

In Search for Identity Outside Miami
Interview with Jorge J. E. Gracia

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Interviewer: Iván Jaksić, from Stanford University.

[Jaksić] “Jorge, let me begin by asking when, and under what circumstances, you came to the US?”

[Gracia] “I came in 1961, I turned nineteen the day I arrived here. It was a result of the situation in Cuba, the Cuban revolution that started in January of 1959. Things had been moving toward the left, and after the Bay of Pigs invasion, things changed drastically in Cuba. Before, there was always the possibility of openness, some more democratic ideas, some freedoms. But after the Bay of Pigs things deteriorated heavily. The regime took a turn to a more radical approach. The situation became impossible for people who disagreed, and at that time, I disagreed violently with the situation. So I decided to leave. I took the last boat – the last ferry boat – out of Cuba to West Palm Beach on July 17th.”

[Jaksić] “The age of eighteen is interesting because you are old enough to have a sense of nationality, a sense of belonging, a sense of community, and at the same time it is an age in which you make drastic choices if you have to because you have convictions. I wonder, how did you handle that experience: on the one hand, being attached to a community and to a country, and on the other being so angry about it?”

[Gracia] “It was very traumatic as you can imagine. Of course, not as traumatic, I would say, as it was for someone who was, perhaps, forty-five and felt that he or she had to leave. But at eighteen, all of a sudden I felt that I couldn’t continue in Cuba, yet, of course, the only place I knew was Cuba. My only language was Spanish, I had a very rudimentary knowledge of English. I had never been outside of Cuba. This was an enormous step outside of the place where I had lived all my life. I had just a few friends who had emigrated to the U.S. before this time, and some of them helped me when I got here. But it was extraordinarily traumatic. I agonized about it, but finally said, ‘What is my future here?’ There was no future, clearly there was none. I felt I had to leave. In a sense, I abandoned everything I had known. Of course, I came without any money at all; they allowed five dollars. I remember the moment in which that boat was leaving the Havana Bay. It was so extraordinary, it is a moment I can never forget because my family were on the pier, waving.... Everybody was there, and it was extremely moving. Late in the afternoon of the previous day we had been asked to go into the pertinent offices to see that everything was alright – to be cleared to leave the island – early the next morning, and it took all day to process us, even though there were not many of us. Around four o’clock we went into the boat and it started moving, very slowly, as ships do. All of a sudden, I realized that the world as I knew it was ending. I felt these things on my face and they were tears coming down! Yes, it was a very strong moment for me. Boats are particularly good at delaying departure, so it slowly moved out and I saw the fort of El Morro which is a symbol of Cuba and Havana. And slowly – and the sunset then was there – it was perfect – a perfect situation for sentimentality and nostalgia. Then slowly Cuba disappeared. Havana, you could observe the skyline from the perspective of the boat. Then it faded in the dusk, and then, of course, there was open sea, and

the night, and I wondered, ‘What’s next?’”

[Jaksić] “So, when did you turn to philosophy? Was it in a college in the U.S. or at the graduate level? When did you realize that this was something that you really loved and liked?”

[Gracia] “When I came to the U.S. and went into college my knowledge of English was practically non-existent and here I was thrown into a college environment trying to carry on – it was a tremendous shock. I realized right away that I needed to learn the language so I said, ‘I’m going to isolate myself from all the Latinos or Hispanics that are in the college and I am going to associate only with Anglos until I learn English well.’ And when I started taking courses, one of them was English literature and another was on the English language – composition and so forth. Imagine how I did on them, it was dreadful. But I became fascinated with the language. It was the first time that I had really been exposed to a different language, a different way of thinking about the world and this was hypnotizing to me. I was also fascinated by the literary aspect. We read Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, imagine that, without knowing English! I guessed at its meaning, I suppose. But the richness of the language, the meter, the music, the rhythm, was just captivating to me. So what did I do? Well, what was the most difficult thing that you could have done at that time? First of all, I had declared a math major when I came in because I was a science type. Then, I took these courses. And then I said, ‘Math is not that difficult, it is the same language all over the world!’ So, what did I do? I changed my major from math to English. Can you believe it? One of the things that fascinated me about this exposure to the language was what makes a work of literature great. I wanted to know that. Unfortunately, the courses that I took in English literature did not stress that, they stressed the ideas. The teachers always talked about the ideas in the works. Never about what makes a poem so unique, aesthetically captivating, what makes a novel so fabulous. Then I took a course in philosophy and realized that, if you are going to talk about ideas, it is not in literature that you do it, but in philosophy. Although people in comparative literature today think that they’re doing philosophy, but I didn’t think that was right, so I moved to philosophy.”

[Jaksić] “And at what point did you decide to do medieval philosophy?”

[Gracia] “Let me backtrack a bit. Wheaton College is a very religious, fundamentalist college – and of course, I was not a fundamentalist – I was Catholic – and on the other hand my Catholicism always has been a waving type: I’m a roaming Catholic. At thirteen, was the first time that I decided religion just doesn’t make any sense. I don’t think that I’ve ever been an atheist but I certainly have been anti-Catholic, a non-Catholic, a this or that, but that doesn’t mean that I have adhered to other religions; I have always found that if one’s going to be religious, being Catholic probably is what makes the most sense. But, I have certainly had periods in my life when I have not been Catholic and when I have been anti-Catholic and other periods when I have been very devoutly Catholic and where I have been a kind of an existential Catholic. I had an existential period in college, when I read *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Kierkegaard and so forth – oh, that was an extraordinary period. By the way, this is the sort of thing that Holmes was, and probably he enticed me into it. That pointed me toward the scholastics, particularly Thomas Aquinas. I have never been a disciple of Aquinas or an apologist for him or anything of the sort, but I became interested in him at Wheaton because, if you look at the history of Christian thought, there are very authors who have the stature of Aquinas; and that rationality, that careful thinking, and so on. So there was a group of us at Wheaton – some of them Protestant and some Catholic – that actually took a particular liking to Thomas. But this is not really the reason why I became interested in medieval philosophy. The reason was that I

thought the basic concepts of philosophy were framed in the Middle Ages –most of the concepts that we have, like essence, nature, quality, and relation. Where’re these concepts from? My idea was that, yes, the Greeks have talked about these things but the bridge between the Greeks and us is the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages was the time when modern languages were formed, and where the first treatises and discussions of how these concepts relate to each other were made in the West. I was convinced that in order to do philosophy – and I’ve always wanted to do philosophy rather than be just merely a historian – I had to go back to the Middle Ages to find out the origin of the concepts that we use today. So when I went to the University of Chicago the idea was to study with the famous medievalist Richard McKeon. It turns out that he was not there, he was on leave and about to retire. The guy there at the time who did some medieval philosophy was not a famous person, but he told me that if I was really interested in medieval philosophy, I had to go to Toronto, the best place for it in North America at the time.’ So that’s where I went.”

[Jaksić] “So you did, one or two years in Chicago, and then?”

[Gracia] “At Chicago, I did one year only. I got the MA and immediately left. But we have to put that in the context of the Vietnam War, because if I had stayed I would have had to go to Vietnam. Fortunately I had the legal option of not going by leaving the country. So two things worked out: first, I applied to Toronto, immediately upon coming to Chicago, because I realized there was no future there in medieval philosophy. I remember it was in November or October when I applied to the Pontifical Institute in Toronto, and I was notified that I had been accepted early in January. At that very time came the notification from the draft board saying that I had to go into the Army. I asked for a delay until I finished my MA and then, when I finished, I said, ‘I’d rather not serve, I want to leave the country.’ This was perfectly acceptable because I was not a citizen, I was merely a resident.”

[Jaksić] “One other major issue that occurs to me is that by this time you are functioning in an Anglo world. And there are issues of language – it’s more than language, it’s identity. How did that happen? Did you notice some sort of lack?”

[Gracia] “Some people are very Cuban or Puerto Rican or Mexican, and they always stay there. In my case, I became conscious of a strong contrast between my being Cuban and being Anglo in college. But then, almost immediately, I became more pan-American or Latin American. I remember writing letters to former friends who lived in Miami and talking about Latin America and Anglo-America. This was something that they did not want to talk about, that they dismissed, that they were not interested in. They thought I was weird or something of that sort. Maybe this was a result of the fact that they lived in a very closely-knit community. The people in Miami, to this day, still live in Cuba – probably a mythical Cuba, but it is Cuba. But I have lived outside of that milieu. I had to confront another world. Now, you remember that I said ‘Until I learn English, I want to separate myself from anything that has to do with Spanish or Latin America and so forth.’ And I did. But a year after that I already had sufficient confidence that I had mastered the language and that I knew how things worked – that I fitted in so many ways – that I went back. So we had – in college – a very nice group of friends that got together and did things together. I had some friends that were purely Anglo and did not mix with any of the Latin Americans, and then I had a group of friends who were Latin Americans and did not mix with any of the Anglos, and then I had a group of Latin Americans and Anglos that got together and did things together. So that’s how issues of identity became very important at that time. Now, I did not have any philosophical interest in any of this at all. This was a personal

matter, and then there was philosophy. Philosophy was universal and I was trying to learn about how the world is and how to talk about it cogently and present arguments, and about the history of philosophy, which of course became very important to me. I had not a great deal of interest in anything that had to do with Latin America or the Hispanic world.”

[Jaksić] “In what form did your interest in Latin American philosophy develop, then? When I came to UB you already were established in the field as someone who knew Latin American philosophy, was actually writing about it...”

[Gracia] “The chairman of the department of philosophy here that hired me was Bill Parry. He was a well known logician who had studied with some of the great logicians at Harvard. And he was also a Marxist and had suffered greatly in the ‘50s; his tenure was taken away in this University because of his Marxism. Can you imagine such a thing? Now, a Marxist and a Cuban. The Marxist hired the Cuban, who presumably was supposed to be a right-wing nut. So a left-wing nut, a communist – actually he’d been a member of the communist party – and a right-wing nut from Cuba, and we’re supposed to get together, and we did. But he was not a left-wing nut, he was a reasonable, eminently rational, tremendously understanding person. And, I’ve always tried to be that way too. My anti-Castro bile had passed, so now I could look at this in a rational way. I had and still have objections, but they are not framed in a kind of personal, irrational fashion. So, I was hired as a medievalist in Buffalo, that was my field – but Bill said in a conversation we had, ‘You’re Cuban. I’m sure that there’s Cuban philosophy, there is Latin American philosophy certainly. Why don’t you look into it and see whether we can offer a course on Latin American philosophy?’ So I wrote to Risieri Frondizi, and one of my issues concerned how to get any sources. There was nothing, nothing available. That old anthology by Sánchez Reulet was the only thing, and not available in English any longer. So, how to teach a course on Latin American philosophy under these conditions? It was heroic, like most of what has to do with Latin American philosophy. So, Frondizi and I started talking.”

[Jaksić] “He was at Carbondale at the time?”

[Gracia] “Yes, and we became great friends. He was a marvelous human being. His personal history is extraordinary. He was a very important man, he came from a very prominent family in Argentina – people who were self-made in many ways. He had been President of the University of Buenos Aires. One of his brothers had been President of Argentina, and another was a prominent Marxist intellectual. The extraordinary thing is that Risieri never treated me like an underling or an upstart – which I was. I didn’t know anything, my field was miles away from his field. He had been trained under Romero. And here I was, a medievalist – oh my God, this sounds like the odd couple. But, a couple we were, and we were not that odd, because we worked together extraordinarily well and we were very well matched, it was a marriage made in heaven.”

[Jaksić] “And so you decided to do the collection on man and values, then.”

[Gracia] “Yes, but we had tremendous trouble trying to publish it in English. It was published in Spanish, and there is even a second edition of it. But in English no publisher would touch it. The only one that took the risk was Paul Kurtz with Prometheus. Kurtz was a faculty member here, and he has always been a maverick, he’s always been a sort of anti-establishment type. And so, I proposed it to him and he said, ‘Yes, I’ll do it.’”

[Jaksić] “Was the experience with the anthology discouraging in anyway?”

[Gracia] “Oh, it was horrible. I felt completely discouraged. I read all of these Latin American philosophers and I saw that yes, they are talking about things that have a direct relationship to my own intellectual tradition – the Cuban tradition. There are common problems.

They may have solved them in different ways, but the situation is somewhat similar.”

[Jaksić] “I’d like to explore that sort of sense of discouragement and how it was transformed eventually in the sense that if you’re removed from your community, your country, you make a choice to pursue a field seriously – in this case philosophy – and there is an engagement with it and then at some point you encounter the professional side of it and you see that side not recognized, something that is very close to your own past and identity. How did you negotiate that?”

[Gracia] “I was lucky to this extent: I had a field that was recognized. In a sense, my bread and butter, my stature, my recognition was not in play because I started publishing in medieval philosophy and what I published was regarded as good. When I published the first book that was not a translation or commentary, but a study – this was the *Introduction to the Problem of Individuation in the Early Middle Ages* -- it established my reputation. By the way, I had some trouble publishing it also, because it’s so different from anything that had been published before. Once that book came out, however, my reputation was very well established and the number of reviews was extraordinary: there were more than forty reviews of this book, all over the world. So, I received substantial recognition. Even before that, I was promoted to full professor here -- everybody thought that what I was doing was great, I had this translation of Suárez with a commentary, and this work was respected and thought of highly in this University and in the profession at large. Of course, medieval philosophy is not the philosophy of mind -- there is a bias against it. But medieval philosophy had already established itself somewhat because there was a group of analytic philosophers who had taken an interest in it. I was not part of his group, but the fact that a space had been opened in mainstream philosophy made it possible for people like me to work in it. Also because I was not just a text person, although I had done editions of Latin and other languages and had done very traditional historical studies – some of them even concerned with how manuscripts were dependent on each other and with chronologies and the like that historians love to do. But I was primarily interested in the conceptual analysis of historical figures. This opened doors for me and established my reputation. So what happens next? I have this other weird thing that I do -- something that no one regards as important or interesting -- which is Latin American philosophy. Alright, it is a quirky thing that Gracia does, maybe he has some mental – as one philosopher put it – some psychological problem, and we have to put up with it, because he does this other work that is very good. So we’ll put up with this other, quirky thing. This is how my work on Latin American philosophy was regarded until very recently. What has changed is the demographic situation in the U.S. Another factor that has helped to open doors for this area of interest is the interest in black philosophy and issues that have to do with race. This ground-breaking enterprise has opened some space also for Latin Americans and Latin American philosophy.”

[Jaksić] “Did you decide that this was going to be a field that you’d pursue, and the strategies to use? How did you begin to conceptualize your new commitment?”

[Gracia] “I don’t think this happened until relatively recently. I did have a commitment to it, but the commitment was to continue to maintain a presence of this field in philosophy in the U.S. This was very important to me because I was convinced that there was merit there, and of course, there was also a personal – one wants to say sentimental – investment in it. This is part of who I am. And you know what, Ivan, it is difficult for me to understand people who say, ‘Oh no, I’m Mexican, I’m this or I’m that and I don’t have anything to do with Romero or Sarmiento or someone coming from another part of Latin America. It is difficult because I read Rodó, for

example, and I find so much that appeals to me in terms of who I am – my past, my history – just as I do with many things in the U.S. as well. So, there is a commitment, but the commitment has never been to make this my main field of study, because, first of all, I am a medievalist. I have a reputation in that field, and I have kept it up, not only because this is a bread and butter issue, but also because the Middle Ages are fascinating to me. Now, I can sit here with you and tell you several things that, if I had forty years ahead of me, I would do. And I'm dying to do them and saying, 'Oh well, my time is running out. I have to be very careful with what I do from now on.' But if I had time, it would be such a wonderful project to do this or that. For example, to study the development of category theory throughout the Middle Ages. This is something that has not been done. It would be fabulous. But it's not for me to do. But this main area itself evolved: the issue of historiography itself became important, because I had been doing history all this time. It happened because there was this faculty member here, Peter Hare, who organized a conference on historiography and he asked me for a paper. And I said to myself, 'I've been doing history all my life – of one kind or another, Latin American, medieval – so how is it that this should be done?' So I wrote an article and then of course I was totally dissatisfied with it, and proceeded to write a very thick book – *Philosophy and Its History* -- which is the only systematic work in English on that topic. So I get asked all the time to contribute articles or to do this or that in the area of historiography – philosophical historiography. I have kept this up. Now there was a chapter in the book about texts and their interpretation which I found completely inadequate. So I went on to write two other books on the issues of texts and textuality. And since metaphysics has always been a concern of mine, then I thought I had to say something about it, so that's the book about metaphysics. This takes me to about nineteen ninety six, somewhere around there. While I was writing the book on metaphysics, a change occurred in the climate of opinion in the U.S. as a result of the demographics: the increase of Latinos, Hispanics, was extraordinary. Things began to appear in philosophy about them. So I felt that the time was ripe for a major effort in this direction. This is the origin of *Hispanic/Latino Identity*. This book has opened new fields for me, including an interest in race and ethnicity, some new dimensions about Latin American philosophy, and the issue of Cuban Americans and how they negotiate their identities here. You asked me, 'Was there a point at which you decided to commit yourself more than you had, to have Latin American philosophy as more than a side-line?' I think I reached that point in the late 90s, although it is not so much Latin American philosophy as the issues that have to do with Latin American and Hispanic identity, ethnicity, and race."

[Jaksić] "At the same time it's quite obvious that your reputation in the field is more as a metaphysician. Let's talk about that. How has your engagement with metaphysics been enriched or changed by your engagement with other aspects of philosophy? How has it influenced your work in metaphysics and medieval...?"

[Gracia] "In medieval, it has enhanced my interest in authors that are part of this pre-Hispanic world, as I would call it. The interest in Suárez, the interest in the 16th century, has become greater in many ways. Although I should say that my work in the history of philosophy follows a topical or problems approach. My philosophical and topical concerns are always metaphysical, metaphysics really informs all of my work. I remember Lorenzo Peña telling me once, 'Jorge, the only thing that you do is metaphysics! You do metaphysics everywhere!' And I responded, 'What else is there to do?' This is a fascination. And now, what's happened is that I have been doing it in the area of ethnicity and race."

[Jaksić] "But what are the motivations and goals that you have? Are you contending

against a metaphysical tradition or a set of authors?”

[Gracia] “I imagine that, as a philosopher, self-reflection is essential, and it would be weird, or strange, if I had not thought about this very question. You remember that I had mentioned that I was studying to be an architect. I think that has never left me in this sense: what is it that an architect does? An architect surveys the terrain and then designs a structure with foundations. And the structure is supposed to have a function; it encases a certain space to be used, so that people can move, work, and live in it. And he does it, also, in an appealing fashion; there is a strong artistic component in an architect that cannot be underestimated. So, what is it that I’m trying to do in philosophy? It is like that, in metaphysics in particular. All philosophy begins with experience – here and now. I look at my terrain, and my terrain is what? My experience: what I have perceived, what I have seen, what I have felt. There are parts of that experience that are, perhaps, incomplete. Let me put it in terms of a metaphor: the terrain, to serve its purpose, needs something more than what is there – maybe it is a swamp that needs to be drained. Or, maybe, I have certain needs that the terrain does not offer me. So what do I do? I try to build a structure and I begin by building up these foundations, this structure; and, that’s the metaphysics of it. And slowly walls are added, and there are windows and spaces. And, what is it that I do? I dwell in those spaces, use them, organize this landscape where I am. My experience becomes the basis of my work, my metaphysical work, and the work is geared toward creating a structure that will serve me to live and function in – to put it all together. And there is an aesthetic sense that I would call almost narcissistic because it has to do, fundamentally, with my needs – to make sense of the landscape of my experience. And, not only to make sense of it, but to put me in a situation, namely a building, in which I can function comfortably.”

[Jaksić] “When one thinks about architecture, one thinks about harmony. Is that a search or a desire in an intellectual field?”

[Gracia] “Yes, to put it all together in a way that there are no clashes. This is a fundamental requirement. To be comfortable with one’s experience, with one’s history, most of all to be comfortable with yourself, who you are. Many people are unhappy and one source of their unhappiness is their dissatisfaction with themselves. They haven’t come to terms with who they are. The older I get the more important this is for me – that I think I have. I’m quite comfortable with who I am, with what I do, with my goals – I have put it all together in a sense. What I’ve done has cohesion, has threads tied together and they are all integrated into my life, my needs, my views, my values. This sounds very selfish, perhaps, but ultimately – yes, there are other people, and the other people are there as part of myself in some way, as in relationship to me – but everything is in a sense centered around this identity, who I am and what I have done. I often say, well, actually I am quite comfortable; if I were going to die tomorrow, or even in an hour, or in five minutes, or whatever...”

[Jaksić] “...not before the end of the interview!”

[Gracia] “Alright, I won’t do it before then! I’ll have to stop that heart attack when its coming! But, you know, I don’t feel that I have regrets. I’m not going to say something that some people say: ‘I would never change anything!’ Oh, for God’s sake! I would change endless numbers of things, naturally, I would! And who knows what would happen.... The point is: How is it all tied together? How is that experience of the world and what I have been able to build – the house in which I live intellectually – how is that functioning? Is it functioning well for me, and for those around me? There are many theories about the nature of philosophy and we’ve talked about this often – the Socratic idea that you really are not sure of anything. I know that

some people hearing me say this are going to be terribly scandalized, because ‘we know certain things for certain, obviously.’ Well, do we? The job of philosophy is always to undermine those certainties and make you think, and then try to put something together again. But that house that we were talking about is never complete, there is always remodeling to be done. There is always a window that needs to be opened, one that has to be closed; there is a wall that has to be moved, a particular couch that you want here, but then you want it there. It is a constant flow. My mother was one of those people who hated old things. As a result, there was nothing old in my house. Nothing. No piece of furniture that was antique, nothing, nothing, nothing. She was always on the hunt for the latest in furniture, fashion. So, I was used to having a house in which every two years all of the furniture would change. I am not sure that this is quite the way I feel in philosophy, because it’s not that everything changes, but there’s always tinkering. And sometimes, there has to be substantial change.”

[Jaksić] “I have a question about yourself as a Cuban and a member of the Cuban-American community. Its been tough, you know, the public perception of Cubans, the Cuban movement. You are part of the community, but you do things so contrary to the stereotype of Cubans. So my question to you is, How do you wish this to change, or what would you like to do that would in some ways serve the memory of more complexity or register the fact that this is not exclusively a political experience alone, but is a human experience – what are your wishes and in which direction would they go?”

[Gracia] “My wish is precisely to bring to the American people and the world a sense that there is a Cuban experience outside politics. That the Cubans here in the U.S. have had to face other issues that are as important or more important than the political ones. And that they had to deal with them. This interview is part of an overall project entitled, ‘Negotiating Identities in Art, Literature, and Philosophy,’ and my whole idea about it was precisely that: to try to open a space for a discussion of the Cuban experience apart from the political dialectic that is completely destructive, because once you get into it, there is no way out. Opening this, seeing how, for example, some Cubans – some artists, say – have integrated into their work some of their concerns, some of their memories, some of their ambivalence between the Cuban identity and the American identity. How do they fit with other Latin Americans? And all of this apart from the political situation and rhetoric. The same thing with me, for example, what we’ve talked about in this interview. How is it that I, as a philosopher, relate to issues that have to do with being Latin American, Hispanic, Cuban, part of North America, and keeping the political situation from interfering? The political situation can be brought in, but it has to be brought into the context of this larger picture. The thing that really hurts is that politics is the only thing that’s brought in and everything else is either forgotten or broached in the context of politics. The experience of Cuban Americans has a universal dimension of all peoples who are for one reason or another, alienated from their native lands, away from their nations, away from their cultures. How do they cope? How do they respond? Do they assimilate? Do they gather together? All of these questions are extraordinarily important. How do they negotiate these things? Apart from the causes that brought them out. And, if the causes were political, or the causes were other than political, such as, for example, economic, does that affect their experience and what they do in the new place where they live? These are very rich, very interesting, very extraordinary, issues. One thing that is certainly forgotten is that the Cubans that have come to the U.S. have come in waves. They have been part of different classes, with varying degrees of professional training and education. This has created a Cuban community that is perhaps different from other

communities of immigrants who are primarily, let's say, economically deprived and come to this country to work and earn a living, and therefore, have little education. All these questions and issues seem to me fascinating, interesting, and worthy of consideration when people think about Cubans."

[Jaksić] "Well, that about answers my questions. Thank you."