Latino Oppression

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In his important book, *Race, Racism, and Reparations*, J. Angelo Corlett develops a comprehensive philosophical and political account of Latino identity in relationship to race, to racism, and to reparations. He also develops a metaphysical explanation and definition of Latino identity, an account of the nature of racism, and a position on the affirmative action and reparations debates for African Americans and Native Americans. Thus the book situates Latino policy questions in relationship to African Americans and Native Americans and also in relationship to white women.

Corlett's is only the second book-length philosophical study of Latino identity, following Jorge Gracia's groundbreaking work, *Hispanic/Latino Identity*. Like the latter work, Corlett's book successfully demonstrates that philosophers have a unique contribution to make in not only the debates over policy and morality but also in the debates over the nature of race, ethnicity, and identity, especially in revealing and critiquing the philosophical assumptions behind various kinds of identity claims, making the metaphysical grounds of those claims perspicuous, and comparing various possible ways to define specific identities such as Latino identity.

As in feminist philosophy and critical race philosophy, however, this influence is a two-way street. In other words, not only are philosophers applying traditional philosophical methods to these new questions, but also, the questions themselves are suggesting new philosophical approaches. An example of the latter is Corlett's intersectional focus on metaphysics and moral philosophy. Many of Corlett's arguments are situated at the intersection of these fields, similar to the way the relatively new but burgeoning field of moral epistemology is situated at the intersection of moral philosophy and epistemology. And like much of moral epistemology, Corlett's approach is not simply focused on the intersectional issues, but frames each question he tackles in light of both domains of inquiry. The metaphysics of Latino identity, for example, is a question for Corlett about the best descriptive account we can give that can address some of the questions that have arisen in policy debates over affirmative action and reparations. Thus, he takes up the metaphysical question of who can count as Latino with an understanding that the context of this question is a policy debate over affirmative action and thus always with an eye toward the implications of various definitions and accounts on the policy debates. This is not simply to make metaphysics

subservient to moral philosophy, but to let moral philosophy formulate and frame the questions that metaphysics needs to address. Although such an approach is entirely legitimate, I want to insert a note of caution here. If we were to let policy considerations circumscribe too narrowly the descriptive formulations we will entertain, we will be doing the metaphysical project of elucidating the nature of race or sex a disservice by restricting the scope of debate. And, since the latter fields are quite new fields in philosophy, I believe we need to ensure them a healthy childhood. This is a concern to which I will return.

Latino identity poses some relatively unique metaphysical and political problems for ethnic politics and antiracist policy initiatives. For example, Latinos are multiracial, so does this mean that the category of "Latino" is not a racial category? Latinos are extremely diverse in other respects as well, by class, culture, national origin, and even religion and language, given the large numbers of indigenous peoples in Latin America as well as immigrants, so we might want to say that Latinos are multiethnic as well as multiracial. Moreover, most Latinos do not self-identify as Latinos (at least in non-Anglo dominated contexts) but as Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and so forth. So does the concept of a pan-Latino identity have any real purchase on lived experience? That is, can we even speak in terms of descriptive adequacy in regard to a term that is not used in self-description? Is the term simply a marketing niche or political construct created out of opportunism? Corlett does not spend much time addressing the criticisms that have been made against the pan-Latino concept, but he uses it throughout and seeks to develop a coherent ethical, political, and metaphysical theory about Latinos. If he is successful in developing such a theory, that in itself could provide confirmation that the category is a meaningful one. But in formulating his definition of Latino, Corlett argues that any adequate definition should be one that is acceptable to in-group members, and that this is one of the most important criteria of adequacy. Therefore, I was curious about why he did not address the controversy over the pan-Latino category among Latinos (or should I say among Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans, even Panamanians).

A further complication for any ethical and political account of justice for Latinos comes from the fact that Latinos are in the United States for a very wide variety of reasons. This diversity of causes is less true of Native Americans and African Americans, who generally experienced annexation of land and enslavement, respectively. Mexican Americans experienced annexation, Puerto Ricans and some other groups experienced colonial invasion and colonization, many Central Americans experienced military invasions from the United States either direct or by proxy, and some South Americans experienced CIA-organized government overthrow, torture, and murder. All of these groups (except the Mexicans who experienced annexation) might be said to have had something of a forced march north in order to flee war, violence, and poverty aided and abetted by the government they are now living under. This is a complex political reality. Still other Latinos are here simply because of economic disparities of resources and wealth between north and south, begun not with the recent shifts toward a

more global economy but started more than 500 years ago. And then there are the Cubans, whose experiences are almost entirely unique. So there is no dominant narrative that can explain our presence or justify a coherent set of moral imperatives.

I should note here that many institutions in the United States have affirmative action programs specifically targeted at Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, in an attempt to address the groups that have most experienced racism and discrimination. This policy is at least out of date and needs to include Dominicans. The motivation for targeting specific groups is so that affirmative action programs will not be allowed to hire only white or light-skinned Latinos from European immigrant families, for example. There are some who counter such specifically targeted policies by pointing out that Spanish accents are uniformly discriminated against, and that there are many poor, dark-skinned South Americans in the United States who face racism and discrimination. But the point is that affirmative action policies and reparations policies need not be argued for on behalf of all Latinos as a whole but can target certain specific nationalities or even specific racialized groups (Afro-Latinos or indigenous peoples, for example). If one makes an argument for affirmative action for *all* Latinos, as Corlett does, one needs to address the issue of internal differences and show why these differences are not significant or politically salient. Corlett's arguments are weakened by this inattention to the internal heterogeneity of Latinos.

In this commentary I want to focus mainly on Corlett's general account of Latino identity that he then draws from to address the specific policy questions that he takes up in the latter half of the book. Specifically I want to address his elimination of race as an element of Latino identity, his genealogical definition of Latino identity, and the comparative oppression claims he makes in regard to European American women.

Corlett defends an account of Latino identity that he characterizes as metaphysically antirealist but ethically realist. It is metaphysically antirealist, he tells us, in that it rejects racial essentialism in every form, and holds that identities are socially constructed. But it is ethically realist in that he argues that Latinos exist, have experienced racism and discrimination, and deserve both backward-looking and forward-looking forms of reparative justice, especially affirmative action. Corlett rejects the concept of race and its continued use as an identity category, and argues that Latino identity is a form of ethnicity. He then argues that genealogy provides both the necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion in the category of Latinos. That is, the largest percentage of an individual's parentage needs to be Latino in order for a person to count as Latino. Genealogy is the most important criterion on his account, both necessary and sufficient unto itself, but he also emphasizes experience and cultural identification. He claims that "existential connections" based on intentional shared experiences as well as genealogical ties are the "essences of ethnic groups" (12). And he argues that there can be varying degrees of latinidad. He says:

> Metaphysically speaking, the extent to which one belongs to this or that ethnic group is the extent to which she respects and knows the particular language(s) or dialects of the groups, respects and participates in their respective cultures, has a name that is traditionally associated with members of the group(s), is recognized as a member of the group(s) by in group members, self-identifies as a member of the group(s), and is recognized as a member of the group(s) by out group members. (146)

In devising this account, Corlett tries to take maximum advantage of common sense or intuitive ways in which ethnic identities are today designated. Thus genealogy is uppermost as the criterion of identity, but most of us also acknowledge variations in the degree to which one represents a group.

By making genealogy the only necessary criterion of Latino identity, Corlett avoids the problematic practice of castigating people outside the group if they have the wrong politics or the wrong manner of dress or the wrong set of cultural interests. The coercive conformism that such authenticity tests produce constrain individual self-determination as well as collective transformation or a rearticulated group understanding of what the identity means. Corlett neatly sidesteps this problem by making identity dependent fundamentally on genealogy, not behavior, practices, or political commitments. Moreover, he argues that ethnicity is based on a similarity relation, not an identity relation. On balance, then, the genealogical account provides an absolute criterion of identity while allowing for a lot of variability. This seems a useful approach, though I worried that in only allowing *degrees* of latinidad rather than *kinds* of latinidad Corlett might be privileging current practices as the standard-bearer. To really maximize variability and fight conformism, we need to allow for a variety of types and not just a variety of degrees.

Aside from these small concerns, I appreciate the fact that Corlett refreshingly affirms the basic legitimacy of group identity. Critics such as Anthony Appiah and J. L. A. Garcia have been concerned that group allegiances necessarily compromise moral judgment by making the arbitrariness of identity a reason for moral action. Against this sort of argument, Corlett cites Michael Walzer, who argues that "Individuals are stronger, more confident, more savvy, when they are participants in a common life, when they are responsible to and for other people. . . . For it is only in the context of associational activity that individuals learn to deliberate, argue, make decisions, and take responsibility" (128). This debate over the moral implications of collectivities is simply the latest version of a long disagreement between the followers of Hegel and of Kant, the latter arguing that moral deliberation requires autonomy and separation and the former arguing that morality can only be exercised within a substantive cultural space where individuals are recognized as moral persons. Corlett sides with the Hegelian position here in his assumption that moral deliberation is enhanced rather than compromised by being part of a community. He does express a concern about an excessively internalized in-group moral focus, of the sort that would disregard the moral claims of those from other groups. He values the pro-

motion of "unity among humans while recognizing and respecting the general differences between us—culturally, morphologically, and linguistically" (128). Thus, he does not see any inherent contradiction between group identity and moral universalism. If group identity creates the community within which moral deliberation can take place, then this would seem right. The group creates the conditions of moral agency, and as such deserves an individual's loyalty and concern, but this in no way entails that one's moral regard will always privilege those in one's own identity group over others. I am extrapolating here; Corlett could have gone into more detail on this issue.

Let us return to the genealogical account. Corlett's defense of the genealogical definition of Latino identity seems to be based on two criteria: that it is acceptable to in-group members and that it will provide an objective and nonarbitrary way to designate identity. If political and moral policy initiatives were based on identity categories that were themselves seen as arbitrary and non-objective, he suggests, their moral force would be compromised. I find the genealogical account intuitively plausible and consistent with general patterns of common practice in the way we assess identity. And it does not have the disadvantageous effect of marginalizing any given racial or ethnic group of Latinos as many of the influential constructions of Latino identity have done in the past, because all that matters on Corlett's account is that one's parents are Latinos.

I also find the genealogical account interesting in that it emphasizes what might be called a deterministic material tie over accounts that emphasize agency, fluidity, and social construction. This is interesting in light of Luce Irigaray's critique of Western philosophy's constant tendency toward an erasure of the mother and persistent attraction to the dreams of parthenogenesis in which selves found and ground their own identity and knowledge. Surely there must be a limit to the possibilities of self-creation, and we should each acknowledge our connections and our debts to our forbears. The genealogical account, in contrast to accounts that emphasize self-creation, makes biological parentage fundamental, without privileging the maternal over the paternal, and makes parentage more fundamental than self-interpretation or cultural practice. Corlett's own motivations for this account are based on the desire for an objective, non-arbitrary criterion that can settle identity questions with some finality for the purposes of policy. But even if one were simply to be concerned about the metaphysics of identity apart from policy considerations, an emphasis on the material ties of genealogy is entirely appropriate.

One might then go even further than biological parentage to consider a concept of material ties that exceed biological ties. That is, material connections within families can occur through the sharing of biological material, or through having grown up in a given family, or through having married into a family. Material ties are thus extended to those who adopt or are adopted, or those who marry into a group. For example, if I have a child by someone of a different ethnic group, I have a material tie to that child that is stronger than I would generally have to a friend, an ally, or even a lover. As a nursing mother, when my infant

child cries, my breasts begin to tingle and drip milk, but even if my child is adopted, I may become literally ill if my child is ill, or I may risk my life for my child's life. When a genocidal political force threatens the identity group to which my child belongs, I am thrust into a material opposition with that force; my disagreement with their political agenda exceeds mere moral judgment of their aims and takes on an embodied character as I defend my children's right to live. These are examples of material ties. Having a material tie to another person or group means that I have a material investment that cannot be overturned by a change of circumstance or political view. It's not voluntary.

Corlett's genealogical account honors the material tie of physical connection although he does not flesh out whether genealogy can include adoptive or other forms of familial relation. It seems to me that such an account is completely disconnected from racialist concepts about genetic inheritance or racial essences, because the material tie is not dependent on my holding a belief that the child will carry my racial essence. Rather, the tie is formed through the bond of physical involvement, interdependency, and proximity such as an infant has with its parents or caregivers or that exists between a pregnant woman and her fetus. So I like the material implications of the genealogical account, but would like to see an analysis of material ties that further explains and specifies the kinds of ties and their degrees of connection.

Can the notion of genealogy, or even the perhaps broader notion of a material tie, be completely disentangled from the concept of race? Corlett states that genealogy is not about race, that the genealogical "analysis of the nature of ethnic group membership" should not be read as a "racialization" of the nature of race, and that ethnicity is a matter of social construction (131). But in what sense is genealogy a matter of social construction? The possibilities for parenting relationships are multiplying and becoming more complex, as we have birth parents, surrogate parents, adoptive parents, and even sperm donor fathers. But in what sense is it a matter of social construction who the birth parent is and who the adoptive parent is? We may have culturally inflected and variable ways to characterize familial, caring relationships and we may multiply the categories of parenting, but Corlett's use of genealogy consistently throughout the book focuses on who are one's biological parents. This is not a matter of social construction.

Moreover, making genealogy necessary for an ethnic identity raises questions about how ethnicity is being defined here. Ethnicity is about a culture that a group has created through historical experience, it is about subjective life interpretations, conscious practices and beliefs, whereas race is defined in relation to physical appearance over which an individual has much less control. This is the traditional manner of differentiating between race and ethnic categories of identity. Ethnicity is about the subjective features of a people, the practices they have invented and carried forward, about their interpretation of their history and its meaning. On this view, one could perhaps become a member of an ethnicity if one is adopted into the group and shares its general practices, language, beliefs,

bodily comportment, manner of dress, and so forth. But race is more physical, objective, and less in an individual's power to control, alter, and change.

Corlett distinguishes his genealogical view from what he calls primitive race theories. Such theories espouse a form of "race biologism" that reduces identity to genetic makeup. Beyond the scientific inadequacy of such theories, Corlett rejects the category of race because it takes arbitrary features of the self as having important moral and political implications. Racial theory, he claims, cannot provide objective reasons for according such significance to the arbitrary physical characteristics used to distinguish races. He argues that the concept of race has an incompleteness problem in that genes alone (or whatever fundamental racial essence is thought to exist) can never sufficiently explain the substantive identities and identity groupings that it purports to explain. Corlett considers these to be indefeasible objections which ethnic categories do not have.

Many questions could be raised about Corlett's quick dismissal of race; for example, questions about whether the concept of race necessarily invokes a specious biologism, and whether the term as it is actually used today in everyday discourse actually assumes a moral significance to skin color rather than to the historical events that made skin color salient. Rather than developing these questions, here I want to develop another sort of question: Does Corlett's genealogical account truly succeed at evading race entirely? Note that his genealogical account of ethnicity mimics the biological character of racial identity in being objective, unchosen, and unchangeable. Corlett is uncomfortable with race because it highlights appearance, and appearance, he says, can be surgically altered. However, in a telling passage, Corlett considers the question of whether a child of European American parents who was born in a Latin country and grew up in a Latin culture, speaking the language and acculturated into its practices, and so on, could be classified as Latina. He says no, because we should not categorize someone "as a Latina who shares no morphological features of Latinas obtained from genealogy" and who thus would not be perceived as Latina or experience anti-Latina racism. This argument is telling because it shows that Corlett is assuming that the *effect* of genealogy is a certain morphology, and without the morphology Corlett does not want to characterize a person as Latina. This argument was given just a few pages after Corlett somewhat vehemently criticizes "well-intentioned but racist European American leftists [who] do not consider a person to belong to a particular ethnic group if that person does not . . . appear physically to be a member of the group" (132).

So on this point Corlett's account is somewhat muddled. The sharp and clear differentiation he wants to uphold between his ethnic account and a racialized account of Latino identity does not stand up to scrutiny. It looks as if he has incorporated important elements of a racial concept into his ethnic account, and these elements are actually critical to its ability to be objective and non-arbitrary as well as supportive of certain policy initiatives, such as affirmative action. It is morphology that elicits racism, and it is the experience of racism that mainly justifies affirmative action for Latinos, according to his argument. Thus his

insistence that his account of Latino identity is simply an ethnic but not a racial account exceeds plausibility.

In my own view, we cannot maintain a clear separation between the concepts of race and ethnicity in understanding Latino identity, and therefore it would be better to acknowledge the racialized nature of Latino ethnicity. If we are aiming at metaphysical accuracy, then the best descriptive account would be one that understands that Latino identity has some elements of ethnicity and also some elements of racialization. Most but not all Latinos have been racialized in the United States and experience a very specific form of racism that focuses not just on skin color but also on accent, bodily morphology, hair, and other physical features. My worry is that the ethnic account of Latino identity will disenable our ability to name this problem. It is not subsumable under the problem of antiblack racism; Mexican Americans, for example, who are not white and blond face a very specific form of racial stereotyping and racism.

Finally, let me turn to the normative comparisons that Corlett makes between the political status of European American women and that of people of color. Corlett breaks a longstanding taboo among progressives against making comparisons of harms suffered by various oppressed groups. It has long been considered unfruitful and unseemly to rate and rank oppressions. Such comparisons, it is thought, will only weaken unity, create bad feelings, and invite the oppressed to fight among ourselves for scraps of justice. I find myself appreciative of Corlett's courage in trying to think carefully and responsibly through the comparisons of status, and the differences of historical experience, and in this way adjudicate competing moral claims. One could argue that moral claims are not in competition with each other but are only put into competition by a government, such as ours, that creates a situation of scarcity for all justice concerns. Corlett assumes a situation of scarce resources and subsequently competing claims, and one might take issue with him for this reason, but this would not show that *all* such comparative analyses are illegitimate. Some comparisons might be important to pursue even without a context of scarcity for justice, for the purposes of understanding the specific nature of separate experiences of oppression.

Corlett's main comparative argument in the book is that Native Americans and African Americans have been the most wronged groups in U.S. history, and are therefore deserving of the most in the way of reparations and affirmative action, and he makes very plausible arguments here. He also asserts that Latinos have been wronged and are deserving of backward- as well as forward-looking reparative justice. On these topics he makes generally plausible arguments, except in two respects.

The first is that he tends to dismiss claims of immigrants because they have not suffered historically at the hands of the U.S. government, and he gives the example of Haitians. He says: "It is improper to lump together Africans and Native Americans, say, with recent immigrant Haitians or east Indians or the like for purposes of reparative justice, [because] the former groups (and several like them) were not a part of the systemic racist oppression in the United States" (136).

I suggest we need a more complex analysis here. The United States has not only been busily active in perpetrating oppression within its own national borders but has been a global imperialist player for more than a century. And this involves not simply U.S. based multinationals but the government. So if reparations are based on harms perpetrated by the Unted States, there are more claimants than African Americans and Native Americans. Corlett's argument lacks any acknowledgement of Empire.

The second problem is more significant in that it runs throughout the book in nearly every chapter. Corlett claims that European American women have been among the worst perpetrators of racism against people of color, that they do not deserve much reparative justice if any, that their rights to affirmative action should only come after every other deserving group has been fully met, and that the leadership of the feminist movement has been significantly racist. Corlett never provides any evidentiary support for his claims that European American women are among the worst perpetrators of racism, but we might guess that he is pointing to the ways in which white women are often the first line of offense—they are the bosses who hire, fire, and can make life generally miserable for the army of domestic servants in their employment who so often are women of color. White women can benefit economically and politically from white dominance, and they may well have been the main ones to benefit from affirmative action and other legislation designed to redress not only sexism but racism.

Like others, I would argue that we need more complex analyses to take all of this into account, as feminist theorists (especially transnational feminist theorists) have been doing for many years now. That is, we need an account not simply of white male dominance but also of white female dominance. And I would point out the wealth of feminist theory—some written by European American women—that has developed detailed political theories about the issues of white women's complicity, their complicated allegiances, and their moral position vis-a-vis structures of race and class hierarchy. Corlett does not cite any of this work, but repeatedly quotes Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a couple of other historical figures who put white women's interests over people of color. This is a little like letting George Bush represent the views of the people of the United States.

Corlett's account is further weakened by several problems. Corlett refers to the fact that the normative standards of physical female beauty are based on white women as if this is a comparative point to their advantage, without seeming to understand the fact that women generally are commodified and seen primarily as objects. Being the standard of beauty is no more beneficial than being a prize cow on the market. There are economic advantages that accrue to some white women because of this, but this does not constitute political equality or moral dignity. And the norms of beauty are changing now so that women of color get to compete to be the prize cow. Corlett spends a great deal of space on the racism of white women but almost never mentions the sexism of (some) men of color, which is a serious, life-threatening problem for women of color in every community. So the impression one gets is that gender politics and antisexist policy initiatives

concern only white women, when in reality it concerns all women and all communities. Affirmative action policies and reparations that are guided only by narrow understandings of racism, and also by undifferentiated conceptualizations of communities of color, will not redress the specific forms of oppression that women of color experience.

Corlett's account seriously underestimates the oppression of women generally. We have an epidemic of wife murder, wife battery, rape, sexual abuse, molestation, commodification, sexual objectification, and economic super-exploitation, and these are serious problems at every level and in every community. I am not arguing here that affirmative action for professional white women is the solution, but Corlett's analysis of comparative moral claims does not seem to acknowledge the seriousness of sexism as a general threat to women's lives and well-being.

Certainly we need a class and race analysis of the women's movements to uncover which strata of women are benefiting from moral policy initiatives. There are white women who are benefiting in larger numbers, but the majority of white women work in a gender-segregated workforce and are still underpaid. Most European American women are working-class women who work as secretaries, sales clerks, schoolteachers, hairdressers, and nurses, as well as hotel maids, factory workers, day-care teachers, waitresses, and janitors. Their lives do not resemble the cast of *Desperate Housewives* or *Sex in the City*. They are almost always underpaid at work and too often taken for granted at home. We do need more complex and specific arguments for affirmative action and other reparative justice claims that can acknowledge the real diversity in status and privilege within the category of women, the category of Latinos, and other oppressed categories as well. Thus, we do need to have the courage to make some comparative analyses as Corlett suggests, but we need more complex comparisons.