

LATIN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTION WITH READINGS

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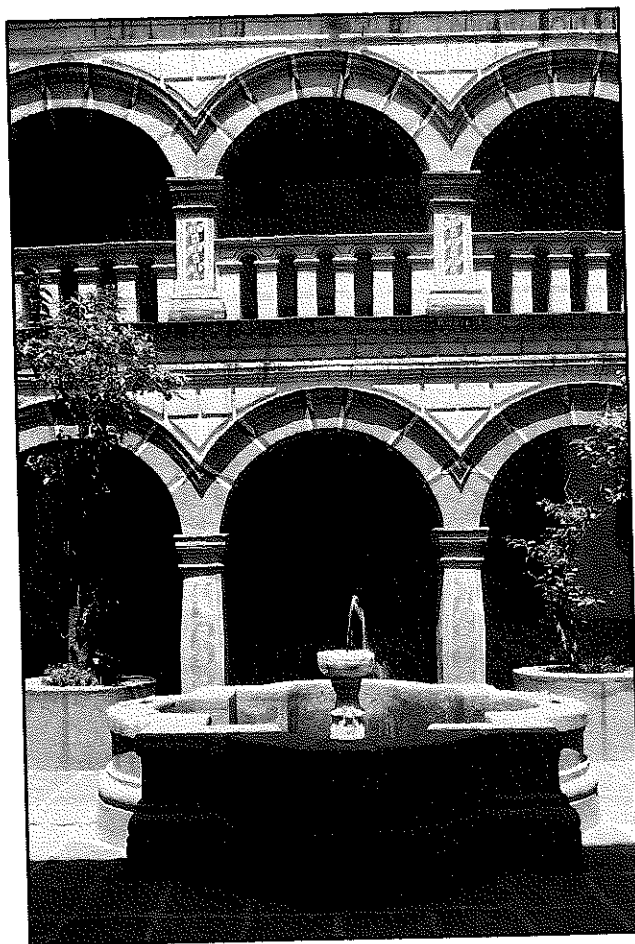
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REPLY TO SOR PHILOTHEA

JUANA INÉS DE LA CRUZ¹

My purpose in studying is not to write, much less to teach (this would be overbearing pride in my case), but simply to see whether studying makes me less ignorant. This is my reply and these are my feelings.

I have never written of my own accord, but only when pressured by others. I could truthfully say to them: *Vos me coegistis* ["You have compelled me" (2 Cor. 12:11)]. What is true and I will not deny (first because it is public knowledge and



Museo de las Intervenciones, Mexico City.

¹ From "Reply to Sor Philothea" in *A Sor Juana Anthology*, translated by Alan S. Trueblood, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 224–227, 210–212. Copyright ©1988 by The President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

then—even if this counts against me—because God, in His goodness, has favored me with a great love of the truth) is that from my first glimmers of reason, my inclination to letters was of such power and vehemence, that neither the reprimands of others—and I have received many—nor my own considerations—and there have been not a few of these—have succeeded in making me abandon this natural impulse which God has implanted in me—only His Majesty knows why and wherefore and His Majesty also knows that I have prayed to Him to extinguish the light of my mind, only leaving sufficient to keep His Law, since any more is overmuch, so some say, in a woman, and there are even those who say it is harmful. His Majesty also knows that, not succeeding in this, I have tried to inter my name along with my mind and sacrifice it to Him alone who gave it to me; and that this was precisely my motivation in taking the veil, even though the exercises and shared life which a community entails were repellent to the independence and tranquillity which my inclination to study needed. And once in the community, the Lord God knows and, in the world, he knows who alone had the right to know it, how hard I tried to conceal my name, and that he did not allow this, saying that it was temptation, which no doubt it was.² If I could repay you some part of what I owe you, my Lady, I think I would be paying you simply by relating this, for it has never escaped my lips before, except when addressed to one who had the right to know it. But I want you to know that, in throwing wide open to you the gates of my heart, exposing to your gaze its most tightly guarded secrets, my justification for the liberty I am taking is the great debt I owe to your venerable person and overly generous favors.

To go on with the account of this strong bent of mine, about which I want you to be fully informed, let me say that when I was not yet three, my mother sent a sister of mine, older than I, to learn to read in one of those establishments called *Amigas* [girls' elementary schools], at which point affection and mischievousness on my part led me to follow her. Seeing that she was being given lessons, I became so inflamed with the desire to learn to read, that I tricked the mistress—or so I thought—by telling her that my mother had directed her to give me lessons. This was not believable and she did not believe me, but falling in with my little trick, she did give me lessons. I continued attending and she went on teaching me, no longer as a joke, since the event opened her eyes. I learned to read in so short a time that I already knew how when my mother found out, for the mistress kept it from her in order to give her a pleasant surprise and receive her recompense all at one time. I kept still, since I thought I would be whipped for having acted on my own initiative. The person who taught me is still alive (may God preserve her) and can attest to this.

I remember that at this period, though I loved to eat, as children do at that age, I refrained from eating cheese, because someone had told me it made you stupid, and my urge to learn was stronger than my wish to eat, powerful as this is in children. Afterward, when I was six or seven and already knew how to read and write, along with all the sewing skills and needlework that women learn, I discovered that in the City of Mexico there was a university with schools where the different branches of

² A probable allusion to her confessor, Antonio Núñez de Miranda, S.J.

learning could be studied, and as soon as I learned this I began to deluge my mother with urgent and insistent pleas to change my manner of dress and send me to stay with relatives in the City of Mexico so that I might study and take courses at the university. She refused, and rightly so; nevertheless, I found a way to read many different books my grandfather owned, notwithstanding the punishments and reproofs this entailed, so that when I went to the City of Mexico people were astonished, not so much at my intelligence as at the memory and store of knowledge I had at an age at which it would seem I had scarcely had time to learn to speak.

I began to study Latin, in which I do not believe I had twenty lessons in all, and I was so intensely studious that despite the natural concern of women—especially in the flower of their youth—with dressing their hair, I used to cut four or five fingers' width from mine, keeping track of how far it had formerly reached, and making it my rule that if by the time it grew back to that point, I did not know such-and-such a thing which I had set out to learn as it grew, I would cut it again as a penalty for my dullness. Thus it would happen that it would grow back and I still would not know what I had set myself to learn, because my hair grew rapidly, whereas I was a slow learner, and I did indeed cut it as a punishment for my slowness, for I did not consider it right that a head so bare of knowledge should be dressed with hair, knowledge being the more desirable ornament. I became a nun because, although I knew that that way of life involved much that was repellent to my nature—I refer to its incidental, not its central aspects—nevertheless, given my total disinclination to marriage, it was the least unreasonable and most becoming choice I could make to assure my ardently desired salvation. To which first consideration, as most important, all the other small frivolities of my nature yielded and gave way, such as my wish to live alone, to have no fixed occupation which might curtail my freedom to study, nor the noise of a community to interfere with the tranquil stillness of my books. This made me hesitate a little before making up my mind, until, enlightened by learned persons that hesitation was temptation, I overcame it by the grace of God and entered upon the life I now pursue so unworthily. I thought I was escaping from myself, but, alas for me, I had brought myself along. In this propensity I brought my greatest enemy, given me by Heaven whether as a boon or a punishment I cannot decide, for, far from dying out or being hindered by all the exercises religion entails, it exploded like gunpowder. *Privatio est causa appetitus* [Privation arouses the appetite] had its confirmation in me.

I went back (I misspeak: I had never stopped); I went on with the studious pursuit (in which I found relaxation during all the free time remaining from my obligations) of reading and more reading, study and more study, with no other teacher than books themselves. One can readily imagine how hard it is to study from those lifeless letters, lacking a teacher's live voice and explanations. Still I happily put up with all those drawbacks, for the sheer love of learning. Oh, if it had only been for the love of God, which would have been the sound way, what merit would have been mine! I will say that I tried to uplift my study as much as I could and direct it to serving Him, since the goal I aspired to was the study of theology, it seeming to me a mean sort of ineptitude for a Catholic not to know all that can be found out in this life through natural means concerning divine mysteries. I confess that I am far

removed from wisdom's confines and that I have wished to pursue it, though *a longe*. But the sole result has been to draw me closer to the flames of persecution, the crucible of torture, and this has even gone so far as a formal request that study be forbidden me.

This was successful in one instance involving a very holy and very ingenuous prelate who thought studying was something for the Inquisition and ordered me to cease. I obeyed her (for the three months her right to so order me lasted) as regarded not taking a book in hand, but as to ceasing study altogether, it not being in my power, I could not carry it out. For, although I did not study from books, I did from everything God has created, all of it being my letters, and all this universal chain of being my book. I saw nothing without reflecting on it; I heard nothing without wondering at it—not even the tiniest, most material thing. For, as there is no created thing, no matter how lowly, in which one cannot recognize the *me fecit Deus* [God made me], there is none that does not confound the mind once it stops to consider it. Thus, I repeat, I looked and marveled at all of them, so much so that simply from the person with whom I spoke, and from what that person said to me, countless reflections arose in my mind. What could be the origin of so great a variety of characters and minds, when all belonged to one species? Which humors and hidden qualities could bring this about? If I saw a figure, I at once fell to working out the relationship of its lines, measuring it with my mind and recasting it along different ones. Sometimes I would walk back and forth across the front of a sleeping-room of ours—a very large one—and observe how, though the lines of its two sides were parallel and its ceiling horizontal, one's vision made it appear as if the lines inclined toward each other and the ceiling were lower at the far end, from which I inferred that visual lines run straight but not parallel, tending rather toward a pyramidal figure. And I asked myself whether this could be the reason the ancients questioned whether the world was spherical or not. Because, although it appears to be, this could be an optical illusion, and show concavities where there might in fact be none.

This type of observation would occur to me about everything and still does, without my having any say in the matter; indeed, it continually irritates me because it tires my mind. I thought the same thing occurred in everyone's case, and with writing verse as well, until experience proved me wrong. This turn, or habit, of mind is so strong that I can look upon nothing without reflecting on it. Two little girls were playing with a top in my presence. The moment I saw its movement and form, I began, in my crazy way, to consider the easy motion of the spherical form, and how, the impulse once given, it continued independently of its cause, since at a distance from the girl's hand, which originated the motion, the top went on dancing. Nor was this enough for me. I had flour brought and sifted, so as to tell, when the top danced over it, whether the circles its motion described were perfect or not. I discovered that they were simply spirals which moved farther and farther from the circular in proportion as the impulse wore down. Other girls were playing with pins—childhood's most frivolous game. I would approach and observe the shapes the pins took, and on noticing that three chanced to form a triangle, I would set about actually connecting them, recalling that this was the shape the mysterious ring of Solomon was said to have taken—that ring on which there were distant glimmerings and depictions of

the Most Holy Trinity, by virtue of which it worked such prodigious and marvelous things.³ This was also said to be the shape of David's harp, for which reason Saul was said to have been cured by its sound. The harps of our day have retained the same shape.

What could I not tell you, my Lady, of the secrets of Nature which I have discovered in cooking! That an egg hangs together and fries in fat or oil, and that, on the contrary, it disintegrates in syrup. That, to keep sugar liquid, it suffices to add the tiniest part of water in which a quince or some other tart fruit has been. That the yolk and white of the same egg are so different in nature, that when eggs are used with sugar, the yolks must be used separately from the whites, never together with them. I do not wish to tire you with such trivia, which I relate only to give you a full picture of my native turn of mind, which will, no doubt, make you laugh. But, Madam, what is there for us women to know, if not bits of kitchen philosophy? As Lupercio Leonardo said: One can perfectly well philosophize while cooking supper.⁴ And I am always saying, when I observe these small details: If Aristotle had been a cook, he would have written much more.

But to continue with the workings of my mind, let me say that this line of thought is so constant with me that I have no need of books. On one occasion, when, owing to some serious stomach trouble, the doctor forbade my studying, I obeyed for several days, but then I pointed out that allowing me books would be much less harmful, since my mental activity was so vigorous, so vehement, that it used up more spirits in a quarter of an hour than studying from books did in four days. So they agreed reluctantly to allow me to read. And not only that, my Lady: even my sleep was not free from this constant activity of my brain. In fact, it seems to go on during sleep with all the more freedom and lack of restraint, putting together the separate images it has carried over from waking hours with greater clarity and tranquillity, debating with itself, composing verses, of which I could draw up a whole catalogue for you, including certain thoughts and subtleties I have arrived at more easily while asleep than while awake, which I won't go into, not wishing to bore you. What has been said suffices for your own acumen and high-mindedness to grasp with clarity and full understanding my native disposition of mind and the origin, methods, and present state of my studies.

Even if these studies were to be viewed, my Lady, as to one's credit (as I see they are indeed celebrated in men), none would be due me, since I pursue them involuntarily. If they are seen as reprehensible, for the same reason I do not think I should be blamed. Still, though, I am so unsure of myself, that neither in this nor in anything do I trust my own judgment. Hence I leave the decision up to your supreme talent, and will abide by whatever it decrees, with no antagonism and no reluctance, for this has been nothing more than a simple account of my inclination to letters.

³ No such ring is mentioned in the Bible. An occult tradition is perhaps being drawn on.

⁴ The Aragonese poet Bartolome Leonardo de Argensola (1562–1631), not his brother Lupercio, is the source of the saying ("First Satire," lines 143–144).

I must admit, likewise, that although, as I have said, a truth such as this requires no exemplification; nevertheless the many precedents I have read about in both divine and humane letters have greatly assisted me. For I see a Debbora [Judges 4 and 5] setting up laws in both military and political spheres, and governing a nation that could boast so many learned men. I see a most wise Queen of Sheba [3 (1) Kings 10; 2 Paralipomenon (Chronicles) 9], so learned that she dared to challenge with enigmas the wisdom of the wisest of the wise, without suffering on that account any reproof. Rather, thanks to that, she becomes judge of the unbelieving. I see so many and such outstanding women, like Abigail [1 Kings (1 Sam.) 25], endowed with the gift of prophecy; others, like Esther, with that of persuasiveness; others, like Rahab [Josue 2], with piety; others, like Anna, mother of Samuel [1 Kings (1 Sam.) 1 and 2], with perseverance; and an infinite number of others, all possessing other gifts and virtues.

If I look among the Gentiles, the first I come upon are the Sybils, chosen by God to prophesy the principal mysteries of our faith—and to do so in such learned and refined verse that it holds wonderment itself in suspense. I see worshiped as goddess of learning a woman like Minerva, daughter of the first Jupiter and giver of all the learning of Athens. I see a Polla Argentaria helping her husband Lucan write the *Pharsalian Battle*.⁵ I see divine Tiresias' daughter, more learned than her father.⁶ I see a Zenobia, queen of the Palmyrans, as wise as she is brave.⁷ An Arete, daughter of Aristippus, learned in the extreme.⁸ A Nicostrata, inventor of Latin letters and extremely erudite in the Greek.⁹ An Aspasia of Miletus, teacher of philosophy and rhetoric and instructress of the philosopher Pericles.¹⁰

⁵ Statius asserts that Polla Argentaria assisted her husband, Lucan (A.D. 39–65), in correcting the first three books of his epic, *Pharsalia*.

⁶ Manto, a seer like her father, is mentioned by Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.7.

⁷ Zenobia, an ambitious ruler of Palmyra, A.D. 266–272, embarked on military campaigns in Asia Minor and Egypt.

⁸ Arete was tutor to her son, the philosopher Aristippus the Younger (fourth century B.C.).

⁹ Nicostrata, also called Carmenta, was an oracle credited by Saint Isidore with the invention of Latin letters (*Etymologies* 1.4.1).

¹⁰ This highly accomplished woman and renowned teacher of eloquence in Athens became the mistress of Pericles.