

Understanding, Knowledge and the Valladolid Debate: Why Las Casas and Sepúlveda Differ on the Moral Status of Indigenous Persons

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English Abstract

I argue that las Casas and Sepúlveda differed in their conclusions regarding the status of Indigenous persons at least partly because las Casas had significant, yet incomplete, understanding of Indigenous persons, culture and societies and Sepúlveda had mere knowledge of them. To this end, I show that the epistemic state of understanding explains why Las Casas properly concluded that Indigenous persons deserve the same moral status afforded to Europeans. And I show how las Casas' understanding of Indigenous persons, culture and societies related to what he got wrong about Indigenous persons.

Resumen en español

Sostengo que las Casas y Sepúlveda diferían en sus conclusiones sobre el estatus de las personas indígenas, al menos en parte, porque las Casas tenía un entendimiento significativo, aunque incompleto, de las personas, la cultura y las sociedades indígenas y Sepúlveda tenía un mero conocimiento de ellas. Con este fin, muestro que el estado epistémico de entendimiento explica por qué las Casas concluyó apropiadamente que los indígenas merecen el mismo estatus moral otorgado a los europeos. Y muestro cómo el entendimiento de las Casas sobre las personas, la cultura y las sociedades indígenas se relaciona con lo que se equivocó sobre las personas indígenas.

Resumo em português

Argumento que las Casas e Sepúlveda diferiram em suas conclusões sobre a situação dos povos indígenas, pelo menos em parte porque las Casas tinham uma compreensão significativa, embora incompleta, dos povos, culturas e sociedades indígenas e Sepúlveda tinha mero conhecimento deles. Para este fim, mostro que o estado epistêmico de compreensão explica por que Las Casas concluiu corretamente que os povos indígenas merecem o mesmo status moral concedido aos europeus. E mostro como a compreensão de Las Casas sobre os povos, a cultura e as sociedades indígenas se relacionou com o que ele errou sobre os povos indígenas.

In the 16th century, Friar Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda engaged in a philosophical debate that would bear on how Europeans related to Indigenous, African and later Latinx American persons until the present day. This debate was the Valladolid debate. The Valladolid debate was commissioned by the Spanish

Crown in response to the Spanish-caused Indigenous genocide which occurred during the 16th century. This debate took the moral status and corresponding treatment of Indigenous persons in the Americas as its locus of disagreement. On behalf of the apologists of this genocide, Sepúlveda presented specious metaphysical and moral arguments to support the false view that Indigenous persons in the Americas were subpersons or natural slaves. These conclusions were not only used to justify this genocide of up to 100 million Indigenous Americans in the century following Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Caribbean (Cave, 2008; Mills, 1997; Stannard, 1992), but they were also used to justify the enslavement of African persons in the Americas and then later the colonizing of Asia and Australia.

Consideration of this debate raises the issue of how Sepúlveda could get so much wrong despite the facts he knew. For example, Sepúlveda knew about many of the technological, organizational, and architectural accomplishments of the Mexica and Maya people. Consideration of this debate also raises the issue of why las Casas more accurately represented reality in the Americas than Sepúlveda while still getting important things wrong. To address these issues, I will explore how Bartolomé de las Casas and Ginés de Sepúlveda's conclusions in the Valladolid debate relate to the epistemic states of knowledge and understanding. I will argue that las Casas and Sepúlveda differed in their conclusions regarding the status of Indigenous persons at least partly because las Casas had some, but not complete, *understanding* of Indigenous persons, culture, and societies and Sepúlveda had mere *knowledge* of them.

To this end, I will show that the epistemic state of understanding explains why las Casas properly concludes that Indigenous persons deserve the same moral status afforded to Europeans. And I will show how las Casas' understanding of Indigenous persons, culture, and societies relates to what he gets wrong about Indigenous persons. To show this, I will appeal to a minimal version of standpoint theory to explain why las Casas largely accurately represents Indigenous peoples and cultures, on the one hand, and why las Casas errs in certain respects vis-à-vis Indigenous peoples and cultures on the other hand.

This argument will also involve an explanation of how Sepúlveda's *knowledge* of Indigenous persons, culture, and societies does not prevent him from arriving at a false conclusion about them that is inconsistent with this knowledge. To explain this, I will appeal to how the human psychological disposition to believe certain ways interacts with 16th century elite Spaniards' positive self-conception.

Section I

In this section, I will argue that las Casas and Sepúlveda's different experiences vis-à-vis Indigenous persons explains why they come to differ in terms of their beliefs regarding the metaphysical and moral status of Indigenous persons.

Bartolomé de las Casas' personal experience in the Americas in general and with Indigenous persons in particular starkly differs from Ginés de Sepúlveda's experience. Susana Nuccetelli points to this fact when she says, "Las Casas differed dramatically from Sepúlveda in that he had direct knowledge of these [Indigenous] peoples" (Nuccetelli, 2020, p. 5). Las Casas spent a large part of his life in the Americas in regions such as the Caribbean, Mesoamerica and South America (Deagan & Crucent, 2002; Gracia & Millán, 2004; Las Casas, 1992b, 1992a; Nuccetelli, 2020). In these areas, he became familiar with Indigenous persons and the habits, customs and practices that made up their forms of life.

In contrast, Sepúlveda's experience with the Americas and its various Indigenous peoples such as the Taino, Caribe, Nahuatl and Mayan people was limited to reports that he received through first-personal testimony and, most often, written reports from Conquistadores, Spanish administrators, and bureaucrats (Nuccetelli, 2020). I submit that this difference in experience in significant measure explains why they differed in their epistemic attitudes towards the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Even though Las Casas and Sepúlveda ultimately had divergent views about the metaphysical, and thus moral, status of the Americas' Indigenous peoples, they began with similarly false beliefs about the Indigenous persons of the Americas. When Las Casas arrived in Santo Domingo with his father on Columbus' second voyage to the Americas, he partook in the common and immoral practices of Spanish colonists such as cultivating and exploiting Taíno land with enslaved Taíno persons (Las Casas, 1992a, 2004; Todorov, 1999). At this point in time, Las Casas' view of Indigenous persons was more or less compatible with Sepúlveda's view that Indigenous persons were examples of what Aristotle considered natural slaves or barbarians. For Aristotle, certain persons are appropriately classified as natural slaves or barbarians because they are supposedly innately brutish and lack the capacity to reason. And on this basis, for Aristotle, those persons who do have a capacity to reason should control or enslave them (Aristotle & Lord, 2013).

On Christmas of 1511, the Dominican monk, Antonio Montesinos delivered an anti-Conquistador sermon in the church of Santo Domingo (Las Casas, 2004). In this sermon, he railed against the immorality of the Spaniards' treatment of the Indigenous Taíno people of the island of Hispaniola. He asked, "with what right and with what justice do you keep these poor Indians in such cruel and horrible servitude?...Are these not men? Do they not have rational souls?" (Las Casas, 1992a, p. xxi). Upon hearing this sermon, Las Casas did not immediately change his views and thus his treatment of Indian persons. But within three years of hearing this sermon, he renounced his 'claim' to or 'right over' the Indigenous persons that worked his land in Santo Domingo and Xaragua, Cuba. It is at this point that he and Sepúlveda began to radically differ in their views of the moral status of Indigenous persons in the Americas.

Las Casas spent many years of his very long life living among Indigenous peoples and cultures not only in the Caribbean but also in Central America and

importantly in Mexico where he served as the Bishop of Chiapas. These years composed the long period between the moment when las Casas first realizes the falsity of his view of Indigenous persons and the point in time when he engaged Sepúlveda's anti-Indigenous argument in the Valladolid debate. Las Casas' first-personal experience with Indigenous persons and cultures over such a long period, I will assume, allowed him to develop some understanding of Indigenous forms of life. As a result, this experience not only put him in a position to at least partly understand the degree of suffering and loss that befell the Indigenous peoples of the Americas due to the Spaniards' predilection for power, slaves, gold, and land but it also put him in a position to understand the immorality of the Spaniards' actions that caused this suffering and loss. For Roberto Goizueta (2000, p. 188), Enrique Dussel has developed a similar view that las Casas realized the immorality of these actions as a result of taking the perspective of Indigenous persons rather than the Conquistadores' perspective. This view differs from the one I present because for Dussel perspective taking explains why las Casas realized the moral truth while on my account first-personal experience does more of the explaining of his realization. Here, I assume that some minimal version of standpoint theory is true where this involves commitment to the view that certain social locations result in deeper understanding of injustice than others (Alcoff, 1999; Collins, 1990; Du Bois, 1903; Harding, 1995; Hartsock, 1998; Longino, 1990; Toole, 2019).

However, I am not claiming that las Casas' occupied the same social location that Indigenous persons occupied. As a consequence, he did not understand what it was like to be an Indigenous person. What I am claiming is that dominant-group subjects *can* develop an elevated level of understanding of injustice through (1) proximity to persons who suffer injustice and (2) having the correct emotional comportment towards those who experience injustice. For example, I grew up in an 'inner-city' Black and Latinx section of New York City. In this neighborhood there was one young white adolescent man who hung out with us, Black and Latinx adolescents, on the block on which I lived. That he was White was so remarkable that his nickname was, 'White man.' This was a term of endearment.

"White man," was impoverished just like the rest of us adolescents of color. He experienced the crime and danger in the neighborhood that we, adolescents of color did. But despite this similarity of location and experience 'White man' knew that his experience differed from his Black and Latinx friends. As a result, 'White man' did not have the same understanding, or standpoint, that Black and Latinx adolescents had. This relation that 'White man' had to understanding of injustice in this neighborhood, I take it, is analogous to how las Casas related to Indigenous persons in the Americas and as a consequence analogous to this understanding of injustice in the Americas. 'White man' understood much more than the average White person who was not similarly situated but, on the other hand, his understanding was less deep than the average Black or Latinx person in the same neighborhood.

Even though I have painted a picture according to which White man's understanding of injustice in this neighborhood largely but not entirely overlaps with the

neighborhood's Black and Latinx adolescents, a consequence of the standpoint view that motivates this picture is that Black adolescent understanding of injustice could differ in significant ways from Latinx adolescent understanding of this injustice. On this account, differences between Black and Latinx adolescents will depend on the different histories of injustice that compose their respective social locations. For example, Afro-Latinx adolescents' understanding may differ less from Black individuals' similar understanding than Latinx adolescents with identities that involve more anti-Indigenous directed injustice. Differences and similarities in understanding will correspond to differences and similarities in their social location.

Sepúlveda's situation starkly contrasts with Las Casas' situation because Sepúlveda never set foot in the Americas. Sepúlveda was a philosopher and theologian at the University of Salamanca which was a preserve of the Castilian elite. Sepúlveda was likely one of the first persons to instantiate what philosopher Charles Mills called White Ignorance. Someone instantiates White Ignorance if she holds a false belief or lacks a true belief because of whiteness or anti-Black, Indigenous or Latinx racism (Mills, 2007). Mills called White Ignorance the obverse of standpoint. Sepúlveda may have been one of the first persons to instantiate White Ignorance because the notion of White or White persons qua race was developed in the years following Columbus' arrival in the Americas. Sepúlveda falsely believed that Indigenous persons were subpersons and thus did not have the same moral status as Spaniards or White-Europeans. I think that I safely assume that Sepúlveda held this false belief because of Whiteness or anti-Indigenous racism. As a consequence, Sepúlveda instantiated White Ignorance. That is, his dominant-group membership explains why he held this false belief.

But Sepúlveda instantiated White Ignorance even though he knew facts that were inconsistent with this White Ignorance. Sepúlveda knew that the Maya and Mexica peoples developed highly advanced civilizations that at least rivaled if not surpassed European civilization (Sepúlveda, 1954). He knew that they had systems of writing, schools, bureaucracies, cities, systems of irrigation, taxation, and monumental architecture. Despite this knowledge, he maintained commitment to his belief that Indigenous persons were natural slaves or barbarians and thus had a lower moral status in comparison to Spaniards in particular and Europeans in general. The idea is that this knowledge that Sepúlveda had constituted evidence which should have motivated him to either not form his false beliefs about Indigenous persons or revise these false beliefs.

I submit that (1) the general human disposition to believe what feels good and avoid believing what feels bad and (2) Sepúlveda's dominant-racial group qua social location in significant measure jointly explain why he maintained this false cognitive commitment in the face of knowledge inconsistent with it.

Human subjects will tend to believe in ways that allow them to maintain their core beliefs (Bendaña & Mandelbaum, In press; Mandelbaum, 2019). Examples of core

beliefs that a subject will tend to maintain commitment to are that ‘I am a good person’ and ‘I am a reliable person’ (Bendaña & Mandelbaum, In press). In the case of Sepúlveda, the belief that ‘I am a good person,’ I will assume roughly equals the belief that ‘I am Christian.’ I safely assume this because, in Europe, notions of goodness and badness, during the 1500s, were explained in terms of notions of good and bad drawn from the Christian New Testament and Catholic doctrine.

When Sepúlveda encountered evidence that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were not subpersons but actually persons, he could have either (1) accepted this evidence and as a consequence revised his belief that Indigenous persons were subpersons or (2) rejected this evidence and maintained his belief that American Indigenous persons were subpersons. If he had accepted this evidence, then he would have had to accept that he and other Spaniards endorsed, promoted, and benefitted from the wildly immoral and non-Christian states of affair such as the genocide and systemic exploitation of these American peoples. If he accepted this, then he would have to accept that he and other Spaniards are not good Christians and thus not good people. Believing this feels bad and as a result Sepúlveda opted to reject this true belief. Here, Las Casas and Sepúlveda differ in terms of accepting this true belief at least partly because of the standpoint or social location that Las Casas developed through engaging in some measure in Indigenous people’s way of life.

Notice that Sepúlveda was a dominant-group member explains why feeling good here resulted in his believing this falsehood, namely that he is a good Christian and a good person. To believe the truth for Sepúlveda vis-à-vis how he as Spaniard related to the Indigenous persons of the Americas involved believing facts that feel bad to believe. This tended to involve feeling bad because dominant group members will tend to benefit from their membership in material and psychic ways that are incompatible with the core beliefs that typically compose any human subject’s positive self-conception. For example, Du Bois (Du Bois, 1998) pointed out that White Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries not only benefited materially, but they also benefited psychically. On this Du Bois said, “while [White group laborers] receive a low wage, [they] were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage” (Du Bois, 1998, p. 700).

Linda Martín Alcoff points out that for George Herbert Mead, the group identities into which subjects are born play a fundamental role in forming persons’ notion of self. Following Mead, for Alcoff, individuals do not have a “fully formed self prior to [their] absorption in a system of social meanings” (Alcoff, 2015, p. 52). I take it that identities such as Black, White, Indigenous, Christian and Spaniard partly composed these systems of social meaning into which individuals were born. As a result, Sepúlveda’s sense of self was very tightly conceptually connected to his view of himself as Christian and Spaniard. And a further consequence of this is that the *encuentro* between Spaniards and Indigenous peoples and the resulting Conquista, or more aptly put genocide, placed epistemic pressure on this false view that he had of himself and other Spaniards.

Social psychologists have noted that the first belief that a subject has on a topic will tend to more stubbornly resist counterevidence than the second, third, and subsequent beliefs that she forms vis-à-vis the same topic (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). If subjects' first beliefs about themselves tend to be core beliefs about themselves and beliefs about their identity group's positive value, then Sepúlveda's belief that he and other Spaniards were good Christians would tend to resist counterevidence because these are some of the first beliefs that Sepúlveda would have formed about himself and his fellow identity-group members. I assume that the fact that 'the Spaniards conduct in the Americas is wildly immoral' is such counterevidence.

Sepúlveda believed in a way that allowed him to protect his identity from the threat of evidence that disconfirmed its positive value. Daniel Kahn et. al (2007) has called this identity protective cognition (Stanley, 2015). The truth of the nature of the Spaniards' conduct in the Americas posed a threat to Sepúlveda's belief that he was a good Christian, and that Spaniards were good Christians. For Kahn et. al, "individuals appraise information in a manner that buttresses beliefs associated with belonging to particular groups" (Kahn et al., 2007, p. 470). On this view, Sepúlveda believed as he did to defend his belief about belonging to the group 'Spaniards.'

Section II

In this section, I will explain the argument that Sepúlveda presents that war or genocide that the Spanish waged on Indigenous peoples was just. Then, I will explain las Casas' refutation of this argument.

Sepúlveda's argumentative strategy was to show that the Spaniards' war against the Indigenous peoples of the Americas was moral involved showing that the Indigenous persons of the Americas were not due the same moral treatment as Christian Europeans. He was aware that he could not simultaneously maintain (1) that the Spaniards' war, and attending genocide, against the Indigenous peoples of the Americas was just and (2) that Indigenous persons had equal moral standing relative to Spaniards and other European Christians. If Indigenous persons have this equal moral standing, then this war was unjust and as a consequence Spaniards violated God's law. Sepúlveda's burden was to show that Indigenous persons do not have this equal moral standing. He attempted this by arguing that Indigenous persons are barbarians or natural slaves by Aristotle's lights (Birondo, 2020).

Sepúlveda assumed that a group of people are natural slaves if they have "inferior intelligence along with inhuman and barbarous customs" (Sepúlveda, 1954, p. 494). Sepúlveda contrasted natural slaves with persons who are slaves by accident or by force. This kind of slave is a slave as a result of coercion, war or more generally the political state of affairs in her society. These non-natural slaves are not slaves because of some innate inferiority as is the case with natural slaves. So, natural slaves differ

from non-natural slaves because natural slaves have some innate, internal property true of them that is not true of non-natural slaves.

Sepúlveda claimed that “those...who are retarded or slow to understand...are by nature slaves” (Sepúlveda, 1954, p. 494). He pointed this out to claim that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas satisfy this description of natural slaves. But he recognized that he must reconcile the fact that the Mexica and Maya peoples had sophisticated, complex societies with this claim about their inferior and barbarous nature. To reconcile fact and falsehood, he attempted to undercut Mexica and Mayan ingenuity and societal attainment by claiming that these features of their society are mere products of automatic non-rational, instinctual responses to their environment. To this end, he said, “although some of them show a certain ingenuity for various works of artisanship, this is no proof of human cleverness, for we can observe animals, birds, and spiders making certain structures which no human accomplishment can competently imitate” (Sepúlveda, 1954, p. 497). What is more is that this is a claim that one can make about European or Iberian ingenuity, but this is precisely the kind of claim that Sepúlveda would be inclined to reject because it is incompatible with false beliefs he holds about himself and Christian Europe relative to Indigenous peoples and cultures.

Sepúlveda may have been one of the first philosophers in the western tradition to attempt to undercut evidence of non-White equality with Europeans. This tactic will be picked up by other western philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and David Hume. Hume in his essay, *Of National Characters*, attempted to explain away the reports he received of highly intelligent Black persons in Jamaica (Hume & Haakonssen, 1994; Rosen Velasquez, 2008). He attempted to explain this away by claiming that such Black persons are merely repeating intelligent claims and comments they have heard from Whites like a parrot repeats its owner’s phrases. In this essay, Hume argued that the characters of different peoples are a result of their environment rather than anything innate about persons or peoples. He makes this claim about Black persons to make clear to the reader that Black persons are an exception to his argument. Hume could not accept the logical conclusion of his own argument. Here Hume took a step down a path of bad argument cleared by Sepúlveda.

Sepúlveda also grounded his claim that that Indigenous persons are natural slaves in Indigenous persons’ supposed status as barbarians (Nuccetelli, 2020, p. 3). Sepúlveda claimed that the “Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World and adjacent islands” because of Indigenous peoples’ “customs and manners” (Sepúlveda, 1954, p. 495). Sepúlveda invoked the notion of a barbarian here because he appealed to a kind of barbarian that Aristotle argued is fit to be ruled by others due to their intellectually inferior nature. That is, for Aristotle certain kinds of barbarians are by nature slaves (Gracia & Millán, 2004, p. 37; Las Casas, 1992b). This is one of four classes of barbarians that Aristotle describes (Aristotle & Lord, 2013). Sepúlveda compared American Indigenous peoples with the Scythians of the Eurasian steppes who were nomadic people that the ancient Romans and Greeks had conflict with

and thus held in negative regard. He compared the Scythians to the Mexica because they both supposedly engaged in cannibalism. For Sepúlveda, the Indigenous peoples' customs along with the practice of cannibalism justified his view that they more fully manifested barbarism than the Scythians.

Las Casas countered this argument by explaining that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas are barbarian with qualification. For Las Casas, Sepúlveda erred regarding his exegesis of Aristotle's view of the notion of barbarian. Las Casas presented what he took as more accurate exegesis of this concept. According to this more accurate exegesis, Indigenous persons are not barbarians without qualification or innately barbarians. The basic point here is that some peoples are properly classed as barbarian because of reasons external to them while, on the other hand, some peoples are properly classed as barbarian due to reasons internal to them.

Las Casas pointed to four different kinds of barbarians. Someone counts as the first kind of barbarian if they act in "cruel, or inhuman" ways because of their incapacity to not allow emotions such as anger motivate this behavior. Las Casas pointed out that many of the Spanish Conquistadores have acted in ways such that they are properly identified as this kind of barbarian.

The second kind of barbarian's primary criterion of identity is the lack of a written language that corresponds with the one that a people speak. People who count as this kind of barbarian are only barbarians by accident or by circumstance rather than innately barbarian. The idea here is that it is a matter of chance and historical situation whether a people develop a written language. As a consequence, the Indigenous peoples who did not have a written language were not innately barbarians but rather barbarians due to external or circumstantial reasons. On this point Las Casas says, "they are not barbarians literally but by circumstance" (Las Casas, 1992b, p. 58). Las Casas did know that the Maya peoples had a fully developed system of writing. As a result, I assume that he had in mind the non-Maya peoples here. And it is worth noting that in the last few years scholars of Mesoamerica have realized that the Mexica had a fully developed writing system with a syllabary rather than a merely a pictographic system of storing information (Lacadena, 2008). As a consequence, on Las Casas' view, the Mexica would not have counted as this kind of barbarian.

A person counts as the third kind of barbarian if he, she or they act in immoral and wild ways where this is a result of an innately immoral, "evil or wicked character" (Las Casas, 1992b, p. 59). For Sepúlveda, persons who count as this kind of barbarian are natural slaves in the Aristotelian sense. These people cannot act in accordance with societal laws because they act on the basis of their passions rather than their reason. These persons are extra-political because of this incapacity to bring their behavior in alignment with the norms and values of society. As a result, these individuals are natural slaves because they are not fit or capable of determining their own actions and life courses. Sepúlveda classed the Indigenous peoples of the Americas as this kind of barbarian and thus as natural slaves. It is on this basis that he argued that the war that

the Spanish waged against them was just. That is, it was just because coercion and force are legitimately used in the service of controlling such individuals and peoples.

Las Casas rejected the claim that the Indigenous persons of the Americas are this third kind of barbarian and as a consequence natural slaves. He did so by rejecting Sepúlveda's notion of this kind of barbarian or natural slave. By identifying Indigenous peoples as this kind of barbarian, Sepúlveda commits himself to the view that these kinds of persons can be found very widely. But, for Las Casas, on the other hand, one will seldomly find such barbarians in nature because they are imperfect persons and God is a perfect being. The idea here is that individuals such as these should be extremely rare because they deviate from God's design for the average human being where a core feature of this design is that individuals have the capacity to rationally or autonomously act. Here Las Casas assumes that the existence of a small number of true barbarians is compatible with God's perfection. The Indigenous persons of the Americas number in the millions and populate the areas of the Americas known to the Spaniards at the time (Gracia & Millán, 2004; Las Casas, 2004; Todorov, 1999). Thus, Las Casas reasoned, that Indigenous persons cannot be this kind of barbarian or natural slaves because they are too numerous.

Section III

In this section, I will explain why two dominant-group subjects, Sepúlveda and Las Casas, differed in terms of the accuracy of their beliefs about the metaphysical and moral status of the Indigenous persons of the Americas. I will explain this by appeal to the states of understanding and knowledge. This explanation will involve two assumptions. The first assumption is that Las Casas had a significant degree of understanding of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and forms of life. The second assumption is that Sepúlveda had mere knowledge of these Indigenous peoples, cultures, and forms of life. The importance of these two assumptions for this explanation is *that* Las Casas and Sepúlveda differ in terms of the epistemic states explains why they differ on the matter of the metaphysical and moral status of America Indigenous peoples.

In section one, I explained why Sepúlveda formed and sustained the false belief that Indigenous individuals were subpersons or natural slaves even though he had knowledge that was either in tension with or incompatible with this false belief such as that Mexico and Maya peoples had complex organized societies with highly developed calendars, mathematics, and architecture. I explained this in terms of how (1) human subjects' general disposition to believe what feels good and not believe what feels bad relates to (2) Spaniards' or White Europeans' dominant-group identity. But this explanation leaves unaddressed why Las Casas did not err in the same way.

I submit that Las Casas' understanding of Indigenous peoples of the Americas explains why he ultimately did not believe that Indigenous persons are subpersons and

or natural slaves. That las Casas developed this understanding may also explain why he transitioned from his initial role in Hispaniola as an encomendero, a participant and beneficiary of the encomienda land and slavery system, to the leading advocate for moral treatment of the Indigenous persons and even reparations from the Spanish crown for the injustice and harms they suffered (Nuccetelli, 2020).

To motivate the claim that understanding explains why las Casas did not err like Sepúlveda, I will present two supporting reasons. The first reason is that understanding takes up more cognitive terrain than knowledge and as a consequence a subject will more often tend to notice inconsistencies between cognitive commitments. The second reason is that understanding can involve emotional compoment towards the target of understanding that overrides the general human disposition to avoid believing what feels bad.

This first reason assumes some version of fragmentation theory is true (Bendaña & Mandelbaum, In press; Egan, 2008; Elga & Rayo, In Press). Fragmentation theory is a view in the philosophy of cognitive science regarding how individuals store beliefs. According to one version of fragmentation theory, individuals store beliefs on independent data structures in the mind (Bendaña & Mandelbaum, In press). These data structures are called belief fragments or mind fragments. The fragments that an individual stores her belief on will depend on when and where she forms the belief. As a consequence, information that we encounter very frequently will tend to reside on more fragments than information that we encounter less frequently. The idea here is that the more contexts in which a subject forms a particular belief, the more fragments on which this belief will reside.

This view of belief storage explains why a person can hold a particular belief on one occasion and then hold a belief inconsistent with it on another occasion without sensing incoherence between these beliefs. This view explains this because a subject will only sense inconsistency between beliefs that reside on activated fragments. Fragments are activated by the context one is in. Some evidence of this is that individuals often go back to the places in which they formed a belief to recall it. If one belief is inconsistent with another belief, but one belief is on an activated fragment while the other is not, then a subject will not sense the inconsistency between them because subjects only sense inconsistency between beliefs that reside on fragments that are activated.

Notice that the inconsistency that many White Americans manifest in the domain of racial injustice can be explained by appeal to fragmentation. Suppose that a White American, Chad, believes (1) that he deserves what has and (2) that racial injustice in the US obtains. These beliefs are either inconsistent or in tension because if racial injustice obtains and White persons unfairly benefit from racial injustice, then they cannot deserve what they have because they obtained what they have in virtue of unfair advantage. That is, unfair advantage due to racial injustice is incompatible with deserving what one has. Fragmentation can explain why Chad does not sense the

inconsistency between (1) and (2) because on this view (1) and (2) can reside on different fragments that are not both activated.

Fragmentation theorists have analyzed fragmentation in terms of belief rather than, say, understanding. Beliefs on the one hand are often considered cognitive commitments to individual discrete propositions. Understanding on the other hand is often considered to involve more than a mere commitment to discrete propositions.

Many epistemologists agree that understanding involves some “extra” or “further” cognitive feature beyond what knowing involves. Understanding can involve grasping the relations between ideas and concepts regarding an understanding target (Elgin, 2009), grasping explanatory relations and how things cohere in the domain of understanding (Kvanvig, 2003) and awareness of how the internal bits of the target of understanding relate to each other (Riggs, 2003). A view that cuts across these and many views of understanding is that “understanding is directed at a complex of some kind...with parts that depend upon, and relate to, one another” which a subject “grasps or apprehends when [she] understands” (Grimm, 2012, p. 105).

On these views of understanding, knowledge differs from understanding because a subject’s knowledge merely involves a cognitive commitment to the truth of a discrete proposition. The traditional view is knowledge at least involves that the belief is true and justified. The important notion here is that knowledge is a belief with certain properties while understanding is not merely a belief with such properties. It involves more than this.

If understanding involves something further such as grasping relations between ideas and concepts and a subject encountered these ideas in different contexts, then this subject’s understanding will involve more fragments than belief. Understanding will involve more fragments than belief because grasping the relations ideas and facts that compose understanding will involve activating information stored on several fragments. Understanding will involve activating information stored on several fragments because subjects tend to encounter the relevant facts and concepts in several or disparate contexts. Take las Casas’ understanding of the Taíno people. Las Casas encountered information about the Taíno people in various regions of the islands of Hispaniola and Cuba over a period of many years (Las Casas, 1992a). As a result, according to fragmentation theory, his understanding of the Taíno people would consist in information and ideas that reside on many different fragments because he encountered this information and these ideas in various times and places.

That las Casas’ understanding resided on so many fragments, explains why he eventually jettisoned his false belief regarding the Taíno people’s supposedly inferior metaphysical and thus moral status. It explains this because that he had this understanding made him more likely to notice the inconsistency between his understanding of the Taíno people and this false belief. According to fragmentation theory, individuals will render consistent beliefs that are inconsistent which both reside

on an activated fragment or fragments. Here las Casas' understanding activates more of his mind fragments and thus he will tend to notice and thus resolve more inconsistencies on them.

On the view of how understanding and fragmentation relate that I have presented, when a person understands something that involves information that she has learned in disparate contexts, she will activate the distinct belief fragments that this information was stored on. And, consequently, she will resolve inconsistencies between information that is stored on separate fragments because she will notice information on one fragment that is inconsistent with information on another fragment. If this account is correct, then it should be plausible that las Casas' understanding of Indigenous peoples led him to reject falsehoods about the inferiority of Indigenous persons.

I now present the second reason why las Casas did not err like Sepúlveda. This reason is that understanding can involve emotional comportment towards the target of understanding that overrides the general human disposition to avoid believing what feels bad. So far, I have explained Sepúlveda's error in terms of how he is disposed to avoid believing what feels bad. As a result, Sepúlveda rejected information that Indigenous persons were fully human persons to avoid believing that he and other Spaniards were not good Christians.

Presumably, las Casas as a Christian was susceptible to the same psychological disposition that resulted in Sepúlveda erring. Even though, I have explained why las Casas did not similarly err in terms of fragmentation, one might think that this psychological disposition could have overridden the effect of las Casas' understanding vis-à-vis whether he believed the falsehood that Indigenous persons were subpersons. But las Casas' understanding's effect on whether he falsely believed here may not have been overridden by this disposition if understanding involves an emotional comportment towards the target of understanding.

Epistemologists have discussed understanding in purely intellectual terms. On this view of understanding, it involves features such as grasping relations, sensing coherence between facts and the capacity to explain a target of understanding. These epistemologists have not considered how the features of understanding may differ depending on what a subject's target of understanding consists of.

Take understanding of injustice. I submit that if a person has sufficiently deep understanding of, say, racial injustice, then this person will have a certain emotional comportment towards racial injustice in general and those who both suffer and perpetrate injustice in particular. Someone who understands racial injustice in the US will likely experience anger at the fact of White supremacy in the US. Consider the opposite. If someone claimed that they had sufficiently deep understanding of racial injustice in the US and they reported that they did not experience the emotion of anger towards this state of affairs, then a spectator might reasonably remark that this person did not actually have this understanding because anger directed at this state of affairs

invariably accompanies this understanding of it. In other words, if someone understands this phenomenon well enough, then they will be angry. If someone is not angry, then this is a signal that they do not understand the phenomenon well enough.

Similarly, if Las Casas had sufficiently deep understanding of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, then one might think that he would experience the emotion of admiration vis-à-vis their achievements and positive features. If, on the other hand, he did not experience this emotion, then he presumably did not have sufficiently deep understanding of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. But Las Casas not only communicated that he experienced such an emotion that accompanied his understanding of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, but he also communicated that he experienced the emotion of anger at the genocide and injustice that these peoples underwent at the hands of the Spanish Conquistadores.

Now, if (i) the emotion of anger accompanied Las Casas' understanding of the Indigenous genocide and (ii) the emotion of admiration accompanied Las Casas' understanding of Indigenous peoples' civilizational achievements and Indigenous societies' positive features, then, (iii) together, these emotions would have together swamped Las Casas' disposition to avoid believing something that would have felt bad namely, that he and his fellow Spaniards in the Americas were bad Christians because they treated Indigenous persons in such a wildly immoral manner.

One might object that whether these emotions would have swamped this disposition to believe depends on the intensity of Las Casas' emotions of admiration and anger relative to how bad it would have felt for him to believe that he, Las Casas, was a bad Christian. A response to this is that this is an empirical question that social psychologists must settle. But I submit that if degree of understanding correlates with intensity of accompanying emotion, then Las Casas' emotions of anger and admiration would have likely overridden this disposition to believe.

Section IV

In this section, I will consider why Las Casas incorrectly represented features of Indigenous persons even though he more accurately represented Indigenous persons of the Americas in comparison to Sepúlveda. I explain why Las Casas erred in this way by appeal to Las Casas' conception of himself as an evangelizing Catholic Christian and his relative lack of standpoint. I will argue that this portion of his self-conception at least partly explains why he idealizes Indigenous persons and thus misrepresents them in some degree.

In Las Casas' Letter to the Council of the Indies, he said, "At no other time and in no other people has there been seen such capacity, such predisposition, and such facility for conversation...Nowhere in the world are there countries more docile and less

resistant, or more apt and better disposed than these to receive the yoke of Our Lord” (Todorov, 1999, p. 163).

In his *Apologia*, las Casas said, “The Indians are of such decency, that they are more than the other nations of the entire world, supremely fitted and prepared to abandon the worship of idols and to accept, province by province and people by people, the word of God and the preaching of the truth” (Todorov, 1999, p. 163).

Las Casas described the Indigenous peoples of the Americas in this idealized manner repeatedly. He paints Indigenous peoples that differ in terms of language, culture, belief-system, societal organization, and appearance with a broad brush that does not acknowledge these differences. Regarding this, Tzvetan Todorov points out that las Casas described Indigenous “populations equally distinct and even remote from each other, from Florida to Peru; yet they are all...invariably ‘gentle and peace-loving’” (Todorov, 1999, p. 164).

Las Casas represented the Indigenous peoples of the Americas without acknowledging (1) the differences that obtained between them and (2) that they had negative features or flaws just like peoples from the rest of the world. He represented them in this way partly because he was attempting to persuade the Spanish Crown and authorities to intervene on behalf of Indigenous persons. That las Casas presented the Indigenous peoples of the Americas as morally outstanding peoples who were the perfect recipients of Catholic doctrine put him in a position to more fervently demand that the Crown halt the ongoing genocide. The idea is that if a people are more likely to accept the word of God than other peoples of the world, then this is a reason to safeguard them because converting souls to the Christian faith was not only commanded by God but also kept their souls from the eternal fires of hell.

Las Casas representation of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas as lacking negative features required him to deemphasize the differences between them because downplaying their differences was less in tension with the view that they were some of the best possible recipients of Catholic doctrine. The idea is that las Casas’ goal of convincing the Crown of the idea that they were ready to jettison their paganism is easier to accomplish if Indigenous peoples were viewed as largely the same rather than a set of vastly different peoples. It is easier to accomplish on this view because if Indigenous peoples greatly varied, then their readiness for the word of God would more likely greatly vary as well.

So far, I have presented a polemical reason why Las Casas misrepresented to the Spanish Crown. These may at least partly explain why Las Casas misrepresented Indigenous persons in this way, but this reason does not necessarily require that he actually endorsed or believed the idealized way he represented them. However, I will now present a psychological reason that if true can explain why las Casas inaccurately believed that the Indigenous peoples instantiated this idealization he presented in his arguments. Las Casas devoted most of his very long life to defending and advocating

on behalf of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. This became part of who he was and for good reason.

If (1) las Casas' self-conception was partly constituted by his view of himself as the defender of the Indians, (2) it felt good for him to believe that he was defending a group of people most likely to accept Catholic doctrine and (3) it felt bad for him to believe that was not defending such a people, then (4) that las Casas developed this idealized view of Indigenous peoples is consistent with this human tendency to believe in ways that preserve individuals' positive self-conceptions or cherished beliefs about themselves.

These polemical and psychological reasons are not mutually exclusive. I submit that they can jointly explain why las Casas represented Indigenous persons in this idealized and thus false way. Las Casas may have developed this idealized view of Indigenous persons because of its polemical utility, but then he could have also come to hold the view due to how it related to his positive self-conception of himself as a defender of Indigenous peoples and as a good Christian evangelist. On the other hand, he may have come to this view for this psychological reason and then, that this view was so polemically useful, he may have become more committed to it.

Some have pointed out that las Casas' construal of the Mesoamerican ritual practice of human sacrifice as compatible with natural law is in tension with his claim that Indigenous peoples have equal moral status as Europeans (Carman, 2016; Nuccetelli, 2017). According to las Casas' and his peers' understanding of natural law theory, human subjects can distinguish between morally right and wrong actions because of a God-given capacity to reason (Carman, 2016). There is a tension here because las Casas attributes the capacity to reason to Indigenous persons even though some Mesoamerican societies practiced human sacrifice. Here the fact that Indigenous persons did not recognize human sacrifice's immorality is incompatible with the notion that they have the capacity to reason and thus that they are human subjects due moral treatment. To resolve this tension las Casas argued that a human subject's capacity to reason alone may not suffice for her to recognize that human sacrifice is immoral. For las Casas, divine law or Christian doctrine in addition to human reason suffice to put a subject in a position to recognize human sacrifice's immorality and as a consequence that Indigenous societies had not yet received Christian doctrine explained why they did not recognize human sacrifice's immorality. The psychological and polemical reasons to which I appeal to explain why las Casas erred in his representations of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas can also explain why he presented an argument that featured what is at least a prima facie tension.

However, scholars of the Valladolid debate differ on whether las Casas' argument involved an actual or ultima facie tension (Brunstetter & Zartner, 2011; Méndez Alonzo, 2017). And some anthropologists have come to view the Mesoamerican practice of human sacrifice as a part of Mesoamerican warfare and power relations in a way very similar to how Western warfare and power relations result in the killing of thousands or

even millions of persons (Graham, 2012; Metze, 2014). Others have argued that Mesoamerican societies may have featured less killing than European societies even though they featured human sacrifice (Dodds Pennock, 2014). If the nature of Mesoamerican human sacrifice is unclear, then whether las Casas' argument features commitments that are either in tension or contradictory should also be unclear because the immorality of a practice depends on the features of the practice.

Now, someone might object that the account that I have presented implies that las Casas' understanding of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas exculpates him of blame for his role in the European acculturation of the Indigenous societies of the Americas. The thought here is that this kind of understanding has some sort of higher or superior moral status to Sepúlveda's mere knowledge of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas such that las Casas is properly evaluated as less morally blameworthy for his role in this acculturation in comparison to Sepúlveda.

A reply to this objection is that the account that I have presented merely invokes how the epistemic states of understanding and knowledge of a particular content relate to the social locations of two subjects, namely las Casas and Sepúlveda. This account does not involve a commitment to the moral or exculpatory value of understanding or knowledge vis-à-vis las Casas' and Sepúlveda's roles in the European acculturation of the Americas. It does not involve this commitment because in this account I only examine how moral and political features of the 16th century world relate to how well or poorly these two subjects represent it. An account that sheds light on what degree las Casas is culpable for this acculturation would involve explanation of how his understanding relates to the ways he promoted this acculturation. This account does not involve explanation of this relation and thus it does not involve a view of the degree to which las Casas is morally culpable for this acculturation.

Conclusion

I have argued that las Casas and Sepúlveda differed in their conclusions regarding the status of Indigenous persons at least partly because las Casas had significant, yet incomplete, *understanding* of Indigenous persons, culture, and societies, while Sepúlveda has mere *knowledge of them*. To this end, I have shown that the epistemic state of understanding explains why Las Casas properly concludes that Indigenous persons deserve the same moral status afforded to Europeans. I have also shown how las Casas' understanding of Indigenous persons, culture, and societies related to what he got wrong about Indigenous persons.

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