

The Influence of Aristotle's Political Philosophy on the Spanish Colonial Wars: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and His Just War Thought

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to reveal the influence of Aristotle's political philosophy on the Spanish colonial wars through the example of Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490–1573) and his just war thought. The study argues that Aristotle's political philosophy was not merely a political theory proposed at a particular moment in history and then forgotten; rather, nearly two thousand years later it was invoked as a political guide in legitimizing Spanish colonialism. This argument is grounded within the framework of Sepúlveda's treatise called *Democrates Secundus: On the Just Causes of War Against the Indians*. The study first examines the four arguments of Sepúlveda, which seeks to legitimize war, political domination, and slavery against the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. The most prominent critic of Sepúlveda was Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1566), whose objections to these four arguments will constitute the second focus of the study. The study arrives at three conclusions. Firstly, it becomes evident that in the early modern period, although Aristotle's views on logic, cosmology etc. had been severely criticized and abandoned, his conception of just war thought found wide support. Secondly, the universalist rhetoric of power-laid bare in Sepúlveda's thought and used to legitimize imperialism through appeals to universal values- continues today in the policies of the United States, seen clearly in George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump administrations. Finally, it is understood that the Sepulvedan mindset, which justified colonial violence by ontologically denying indigenous peoples' full recognition as human beings, today can be seen in the actions of Israel's occupation of Palestine which has intensified since October 7, 2023. Since this Sepulvedan mindset rests upon Aristotle, it is understood that Aristotle is not dead; his ghost still haunts the contemporary world.

Aristoteles'in Siyaset Felsefesinin İspanyol Sömürge Savaşlarındaki Etkisi: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda ve Haklı Savaş Düşüncesi

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ÖZET

Bu çalışma, Juan Gines de Sepulveda ve onun haklı savaş düşüncesi örneklemeden hareketle Aristoteles'in siyaset felsefesinin İspanyol sömürge savaşlarındaki etkilerini ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma Aristoteles'in siyaset felsefesinin tarihin bir anında teklif edilmiş ve daha sonra unutulmuş siyasi bir kuram olarak kalmadığını, onun yaklaşık iki bin yıl sonra bile İspanyol sömürgeciliklerinin meşrulaştırılmasında kendisine başvurulmuş politik bir kılavuz olduğu argümanını dile getirmektedir. Bu argüman Sepulveda'nın *Democrates Secundus: On the Just Causes of War Against the Indians* başlıklı eseri kapsamında temellendirilmektedir. Çalışma öncelikle onun Amerika kıtasında yaşayan Yerli halklara karşı savaşı, politik hâkimiyeti ve köleliği meşrulaştırmaya çalışan dört argümanını ele almaktadır. Sepulveda'yı en çok eleştiren kişi Bartolomeo de Las Casas (1474-1566) olmuştur. Bu yüzden çalışmada ikinci olarak Las Casas'ın onun bu dört argümanı hakkındaki eleştirilerine yer verilmektedir.



Çalışma toplamda üç sonuca varmaktadır. İlk olarak felsefe tarihi açısından erken modern dönemde, Aristoteles'in her ne kadar mantık, kozmoloji v.b. konular hakkındaki görüşleri ciddi eleştiriler almış ve terk edilmiş olsa da onun haklı savaş düşüncesinin yaygın bir destek bulduğu anlaşılmaktadır. İkinci olarak George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump yönetimlerinde açıkça görüldüğü üzere, Sepulveda'da kendini net bir şekilde ifşa eden ve emperyalizmi evrensel değerlere müracaatla meşrulaştıran iktidarın evrenselci retorığının, günümüz dünyasında ABD tarafından sürdürüldüğü sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Son olarak yerli halkları ontolojik açıdan tam anlamıyla insan olarak görmeyerek sömürgeci şiddeti meşrulaştıran Sepulvedacı zihniyetin, günümüzde İsrail'in 7 Ekim 2023'ten beri şiddetini artırdığı Filistin işgalinde görülebileceği sonucuna varılmaktadır. Sepulvedacı bu zihniyetin Aristoteles'i merkeze almasından ötürü Aristoteles'in ölmediği, hayaletinin günümüz dünyasında dolaştığı anlaşılmaktadır.

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INTRODUCTION

Christopher Columbus kept separate logbooks for each of the four transoceanic voyages he undertook between 1492 and 1502, which ultimately resulted in the arrival of European nations to the American continent—what they came to call the “New World.” In these logbooks, he recorded day by day the events he experienced. Columbus notes that, after departing Spain on August 3, 1492, his long and arduous first oceanic expedition culminated on Friday, October 12, 1492, when he first sighted a piece of land belonging to the continent. From the logbooks we learn that Admiral Columbus crossed to the shore in an armed boat. Immediately thereafter, his logbook contains the following notes concerning the process of *taking possession* of the newly encountered lands (Columbus, 2015, pp. 19–28):¹

“...Upon landing they saw dark green trees, streams, and all sorts of fruits. The Admiral, accompanied by two captains, called to his side the notary of the fleet Rodrigo de Escobedo, Rodrigo Sánchez of Segovia, and the other men who had jumped to the ground. In the presence of all, he asked the two aforementioned men to bear lawful witness that he took possession of this island, and, as can be seen in far greater detail in the official documents prepared for this purpose, he fulfilled the necessary conditions and indeed took possession of the island.

...Nevertheless, I said to myself that it would not be fitting to pass by these islands without taking possession of each one of them.

...These islands are very fertile, very green, and with the softest of climates. Many things may be found here, though for the moment I cannot know what they are. I do not wish to waste more time, but rather intend to take possession of as many islands as possible in order to search for gold.”

The fact that, through Columbus, the Spanish Empire began to lay claim to the territories of the continent provoked objections from the Portuguese Empire, which at the time was preoccupied with seizing sources of wealth on the African continent. As a result, roughly two years after Columbus's first landing, Pope Alexander VI intervened to resolve the colonial political disputes that had arisen between these two imperial powers, and on June 7, 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas was signed. In the presence of the kings of both nations—and as can be better understood from the picture below—the Pope divided the world in two by means of a meridian line drawn vertically across the Atlantic Ocean, beginning to the east of Brazil. In order to establish peace and order, he declared the lands to the east of this line to be the Portuguese sphere of influence, and those to the west to be the Spanish sphere (Jordao, 1868, pp. 270–271; Pope Alexander VI, 1494). With this treaty, the Pope granted the two European empires the right to dispose of these regions—as they were non-Christian lands—as they saw fit, thereby providing a theological foundation of legitimacy for colonial expansion.

¹ The emphasis in the italicized words is mine. Similarly, the following words recorded in the Logbooks are significant in terms of our subject (war): “They have no weapons, nor do they even know what they are; I showed them swords, and they were so ignorant that they grasped them by the sharp edge and cut their fingers. They have nothing made of iron. Their spears have no iron tips; some instead attach a fishbone or whatever happens to be at hand.” (Columbus, 2015, p. 22).



Figure 1. The Treaty of Tordesillas and the Division of the Globe into Spanish and Portuguese Spheres of Influence

Although theological grounds of legitimacy were established for the wars of conquest and struggles for political domination waged by European states, especially in the territories of Africa and the Americas, a philosophical problem within the scope of legal and political philosophy has persisted to this day: By what right do European states find themselves in lands that do not belong to them, and on what legitimate basis do they claim the right to seize those lands? At precisely this point, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490–1573), the subject of this study, comes into view, and his just war thought is noteworthy insofar as it attempts to provide a philosophical grounding for this very question. Since Sepúlveda’s just war thought fundamentally centers upon Aristotle, this study aims, through the example of his theory, to uncover the influence of Aristotle’s political philosophy upon the Spanish wars of conquest. In this way, within the framework of Sepúlveda’s just war thought, it will be argued that Aristotle’s political philosophy was not merely a political doctrine proposed at one point in history and then forgotten, but that nearly two thousand years later it continued to serve as a political guide invoked to legitimize Spanish colonialism. This argument will be developed within the limits of Sepúlveda’s work entitled as *Democrates Secundus sive De Justis Belli Causis Apud Indos (The Second Democritus: On the Just Causes of War against the Indians)*.

What renders Sepúlveda significant in the history of thought is his involvement in the political debate known historically as the Valladolid Controversy (1550–1551). The colonial enterprises of the Spanish Empire on the continent provoked not only external but also internal objections on humanitarian grounds. Indeed, according to Hanke, nothing in Spanish history was debated as continuously and intensely as the conquest of the Americas and the problems it engendered (Hanke, 1974, p. xiv). For this reason, King Charles V convened public debates in the city of Valladolid to determine whether the wars, struggles for political domination, and related colonial activities undertaken by the Spanish Empire were legitimate or in conformity with justice. As Hanke emphasizes, this was one of the most remarkable moments in the history of the Western world: for the first, and perhaps the last, time, a colonial state opened to official discussion the question of whether the actions it employed to expand its empire were just (1974, pp. xi–xii).

Another issue debated at Valladolid concerned whether the indigenous peoples were ontologically equal to Europeans in their status as “human.” Two opposing camps presented their arguments in turn.

On one side stood Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, the focus of this study, who articulated four main arguments to prove that Spanish colonial enterprises were legitimate and just. Opposite him stood Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1576), who throughout the debate refuted Sepúlveda's arguments one by one, offering a critical perspective on Spanish colonialism and its practices—including wars of conquest, the establishment of political domination, and even the enslavement of indigenous peoples. Las Casas's criticisms are articulated in his work *In Defense of the Indians*.

Accordingly, in terms of the structure of this study, Sepúlveda's arguments will first be examined, along with the philosophical references upon which he draws. Thereafter, Las Casas's objections to these arguments will be considered one by one.

1. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda's Four Arguments for Justifying War and Political Domination

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (1490–1573) was a Renaissance thinker born in Córdoba, Spain. A decisive turning point in his philosophical biography was his education between 1515 and 1523 at the Spanish College in Bologna, Italy. There he acquired, especially under the instruction of Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1524), a profound admiration for Aristotle and his philosophy (Bell, 1925, pp. 1–5). During his years of study and afterward, he translated into Latin many of Aristotle's works from the Greek, including the *Meteorology*, *Parva Naturalia*, *On Generation and Corruption*, and the *Politics* (Coroleu, 1996, pp. 325–329). One of the debates in which the influence of Aristotelian philosophy upon Sepúlveda can be most clearly discerned is undoubtedly that concerning the concept of just war. At this juncture in our study, before addressing Sepúlveda's theory of just war directly, it will be useful to consider what is meant by just war, some of its intellectual genealogies, and its connection to the contemporary world.

1.1. The Concept of Just War, Some of its Intellectual Genealogies, and Its Place in the Contemporary World

The concept of just war may be described as the body of ideas and practices that seeks to impose certain restrictions on war by discussing under what circumstances political entities may legitimately initiate war, what may legitimately be done during war, and what may legitimately be undertaken in its aftermath. In this tradition, the phenomenon of war has been considered from three perspectives, typically expressed in Latin as: (i) *jus ad bellum* (justice in the resort to war), (ii) *jus in bello* (justice in the conduct of war), and (iii) *jus post bellum* (justice after war).

What, then, makes the just war tradition significant in terms of contemporary political reality? This question may be answered specifically with reference to the United States, which continues to pursue an imperial policy. A glance at recent world political history reveals that the U.S. has often invoked this tradition to justify the legitimacy of its wars in many regions of the world. For instance, George H. W. Bush (1924–2018), the 41st President of the United States, when justifying America's entry into the First Gulf War between Iraq and Kuwait, appealed directly to the just war tradition and Western political philosophy, declaring (Bush, 1992):

“Saddam tried to cast this conflict as a religious war, but it has nothing to do with religion per se. It has, on the other hand, everything to do with what religion embodies: good versus evil, right versus wrong, human dignity and freedom versus tyranny and oppression. The war in the Gulf is not a Christian war, a Jewish war, or a Moslem war; it is a just war. And it is a war with which good will prevail... We are told the principles of a just war originated with classical Greek and Roman philosophers like Plato and Cicero and later they were expounded by such Christian theologians as Ambrosius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas. The first principle of a just war is that it supports a just cause. Our cause could not be more noble... But a just war must also be declared by a legitimate authority... Every war, every war is fought for a reason, but a just war is fought for the right reasons, for moral not selfish reasons.”

Similarly, Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in 2009—ironically awarded even as his country was engaged in wars in Afghanistan and elsewhere—also invoked the concept of just war as in the followings (Obama, 2009):

“War, in one form or another, appeared with the first man. At the outset, its morality was not questioned; it was treated as a natural phenomenon like drought or disease... Over time, however, as legal codes sought to restrain violence among societies, philosophers, clerics, and statesmen also endeavored to regulate the destructive power of war. The concept of a ‘just war’ thus arose, proposing that war could be just only under certain conditions... I do not claim to offer a definitive solution to the problem of war today. But what I do know is that confronting these problems will demand the same vision, hard work, and perseverance possessed decades ago by men and women who labored with remarkable courage. It will require us to rethink our concepts of just war and the requirements of a just peace in new ways. And so we must begin by accepting this harsh truth; violent conflict will not be eradicated in our lifetimes, for there are times when nations—acting alone or together—see the use of force not only as necessary, but as morally justified... Yes, instruments of war do have a role to play in the preservation of peace.”²

Finally, to support our contention that the just war tradition constitutes one of the reference points of legitimacy for contemporary American wars, one may cite the 2023 updated edition of the U.S. Department of Defense *Law of War Manual*. As is made explicit therein, the just war tradition of Western political philosophy is said to be of fundamental importance to decisions regarding the resort to war by the United States (U.S. Department of Defense, 2015, pp. 20, 25–26, 39–40)³.

From the standpoint of the history of political thought, then, one may readily affirm the existence of a line of continuity in the just war tradition, and that this question has remained a perennial subject of political philosophy from antiquity to the present. Indeed, John Rawls, one of the most significant political philosophers of recent times, addresses the problem of just war in his *The Law of Peoples* (Rawls, 2006, pp. 97–101, 103–115). As in many other matters, so too in debates over the legitimacy of war, an important source remains the tradition of ancient Greek political philosophy. At this point, Aristotle emerges as the first thinker to employ, in a conceptual sense, the notion of “just war” (*dikaios polemos* / δίκαιος πόλεμος).

According to Aristotle, ontologically, some persons exist by nature as slaves, while others exist by nature as masters. Those endowed with the capacity for foresight through reason are by nature masters (*archon physei* / ἄρχον φύσει) and rulers, whereas those who can only fulfill tasks through bodily strength are by nature slaves (*physei douloi* / φύσει δοῦλοι), who must be ruled (Aristotle, 2018, p. 157 [1252a24–1252a34]). For Aristotle, it is evident that some persons are by nature slaves, since, as he remarks: “Those who differ from other men as much as soul from body, or man from beast—men whose chief use of their bodies is to supply the necessities of life—are slaves by nature... It is better for them, as for all inferiors, that they should be under the rule of a master” (Aristotle, 2018, p. 166 [1254b14–1254b20]).

To ground his doctrine of natural slavery, Aristotle further adduces an argument that he regards as founded upon empirical reality: in all things composed of diverse elements that nevertheless share a relation of partnership, there exists a relation of ruler and ruled. Examples include soul–body, reason–desire, male–female, human–animal. For Aristotle, this relation must also hold among human beings: those whose highest function is merely bodily labor are by nature slaves, and their good lies in being

² Aydoğan’s study discusses, in a contemporary context, the relationship between the armed drones that the United States began to use with increasing frequency during the Obama era and the *jus ad bellum* dimension of just war theory (2025, pp. 328–329).

³ For a more detailed analysis of the United States’ hegemonic strategies carried out through wars in foreign policy, see Sertçelik (2024, pp. 276–281).

ruled by those who are by nature masters. Nature itself, he contends, intends such a division: “Nature (ἡ φύσις) wishes to make a difference between freemen and slaves, that the bodies of the latter may be strong for necessary purposes, and that the former, being unfitted for such services, may be useful for political life... Wherefore it is evident that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right” (Aristotle, 2018, p. 167 [1254b27–1254b39]). Hence, for Aristotle, those who are slaves by nature ought properly to be subjected to those who are masters by nature. By “masters,” moreover, Aristotle clearly intends those who are fully possessed of moral and political virtue, rational deliberative capacity, and who are free Greek citizens.

At this juncture, a question may be directed to Aristotle's political theory: What if those who are slaves by nature refuse the good that Aristotle assigns to them—that is, refuse to submit to the rule of those who are masters by nature? Aristotle's doctrine of just war provides a response precisely to this question. For him, the art of war (*polemikē* / πολεμική) is essentially a form of the art of acquisition (*ktētikē* / κτητική). This art may be used against wild beasts and against those who, though by nature (*perphykotes* / πεφυκότες) fit to be ruled, nevertheless refuse such rule; for such a war is by nature (*physei* / φύσει) a just war (*dikaios polemos* / δίκαιος πόλεμος) (Aristotle, 2018, p. 175 [1256b7–1256b26]). In short, for Aristotle, the just cause of war lies in the refusal of those who are slaves by nature to accept the despotic rule of those who are masters by nature.

Turning to medieval Western philosophy, the two figures who canonized the just war tradition were Augustine (354–430) and Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274). The anti-war stance characteristic of the early period of Christianity began to shift once the religion was adopted as the official faith of the Roman Empire. In this respect, Ambrose (ca. 340–397), the teacher of Augustine, was among the first to reject the error of absolute pacifism. For Ambrose, war as violence was not, in itself, something that Christians must oppose; rather, attention must be paid to whether it was a just war (*bellum iustum*). Ambrose declared: “It is the wise who undertake just wars” (Ambrosius, 1896, p. 30). Reiterating this view, Augustine likewise stated: “It is the wise who undertake just wars” (Augustine, 1887, p. 405). But what, then, is a just war? Augustine's definition, canonized in the history of the just war tradition and open to considerable interpretation and manipulation, is as follows: “Just wars are those that avenge injuries (*ulciscuntur iniurias*)” (Augustine, 1958, p. 428).

A thinker deeply influenced by Augustine's political reflections on war and frequently referring to him was Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas holds a distinctive place in the history of the just war tradition, particularly in terms of systematizing the conditions under which war may be considered just. According to Aquinas, three things are necessary for a war to be just: (a) legitimate authority (*auctoritas principis*), (b) a just cause (*causa iusta*), and (c) right intention (*intentio recta*) (Aquinas, 1952, p. 578). In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas develops his discussion of the legitimacy of war in a highly theoretical context, without explicit reference to the political events of his own time, such as the Crusades (1096–1291). Yet in his *Quaestiones de Quodlibet*, he explicitly affirms that the Crusades indeed possessed these three characteristics. This can be seen in his remarks on whether soldiers participating in the expedition could obtain indulgences (Aquinas, 1983, pp. 111–112):

“For an indulgence to be beneficial to a man, three things are necessary. First, there must be a cause (causa) concerning the glory of God, the necessity of the Church, or its well-being. Second, there must be the authority (auctoritas) of the Pope who grants indulgences. Third, the intention of the one seeking the indulgence must be good. All three of these are present in the papal decree. For the cause is rightly stated to be the extension of aid to the Holy Land; the authority is that of St. Peter, Paul, and the Pope himself; and the intention is declared to be the doing of good...”

Sepúlveda, the central thinker of this study, sought to construct his own theory of just war by synthesizing the views of these three figures on war and its legitimacy.

1.2. First Argument: The Indigenous Peoples are Natural Slaves in the Aristotelian Sense

As noted above, Sepúlveda presents his arguments concerning the legitimacy of the wars waged against the indigenous peoples of the New World in his work *Democrates Secundus sive De Justis Belli Causis Apud Indos* (*The Second Democritus: On the Just Causes of War against the Indians*). Written in the form of a dialogue, the work unfolds through two main characters: Leopoldus, who questions the justice of the wars conducted by the Spaniards, and Democrates, who seeks to prove their legitimacy and who serves as the mouthpiece of Sepúlveda's own ideas.

Sepúlveda introduces the central problem of the book, which he dedicated to Don Luis de Mendoza, in the following words (Sepúlveda, 1987, p. 44)⁴:

“Most noble Lord, as you are aware, the question of whether it is unjust or rather a just war that the kings of Spain and our people have subjugated, by force, those barbarous nations inhabiting the western and southern regions, commonly called the Indians, and upon what just cause they should be incorporated into our empire, is a most serious one.”

According to Sepúlveda, for a war to be just, certain Thomistic principles must be observed: just cause (*justas causas*), right intention (*rectum animum*), legitimate authority (*legitima auctoritatem*), and right conduct of war (*rectam rationem*). He enumerates three fundamental causes that justify war: first and most natural is to repel force with force, i.e., self-defense; second is to recover what has been unjustly taken; third is to punish those who, within their own lands, have not been duly penalized for their crimes. For instance, the Romans declared war against the Corinthians for having treated their ambassadors in violation of the law of nations (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 68–78).

Yet, with respect to these three causes, Sepúlveda confronts a difficulty. For the indigenous peoples—whom he characterizes as “barbarians”—had neither exercised force against the Spanish crown, nor unjustly seized goods or lands, nor committed crimes requiring punishment. At precisely this juncture, Sepúlveda seeks to extend the framework of classical just war theory by proposing four additional causes, which, in his view, are sanctioned by natural and divine law, and thereby justify war against the natives.

In Sepúlveda's initial line of argumentation, we observe that Aristotle is placed at the center. Aristotle can be described as the first great system-building philosopher, known not only for his ethical and political views but also for the ideas he articulated in logic, ontology, and many other fields of philosophy (Molacı, 2018, pp. 37-38). Sepúlveda's initial argument explicitly draws on this great philosopher's conception of natural slavery, quoting directly from his *Politics*. In his interpretation, just as Aristotle maintained, those who by nature are destined to live under the dominion of others must submit to their authority, and if they resist such subjugation, war against them is just according to the law of nature. The indigenous peoples of the New World, Sepúlveda contends, are precisely such natural slaves as described in Aristotle's *Politics*. Consequently, should they refuse to submit to the dominion of the Spaniards—who, by nature, occupy the position of masters—then, as both Aristotle affirmed and Augustine approved, a just war must be waged against them (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 80–112).

For Sepúlveda, although diverse forms of rule exist in nature (father over son, husband over wife, master over slave, king over subjects, soul over body, reason over desire), they all derive from a single principle: the superior commands the inferior, the stronger governs the weaker, the virtuous rules over the less virtuous. This principle applies both to human relations and to relations among nations (Sepúlveda, 1987, p. 80). Within human society, there exists a natural hierarchy: those who, by reason and prudence, are naturally masters, and those who, though physically capable of labor, are deficient in

⁴ In making references to Sepúlveda's text, the Latin version in this Spanish–Latin edition has been taken as the basis.

understanding and intellect, and thus are naturally slaves (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 82–84).

Sepúlveda's innovation lies in applying this binary hierarchy explicitly to the sphere of international relations, thereby going beyond Aristotle. For him, Aristotle's distinction also encompasses "barbarous and inhuman peoples, estranged from civil life and gentler customs (*tales esse barbaras et inhumanas gentes a vita civili et a mitioribus moribus abhorrentes*).” Such peoples, lacking virtue, rational capacity, and proper law, must be subjected to the rule of the Spaniards, who are superior in all these respects. Indeed, this subjection would be to the benefit of the barbarians themselves, for, as Sepúlveda provocatively claims, the difference between Spaniards and these peoples is akin to that between humans and monkeys. Should they refuse this subjection, then, once again, the Aristotelian-Augustinian principle applies: those who by nature ought to submit but resist are to be subdued through a just war sanctioned by natural law (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 84–102). For, in every respect—reason, virtue, even humanity itself—the indigenous peoples stand below the Spaniards.

Finally, in the context of this first argument, it must be noted that Sepúlveda refers to the natives not as *homo* (human) but as *homunculi*, a term better rendered as “half-men.” He grounds this designation in their lack of a social order encompassing science, art, history, and law. In his words:

“It is exceedingly difficult to find any sign that they are truly men. They are ignorant not only of science, but even of the use of letters... They have no written laws, no institutions; only barbarous customs... They are lascivious creatures, feeding on human flesh.”

Even if some among them display remarkable skill in the arts, this does not constitute proof of genuine intelligence, for bees and spiders too perform marvelous works beyond the capacity of many men (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 104–110).

1.3. Second Argument: The Indigenous Peoples Commit Crimes Contrary to Natural Law

Sepúlveda's second justification for waging war against the natives rests on their commission of crimes against natural law, such as homosexual acts and the ritual sacrifice of human beings (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 112–120). The doctrine of natural law was not only central to Sepúlveda's reasoning but also served as a recurrent intellectual foundation for legitimizing Spanish colonial wars. Indeed, from Sophocles in fifth-century BCE Athens to Leo Strauss in twentieth-century political philosophy, the problem of a universally valid law—transcending the variability of positive law from one society to another—has never lost its relevance.

According to Strauss, the need for such a principle remains as evident today as in antiquity. For otherwise, to claim that all rights derive solely from positive law would be to entrust the very concept of justice entirely to the authority of local legislators. Yet in ordinary life we constantly speak of unjust laws or unfair judicial decisions. In doing so, whether consciously or not, we appeal to a standard beyond positive law itself. This reveals that there exists a measure of right and wrong, of just and unjust, that is distinct from, and in some sense superior to, positive law (Strauss, 2011, pp. 18–19).

As İşsevenler (2021, p. 30) explains, natural law may thus be defined as the attempt to ground law in the very foundations of justice, equality, and freedom, deriving its authority either from human nature or from the natural order of existence itself. For Sepúlveda, philosophically speaking, natural law is “the law that has the same force everywhere, not because of approval or disapproval, but because it is by nature so (*ubique habet eandem vim, non quia sic placuit aut secus*).” Theologians, he notes, define it differently: natural law is the participation of rational creatures in the eternal law (*lex aeterna*) that God inscribed into the order of creation. Following Augustine, Sepúlveda defines eternal law as “the will of God that demands the preservation of the natural order and prohibits its violation” (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 66–68).

Summarizing, for Sepúlveda, natural law is the set of universal ordinances established by God in nature to safeguard the order of the cosmos. Consequently, the crimes committed by the natives—human sacrifice, cannibalism, homosexual practices, and so forth—constitute violations of this eternal law. For this reason, he maintains, a just war should be undertaken against them in order to abolish such practices and to establish a new civil order in their lands.

Leopoldus, however, raises a crucial objection (Sepúlveda, 1987, p. 122):

“But if one is to wage war against a people on the grounds that they act contrary to natural law or commit sins, then there will be no nation against which war may not be declared. For how many nations are there that truly live according to natural law?”

As Leopoldus further observes, even among Christian nations of Europe, crimes deemed contrary to natural law—such as theft, murder, or adultery—are commonplace. In response, Sepúlveda insists that judgment must be rendered not on the basis of individual transgressors but on the foundation of the community’s established legal order. The crucial difference, he argues, lies in the fact that the customs and laws of the natives explicitly permit such violations of natural law. Therefore, if they refuse to submit to Spanish authority, Christians may justly wage war against them for their grievous sins, barbarism, and inhuman practices. Such a war, Sepúlveda contends, would ultimately serve the natives’ own good (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 122–128).

1.4. Third Argument: The Indigenous Peoples Massacre Innocents

Drawing upon reports concerning the New World, Sepúlveda asserts that the natives annually sacrifice more than twenty thousand men in their religious ceremonies. Hence, wars undertaken to prevent further harm to innocent lives must be considered just. Moreover, such intervention corresponds to the Christian duty of “neighborly love.” Because of these horrific practices—human sacrifice, cannibalism, and other monstrous rites—the barbarous peoples ought to be subjected to the rule of more civilized nations. If they refuse to submit voluntarily to such beneficial rule, they must be compelled by force of arms. Such wars, he concludes, are just according to natural law (Sepúlveda, 1987, p. 128).

1.5. Fourth Argument: Preventing the Spread of the Gospel

Finally, Sepúlveda contends that wars undertaken to remove obstacles to the spread of the Gospel are just wars—indeed, the most just of all. For there can be no greater cause of war than to ensure that pagans, even against their will, and if necessary by coercion, are converted to the true faith of Christianity (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 134–152).

2. Bartolomé de Las Casas’s Critique of Sepúlveda’s Arguments

As Villa aptly observes, while the Spanish Empire invented colonialism, it also invented the critique of colonialism (Villa, 1992, p. 420). One of the principal architects of that critique was Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474–1556). Las Casas first arrived in the newly discovered American continent in 1502, and in 1510 he served there as the first priest appointed to those lands. At the outset, he took part in the *encomienda*—a slave-based economic system that reproduced the feudal order of Europe and constituted a pillar of Spanish colonialism—under which the natives were forced to labor in agriculture, animal husbandry, and mining. As the system’s inhuman injustices multiplied, however, Las Casas withdrew from it. He then returned to Spain and sought to convey to the Spanish authorities the injustices it had produced (Wallerstein, 2007, p. 12). Although he went back to the Americas in 1522 to combat those injustices, in 1547 he gave up his efforts in the field and, drawing on nearly half a century of experience, returned to Spain for good (Hanke, 1974, p. 57). He devoted the remainder of his life to contesting the arguments that supported Spanish colonialism and to defending the rights of the indigenous peoples. In this respect, his most famous opponent—especially in the Valladolid Debates

(1550–1551)—was Sepúlveda. Throughout those debates, Las Casas systematically analyzed and sought to refute the four arguments summarized above by which Sepúlveda endeavored to legitimize Spanish colonialism.

2.1. The Critique of the First Argument

Contrary to Sepúlveda's first argument, Las Casas contends that the indigenous peoples cannot, in any ontological respect, be classified as natural slaves in the Aristotelian sense expounded in the *Politics*. Sepúlveda's depiction of the natives as barbarians who are slaves by nature, he argues, stems from an indiscriminate use of the concept of "barbarism." In fact, if one considers Aristotle's political philosophy, as well as Thomas Aquinas and other scholastics, one finds four distinct definitions of barbarism (Las Casas, 1974, p. 28; Hanke, 1974, p. 83).

In its first and most common usage, "barbarism" designates those who are devoid of moderation, cruel, savage, and inclined to actions repugnant to human reason. In the *Politics*, Aristotle indeed speaks of such barbarous persons as the least human among living beings, since they lack a full awareness of law and a rational faculty. This is true; yet, in this sense, barbarism is not an essential property. Greeks, Latins, or inhabitants of the most advanced countries may be described as barbarians if they perpetrate such cruel acts. Indeed, given the inhuman treatment inflicted upon the natives, the Spaniards have surpassed all other barbarians (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 28–29).

In its second sense, barbarism denotes the absence of a written linguistic system through which one's thoughts may be expressed. Because the natives do not know how to express their thoughts in such a system, they are assumed to be uncultured and uneducated. Yet, on this understanding, the natives are barbarous only in a limited, not absolute, sense: a person may count as barbarous in this way and still be wise, courageous, and prudent. Moreover, it is known that Fray Domingo de Santo Tomás composed a grammar of the native languages of Peru. Hence, Las Casas argues, these peoples cannot be deemed natural slaves in the Aristotelian sense (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 30–32; Hanke, 1974, p. 83). Unlike Sepúlveda—who never set foot on the continent—Las Casas, who lived there for half a century, appeals to his empirical experience: do not the great kingdoms, excellent cities, legal systems, religious beliefs, customs and traditions, and commercial relations of the natives suffice to show that Sepúlveda is mistaken? (Las Casas, 1974, p. 42).

In a third—and, for Las Casas, the true—sense, barbarism refers to a condition of cruelty, savagery, and lack of reason arising from a demonic and maleficent disposition, or from the barrenness of one's habitat. Such persons neither live under the rule of law nor possess a political organization; they also lack social institutions. They enter into no contractual practices such as marriage or commerce. These are the people Aristotle describes as natural slaves, dwelling in forests and mountainous regions (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 32–33). Yet, precisely because of the characteristics listed above, truly barbarous persons, Las Casas contends, are exceedingly rare. Such a condition is contrary to human nature, which is itself part of nature's processes of coming-to-be and passing-away. He grounds this view by invoking Aristotelian principles reiterated in *On the Heavens*, *Rhetoric*, and the *Parva Naturalia* ("On Youth and Old Age"): "Nature always aims at the best order possible," and "things in nature occur in a determinate order, because they occur in a similar way." Accordingly, on an Aristotelian ontology, deviations in nature's processes are rare: just as fire proceeds from fire and the human from the human, everything in nature brings forth what is like itself. The natives, then, are human beings born of other human beings and endowed with the same rights. To assume, with Sepúlveda, that most natives are genuinely barbarous—devoid of reason and incapable of political organization—would run counter to nature's order and insinuate a defect in God's creation (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 36–38). Thus, against Sepúlveda's appeal to Aristotle to prove that the natives are natural slaves, Las Casas appeals to the same philosopher to prove that they are not.

With respect to those exceedingly rare individuals who could truly be called barbarous, Las Casas concedes that what Aristotle says of natural slaves may apply: if they refuse to submit to the authority of a more civilized people, one might, in extremis, resort to coercive measures, even war. Two caveats are essential, however. First, the compulsion to a more civilized life is legitimate only for the rulers of the polity. Second, such persons must not be forced in a cruel manner, but persuaded gently. Las Casas's final word on the matter is this (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 38–40): “Although Aristotle—ignorant as he was of Christian truth and love—suggests that those endowed with reason may hunt barbarians as they hunt wild beasts, let no one infer hence that barbarians may be killed, or burdened and driven as animals are, and thus seized and subdued for that purpose. Farewell, Aristotle! For we are bound by Christ's command: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

In a fourth and final sense, “barbarian,” according to Las Casas, encompasses all who are not Christians. In this sense, no matter how well governed a people may be, or how intelligent a person may be, if they do not partake of the wisdom of Christian philosophy, they are condemned to barbarism. Although Las Casas acknowledges the political capacities of the Turks and Arabs, he nonetheless maintains—following Augustine—that societies ignorant of Christ cannot be ruled justly. Sepúlveda's error, in the end, lies in his failure to attend to the distinctions drawn by Aristotle and the Church Fathers among these four types of barbarism (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 49–53). Las Casas also poses a very simple question to Sepúlveda: if it were just for one nation to wage war against another on the basis of the barbarism argument, would not the Turks and the Moors—those two troublesome nations—be wholly justified by the law of nature in waging war against the natives?

According to Carl Schmitt, the Aristotelian argument for natural slavery, which Sepúlveda follows, is in its consequences inhumane, even as it presupposes its own distinct conception of humanity—namely, the superior humanity of the conqueror (Schmitt, 2003, p. 103). The conqueror, by virtue of his higher form of humanity, is said to elevate the lower, barbarous peoples to a civilized life. Yet Las Casas offers a decisive counterpoint. What, he asks, would Sepúlveda say to the following statement by the Roman historian Trogus Pompeius? (Las Casas, 1974, p. 43): “Spain was the only conquered region that had not previously been under anyone's yoke, until, after Augustus had subdued the world, he turned his victorious armies upon that barbarous and savage people (the Spaniards) and seized the region; thereafter he led them to a civilized mode of life.” From this, Las Casas asks (Las Casas, 1974, p. 43): if this historical record describes the Spaniards—not the natives—as barbarous and savage, were the Romans' wars to rescue the Spaniards from their barbarism legitimate? Or, when the Spaniards defended themselves against Rome, were they engaged in an unjust war? In this light, as Schmitt also notes, Sepúlveda's characterization of the natives as barbarous and savage, with appeal to Aristotle, served to place them outside any legal order and thereby to facilitate the free seizure of their lands (Schmitt, 2003, p. 102).

2.2. The Critique of the Second Argument

As noted above, Sepúlveda's second argument holds that war becomes legitimate in order to punish crimes contrary to the law of nature, including human sacrifice in religious rites, homosexual acts, cannibalism, and idolatry. Las Casas rejects this argument. No ruler has juridical authority to judge regions beyond his own territorial jurisdiction. Because the natives do not live within the Spanish dominions, they cannot be subjected to punitive wars by the Spaniards. Punishment presupposes membership in a determinate political order and subjection to its legal processes. Thus, Jews, Muslims, and idolaters who are not subject to Christian governance cannot be punished by Christian rulers for their conduct, however evil it may be, since they do not fall under canon law. Las Casas approaches the problem both politically—by grounding the legitimacy of authority in social consent—and theologically—by invoking the principle articulated by Paul and endorsed by Augustine, Aquinas, and

other Fathers: “For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those inside that you are to judge? God judges those outside” (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 54–66).

2.3. The Critique of the Third Argument

Las Casas acknowledges that the third argument—aimed at saving the tens of thousands of innocents allegedly slain in sacrificial rites—has an important point of departure. The salvation of innocent souls is entrusted to the Church and, in that sense, they are under its protection; steps must therefore be taken to prevent their eternal damnation at the hands of the natives (Las Casas, 1974, p. 186). He concedes that the natives kill innocents. Nevertheless, even if unbelievers perpetrate such acts, punitive wars must not be waged against them, for such wars would lead to the deaths of even more innocents. Furthermore, while it is chiefly kings and priests among the natives who consume the flesh of the slain, those who die in war are often other innocents not guilty of such practices. Wars that kill innocents will also implant an abiding hatred of the Christian faith in the hearts of the surviving natives. Las Casas’s solution is to apply the principle of choosing the lesser evil wherever two unavoidable evils confront us, in accordance with natural law. In short, he argues, one must never resort to war to liberate the innocents who are being killed; rather, one must tolerate the evil to avoid a greater one (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 190–191).

2.4. The Critique of the Fourth Argument

Sepúlveda’s fourth argument maintains that wars undertaken to spread the Christian faith among the natives are legitimate. He bases this claim on the Gospel parable of the wedding feast. In the parable, a man prepares a great banquet and invites many guests; when the time comes, they offer excuses and refuse to attend. The host, angered, orders his servants to bring in the poor, the blind, and the lame; when places still remain, he commands: “Go out to the roads and hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled.” From this, and supposing Christ’s approval, Sepúlveda infers that people may be compelled to enter the Christian faith and accept the truths of the Gospel (*compelle eos intrare*). Las Casas, however, concludes—following Aquinas and other Church Fathers—that the “compulsion” in question must not be physical coercion but persuasion, the constraining power of reasoned argument and charity (Las Casas, 1974, pp. 267–273).

CONCLUSION

This study arrives at three conclusions; one concerning the history of philosophy and two concerning contemporary world politics. First, from the standpoint of the history of philosophy, Aristotle’s political philosophy did not remain a theory proposed at a certain moment in time and then forgotten; rather, as the case of Spanish colonialism shows, even nearly two millennia later, in the early modern period, it functioned as a political guide invoked to reshape realpolitik. In this respect, his political philosophy served as a handbook for legitimizing Spanish colonialism. As the eminent historian of philosophy Kenny aptly notes, one of the first things one observes when approaching early modern philosophy is that Aristotle begins to withdraw from the philosophical stage (Kenny, 2017, p. 12). For example, Francis Bacon (1561–1626) held that Aristotle’s science, grounded in deduction, impeded scientific progress and, as an alternative, developed a methodical conception of induction. Likewise, with the telescope he devised, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) demonstrated the error of Aristotle’s long-accepted cosmological model. Aristotle’s ethics and political thought, too, came under heavy criticism. Yet it appears that his idea of just war, derived from his notion of natural slavery, enjoyed broad support in the early modern period. Nor was this confined to Spanish political thought; it is also evident, for instance, in English political philosophy. A striking example is Francis Bacon. In his dialogue *An Advertisement Touching a Holy War*, the character Zabadeus seeks—drawing on Aristotle’s conceptualization of *natura dominus* (masters by nature) and *natura servus* (slaves by nature)—to

demonstrate that a war against the Turkish Empire would be just according to the law of nature (Bacon, 2005, pp. 29–32). For Arslan, Aristotle was a philosopher necessary to every civilization in a positive sense; hence, in his view (Arslan, 2017, p. 9), “he was accepted and exalted by every civilization (Greek, medieval Islamic, medieval Western Christian, and finally the modern West).” However, considering the influence of his ideas about war and its legitimacy on Spanish colonialism, the present study concludes that Aristotle affected many civilizations not only through the positive consequences of his thought but also through its negative ones.

Second, the debate examined here between Sepúlveda and Las Casas bears a close relation to contemporary world politics. Few thinkers have grasped this more incisively than Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019), and it is fitting to formulate this conclusion with reference to him. In Wallerstein’s view, the importance of the sixteenth-century debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas lies in its continuing relevance and in its capacity to expose the rhetoric of power—namely, what he calls “European universalism.” Since the sixteenth century, European states have legitimated their colonial and imperial actions by claiming to protect values deemed universal (human rights, democracy, natural law, the protection of innocents, freedom, etc.). In this respect, Wallerstein argues, Sepúlveda’s four arguments reappear in today’s world politics as follows: (a) barbarism; (b) putting an end to practices that violate universal values; (c) rescuing innocents from the hands of tyrants; and (d) spreading universal values. The arguments merely change form. Thus, for Sepúlveda in the sixteenth century, the imperative was to spread Christianity; in the twenty-first, it becomes the imperative to spread democracy. Likewise, those who suffered under the natives give way to those oppressed under the rule of Saddam Hussein (1937–2006) (Wallerstein, 2007, pp. 9–31). A glance at recent American political history suggests that the United States corroborates Wallerstein’s thesis—grounding its wars in the rhetoric of European universalism. The values invoked are this time ethical and political ones such as freedom, democracy, rescuing innocents from cruel dictators, and ending barbarism. For example, in justifying the war of invasion he launched against Iraq on 19 March 2003, George W. Bush, the 43rd president of the United States, asserted that the war would bring freedom to the Iraqi people (Bush, 2003a, para. 10). Again, according to Bush, the fundamental reasons for the wars waged by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan were to liberate fifty million people living under two cruel dictators, to establish democratic regimes in those countries, and to deliver them from some of the most tyrannical governments on earth (Bush, 2003b, para. 8). Likewise, when the 44th president, Barack Obama, set out the reasons for the American military interventions during the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, he advanced grounds that correspond to Sepúlveda’s arguments: (1) the barbarism of ISIS terrorism; (2) crimes against humanity and violations of international law; and (3) the deaths of innocents resulting from the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons (Obama, 2013; Obama, 2014). Even the recent declaration by the newly re-elected president Donald Trump that he has “completely obliterated” Iran’s nuclear enrichment facilities at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan—facilities belonging to a sovereign state (Trump, 2025, 0:57)—can be assessed through the lens of European universalism. The legitimacy of Trump’s military operations, ostensibly aimed at eliminating the nuclear threat, is linked once more to universal values such as international peace and security, international law, and world peace. In the rhetoric of power, Sepúlveda appears to defend innocents or the laws of nature; Trump, for his part, appears to defend the universal values just mentioned. In reality, however, what this universalist rhetoric seeks to conceal are economic and political interests. In this sense, it is clear that the universalist rhetoric of power repeats itself in an eternal cycle, especially in contemporary world politics.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight yet another dimension of the Sepúlveda–Las Casas debate that bears directly upon contemporary world politics. Sepúlveda’s justification of Spanish colonialism—of wars of domination on the continent and of the dispossession of its peoples—rests fundamentally on the first Aristotelian argument. That is, members of these peoples cannot be regarded, in an ontological

sense, as fully and genuinely “human.” In his view, since they are slaves by nature, they must be classified within a lower category of being. Indeed, Sepúlveda did not use the Latin term *homo* (human) for the natives, but rather the expression *homunculus*, which may be translated as “half-human” (Sepúlveda, 1987, pp. 104–106). To claim that these peoples are not truly human, and not equal to others, is, as Schmitt has previously argued, to situate the relationship between them and European states outside the framework of law. From this point onward, the natives become mere living beings who may, when necessary, be legitimately killed, and their lands mere property that may legitimately be seized. All acts of violence henceforth assume the appearance of legitimacy.

One of the clearest indications that this Sepúlvedan mindset persists today can be found in Israel’s war of occupation in the Palestinian territories, particularly in the intensified violence since October 7, 2023. The killing of hundreds of thousands of people in Gaza since that date, their forced displacement, the famine they endure, the genocide, and the pervasive cruelty have all been legitimated, in part, by Israel’s refusal to recognize Palestinians as fully human. A stark piece of evidence is provided by the words of Israel’s Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant (Gallant, 2023): “I have ordered a complete siege on Gaza. There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel; everything will be closed. We are fighting human animals (חיות אדם), and we will act accordingly.” From these words—which normalize evil in its most blatant form—we discern, in political terms, that Aristotle has not died; his specter still haunts the present world. In contrast to this Aristotelian spirit—animated by the dictum that ‘the human being is a rational animal’ (*ho anthrōpos zōon logon echon*, ὁ ἄνθρωπος ζῷον λόγον ἔχον), the people of Gaza—by resisting occupation, blockade, starvation, and every form of oppression—propose to the peoples of the world a different maxim: “the human being is a resisting animal” (*al-insān ḥayawānun muqāwimun*, (الإنسان حيوانٌ مُقاوِمٌ)). Gazans have once again taught us that to be truly human is, in an essential sense, to resist. A manifest sign of this teaching is the Global Sumud Flotilla⁵, now approaching Gaza, which stands as a symbol of resistance and solidarity against the blockade and genocide.

⁵ The Global Sumud Flotilla is the largest independent and collective humanitarian initiative ever organized for Gaza. Supported by civil society organizations worldwide, it was launched to break Israel’s eighteen-year naval blockade of Gaza and to deliver humanitarian aid. Departing from the ports of Genoa in Italy and Barcelona in Spain, the flotilla is accompanied by vessels from numerous countries.

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