

MERCÈ RIUS AND DANIEL GAMPER

# Conversation with the philosopher Xavier Rubert de Ventós

**XAVIER RUBERT DE VENTÓS** Born in Barcelona on 25th August 1939. Degree in Law (1961) and doctorate in Philosophy (1964). Santayana Fellow at Harvard University in 1972. Professor of Aesthetics at the School of Architecture (Technical University of Catalonia) in 1970. Member for Barcelona in the Spanish Parliament from 1984 to 1986. Member of the European Parliament from 1986 to 1994. Resumed university teaching in 1995. Received the Creu de Sant Jordi (Saint George Cross) from the Generalitat (Government) of Catalonia in 1999.

**MERCÈ RIUS** and **DANIEL GAMPER** are lecturers in Philosophy at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

**We've heard that you started your university studies in the Faculty of Medicine but you soon left it to study Philosophy, although you first obtained a degree in Law. One of your best-known books, recently translated into German, is called *Per què filosofia?* (Why Philosophy?, 1983). So, why not philosophy from the start?**

When I told my father, who was a lawyer, that I was thinking of studying philosophy, he responded with an ironic, "Now, that's really something. I see you're not going to be happy with any kind of work that isn't in direct connection with the truth". I was discomfited by his observation. He knew what he was talking about. Since his student days at the republican Autonomous University in the nineteen-thirties, my father had had philosopher friends, in particular Josep Maria Calsamiglia and Jordi Maragall Noble, but also Joaquim Xirau, Eduard Nicol, Josep Ferrater Mora... and these were men who suffered during the Franco dictatorship, everything from academic ostracism through to exile. In any case, my father was right. I did want to be, as Ors had said at the beginning of the century, "a specialist in general ideas".





| Caribe River (Venezuela), Toni Catany (2004)



Then again, there was my enthusiasm for football. I played in the Barça boys' team ("more than a club", in those years of anti-Franco resistance). When you're fifteen and they tell you you're good, you're dazzled. The one who really rattled me, though, was my uncle, the philosopher Joan Teixidor, who said, "Think that by the time you're thirty you can be an old footballer or a young philosopher". He convinced me, nonetheless, and I enrolled for Medicine. The thing is, the phenomenon of life captivates me, affects me, moves me. I can't come to grips with the idea of being a bit of mindlessly accelerated nature. But medical practice wasn't for me. Then again, the question about everything that can't be stopped without it starting to stink is still, even now, the one that thrusts me into philosophical reflection. I confess that thinking puts me on edge and that I only do it if there's no alternative —when something, good or bad, amazes me, when it disturbs me, wrongfoots me... Then, yes, I do try to understand it... Either that or I watch telly, *tertium non datur*. In fact, a good part of *Per què filosofia?* comes from weekly sessions prepared for a television programme.

No, philosophy wasn't my first academic option and neither should I like to spend my old age as a "practising intellectual". I've seen more than one person of international renown (to be concise, Roland Barthes, to give one example) being completely taken aback by observations of some young person, for example my own, when I must have been about thirty. I recall that the only thing that seemed to matter to that gentleman, whom I admired, was not whether my questions or objections represented any clear understanding of his thought. In fact my aim in formulating them was little more than to "put matters on the table". And the only thing that seemed to concern him was whether I was for or against his ideas... I came to the conclusion that dying as an intellectual meant dying in a very vulnerable state. So, I don't know, maybe I'll end up being a rural landowner or something like that.

**And how did it happen that, when you started with philosophy, you went off to Madrid, to study under José Luis López Aranguren? Professor Aranguren worked mainly in the field of ethics, while your first writings just after you had obtained your degree were about aesthetics. We refer to your end-of-course thesis (*El arte ensimismado*, Art Engrossed, 1963) and your doctoral thesis (*Teoría de la sensibilidad*, Theory of Sensibility, 1969). Then came other works such as *La estética y sus herejías*, which was translated into English with the title *Heresies of Modern Art*.**

In fact, my first published writing was a letter to the editor of *La Vanguardia*, against NATO's decision to consider the Soviet invasion of Hungary as "an internal affair" so that they could shelve it. But my first theoretical article dealt with what I have later seen is called "the dissonance principle", which might be summarised thus: If you don't do what you believe in, you'll end up believing in what you do. It had nothing to do with aesthetics. My preferences even then were the same as now, the critique of knowledge and morality. However, my uncle's library gave me access to the classics of artistic modernity and, in particular, vanguard art, which was one of those things that irritated me and that provoked me to a theoretical response. I didn't share the smugness of the sixties and, of all the manifestations of the period, its aesthetic discourse was the most flimsy and the easiest to submit to criticism while, at the same time, this was my

initiation into academic work. Moreover, since, unlike matters of morality, aesthetics didn't impinge on me much, I was able to abide by the classical model of "disinterested knowledge". Later, for political reasons that are not relevant here, I didn't get the Chair in the Faculty of Philosophy but in the School of Architecture. There, as happened with my subsequent political experience, I really did come into contact with reality. In philosophy there is no possible application, while the politician is a man who makes decisions. Now, though architecture and politics had this advantage, the drawback was the impossibility of any dialogue that wasn't restricted to short-term interests. When I began to reflect on everything that is problematic, that resists our efforts to think about it, and I mean in strictly philosophical terms, I saw that people who listened to me weren't following me. And I knew I couldn't go on.

Just as I couldn't stand the rhetoric of the vanguard people, neither could I bear the ideological discourse of the different strands of Marxism at the time. I preferred to act and not argue about Marxist scholasticism. Hence, in the early sixties I ended up in the police station more than once. In Madrid they nabbed me in a demonstration with forty-two women when I was studying philosophy there. Aranguren represented the progressive standpoint. Above all, he was a great teacher. My apprenticeship with him was intense. And I discovered Eugeni d'Ors... I got the idea of going to study with Aranguren when I read his book *Catolicismo y protestantismo como formas de existencia* (Catholicism and Protestantism as Forms of Existence), which was published in the nineteen-fifties. It was after a stay in England where I had converted to Protestantism, if one may put it like that.

### **Are you speaking figuratively about this question of conversion?**

Well, it was a "conversion" —both mental and affective— that only lasted five months. I'd just read Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*. And I'd been struck by his radical disposition, which resembled what I'd later find in Kierkegaard, one of the writers to whom I have felt and still feel closest. It was a matter of the fear and trembling inspired by the *ganz anders* (Wholly Other). So I thought if there was a god, if such a boundless thing existed, at least it would be a good idea to have a direct, unmediated relationship, like the Protestants do. I went to some lectures on Protestantism... and ended up sipping tea after the religious service with the ladies of the parish and the reverend. Of course, our priests were quite tame as well except for the issue of celibacy because this was opportune in its eccentricity, which creates distance, in my view. Yet, in these social gatherings, the Anglican Church turned out to be even worse than the Catholic Church. So I unconverted.

### **You just mentioned Eugeni d'Ors, saying you discovered him thanks to Professor Aranguren. Wasn't there something a bit roundabout in going to Madrid to find out about the work of a Catalan thinker?**

Of course there was! Aranguren had written a book on Eugeni d'Ors' philosophy in his youth. Again, Ors' *Glosari* (Glossary), which had been brought out by the old publishing house Selecta also came into my hands. So there you have it, in the midst

of the generalised redundancy, Ors turned one's head and opened one's eyes. I was delighted. More than his theses, I was seduced by his twist on matters. He made me see things that I hadn't realised could be seen like that. Ors was impertinence personified in a straitjacketed country. If you'll permit a "nifty" turn of phrase, we are such a common-sense country that our madmen merely become artists. It's very difficult to generate enthusiasms here. Even so, I still got enthusiastic later on over another of our thinkers who had died very young: Joan Crexells. He taught me that nothing could be "absolved" from its determining factors —psychological, sociological, historical, et cetera— nor really "resolved" either, to give an *ad hoc* synthesis. For me, the gravest sin of all, now and always, is to postulate that man needs to believe in order to remain consistent. Hence my moral aversion to the application of principles and this formulation of "I never...". The morality I stand for doesn't include this "never".

**In the early seventies you were teaching at the universities of Harvard and Berkeley. Could you tell us what the atmosphere was like there?**

Yes, they appointed me Santayana Fellow at Harvard University. This is a position conceded each year to a young philosopher. The title of "Professor" is bestowed and the incumbent can use it thenceforth. The selection ceremony —a lunch-interrogation with the president of the university at the head of the table (and there the president has a very high institutional standing)— was the most solemn I've ever experienced. I'd been officially introduced by the poet Jorge Guillén, after my stay at Berkeley. So I went there having immersed myself in counterculture at the Californian university, where my classes were received with "Beautiful!" and where I enjoyed subversive performances by groups of hippies and feminists. (In Barcelona, the home-grown version of sexual liberation —more token than anything else, one must say— had its headquarters in the night club Boccaccio.) The contrast with Harvard in the year when I had to meet the teaching obligations of my new status was huge. I felt I was faced with voracious students who were ready to squeeze me dry and dredge all my knowledge. I had to work like a navvy preparing the classes they'd asked me to give on Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset, two writers with that touch of Spanish dramatics that I didn't share.

As is well known, in American eyes, a *hispano* can or must be interesting but not intelligent. For example, Harvey Cox was kind enough to write a prologue (he could read Spanish) for the English edition of my book on moral philosophy *Self-defeated Man*, and it was full of cliché folklore references and "Spanish anarchism". Cox, who was professor of Theology at Harvard, was a good example of the Christian progressive trend at the time: I also met Nozick, Quine, Rawls, MacIntyre... Nelson Goodman was on sabbatical and they installed me in his office.

**What was your impression of Rawls' political thought? Did he influence your own liberalism?**

I didn't draw any theoretical conclusions about Rawls while I was at Harvard because I read his *A Theory of Justice* on the plane on my way back home. Moreover, we didn't

see each other much. I only had lunch with him a couple of times, once in the company of Norbert Wiener, who did indeed impress me deeply. Among the moral philosophers, the one I liked most was MacIntyre, who didn't teach at Harvard but at Boston University. As for the liberals, the great names, as far as I'm concerned, are John Stuart Mill and Isaiah Berlin. In Rawls' work I find social-democratic goodwill *à la recherche* of a credible-pragmatic formulation. But I know where he's trying to go. With Rawls, the effect was exactly the opposite of what I've told you about with regard to Ors. I accept his theses on political liberalism but the path he describes doesn't "fertilise" me.

**But you've always said you were a Kantian. So aren't you attracted by Rawls' very well grounded normative apparatus?**

In Kant, I'm not so much attracted by the normative aspects of his work as by his constant awareness of our own limits and, along with that, all the questions we can't answer though we can't stop asking them either. I am a lawyer —at least I have a degree in Law— who is allergic to the law. For years, I suffered the distress of moving around the world without papers because the Franco authorities had confiscated them. (On one journey to England I had serious problems because of not having a passport.) Even today, I feel absurd gratitude towards the policeman who asks for my driving licence and then lets me go without penalty. I'm sure my allergy to the law comes from this, even though I've always enjoyed the optimum social conditions for appreciating it. I mean the rich try to be above it and the poor try to manage beneath it. The law doesn't mean the same thing for everyone. In short, it doesn't make me feel as soothed as it should, so in this regard I don't see myself as a liberal. I don't deny, to return to Rawls, that normativism constitutes the most appealing aspect of his work, although for me it is totally alien. Whereas I like reading some fascist writers such as Céline, Drieu La Rochelle and there's another one whose name escapes me right now...

**Ernst Jünger, perhaps?**

No, no way! In his *Paris Diaries*, he describes how he kept the last letters of people who were condemned to death by the Nazis during the war and, with icy elegance, justifies the convenient circumstance that they never reached their destinies. In contrast, Drieu La Rochelle and Céline accept their human condition without making excuses. I too am a man and don't like being one either. I feel strange about it, bad, uncomfortable, hung-up, perplexed. If my philosophy has been of any "use" to me, it's been to situate my monstrous condition within an order of general discourse. I feel affinities with Céline, Drieu and more and more with Marx. I'm more radical ideologically. Once I was surprised by people who became radical when they got old. But it's happening to me too. I think that if, to cap it all, someone's created man, if there's a God that lets a mother see her child die in her arms in a bombing attack, I don't want to know him.

In *Dios entre otros inconvenientes* (God among Other Stumbling Blocks, 2000) I focused on the theme of religion, the "myth", as a crystallisation of atavisms that

reconstructs —on the symbolic level— instinctive solidarity that has been undermined by the development of “logos” (and Bergson has bequeathed us a magnificent description of the process). Hence, for example, goose pimples associated with physical defencelessness took on a very different slant when they were linked with religious emotion: atavism was transformed into a sense of the sublime. Nonetheless, given present-day circumstances, tragic religions might very well be needed so we can keep going. Or mysticism or fanaticism. A moral socialised God no longer responds.

**Could you tell us now, please, about the Barcelona-New York Chair of which you were one of the founders?**

This was an exciting experience. First of all, I had to learn to negotiate with the Americans. We got the Chair started in 1979 in the midst of a lot of difficulties since we only had the small amount of money from the grant that Pasqual Maragall was able to give us as Lord Mayor of Barcelona. And we had to get people interested in New York, where you can choose from among an infinite number of cultural events every day. But the adventure lasted seven years. The idea of learning our language was very well received there. I remember that we spoke Catalan with Ambler Moss, Carter’s ambassador to Panama and signatory to the only progressive treaty pertaining to the area. If I’m not mistaken, he’d been a consul in Barcelona. As far as I’m concerned, I was lucky with the people I met: Susan Sontag, Richard Sennet, David Stella or, in other words, the New York intellectual circle. All sorts of people came from Catalonia to participate in conferences and congresses, from politicians like Jordi Pujol through to singers like Raimon, and our plastic artists as well, of course. In brief, the experience was a good preparation for my stage in politics, which I embarked upon after the first three years of the Chair’s being operative, first as a member of the Spanish parliament and then in the European parliament. Thanks to the good offices of Monsignor Hickey, archbishop of Washington, I managed to organise the presence of Monsignor Rivera, archbishop of San Salvador, at a congress I organised in Washington so that Felipe González could negotiate with Ronald Reagan the terms of Spain’s entry into NATO.

**We’d like to deal in some detail with the different facets of your work, which embraces a range of different philosophical perspectives (ethics, aesthetics, epistemology), passing through political reflection with books like *Europe y otros ensayos* (Europe and Other Essays, 1986), *El laberinto de la hispanidad* (The Hispanic Labyrinth: Tradition and Modernity in the Colonization of the Americas, 1987) and *Nacionalismos* (Nationalisms, 1994), through to some incursions into the threshold territory between philosophy and literature with *Ofici de Setmana Santa* (Holy Week Office, 1978), *El cortesà i el seu fantasma* (The Courtier and His Ghost, 1991), *Manies i afrodismes* (Crazes and Aphrodisms, 1993)... But, since we don’t have enough time for that, we’ll ask you to tell us what your own preferences are.**

I’m not interested in mysticism or physics, but only in what lets me intervene while still having its own logic, like organic tissue for example. I’m interested in phenomena that, although they are not boundless or incomprehensible, are beyond me in that they

are not amenable to reduction by any analysis I might engage in. In this sense, my belonging to a lineage perplexes me more than the things that come out of me, by which I mean whatever I might have as my own or something original. Everything that is beyond me because I am a result of it rather than a generator —milieus that I do not know and shall not know: beliefs, routines, convictions, inertias— all of this amazes me, surprises me, disconcerts me. This is why I've sought the lesser clauses of the ego. In *De la modernidad* (On Modernity, 1980), which I believe is my best book, I called it a "non-Fichtean ego". But I took my first steps in this direction with the book with which I feel most personally identified, *Moral y nueva cultura* (Self-defeated Man. Personal Identity and Beyond, 1971). I gave it that title in Spanish because, at that time, description was assigned to "ethics" and prescription to "morality". Now I'd say it was an attempt to counter the inertias of our species instead of being limited to merely describing them. I start out from the assumption that these inertias occur at both natural and cultural levels without there being, on the other hand, any clear distinction between them. Nature and culture increasingly overlap in psychological time and not just in historical time. The latter is what happened before, when what was thought to be natural was revealed as cultural. And then we have the contrary, because much of what we believe to be cultural has ended up showing us its socio-biological roots... This would be one of the two essays I'm thinking of writing: one on the transfers between nature and culture and the other on the "principle of incompetence".

In *Moral y nueva cultura* I took the part, against the "man of principles", of the person who knows how to make a game of circumstances. The different spheres for which we opt throughout our lives involve the sacrifice of many others. Hence, in opposition to the tendency to universalise one's own situation, we have the duty not to forget that we are walking over the remains of all the other abandoned options. For example, in spite of the traditional sermons on the socialising power of the family, or recent appeals to demographic decline and the need to "make a country" (as we say in Catalonia), the fact is that having children is the most antisocial thing in the world. When you have them, you want them to live out their lives in better conditions than other people have. It's no problem if that goes against your fundamental ideas. You hope that what you preach with all your heart will not come about and, moreover, you feel justified in it. Thus, in order not to cause more harm than the inevitable, one has to be very aware of the partiality of one's choices. One has to know how to participate in the game rather than taking shelter behind principles. Now, the game I'm speaking of has nothing "playful" about it. Before playing, one has to discover the degree of attention and inattention that each person or each thing —morally— requires. If I press too hard on the bird I've picked up I'll end up with just the corpse of the bird in my hands. Yet, from the position of the one who "is played" instead of being the player, I'll know how to understand even the options that conflict most with my own. Another example: I want independence for Catalonia precisely because I understand the standpoint of the Spanish state, and it is everything that is legitimate, and nothing more nor less than that, about that perspective that riles my fellow citizens because the interests of both parties do not coincide or even complement each other as once happened.



**Does this understanding vis-à-vis the options of the other foster tolerance?**

I'd say it does. But note that I haven't referred to tolerance but rather have raised the moral question in epistemological terms. Basically, it's a matter of maintaining the precise distance that knowledge requires. This distance regarding the world that surrounds one can be attained in different ways. One that has always interested me is that which is characteristic of the reactionary (and I referred to this earlier when I was talking about some fascist writers). Another is that of the person in love. The erotic dimension gives you absolute distance with regard to the world in general. Just as Sartre said of *la nausée*. Humanised, "gestaltized"... objects suddenly cease to be so. In my case, my own face has only seemed strange when I've been immersed in an amorous mess.

**What are your views on the phenomenon that's now being referred to as "loss of values"?**

As if values were something that might exist or not! The "values" of a period or of a person are, if anything, the precipitate of the rhythms of transformation that period or person has undergone. In this sense, not very long ago, history was still happening slowly but, all of a sudden, there were events occurring that were very real even if we hadn't dared to imagine them. This is precisely the kind of experience that I have a burning desire to think about. This is, I repeat, the occurrence in psychological time of what used to be protracted over historical time. Who was able to foresee the fall of the Berlin Wall? And what about human parthenogenesis, or cloning? We never even dreamed it could happen! But now destiny can be designed in such a way that design becomes our destiny. And to the extent that spheres that are defined as natural fall outside of this definition because they can be manipulated, one of the disturbing questions is who then controls them? The autonomous individual, multinationals, or American imperialism?

I'm imagining a son who has his own family visiting his elderly mother in hospital where she lies in an irreversible coma and the doctor asks if he'd prefer them to pull out the plugs before or after the holidays. Here, the traditional response of "we'll abide by the judgement of science" doesn't hold. We are the ones who have to make the decision. If somebody has to kill her it must be us, the people who love her most. Here we have a huge limitation to our enlightened mentality. This was a great ideal but just as we are not able to come to grips with the challenges we have brought about in our social life, neither is the enlightened response able to deal with our fears. Hence, you have to take on board the fact that you live in a world where you can decide a lot of things that you'd prefer not to be able to decide —going against your reiterated appeal to freedom.

In these circumstances, speaking judgementally of the crisis or loss of values means being ignorant of the narrative structure in which the transformation takes place. This is why I think the most sensible standpoint is the critical one. One must describe the evaluations themselves to the extent that, conversely, there are no pure facts that are independent of values. This is why I like to speak "naturalistically" of values...

**Forgive the interruption. Don't you think it's counterproductive to defend the independence of Catalonia with this kind of argument? At least for strategic reasons. Doesn't it risk leading to more opposition than support? Furthermore,**

**how do you imagine your possible readers will take your socio-biological digressions, not to mention your female readers with a certain feminist sensibility?**

Maybe. I'm sorry about that. But I have to speak from the place where I am, and the most I can do is to try and explain it. Strictly speaking, it's the only thing I can explain. I was referring to this with the "non-Fichteian ego". When you try to gain a little understanding of everything that's beyond you, the only way of approaching it consists in taking yourself as a symptom. I don't go looking for theoretical sutures and neither do I think I should go looking for them, as I have said. I settle for explaining the reaction I have to each thing because I understand that only my reactions are able to bring out —objectively— what the world that impinges on me is like. I am nothing but this repercussion. Again, if there is any chance of being effective or of conveying something worthwhile, it comes through this attempt. The religious person calls it "testification", and I prefer to call it "symptomatic". Again, what the hell! I'm staying with the lines of Calderón de la Barca: "If I don't say what I think, what's the point of being mad?".

**One last question: is it possible to capture a particular character of Catalan philosophy that would distinguish it from Spanish philosophy, in spite of the ruptures that our tradition has suffered because of political causes? We believe you've given us to understand that this is what you think. We'd propose, then, characterising it through its pronounced leaning towards aesthetics —which is even evident in our thinkers who are lovers of theology— but also towards a certain positivism —not always exempt of romanticism— with a clear preference for biology. Would you agree with this?**

No question about it. This is so much the case that I feel like the problematic compatibility between romanticism and the bidet. Neither angel nor beast, I represent the modest lifelong attempt to take everything at once, with a bit of sense, with dignity or at least knowing what shame is. I work or, better said, I am a version of this character-type you've just described —living uncomfortably in this skin, in these circumstances of ours.

**One last footnote: do you think philosophy can help people to be happy?**

Not me. It just helps me to survive. To survive. That yes !!

■ **Books in translation**

*Self-Defeated Man. Personal Identity and Beyond*, New York, Harper&Row, 1975 [original title: *Moral y nueva cultura*]; *Heresies in Modern Art*, Columbia University Press, 1980 [original title: *La estética y sus herejías*]; *The Hispanic Labyrinth: Tradition and Modernity in the Colonization of the Americas*, New Brunswick, Rutgers 1991 [original title: *El laberinto de la hispanidad*]; *Philosophie ohne Eigenschaften*, Aachen, Ein-Fach-Verlag, 1999 [original title: *Per què filosofia*].