The Virtues of Mestizaje:
Lessons from Las Casas for an Inter-American Ethics

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Abstract: Anglo-American virtue ethics tends to overlook potentially invaluable contributions from Latin American philosophy for developing a satisfying intercultural conception of the virtues. Indeed, the assumptions that enabled Western imperialism in the Americas (assumptions about the superiority of European culture or American exceptionalism) seem also to influence Anglo-American conceptions of the virtues. Drawing on the decolonial-feminist epistemology of Linda Martín Alcoff, my paper argues that cultural-historical prejudices have obscured a more plausible and open-ended version, a helpfully intercultural and self-consciously ‘mestizo’ version, of a contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. It does so by highlighting some of the best insights from Bartolomé de Las Casas on the Conquest of the Americas, in order to argue that cultural mestizaje can enrich the best Anglo-American accounts of the virtues we have, both now and in future research on moral character.

1. Introduction

Western imperialism has received many different types of moral-political justifications, but one of the most historically influential justifications appeals to an allegedly universal form of human nature. In the early modern period this traditional conception of human nature—based on a Western archetype, e.g. Spanish, Dutch, British, French, German—opens up a logical space for considering the inhabitants of previously unknown lands as having a ‘less-than-human’ nature.¹

This appeal to human nature originally found its inspiration in the philosophy of Aristotle, whose ethical thought pervaded the work of European philosophers at the outset of the early modern period and the modern age of empire. Indeed some Spanish writers—most famously, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (b. 1494)—explicitly appealed to Aristotle’s ethical-political philosophy in order to justify the conquest of the Americas in the early sixteenth century, for instance to justify war

against the Aztecs and other indigenous peoples. At the time of European arrival, the Aztec civilization was easily the greatest in Mesoamerica—and yet the Europeans generally considered the Aztec people to be ‘barbaric,’ i.e. less-than-fully-human.

Despite Aristotle’s association with the history of Western imperialism, the past forty years in moral philosophy have seen an explosion of interest in Aristotle’s ethics, especially the idea that the virtues are indispensable to a good human life. Today, proponents of an Aristotelian ethics can insist that Aristotle’s appeal to human nature can easily allow for—and even celebrate—the wide variety of lifestyles found in different cultural-historical contexts, that it can allow for a more flexible conception of the ways in which human nature is realized in different cultures and historical moments. Several philosophers have even developed accounts of some of the previously overlooked virtues that people will need under conditions of oppression or social marginalization, conditions that are often the result of intercultural imperialism (e.g. Tessman 2005, Medina 2013). These recent developments flow naturally from an Aristotelian orientation,

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2 Beuchot (1998, 28) mentions the Scottish philosopher John Major (Mair) (b. 1467) and the Spanish Bishop Juan de Quevedo (b. 1450) as Sepúlveda’s precursors in the appeal to Aristotelian ‘natural slaves.’ Cf. Hanke (1959, 14–16).

3 Alcoff (2017, 402) argues that the Eurocentrism involved here essentially involves an epistemology of ignorance: “Such a construction of barbarian identity removes any motivation to learn other ways or creeds. The claim that those designated inferior and inadequate thinkers is not justified by a study and evaluation of different practices, customs, forms of religiosity, institutions, beliefs, and the like, but simply on the observation that a group is not-Christian or not-rational or not-self.” She argues that Las Casas recognizes his own perspective as a perspective, and hence that he can “see the Other as having a substantive difference, and not simply as a ‘not-self’” (2017, 405). Cf. Gutiérrez (1993, passim; and 188–189, quoted below); Beuchot (1998, 26–36).

4 Philosophers who are explicitly indebted to Aristotle here include Tessman (2005) and Fricker (2007). Recent discussions of epistemic injustice—and epistemic virtue and vice more generally—are all ultimately indebted to the revival of Aristotelian ethics in the latter part of the twentieth century. In future
and such developments should lead us to consider, further, whether the assumptions that enabled Western imperialism might linger enough today to influence contemporary conceptions of the virtues—for instance, unreflective assumptions about European cultural supremacy and American ‘exceptionalism.’

My hypothesis is that such unreflective cultural prejudices have shaped the Western development of Aristotelian ethics—as already illustrated in Sepúlveda’s appeal to Aristotelian ‘natural slaves’—and that such prejudices partially explain the felt need for an extra-ethical foundation for the virtues, one provided by a universal and morally determinative form of human nature. An honest acknowledgement of the historical development of Aristotelian ethics would therefore be a first, but crucial step towards developing a more modest, intercultural version of a neo-Aristotelian ethics—an approach that aims precisely, in its open-endedness and epistemological humility, to supersede any form of imperialism. Such prejudices can obscure a more plausible and open-ended version—an intercultural and self-consciously ‘mestizo’ version—of a plausible neo-Aristotelian ethics (cf. Beuchot [2005, 126–127]).

What I argue here is that a consideration of the actual historical collision of these two radically distinct belief systems, Christian and Aztec, reveals the possibility of a helpfully ‘dialogical’ Aristotelianism, one that strains to understand, from within, the perspective of alien others. This dialogical Aristotelianism disavows an ‘epistemology of ignorance’—it disavows the need not to know, the motivation not to learn, something that Alcoff (2017, 402) considers to be essential to Eurocentrism (cf. Mills 2007, Pohlhaus 2012). A dialogical Aristotelianism work I aim to urge the importance of this genealogical fact for the future development of neo-Aristotelian ethics: Such an ethics must *embbody* epistemic justice.
strongly suggests that a philosophical version of ‘mestizaje’ might enrich the best philosophical accounts of the virtues we have, both now and in future research on moral character.\(^5\)

2. The Aztecs as Alien Others

In order to illustrate this dialogical version of an Aristotelian ethics, I will discuss one of the arguments deployed by Bartolomé de Las Casas (b. 1484) in defense of Aztec human sacrifice.\(^6\)

This defense was originally delivered in front of the “Council of the Indies,”! a tribunal convened in 1550 by Charles I of Spain—Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire—in order to determine the nature and fate of the native inhabitants of the ‘Indies’ (our Americas). The question before the Council was whether waging war against the native inhabitants of the Indies was morally justified in order to convert them to the Christian faith. This question seemed urgent given the

\(^5\) Julio Covarrubias’s recent case for ‘letting go’ of mestizaje rightfully emphasizes concerns about epistemic settler erasure and the logic of elimination that threatens indigenous communities (Covarrubias, 2019, sect. 3). But the virtues of mestizaje are directed at the dominantly situated paradigm in philosophy, a Eurocentric paradigm that apparently cannot, as Alcoff says, “play well with others” (2017, 401) (see also Pappas [2011] on the emphasis, in William James and John Dewey, on what North American philosophy and culture can learn from Latin America). Hence it is not true in this context that “to speak of _mestizaje_ is to speak … of a kind of cultural genocide that reproduces settler erasures” (Covarrubias, 2019, 6). What is good for the dominantly situated gander is not (necessarily) good for the marginally situated goose (cf. _Nicomachean Ethics_ II.6, 1105a35–1106b7).

\(^6\) To speak of the Aztecs here is perfectly appropriate, in spite of the fact that the conquest of Tenochtitlán (1521), the Aztec capital, antedates the debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda at Valladolid (1550–1551). In the minds of sixteenth-century Europeans, nothing could have compared to what the Spaniards witnessed at Tenochtitlán. In this assumption I am following the lead of Anthony Pagden, who notes that: “The most famous of the Amerindian cannibals were, _of course_, the Mexica, whose spectacular bouts of human sacrifice were assumed to have been followed by orgiastic feasts on the flesh of the victims” (1982, 83, my emphasis).
apparently barbaric nature of the Aztecs and other indigenous peoples—something most notably demonstrated by the religiously sanctioned practice of human sacrifice and the equally morbid practice of consuming the flesh of the sacrificial victims. Despite these gruesome practices—which genuinely horrified sixteenth-century Europeans—Las Casas defends the rationality of the Aztec way of life.

The discussion here should not of course be thought to question the gruesome nature of Aztec human sacrifice. One recent historian, drawing on authoritative sources, offers this lurid description:

In a typical ritual … the helpless individual was confronted with the sight of the great sacrificial stone, stained with blood, which also matted the hair of the magnificently adorned priests. Seized by these gory apparitions, the victim was stretched backwards over the stone altar, each limb extended by a priest so that the back was arched and the chest stretched taut and raised high toward the heavens. A fifth priest struck open the chest with an obsidian knife, excised the heart with knife and hands and raised the fertile offering to the heavens, displaying to the gods the sacrificial fruit.\(^7\)

Las Casas addresses the question of whether it would be just to wage war against the Aztecs, in the name of Christianity, in order to end this practice and to spare the lives of the innocent victims. The answer he gives is “No.”

Las Casas’s defiant approach to these issues already shows in his response to a different Spanish pretext for war. According to this different justification, war against the indigenous

\(^7\) Dodds Pennock (2008, 21); cf. *Florentine Codex* 2.2.
peoples is justified because they are guilty of killing Christians and therefore guilty of thwarting the spread of Christianity. Las Casas provides a sharp response. It highlights the *contemporary* relevance of thinking through his arguments—for instance, the relevance for evaluating past and present U.S. policy toward indigenous peoples and their descendants. In response to this initial pretext for war—that war is justified because the Indians kill Christians and prevent the spread of the Gospel—Las Casas responds that although the Indians have indeed killed Christians, they have not killed them *qua* Christians. Rather, the Indians kill Christians *qua* perpetrators of violence, theft, rape, torture, and murder. This insightful distinction is a distinction of which any Aristotelian can be justly proud. Its contemporary relevance should be obvious.

3. The Limitations of the Natural Light of Reason

Overall, Las Casas argues that the Aztec way of life “cannot be excused in the sight of God” (that they are not *objectively* correct about the propriety of human sacrifice) but that it “can completely be excused in the sight of men” (1974, 221). What this means is that no one can justifiably blame the Aztecs for their violent religious practices—but certainly not the Spaniards. Thus the following line of inquiry, with which Las Casas opens his discussion of

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8 On the contemporary relevance of the Valladolid debate, see the excellent recent treatment in Santana (2019). See also the magisterial discussion of Las Casas in Gutiérrez (1993). The best short book on the debate in English—which encompasses both the prelude and aftermath of the debate—remains Hanke (1959). See also the more detailed discussion in Hanke (1974).

9 For details, see Las Casas (1992). It has been long recognized that for rhetorical and political purposes (this was quite common), Las Casas engages in certain exaggerations of the devastation he documents, especially regarding magnitude (e.g. number of deaths). For contemporary discussions that significantly temper the ‘Black Legend’ of unparalleled Spanish brutality, see Greer, Mignolo, and Quillian (2007).
human sacrifice, is certainly intended to sting. Las Casas says that, “It would not be right to make war on them for this reason.” This is because

it is difficult to absorb in a short time the truth proclaimed to them … Why will they believe such a proud, greedy, cruel, and rapacious nation? Why will they give up the religion of their ancestors, unanimously approved for so many centuries and supported by the authority of their teachers…? (Las Casas 1974, 221)

In this passage Las Casas gestures toward an argument that will hinge on the epistemological limitations of the “natural light of reason.” He argues that it is difficult to convince rational people to abandon their cultural heritage, especially if one can only appeal to the argumentative resources provided by the natural light of reason—that is, if one cannot also appeal to the further epistemological resources provided by “faith, grace, and doctrine.” Waging war on the Aztecs would be unjustified, Las Casas says, because without antecedent Christian access to faith, grace, and doctrine, it is “difficult to absorb in a short time the truth proclaimed to them.” Here Las Casas emphasizes that the ‘natural light of reason’ displays epistemological limitations: In the absence of divine revelation, natural reason seems to provide justificatory reasons in favor of human sacrifice.10

10 Cf. Beuchot (1998, 28–30). Las Casas also deploys a very different defense, also effective, that centers on involuntary or ‘probable’ error; I discuss this different defense in other work and emphasize its Aristotelian underpinnings. I also argue elsewhere that any plausible neo-Aristotelian ethics must exhibit the epistemological open-mindedness and straining for inter-cultural understanding exhibited here by Las Casas.
There are at least three strategies for establishing that there are such limitations. In the Defense Las Casas employs the first two strategies; his avoiding the third one must have been determined by facts on the ground.

First, Las Casas appeals to biblical and historical precedents of human sacrifice that seem to illustrate its consistency with natural reason. He cites biblical episodes apparently indicating that God sometimes requires (or permits) human sacrifice. He also cites episodes of human sacrifice among the Europeans: Greeks, Romans, and even “our own Spaniards” (1974, 224).¹¹

Second, Las Casas argues that natural reason seems even to require sacrificing humans to God. He proceeds by first establishing four principles (mostly by appeal to theological and philosophical authorities): (1) No nation is so barbarous that it does not have at least some confused knowledge of God; (2) People are led by natural inclination to worship God according to their capacities and in their own ways; (3) There is no better way to worship God than by sacrifice, which is the principle act of latria [adoration]; (4) Offering sacrifice to the true God, or to the one who is thought to be God, comes from the natural law, whereas the things to be offered to God are a matter of human law and positive legislation (1974, ch. 35). From these principles Las Casas derives the conclusion of natural reason (given that nothing is more valuable than the life of man). He writes:

Therefore nature itself dictates and teaches those who do not have faith, grace, or doctrine, who live within the limitations of the light of nature, that, in spite of every contrary positive law, they ought to sacrifice victims to the true God or to the false god

¹¹ These precedents from ch. 34 of the Defense seem to be part of the argument about probable error that I mention in n. 10 just above; but they may be serving a dual purpose in these chapters.
who is thought to be true, so that by offering a supremely precious thing they might be more grateful for the many favors they have received. (Las Casas 1974, 234)

A similar conclusion might also be reached by direct appeal to Christianity, as follows.

Third, Las Casas might have argued—since appeal to biblical and theological authority is not off limits—that Christianity itself essentially involves human sacrifice. Hence, the activity of human sacrifice cannot, by itself, be any sign of barbarism. The view here would be that the Aztecs are only partially mistaken, since the sacrificial debt has already been paid in the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, if one takes seriously the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation—that the bread and the wine of the Eucharist are not representations of the body and the blood of Christ, but that they literally are the body and the blood of Christ—then Christianity also involves a form of cannibalism.12

What each of these strategies demonstrates is the possibility of a radical form of hermeneutical charity even regarding the allegedly barbarous practices of the Aztec people. Gustavo Gutiérrez nicely summarizes this in his magisterial study of Las Casas. Gutiérrez writes:

By attending to the customs, lifestyles, and religious freedom of the Indians, [Las Casas] created the necessary conditions for a dialogue to be conducted in respect for both parties. In this manner of dialogue, reason, not undue pressure, makes possible an integral presentation of the gospel message: now that message is offered—without prejudice to the values of the one proclaiming it—for the free acceptance of each hearer.

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Such a dialogue will respect the rational freedom of both parties. It will also involve, not only the giving of reasons, but also the taking of them:

If evangelization is a dialogue, it will not exist without an effort to understand the position of one’s interlocutor from within, in such a way that one may sense the vital thrust of these positions and grasp their internal logic. Neither will it be possible unless one is ready to give as well as to receive.\textsuperscript{13}

This passage characterizes the dialogical approach that I am advocating. Although we should certainly be wary, in cross-cultural contexts, of any appeal to “evangelization,” Las Casas’s radical hermeneutical charity advances the discussion here.\textsuperscript{14} Las Casas demonstrates the central virtue involved in a philosophical version of mestizaje, which is a distinctive form of epistemic justice. This epistemic virtue disavows an epistemology of ignorance by recognizing and—where appropriate—encouraging philosophical admixture. This philosophical admixture will occur in at least two ways. First, it will occur across spatio-cultural geography and between different philosophical, cultural, and academic communities. This is a kind of cross-pollination—something that seems to be more often lauded than practiced. Second, it will occur across world-

\textsuperscript{13} Gutiérrez (1993, 188–189, my emphasis). Gutiérrez finds a similar hermeneutical charity in the work, much later, of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (b. 1648): see Gutiérrez (1993, 525, n. 69).

\textsuperscript{14} This seems to be the context in which to understand Alcoff’s claim (2017, 405) that in contrast to a Cartesian form of self-understanding, Las Casas is “groping toward a different self-understanding, in which one’s own inclinations are analyzed in relation to their social context.” For much harsher verdicts on Las Casas’s evangelism, see Castro (2007) and von Vacano (2012). Neither author seems to me adequately to address Gutiérrez’s painstaking case for the claim that a “single idea” governs Las Casas’s Apología: “respect for the Indians’ religious customs” (1993, 174).
historical time, as a result of one’s own historical (i.e. genetic) philosophical inheritance, an inheritance that shapes one’s overall philosophical outlook, one’s framework of thought. This is a kind of dialogue with the past.\footnote{Beuchot (2005) helpfully argues for the type of anti-presentism that I mention here. He argues that contemporary Mexican philosophers can benefit from a neo-Aristotelian outlook that appreciates the influence of cultural-historical tradition—he cites the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Hans-Georg Gadamer (127). Beuchot reasonably asks: “If it is true that we live within a tradition, how can we advance in it or even oppose it if we do not have at least a minimum knowledge of it?” (114). The right hermeneutical balance can nevertheless be, in any specific context, difficult to strike: see O’Gorman (2017 [1960]) on understanding Aztec archeological artifacts (specifically, the magnificent statue of Coatlicue in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City).}

4. Epistemic Justice for an Inter-American Ethics

In the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Aristotle restricts the audience of his ethical lectures on the grounds that those who engage in moral philosophy must have been well brought up or brought up in good habits. What is less frequently noticed is that this requirement—to have appropriate ethical starting points and to have a character sufficiently well formed that one is not swayed by, e.g., unruly desires—is a requirement that also applies to Aristotle himself, and to Aristotelian moral philosophers in general, since they are also engaged in the practice of moral philosophy. But in the aftermath of the Spanish conquest of Tenochtitlán and other parts of the Americas, Aristotelian moral philosophy did not generally embrace the dialogical approach advocated by
Las Casas. I believe we need to trace the history of the damage done to moral philosophy in the long historical interim.\textsuperscript{16}

By way of analogy, consider an episode of European barbarism, recorded from the perspective of Aztec witnesses immediately before the fall of Mexico. In this episode, Spanish soldiers block the exits during a festive religious gathering, allowing the soldiers to massacre the participants. This gruesome episode seems to be taking inspiration from something in Homer and giving inspiration to something in George R. R. Martin—except that this actual historical episode involves gross violations of human dignity:

And when they had closed them off … they then entered the temple courtyard to slay them … they surrounded those who danced whereupon they went among the drums. Then they struck the arms of the one who beat the drums; they severed both his hands, and afterwards struck his neck, [so that] his neck [and head] flew off, falling far away. ... Of some, they struck the belly, and their entrails streamed forth. And when one in vain would run, he would only drag his entrails like something raw, as he tried to flee. …

And the blood of the chieftains ran like water; it spread out slippery, and a foul odor rose from the blood. And the entrails lay as if dragged out. And the Spaniards walked everywhere, searching the tribal temples; they went making thrusts everywhere in case

\textsuperscript{16} The valuable collection of essays in Miller (2017) provides a good beginning here—it considers the historical reception of Aristotle’s ethics—except that there is no consideration of the Conquest or the Latin American world. See also notes 18 and 19 below.
someone were hidden there. Everywhere they went, ransacking every tribal temple they
hunted.¹⁷

Ultimately it is unclear whether European-American philosophy has displayed an understanding
of cultural others that has been much better than the understanding displayed in this historical
episode. Whether intentionally or not, European-American philosophy has been remarkably
effective at securing its borders against what many of its practitioners consider to be alien
influences. This includes influences from other cultures and demographics, other academic
disciplines (e.g. history, sociology, anthropology), and other philosophical methodologies than
the one developed within European-American philosophy in the early twentieth-century and still
insisted upon by some philosophers as the defining mark of any genuine philosophy. Indeed,
many contemporary philosophers seem to be eerily at home with the history of Western
imperialism. This is a history that such philosophers seem to think can be neatly left in the past,
in such a way that they—and their favored research projects—can continue to benefit from
centuries of past injustices.

Obviously I cannot fully develop this suggestion here.¹⁸ Instead of doing so, I will
mention something that I believe is utterly crucial for developing a plausible neo-Aristotelian
ethics informed by an intercultural perspective. This is a radical form of cultural self-scrutiny,
especially a scrutiny of the ethical and epistemic prejudices that are embedded within our social-
historical framework of thought—a framework of thought that is of course usually taken for

¹⁷ Florentine Codex 12.20, 53–54.
¹⁸ The historiographical study in Park (2013) and the work of Robert Bernasconi and Walter Mignolo
(among others) have helpfully gotten the discussion started, as have recent attempts to create ‘new
narratives’ in the history of philosophy. The publication of Maffie’s study on Aztec metaphysics (2014)
illustrates another type of void waiting to be filled.
granted. It ceases to be taken for granted (or can do so) when it comes into contact with radically alternative frameworks, ones that are culturally or historically distant from our own current location. To put the point differently: contemporary moral philosophers need to pay greater attention to history in at least two senses. We need a better understanding of the history and the historicity of philosophy, an understanding that is not willfully inaccurate and that disavows the arrogance of knowing only one’s own philosophical tradition.¹⁹ We also need a better appreciation of our current place in history and our cultural particularity—a critical understanding of the framework of thought that can of course seem inevitable to us. This would be a form of neo-Aristotelian ethics that takes seriously those genealogical approaches that still remain very much against-the-current in contemporary moral philosophy. It would also be a form of Aristotelian ethics that, in better appreciating our current (globalized, multicultural, postcolonial/neo-colonial) place in history, strains to embody the virtues of epistemic justice.

WORKS CITED


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¹⁹ Latin American philosophy provides an epistemological opportunity for European-American philosophy: to scrutinize its own historical development from the radically alternative perspective of world-historical marginality. This theme in Latin American thought—the theme of marginality—has been especially emphasized in the work of Leopoldo Zea, Enrique Dussel, and Walter Mignolo. See for instance Zea (1992 [1957]), Dussel (1995), Mignolo (2000); see also Alcoff (2017), Schutte (1993). On the dangers that can prevent dominantly situated groups from taking advantage of such epistemological opportunities, see Mills (2007), Pohlhaus (2012).


