

# reseñas de hojalata

## “In democracies, we are all politicians”: Fernando Savater

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### Presentation

In October of 1999, Spanish philosopher, Fernando Savater, visited Manizales, at the invitation of *Jornadas Juveniles Latinoamericanas*, a space which emerged from a children's group that created the Latin American Theater Festival, in 1993. The same group, in 1997, separated themselves to facilitate a meeting, led by Pedro Zapata, and organized by youth between the ages of 12-25, so as to bring together young creators from the entire continent.

This interview<sup>2</sup> of Fernando Savater was analyzed within the framework of said visit. Two decades later, *Escribanía* reproduces this dialogue with one of the most widely-read philosophers on the

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- 2 One edited version of this interview was published in the *El Espectador* newspaper, in the Tuesday, October 26, 1999 edition, in the Culture section, on page 1-C, with the title *La ética está en cada uno*.

continent. In this interview, he discusses ethics, morals, religion, education, internet, youth, and politics. His most recent book, *La peor parte. Memorias de amor*, was published in 2019 by Ariel, and contains his reflections, following the 2015 death of his wife, Sara Torres Marrero, with whom he had lived for 35 years.

## Savater: *superstar* philosopher

Not in vain has Fernando Savater been called “the philosopher of the obvious”. Many things that he has said seem so evident that they are too simple to come from the mouth of one of the most widely-recognized intellectuals of the close of the century. However, as he himself indicates, “the truth is not always brilliant, but it is always necessary”.

His speech is clear, precise, cordial, and brimming with humor and irony. He says nothing more than is necessary, and listens attentively. He says that language is humanity’s true genetic code, that awareness of the imminence of death is that which makes man human, in all dimensions, and that ethics serve to make us happy: “Joy is being reconciled with the world, without falling into the trap of thinking that everything is going well. To be happy is to be content, because existing is better than not existing”.

His thoughts are recognized worldwide. He combines his work as a philosophy professor, at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, with his vocation as a writer. He has written nearly 50 books, which have been translated into 18 languages, and although he declines to attend 90% of the conferences to which he is invited, he participates in an average of three per week.

He says that he has no normal life because he spends so much of his time traveling, despite his dislike for this activity. However, when he is with his wife and son, Amador, in San Sebastián, the city in which he was born 52 years ago, he spends his time reading, writing, and watching movies. He also visits the racetrack and invites friends, some of which have accompanied him since high school, to his home to drink whiskey. “I was once a drunk, and visited the taverns often, but with time, you leave your vices, one by one. One ceases to be worthy of them”, he says.

He just published *Las Preguntas de la vida*, a type of introduction to philosophy for undergraduate students. The book required such a great deal of research that he plans to take a sabbatical next year. However, Nietzsche’s centenary of death looms, one of his preferred philosophers, and on the occasion of this ephemeris, he has a project in mind that may affect his plan to relax.

An insatiable reader, friend of the controversial Cioran, and participant in drug legislation, he wishes to clarify that he is neither confessor, counselor, nor fortune teller. He possesses no formulas or recipes to improve education or become more ethical, and prefers posing questions to providing answers. He says he has no intention of becoming immortal. He is pragmatic and does not believe in “supernatural folklore”. He cares little for the way in which he will be remembered after his death, and simply hopes to be useful to those with which he lives. “If they speak of me after I die, I would hope they viewed me as a person who attempted to conserve certain ideals from the Illustration, in a century that is not always terribly illustrated”.

Savater came to Colombia to discuss century's end, ghosts and myths, and to reflect upon ethics, education, and the citizens of the next millennium. However, he clarifies that he does so ironically, in his insistence that it is impossible to know anything about the future. "Ghosts and myths are not a scientific perspective. I am not a futurologist. I do not know what the world will be like in one hundred years any more than I do in three months. The important thing is that we have sufficient perspective to perform projects and for the ideals of the present. The future must serve as something that "pulls us, and is beyond our present, but cannot be seen as something which is defined, because nothing is written".

## Does our society continually overlook ethics?

No. I do not think this at all. Ethics are unstable, like the tables of the law. They are a reflection of each individual's freedom. So, in all eras, there are those who consider their freedom, and others who are occupied by routine, the activities of others, or whatever appeals to them. When we discuss ethics in societies, we think of violence, of terrible, appalling things that happen, but this has always been the case. At no point in time has everything been ethical or moral, or have there been more good people than bad. The important thing is to consider the individual relationship that each of us has with ethics, and not the relationship between ethics and society.

## Then what is your opinion of the recurrent phrase regarding the "values crisis"?

This commonly emerges from a lack of comprehension of the meaning of values. Values are always in crisis, because they emerge therefrom. If I walk down the street, and see a perfect world, I will develop no courage, but if I see a large man beating a child to take his candy, courage surges forth, in protest of that which is and that which should be. The gap between what is and what should be is a crisis, and this permits value development. What people are trying to say is that they remember that, in the past, children respected their parents more, or that women wore longer skirts. These are vanities, but are often repeated, like all empty things repeated by those who delight in the delivery of moralizing sermons.

## There are those who relate, morally and ethically, to religiosity. In recent years, religions, cults, and such beliefs have proliferated. What is your analysis of this tendency?

Ethics seek a better life, and religion seeks something better than life. These are radically different ideas. New religions do not break from the Catholic past -- they replace it. This is a variety of the same thing: instead of attempting to develop further reflection and autonomy, they change their garb to that of irrational mystics. People seek authorities to lead them because they are unable to abide their own freedom. The attitude of the vassal of a divinity is contrary to the autonomy of ethics. A person who is ethical, but believes that they must

fulfill certain commandments in order to go to Heaven, as a prize, or in order to avoid Hell, as a punishment, is not moral at all. A moral person does not act in hopes of repayment. They do so because they are convinced that what they do is best for their life.

If what people seek is authority, how do we reconcile authority and discipline with freedom, in daily relationships, including father-son or teacher-student relationships?

Authority is essential in a stage of life. Authority means “to help grow”, and for this reason, when someone is growing, it is right for parents and teachers to help them, not only intellectually, but also, they must serve as resistance: human beings grow like ivy, supporting ourselves on that which provides resistance. Discipline is the path to make us aware of freedom, because freedom is unnatural. Nobody is born free, one becomes free. However, if authority and discipline continue beyond this “help to grow”, they become a type of perpetual tyranny, that seeks to treat everyone like children. Today, we live in a spiritual Disneyland, in which teachers and parents always want to seem pleasant, although this sometimes implies relinquishing their authority. In order to compensate for this, the state must become more and more paternalistic, when it should be the opposite. Democracies, instead of being created by responsible adults, are created by those who protest that the authority has not done enough for them, instead of considering what they can do to improve the system.

From your perspective, what threat do you consider relevant today for the future of humanity?

I think that a big problem that affects citizens is the fact that there are six billion of us. We can no longer live in tribes, as in times past, and problems have become more and more global. Globalization is considered negative, like drugs, guns, or finances, but we continue to believe that, if there can be global justice for cases such as that of Pinochet, there can be global humanitarian interventions that protect human rights. If we are aware that we live in the world, the challenge is to consider the point to which we should develop institutions, governments, and forms of protection, on a global scale, on which multiculturalism is protected, promoted, and respected.

Then what attitude should characterize an ethical citizen who is aware of these millennium-close challenges?

The development of the habit of critical reflection on one’s own life. Not taking for granted the situation in which one lives, whether good or bad. They are both natural and eternal. One need not accept the permanent existence of crime, misery, or abandoned children living in the sewers. These things, just as with the good, began at a given moment, and may be ended. As such, one must be aware of those things that may be achieved, when they reflect, and unite with another -- not that of “society is so bad that there’s no reason for me to bother worrying”.

## Is education tasked with molding this type of citizen?

Education is very important, but is not the only responsible factor. The uneducated advance with a burden that impedes their ability to keep up. Thus, one must choose between two evils. It will always be preferable to attend the worst school than to not attend. Still, a large part of education remains in the hands of the religious. I think that there should be religious education for those parents who desire this, but there should also be a secular alternative. The government should be concerned with solid, public education, available to all, which responds to the ideals of the open, universalizable school. At this point in time, education that boasts a majority clerical viewpoint must be seen as an unfortunate setback.

## Do new technologies imply an educational revolution?

New technologies are instruments, not panaceas that resolve everything. There are those who believe that, once children have a computer connected to the internet, they will enter into the kingdom of knowledge, but things are not so simple. There are also those who view the internet as apocalyptic, which is also untrue. The internet can be dangerous, in terms of time loss, for those who do not know what they are looking for, but can also be very useful. With internet, that which occurred with dictionaries now occurs: there were parents who were afraid for their children to look up bad words or see images of naked people. It is like a kitchen knife: it can either cut your finger or an onion.

## Has the power of education in societal change been overstated?

Education is essential, but is not the solution to everything. For example, violence arises from structural problems that correspond not only to a lack of education. What is interesting is that many people trust in the power of education, but worry because, in their countries, there is well-substantiated education, and they do not know what part of their taxes correspond to the educational sector. Quality education is costly, and money must be contributed by all of society for it to be provided to all, in adequate conditions, for teachers to have time to study, keep abreast of their fields, and have opportunities for exchange, etc. In Latin countries, there is a secular contempt for the teaching profession: teachers are much more important than bankers, but this is not reflected in social appreciation. It is false that, with the mere pedagogical vocation, and without resources, teachers can play their role well. For example, surgeons also have a great deal of passion for their profession, but they do charge good money. Education is not based solely on money, but it does demand resources in order for there to be small numbers of children in classes, and personalized teachers for individual cases to be examined.

## Education is tied to the topic of youth, which you say has been exaggerated...

Hyper-juvenilization, in large part, is of commercial interest, because, at this time, there are many youths with buying power, and the young have very active lives, guided by desire and impulse, while adults, more or less, know what it is they want. Further, there is the horror

myth of physical decadence: in all eras, it has been said that it is better to be young than old, but therein is an obligation to be young, and he who is not young is ill. There is no concrete view of old age. An old person has no reason to feel young. An old person must feel old, and yet be useful. This occurs owing to the tendency to seek authority figures who direct and control, to keep us immerse in a perpetual youth, entertain, and protect us. One must be young when it is time, and thereafter, what follows is unnatural, although clearly we all have our childish dimensions...

## What is your opinion of Colombia's situation?

Although for those who live in the Basque country complaining is a way of life, compared to the situation in Colombia, we live in paradise. In the entirety of ETA history, there have been 900 dead, which you amass here in a mere number of months. What we have done in the Basque country is try to avoid and cut off the wave of violence before it reaches an unmanageable level, and becomes entrenched in society. In the Colombian case, I see that the situation is much more complex, because it is not just a single group participating in the conflict, and there are economic and social factors, such as drug trafficking, that aggravate the situation. However, I do believe that manifestations, such as marches, provided these become a permanent attitude of protest, indicate that society is reacting, and that it does not expect the solution to the conflict to fall from the clear blue sky.

The difference between democracy and authoritarianism is that, in dictatorships, a small group seizes the political world, while in democracies, we are all politicians. If we say that all politicians are bad, that is our fault, because we chose poorly, or stopped intervening and participating, or did not remove the corrupt or useless. In democracy, nobody is relieved from their political situation, and in this sense, I believe that marches are a step toward taking an active part in this political life.

I see that there is a generalized desire, in the immense majority, to achieve peace. Colombia is a fundamentally rich, but unjust country, as this wealth is imperfectly distributed. However, it is wealthy, especially considering that, at this time, there are countries with inviable economies. Thus, one does not understand, in a country like this, why such intense violence occurs. People are convinced that something must be done, but the spark of social decision or political strength is lacking, as is a state that functions as such. One cannot continue to pray to the Virgin to fix things. The state exists to monopolize violence and impede vengeance and the struggles of all against all.