with strongly fideistic leanings. Particularly difficult to swallow for me was the anti rationalist tendencies of both faculty and students. Fortunately, not everyone was in sync with the prevailing mentality. A group of students who were rebelling against the Wheaton mainstream had been reading Aquinas and that is how I came to be introduced to the Middle Ages. There was also a philosophy professor who was sympathetic to Aquinas and assigned some of his texts in class. And when I began to read the *Summa,* I found the common sense, the intellectual rigor, and the underlying trust in reason refreshing. Still, it was not because of a religious interest that I decided to go into medieval philosophy, although I am sure it helped. The main reason was that in reading Aquinas and other medieval writers I realized that the language we use in contemporary philosophy and most of the ideas peddled today had counterparts in the work of medieval philosophers/theologians. This discovery led me to believe that in order to understand what was going on today, including the presuppositions within which philosophers work, I had to go back to the origins of western philosophical terminology in the Middle Ages. For, although it's true that western philosophy is grounded in classical thought, it was the medievals that integrated their language and ideas into the mainstream. The West did not have direct access to the Greeks until the Renaissance.

All this fitted well with the strong interest in language I developed after coming to the United States. I had arrived with a very limited knowledge of English and the immersion in it was like a revolution for me. I wanted to know more about how language works and how we communicate effectively through it. This was one of the reasons why I was also attracted to logic and eventually to Wittgenstein and philosophers who favored a linguistic approach, including an emphasis on ordinary language. (You probably have noticed that I avoid philosophical jargon as much as possible and try to philosophize using ordinary language and everyday examples.) At this earlier time this interest served to move me in the direction of the history of philosophy in the Middle Ages.

With this in mind I applied to the University of Chicago because it had Richard McKeon (teacher of Richard Rorty and Marshall McLuhan among other notorious intellectuals) in the faculty. He was a pioneer in the study of medieval philosophy, and a very broad thinker with interests that in many way I was to develop later. He had even studied for a while with Etienne Gilson, whom I was going to meet in Toronto. I also applied to other schools, but Chicago was my first choice because of McKeon. However, when I got there it turned out that McKeon was already 65 and thinking about retiring. In fact he was on leave for at least a year. Still, I was able to take a course on medieval philosophy with a guy by the name of O'Meara, who was a good teacher but had not produced much scholarship. Only four students had registered for the class I took with him. Most students were taking courses with other faculty on hotter subjects: Coburn on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations,* Gendlin on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,* Gewirth on political philosophy, and of course logic with someone I can't remember. I loved O'Meara's course and wrote a paper on matter, which as you know, is a favorite individuator

among medieval authors.

Chicago had also another medievalist of sorts, Alan Gewirth, who had worked on Marsilius of Padua. He had a brilliant mind and was an engaging lecturer. I was awed by the sharpness of his intellect and, after Wheaton's fideism and existentialism, by the radical rationalism that informed his analytic method. If I had stayed at Chicago, I would have tried to study with him, although his interests had shifted toward ethics and politics which have never been my priorities. Given my interest in medieval, I did not see a future in working with him in spite of my admiration. In fact, his and O'Meara's advice was to go to Toronto, where the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies was at the time the main center for the study of medieval philosophy in the world. It had been founded by Gilson and included such well known people as Anton Pegis, Joseph Owens, Armand Maurer, and Edward Synan. Moreover, the Institute had a program of complete immersion in medieval studies in preparation for a concentration in particular fields. Students had to take year long courses on Canon Law, Paleography, Art, Literature, Theology, Medieval Latin, and of course, Philosophy. This sounded intriguing to me, and so I applied to the Institute and once I got accepted decided to leave Chicago after completing an MA. That is how I became a medievalist, even though my motivation was far from becoming one. I was a philosopher who thought that in order to understand philosophy today, one had to begin by learning medieval philosophy. I am sure most philosophers would think I was crazy.

#2 You wrote a 576 page dissertation on Francesc Eximenis's *Terç del Crestià*? Why?

As I just mentioned, the Institute had a distinguished faculty in philosophy, but it included many top scholars in other fields as well. It was a primarily interdisciplinary center. And so I developed a taste for interdisciplinary work. The emphasis was on scholarship with a big S. Particularly big was learning to work with manuscripts in the edition of medieval texts and I became fascinated by the rigor of serious scholarship, not the wishy-washy stuff that is common everywhere these days. Very few of those who regard themselves as historians of philosophy have any idea of what it takes to do serious work in the discipline. Most so-called historians today are dilettantes, lacking even the basic tools and skills to do serious work. The Institute was something else, and the people there were incredible.

My first serious philosophical work at the Institute was on universals, and my Licentiate thesis included a Latin edition of the questions on universals by a late medieval author, Guido Terrena as well as a study of the doctrines presented in them. But for my PhD dissertation at the University I chose something more fun: First a more controversial topic, evil, and second an author who was a minor thinker and whose work had a popular and literary bent. In particular, I decided to edit a text of his on the seven deadly sins. Along with my interests in language and communication, I wanted to master the techniques of editing medieval texts, and this work has survived in nine manuscripts. The questions on universals by Guido survive in only one and so in editing it I was not able to practice the kinds of techniques that I had learned at the Institute:

dating manuscripts, deciphering the writing and abbreviations, setting up a stemma that reveals interdependence, collating texts, correcting grammar, identifying references, and so on. All very boring to most people surely, but fascinating to me.

My PhD dissertation was not meant to explore philosophical concepts in depth, but to develop the skills that are essential for making available the very texts that are the source of philosophical speculation. For me in particular, with my interest in language and the transmission of meaning through it, this seemed a worthwhile project. Again, I was trying to prepare myself for the philosophical work that I thought I would be doing later.

#3 What were your early post-doctorate research interests? When did you become interested in questions of individuation?

As I mentioned earlier, in Chicago I wrote a paper on matter, which is one of the favorite individuators for Aristotelians. And at the Institute I wrote a Licentiate thesis on Guido's doctrine of universals. Clearly it was a matter of time before I would run into individuation. When I got to Buffalo, I decided to pursue my interest in universals, and that is where I discovered Suárez. But soon enough I realized that universals were a very popular topic, too popular, and I wanted to explore something that had not been beaten to death by previous historians. And what is closer to universals and has been explored very little but individuals and individuation? The fact that a score of major contemporary philosophers, such as Strawson and Bergman, had been interested in this topic was a great incentive, for you must remember that my primary motivating factor behind all this activity was doing philosophy, not doing the history of philosophy, although I thought, and still think, that doing good philosophy is facilitated by knowing the history of philosophy.

Given the close relationship between universals and individuals, I began by studying carefully Suárez's Disputation on universals, of which J. F. Ross had made a translation. This lead me to do a translation of the Disputation on individuation. To the translation I added a systematic introduction and a very extensive glossary of terms that traces the meanings with which Suárez uses them to their sources in Aristotle and the medieval authors that preceded him. If you have never looked at it, I suggest you take a look. It is a work of love and curiosity, considering that although I have frequently been commended for it, it has not earned me any reputation to speak off. By the way, a disregard for what other philosophers think important, and the mileage that I might get out of what I do, have never been serious considerations when deciding what to do. I have always done what I like to do without any regard for the pay off in terms of career advancement or fame. The price I've had to pay for this has not been insignificant but I have not regretted it. It has given me a kind of freedom that many intellectuals do not enjoy because of their excessive concern with reputation, fame, and recognition.

#4 There certainly seems to have been a resurgence in Thomistic studies, or at least the

hylomorphic approach is making inroads into analytic philosophy with the movement known as analytical Thomism. Any idea why this is happening now? Is it that analytic metaphysicians have come to realize that they are reinventing a lot of medieval wheels?

I think it is a two way street. Analytic metaphysicians have realized that they were repeating history without knowing it, and medievalists have realized that most mainstream medieval philosophers fall into a tradition that is quite close to the analytic one. In fact, if you look at the Middle Ages you will see that philosophers at the time were divided into two groups: those who did some kind of philosophical analysis, where rigor and precision were particularly valued, and those for whom rhetoric and allusion were primary. These correspond pretty well to the two traditions we have today: analysis and Continental philosophy. And as is the case today with analysts and Continentals, the members of the medieval traditions hated each other with a vengeance.

The best example I know of how analytic and medieval philosophers are engaged in the pursuit of the same goal by similar means is precisely the problem of individuation. The positions that contemporary philosophers have devised with respect to this issue mirror to a great extent the positions developed in the Middle Ages as I think my work on this topic demostrates, particularly *Individuality*.

#5 There are a lot of contemporary Thomists - some even seem to think that Thomas Aquinas shares the Pope's infallibility. What relatively neglected medievals might do well with a little more attention if some Thomists put down the *Summa* long enough to study the writings of these lesser known medievals?

"Lesser known" is a relative term. Consider that some philosophers only know Ockham for his "razor" and he is one of the most important philosophers of the Middle Ages. Indeed, for me he ranks right along Aquinas and Abelard (Abelard is another that probably is not known by most contemporary philosophers). The Middle Ages continues to be an unpopular field. And one can easily understand why: it is hard work and the topics of the age are either religious or very abstruse. As an undergraduate I never heard of the problem of individuation, for example. And who hears about it in our Department? Probably some philosophy faculty have never heard of it either.

Now, if you were to ask for the periods in the history of medieval philosophy that are most neglected by historians and deserve attention, I would say the period before the translations which extends from the sixth to the twelfth centuries, and the post medieval scholastic period. between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. But there are glimmers of hope. One of them is our own Daniel Novotny, who wrote a dissertation about "beings of reasons" (such things as chimeras and centaurs) in Suárez and the post Suarecian period.

But you are right, Aquinas continues to be dominant. We can blame Pope Leo XIII for it. His declaration of Thomas's philosophy as "a philosophy of perennial value" had a lot to do with getting members of orders and devout Catholics in general to believe that his philosophy is the

only one that counts. This is deplorable, because the Middle Ages is one of the richest and most varied periods in the history of philosophy. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that twelfth century Paris ranks right along Socrates' Athens in philosophical abundance and sophistication. Christ is reputed to have recommended that we leave politics out of religion, and I would add to it to leave theology out of philosophy (but not the reverse, theology needs philosophy badly!).

Let me add something else here for the sake of budding medievalists. Most medievalists work on people, not problems, and this limits their vision and understanding. In the *Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages* that I edited a few years ago with T. Noone, we included a section of books on topics and problems at the end. Well, it is very short, because most historians of medieval philosophy do not write books on topics or problems. They write instead on particular authors and as a result become followers of particular figures that they feel they need to defend strenuously. This has epidemic proportions with Aquinas. And this is a real pity.

#6 You won the Aquinas medal a few years after the Pope won it. Did John Paul II present you with the medal? If not, did he send congratulations? Perhaps he died before you won the award. But he is a saint so couldn't he, according to Catholic teachings, know that you won and still send you congratulations from beyond? If so, why do you think he hasn't recognized your winning the prize?

The medal was presented by the President of the ACPA at the time and Eleonore Stump intorduced me. I think the Pope had other thing to worry about, particularly with all the scandals that have rocked the Catholic hierarchy in recent years. Note that I make a distinction between "the hierarchy" and "the Church." These two are often conflated by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, even though the distinction seems to be quite clear. Another reason is that even if he had known that I existed, he probably would not have paid attention to me because he would likely know that I have never been sympathetic to his brand of Catholicism. The Popes I like are John XXIII and our present Francis. Unfortunately, the first one had a short reign and the second looks like he might also have a short one (either the Mafia, Al-Qaeda, or ironically some extremely conservative Catholic might feel the need to send him to the pearly gates....).

#7 What can you achieve after winning the Aquinas medal? It is the field's top honor. I fear that winning the Aquinas medal is like winning an Olympic gold medal, life is all downhill after that. Has that been your experience?

I've never been interested in honors of any kind. They make me quite nervous and I do not know how to act when I get them. I never feel that I deserve any of these things. And I am never sure whether the reasons I get them are political. Politics is rife in all associations and I have never been a good politician. In fact, I have an anti-authoritarian streak that makes me suspect all of these prizes. Obviously some very fancy philosophers have gotten this medal, including three of my teachers, but some not very fancy ones have also gotten it, so perhaps I am one of the less fancy ones, and this is OK by me.

In my view it is a terrible idea to be looking for any kind of honor, whether you are a philosopher or not, but particularly if you are a philosopher. The danger of becoming self important, puffed up, and of living with the obsession to have others render your honor and acknowledgment, makes for a very unhappy life. Today fame seems to be the main, and perhaps only, object of desire, and this is unfortunate. The object of desire should be *the* good, as Aristotle pointed out long ago. Fame is *a* good to a certain extent, but not one at the top of the hierarchy.

Except for giving me a certain satisfaction in having done well by those of my teachers who also had the same honor, the medal did not change anything for me. What I do as a philosopher has nothing to do with external rewards– although having a good salary is certainly a plus. I do what I do as a philosopher because I like doing it, because it satisfies something in me that I am sure other people don't have and do not feel the need or desire to satisfy. Simply put, I like to solve conceptual problems and think about things. Maybe it is in my genes. Winning the medal has not made any difference to me. This might sound odd to most people, but it is the truth.

#8 Maybe you can avoid post-Aquinas medal blues by winning the Templeton award for religious studies. I think the Templeton Prize comes with an award which I assume is worth more than an Aquinas medal even if there is a small Aquinas relic inside it? Did you have the Aquinas medal appraised?

I've been thinking about pawning it. Ha! Ha! Ha! Now, a money award would certainly be welcome. I could buy some art with it! As I said before, I have never been interested in receiving honors. Let me tell you about the Distinguished Professor deal as an example. The story is that Ross MacKinnon, a Dean we had years ago (twenty five more or less), wanted to promote me to DP. Frankly I was not excited about it. In the first place, I was worried about what my colleagues would think. Surely they would think that they deserved it better and that I had managed to get it through some trick. That was one problem. Another problem was that being nominated by a Dean, even if supported by all academic and administrative levels at UB, did not mean I would get it. You see, there is a difference between the ranks of SUNY Distinguished Professor and UB Distinguished Professor. For the latter rank you need only local agreement, but for the former you need central SUNY agreement. This involves a committee in Albany who examines the case and asks for more letters of evaluation. Etc. Many candidates get shot down, or their promotion gets delayed for years, all of which is an embarrassment to the candidate. Then I really disliked the title because it is descriptive. Using it is like advertising yourself, and that I consider to be in bad taste. Finally, there was really very little that the title carried with it. I mentioned all that to the Dean but he insisted. So I said: "OK, I will let you put me up for it, provided that if I get it I receive a substantial salary increase and a reduction in my teaching load." He agreed and so I have the title of Distinguished Professor, even though I cringe any time

I have to write it down below my signature. Indeed, I deserve the salary I have if for no other reason than the discomfort I feel every time I am identified as a Distinguished Professor, don't you think?

#9 You have probably placed more students in good jobs than any other department faculty member. Limiting your answer to your students at research universities, whose work would we be well advised to keep an eye on in coming years?

I have been extremely lucky with most of the twenty one students who have written dissertations with me, particularly because most of them are truly committed to the philosophical life. Although I am sorry for those who have followed me in caring little for honors and fashion because they surely will have to pay a prize for it. Note that I don't agree with all that they think–I would not be a philosopher if I did–but they are doing what I think authentic philosophers do. Apart from this I am happy to know that a good number of them (not all, some I'm sure hate my guts) have some true regard for me, even if they suffered under my direction. Indeed, it is wonderful to have a book dedicated to you by a former student, and this has happened to me several times.

The relationship one has with graduate students is different from the relationship one has with colleagues and other friends. I think one can understand it only if one reads Plato. There is so much satisfaction when teachers see their students doing the kind of work that makes the teachers proud! I am always more excited about the books and articles my students publish than about the ones I do, and then there is the other work in which they are engaged. Some of them are editors of journals, a sometimes difficult and always time consuming task through which they helping other philosophers. (In spite of several opportunities, I have never wanted to be a journal editor – I guess I am too selfish to do it.) Most of my students are still in their prime and they should follow being productive for years to come. Indeed, even the one who is retired is engaged in as many activities as he was before he retired. I should also mention that they are a varied lot, so that their contributions to philosophy expand different fields. So in answer to your question, I would keep an eye on most of them.

#10 Why and when did you get interested in Hispanic philosophy? Was it always a minor interest of yours given your Cuban origins and just shelved because of your other research projects or were you unconcerned with such issues early in your career?

I owe my interest in Latin American and Spanish philosophy. I owe this to Bill Parry who was chairing the Buffalo philosophy department at the time I joined it and is responsible (together with George Hourani) for hiring me. When I got here, Bill suggested that I teach a course on Latin American philosophy and I found the idea intriguing. Indeed, in my work on medieval and scholastic philosophy I had already tried to integrate the work of some Spanish

philosophers (Guido Terrena, Ramon Llull, Gonsalvus Hispanus, Francesc Eiximenis, and Francisco Suárez). So why not Latin Americans?

When I looked into it, I realized that there were no sources to teach it. This is how I became connected (through Marvin Farber) with Risieri Frondizi, an Argentinian philosopher who was in the Unites States at the time. He was a major figure in Latin America who had to leave Argentina for political reasons – he had been President of the University of Buenos Aires, and was the brother to the President of Argentina. Together we compiled an anthology of texts on Latin American philosophy. A Spanish edition was immediately published in Mexico and underwent a second edition shortly after, but we could not get the English edition published. At that time there was no interest in this field in the United States. It was only in the late eighties that I was able to publish a revised version of our earlier text in English. This work took me to Latin America and opened venues of collaboration there. It also prepared the way for the work I was going to do later on identity, nationality, ethnicity, and race, for Latin Americans had been concerned with these issues for a very long time.

I should mention that it is not unusual for scholars of particular nations, regions, or ethne to work on the philosophy of their nations, regions or ethne. You will find, for example, that the proportion of Italians working on Italian philosophy is much higher than of Spaniards or Germans working on it, and so on. In part this is because nations encourage such work and provide resources that are not available for other investigations. Also, there is the issue of the language or languages. It is easy for a Spaniard or Latin American to work on philosophy written in Spanish or Portuguese.

#11 There are a lot of rumors in the department about your departure from Cuba. One had you leaving dressed as a priest. If you don't set the record right soon there will be stories about you swimming the straits to Florida fending off sharks, or less flattering stories about being in Batista's inner circle. (You did graduate from Havana's *St. Thomas Military Academy* with highest honors. How many Marxist insurgents/sympathizers did you to shoot to get *highest honors*?) So how did you depart?

Like all rumors, there is something right and something wrong about them. I did leave Cuba dressed in a soutane and with a letter from the Auxiliary Bishop of Havana that implied I was a seminarian. The truth is that I was not and had never been one. But this ruse made possible for me to leave Cuba together with a group of seminarians in the last ferry to West Palm Beach. It was a rather dramatic departure, of which I will give a more complete account in another place.

#12 Did you leave Cuba because of the oppressive atmosphere in general, or was your family singled out for more mistreatment because they were in the wrong income bracket before the revolution? Is there a magnificent Gracia family waterfront villa that you can claim after the fall

of communism?

There is no villa, but there is a pile of rubble on what used to be a structure on the prime waterfront block of Celimar, a formerly gated beach at the east of Havana. And yes, it would be nice to be able to claim that piece of land, but I doubt very much that it will happen and most likely I will not see it again. The place looks slightly west so you get magnificent views of the sunset and once upon a time I had the idea of taking a picture of every sunset I witnessed there.

Do not get confused about the St. Thomas Military Academy. Yes, it was a military academy, but it was really a private school for toy cadets where we played at being soldiers, had fancy parties, marched in parades, and so on. I graduated as First Lieutenant and first officer of Company A. The instructors on military matters were retired army men, but we had no relation to the government. The only thing that we shared with the Cuban army were gilded epaulets and swords.

Now for your first question. My family had no political standing at all. The only member of the family that had ever engaged in politics was my paternal grandfather, who was elected to Congress twice. But he was so disappointed with the pervasive corruption in it that he gave up politics and devoted himself to practice medicine in a town which for some reason had a very high incidence of cancer in the population. He died at forty six of cancer, allegedly caught because of his work with the cancer patients in the town. So there were no reprisals against us as a family. Besides, my father had died of a heart attack (surprise?) at fifty nine in 1957 (Castro entered Havana in 1959 and I left Cuba in 1961).

1961 was significant because that was the year of the Bay of Pigs invasion. It was clear after it happened, and the revolutionary army and militias defeated the invaders, that the regime was in complete charge and would not tolerate dissent. If you were not sympathetic to the Revolution, which Castro declared to be Marxist Leninist a few months after I left, you had to suffer the consequences of your beliefs. Keep in mind that the government was the only employer in Cuba, private properly was eliminated, and rationing began just as I was leaving. The government controlled everything and you depended for everything from the government. I was in my first year of architecture at the University of Havana and was having a grand time when the invasion occurred. Castro placed the thousands that were under suspicion of actual or possible counter revolutionary activities in detention centers – stadiums and large arenas.

Returning to the University after the Bay of Pigs was simply impossible, and staying in Cuba would have resulted in a life of misery, without a proper job or education. That is the reason I left, but I had to leave alone. My mother chose to stay with my grandmother who was very old, and my sister and her family were not allowed to leave until 1968.

#13 I understand why a medievalist would do his graduate studies at the University of Toronto. But how did you end up at the very conservative and Protestant Wheaton college?

Indirectly, thanks to my mother. She had been an indifferent Catholic until my brother was killed in an accident. The shock was too great and she found that the Catholic clergy were of no help to her. It was in Evangelical ministers and their message that she found some solace. In Cuba we were financially comfortable, so my mother became a main supporter of her church. When I came to Miami, the pastor who had been instrumental in converting her had set up a refugee center. She urged me to apply to Wheaton, from which she had graduated years before and whose president she knew personally. I also applied to Catholic University and to Harvard. I was accepted in all three, but Wheaton gave me the best deal. I did not have a penny. I had arrived in Miami with $5 in my pocket, but President Kennedy had established a college program for Cubans, and Wheaton offered me additional support in the shape of a scholarship and part time work (Buildings and Grounds, meaning mopping floors during the school year and painting and repairing during the summers). Harvard and Catholic University had accepted me for the Fall semester of 1962 and I was placed on scholarship lists. When Wheaton agreed to take me for the Winter semester of 1962, I had no choice but to accept.

#14 Please answer the following question honestly and not by using some medieval sophistry to avoid an outright lie. Did you ever violate Wheaton's no drinking, no smoking and no dancing rule?

OK, I will come clean, but unfortunately you will not find the revelation sensational enough. I never violated the pledge on the college grounds or even in the town where the college was located. But with a bit of casuistry I did convince myself that I was free to do certain things that were not allowed as long as I was outside those locations. My violations were limited in any case because I have a Puritan streak: I've never smoked; I've always been a sensible drinker; and although I love dancing, I didn't have the opportunity to do it while at Wheaton. My violations were mostly restricted to going to the movies and the theater – yes at Wheaton you were taught Shakespeare, but you were not allowed to attend the performance of his plays. So much for rationality and consistency! Please, if you get a chance, write to Wheaton about my behavior so they disown me and stop sending me letters asking for money.

#15 Did your earlier metaphysical work on identity and individuation facilitate your research into Hispanic identity or do they involve very different senses of "identity"?

The senses overlap. In fact I have an article on the individuation of race and a chapter in one of my books on the individuation of ethnic groups. I also explore identity, individuality, and

individuation in the context of texts. The work in medieval was not only helpful, but in fact informed my interest and approach in the contemporary context.

#16 If you were writing your very influential and much discussed *Hispanic/Latino Identity* book today, would it be very different or would you be mostly defending a similar thesis about the familial/relational theory of Hispanic/Latino identity?

I have not changed my mind about this, at least not yet. Naturally one can always improve what one has written, but in terms of the theory there has been no major change, although in later works I do explore some issues I did not explore in the book. Now, I hope you do not think this is just a case of defending what I have claimed in spite of evidence to the contrary. I am merely convinced that this theory is the one that does justice to the facts in our experience. I have never felt that I had to defend anything I had written or proposed, and I have sometimes disowned views for which I had argued before. But one has to be careful not to fall into this trap. Once I asked Alan Gewirth at Chicago why he had not yet published the two books on ethics and political philosophy on which he had been working for twenty years and his answer was that he did not want to be put in a position in which he would feel the temptation to defend his views merely because he had published them. I imagine many people feel that they cannot reject something they once held, something that seems to me plainly stupid.

#17 How long has the Spanish-speaking intellectual world been theorizing about Hispanic identity? Was it an issue during the earliest colonial period? Was the question largely neglected in the English speaking philosophical world before your book?

In Latin America, the first questions related to identity, particularly group identity, were asked as early as 1550 by Bartolomé de las Casas in a controversy he had with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. That controversy concerned the identity of Amerindians, whether they constituted a nation, and whether they were human. The issue was important because it involved rights to property and the Spaniards wanted to take over their lands. Then in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the question surfaced about the identities of the people who had been born in the colonies in relation to the identity of the Spanish born who lived in the colonies. This was followed by a discussion in the nineteenth century about national identity and race which has continued until the present. Unfortunately, lack of clarity concerning the notions of race, ethnicity, and nationality has predominated throughout, just as it has in this country. I recently edited a volume with articles that explore these views in various authors from Latin America, entitled *Forging People*. This is the first attempt at introducing some clarity into the subject with respect to Latin America. Although there are similarities with the situation in the United States, mainstream philosophy in Latin American does not usually address questions of race, ethnicity, and nationality. In fact Latin American philosophers seem to be oblivious to them. Latin American philosophers appear to be obsessed with ethical and political issues – e.g., human rights (the analysts) and liberation (the Continentals). Whereas I've always been more

comfortable in my metaphysical cocoon.

Now as to my *Hispanic/Latino Identity,* this is the first book length philosophical treatment of this topic in English and it is arguable that it may be the first book in any language in spite of the large literature on related topics in Latin America and Iberia. In spite of the attention it has drawn, most people who write on race, ethnicity, and nationality, and particularly about these and Hispanics/Latinos continue to engage in the same confusions and historical mistakes that I tried to correct. Part of the reason is that many scholars, contrary to a widespread belief, are lazy. They don't want to read extensively. The second, is that many of those who work on Hispanic/Latino issues are dogmatic and ideological. They rather hold a false view that supports their ideology rather than a true one that does not. But maybe this is a human trait rather than a Latino one.

#18 Are you fairly pleased with the extent and manner in which the philosophy of ethnicity is being carried out today or would you like its focus to change?

I am quite dissatisfied. Here are some reasons. (1) There is just not enough discussion of it. The main concern, actually the obsession, in this country is with race. And yet much of the discrimination that has existed and still exists, and which affects certain racial groups, is primarily based on ethnicity. (2) People have difficulty understanding that race can be part of ethnicity and this generates the confusion between the two. Ethnicity is a pliable concept whereas race is much less so. (3) Current discussions do not bother to develop a clear metaphysical understanding of these notions before they turn to the ethical and political questions they want to engage. (4) There is an excessive emphasis on witnessing in the context of ethnicity. Many discussions of race or ethnicity amount to telling stories of abuses of one sort or another. Witnessing is important, but philosophers need to go beyond it and develop an analysis of the basic concepts so that one can understand the dynamics involved. Finally, little attention is paid to the importance of ethnicity in the contemporary political context. Just remember Ukrania, Irak, Sudan, Nigeria, Spain, and the US.

#19 My impression is that the philosophical study of ethnicity very often gets grouped together with philosophy of race? If my impression is not wrong, is there a drawback in race and ethnicity being studied together? Does the subject of ethnicity benefit from similar concerns and tools and assumptions that scholars bring to investigating race or would both philosophical pursuits be better off sometimes with more independence from each other?

Race and ethnicity are closely connected in part because both involve familial relations. But there is a big difference between them: race *necessarily involves* descent and phenotypes whereas ethnicity *may involve* descent and/or phenotypes, *but need not do so.* There is also the fact that race may play a role in ethnicity. Consider the case of Latinos, which are often thought to constitute a race or at least involve racial elements.

Can we keep race and ethnicity apart? And should we keep them apart? Both points are contested by some philosophers. They believe that ethnicity is always racialized (e.g., Latinos are always thought to constitute a racial group) and separating ethnicity from race is a mistake because part of the discrimination suffered by ethnic groups is due to the fact that they are racialized (e.g., again, the case of Latinos). My take on this is just the reverse: most often discrimination of racial groups is the result of their ethnicity. But more important, that regardless of whether race and ethnicity are or are not in fact separable, developing clear conceptions of them helps to sort out the ethical, political, and social issues they involve.

For example, if one understands the familial root of both one can then see how race is incorporated into ethnicity in certain contexts. This in turn helps us to see how discrimination works against ethnic groups that are treated as races. In short, the answer to your last question is that a clear conception of race and ethnicity should help in our understanding of both, but that such an understanding requires that we compare them; we need to talk about them together in order to understand how they are similar and different.

#20 Does Hispanic philosophy have the same emancipatory potential as the philosophy of race? Did Latin American anti-colonial theorists and movements draw upon philosophical theorizing about ethnicity?

One of the main topics of discussion in Hispanic/Latino and Latin American philosophy has been, and continues to be, the nature of this philosophy and its relation to mainstream western philosophy. For many of those engaged in these discussions, the goal is to find a place under the sun for Latin American philosophy. In order to achieve this goal they argue that the first step is to emancipate this philosophy from its colonial past and subservient present in relation to European and American philosophy.

The discussion of these topics first explicitly surfaced in the early part of the twentieth century, although there are elements of it that go back at least to the nineteenth. And the parallels between African/African American/Africana/Black philosophy and Hispanic/Latin American/Latino/Ibero-American philosophy are quite clear as one of our recent graduates, Stephanie Rivera Berruz explores in her doctoral dissertation. Interestingly enough, the discussion concerning Latin American philosophy is not focused on race, as is the case with African American philosophy.

#21 Does ethnicity have a similar history of pseudo-science that plagued thinking about race for so long? Has been a need for "consciousness raising" in Hispanic culture as there has been for blacks or have Hispanic ethnic groups internalized far less pernicious conceptions of themselves than blacks?

Yes, to the extent that in Latin America race and ethnicity are often confused, discussions

about ethnicity are often influenced by shaky scientific conceptions, including shoddy evolutionary theory. These views have been used to argue for the superiority of Latin values over the more pragmatic values of American culture and vice versa. The success of the United States and European culture and the neglect of Latin American culture has been a thorn in the side of Latin Americans in particular. They feel neglected, discriminated against, and generally regarded as a lower kind of beings. And so, just like blacks, they have complained and worked hard to achieve the recognition they think they deserve. The sense of being discriminated against, of not being considered valuable, and of being thought of as marginal and unimportant has worked negatively for Latin America in two senses. First, because one reaction has been that of copying what others have done and, second, because they have internalized the attitude of Americans and Europeans about Latin America, agreeing with them in judging that Latin America has little to offer to the world, at least in philosophy. It is a sad situation.

#22 How does a philosopher end up curating art exhibits on Painting Borges and Latino Identity in Art?

Because art exhibitions are helpful ways and media to raise philosophical problems that otherwise are difficult to tackle. Keep in mind that one of my great concerns throughout my career has been interpretation. The difficulties raised by interpretation first took hold of me in the context of the history of philosophy. How can I, in the twentieth century, recover the past? How can I understand what Boethius had in mind by reading a text written by him fifteen hundred years ago? How can I be sure I understand what he says? How can I be sure that I am not reading into it something that is not there? Anachronism is a great temptation for a historian of philosophy.

I tackled these questions in my book on philosophy and its history. But, of course, the issues I raised in the context of the history of philosophy can be extended and become more pressing when the texts one is trying to understand are not philosophical. For example, how do they apply to the case of texts that communities of believers think are revelations from a divinity? I explored these questions in my book on how we can know what God means.

But what happens when the texts are literary? Are the rules of interpretation different for them? And what if, instead of texts, the media of understanding are works of art? This is one of the roads that brought me to art. Another is my interest in ethnicity and issues of ethnic identity. For art is probably one of the most effective expressions of a people's ethnic or national identity when it comes to revealing both who they are and who they think they are. A third one is my strong love for art. Recall that I attended art school and was studying architecture for a year while in Havana. That love never stopped, although it was put on ice to a certain extent while I was worried about philosophy and philosophical questions. It was only in recent years that I have been able to put together my love of art, my philosophical interest in social identity, and my concerns with hermeneutics. The issue of identity I explored in an art exhibition on Cuban

American art and the book of interviews with artists that followed it. The philosophical dimension of art I explored in the retrospective on Carlos Estevez's work and the corresponding book, *Images of Thought*. And the hermeneutic angle of literature and art came through in the exhibition "Painting Borges" and the book that accompanied it. Now I am thinking about an exhibition on Hispanic/Latino identity in art, and a book as usual, that this time will deal with this complex issue in the United States. But I have not decided yet whether to do it.

#23 How did your philosophical background help (or hinder) your study of art?

I am very biased when it comes to philosophy, so I cannot even consider the possibility that philosophy would hinder anything. I think philosophy always helps, that is, if it is good philosophy. By this I mean a philosophy that is not ideological and placed at the service of something else, like power, greed, vengeance, or even faith. If philosophy is what Socrates had in mind, that is, the love of wisdom, how could it possibly interfere negatively with any worthy human enterprise? Aren't we supposed to be rational beings in search of wisdom? Philosophy is concerned with truth, goodness, beauty, rationality, virtue, all that is valuable in our experience and pertains to our nature. Besides, we must keep in mind that one of philosophy's most important services is integrative. Philosophy is the only discipline that tries to put together all our experiences and knowledge. And this function can only help the other enterprises in which we engage.

When it comes to art, philosophy does it by providing us with an understanding of what art is all about and its relation to other human endeavors. Of course, for me in particular philosophy has been the key to my program insofar as my concern has been with the understanding of how art can interpret literature, thus providing avenues of understanding that otherwise would not come to fruition. My aim has always been philosophical, but has it also contributed to a better understanding of art? Yes, because art, although a different enterprise from philosophy, is also about understanding, even if that understanding is not strictly speaking of the same propositional sort philosophy provides. Most art people do not consider this aspect of art, but it is there, as it is plain in art's history. Mind you, I do consider the transformation of art into a philosophy or vice versa, as some have suggested, a mistake. The value of both is precisely that they are different and irreducible to each other. Each of them provides a better grasp of what the other is about and through that of the world of which we are part.

#24 Any truth to the rumor that Federal attorneys are investigating you for engaging in insider trading in the art world – anonymously buying up artworks on the cheap through a middlemen just weeks before your increase their value tenfold through your university sponsored art exhibits, catalogues and books?

You see, this is the kind of thing that has led me to think that one always has to keep

valid passports to more than one country. One needs to be prepared to leave a country in a moment's notice. I also keep my soutane in the front closet of my home, just in case a disguise were necessary. But even greater insurance is the secret files I keep on my friends, colleagues, and acquaintances with information that could be of interest to the IRS, again just in case I need to do some trading. Hahaha!

#25 If the insider trading scandal forces you to retire early, what new scholarly projects do you plan to pursue away from your corner office in Park Hall?

Well, maybe "scholarly" is the wrong term to describe what I would do. I need to think hard about it, so I need to begin with an extended stay at some lost beach in Latin America – the sort to which the hero of the movie, The Shawshank Redemption retired – to facilitate my ruminations. I am sure the sun, the beach, and a good diet of margaritas and mojitos would help me come up with an interesting way of spending the remaining days of my life, without having to file annual reports or put up with other bureaucratic delicacies..... I don't even think I would miss my nice office in the Department or, even more, the "wonderful climate" of western New York!