OLD WORLD PHILOSOPHY IN A NEW WORLD:
FROM NATURAL SLAVE TO NATURAL MAN

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In fourteen hundred and ninety two — we all know the story — Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Leaving aside whether the Admiral from Genoa actually ‘discovered’ the New World, it is clear that his fortuitous arrival in the West Indies led to one of history’s most dramatic encounters. As Abbot Raynal remarked nearly three centuries later in his famous *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1781), the discovery led to ‘a revolution in commerce, the power of nations, and in the mores, industry and government of all peoples’. These historical ramifications, however, are only part of the story, as the discovery was also an important catalyst in literary and philosophic terms. It triggered, during the sixteenth century, a serious investigation into the nature of man through the lens of European attempts to understand the ‘Indios’ of the Americas.

In this essay, I investigate how the period surrounding the discovery of the New World demarcates a crossroads of ideas regarding the nature of man. For Europeans, the shock of the unforeseeable appearance of this previously unknown continent with strange peoples provided no satisfactory historical or cultural paradigm for understanding the ‘other’ of this alien world. Whereas all previous encounters with strange peoples and unknown lands ‘had been to some degree, however small, anticipated’ because Europeans knew ‘roughly where to find them,’ no one expected the discovery of the Amerindians of the New World.

Within the European picture of the universe circa 1490, the continent of America ‘as such, literally [did] not exist’ and its discovery was ‘unforeseen and unforeseeable.’ In 1490, the world was thought to be complete, because Ptolemy had charted it. By 1500, there was suddenly a whole new continent whose appearance did the unthinkable — it proved Ptolemy wrong. And, in the words of Montaigne, ‘if Ptolemy was once mistaken on the grounds of his reason’ the question remained whether or not it ‘would be stupid for me now to trust to what these people say’ about the New World. Montaigne’s reference to ‘these people’ was an implicit reference to Aristotle, whose philosophy defined the dominant philosophical paradigm. His scepticism reveals how the contemplation of the New World led him to question the authority of this paradigm, and hence the traditional notions of humanity.

As a consequence of this shock encounter with the previously unknown beings of the New World, the beginning of the sixteenth century saw a period of deep reflection on the nature of humanity as European travellers, philosophers, and theologians grappled with the strangeness of the Americas. I argue that the discovery raised questions about the nature of humanity, bringing into doubt the validity of the traditional Aristotelian categories of medieval philosophy applied to understanding the New World, thus leading to innovations in the concept of human nature. I focus on two thinkers whose ideas signify divergent points on the spectrum to be found at this historical juncture: Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Michel de Montaigne.

Sepúlveda was a Spanish thinker whose work embodies the classical Aristotelian vision of Old World philosophy. His understanding of the indigenous
populations of the New World as the equivalent of Aristotle’s natural slaves, articulated in his dialogue *Democrites secundus de justis belli causis* written in the 1540s, shows his adherence to Aristotelian political categories to make sense of the novelty of the newly discovered continent. Sepúlveda is best known as the infamous opponent of Bartolomé de las Casas at the famous debate at Valladolid in 1550 regarding the justice of the conquest and the rights of the indigenous. His ideas are valuable to understand because they represent how those who saw the New World through the lens of the traditional paradigm viewed the indigenous. Yet, while Sepúlveda remained wedded to the dominant Aristotelian vision of man inherited from the Middle Ages, the French thinker Montaigne, who was writing in the 1580s, fashioned a new understanding of man in his *Essays*. Troubled by the cruelty of the Spanish encounter with the Americas, Montaigne was sceptical of the traditional Aristotelian paradigm and thus looked at the New World through a different lens. When confronted with the problem of how to understand those whose barbaric customs, according to the inherited paradigm, suggested they were closer to natural slaves than human beings, he viewed them as the epitome of natural man.

The interest of pairing these two thinkers is twofold. First, they were presented with the same set of ‘facts’ about the New World. Sepúlveda garnered his empirical data on the Amerindians based on first-hand conversations with the conquistador Hernán Cortez. Montaigne received a large portion of his facts from Cortez’s official biographer, Francisco Lopez de Gómara, whose *Histoire générale des Indes occidentales et terres neuves* he read in translation. Second, while they

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7 There is an abundance of literature on the Valladolid debate. See the seminal work by Lewis Hanke, *All Mankind is One* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974); also Ángel Losada, 'The Controversy between Sepúlveda and Las Casas in the Junta of Valladolid,' in *Bartolomé de las Casas in History: Towards an Understanding of the Man and his Work*, ed. by Juan Friede and Benjamin Keen (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp. 279–306.

8 There is no evidence that Montaigne was aware specifically of Sepúlveda’s arguments, nor that he was targeting the Spanish humanist. However, he was aware and highly critical of Aristotle’s arguments which inspired Sepúlveda, as well as Sepúlveda’s source for the New World, Cortez.

9 One of Sepúlveda’s prime sources for the New World was Hernán Cortez’s *Cartas de relación*. Sepúlveda makes reference to conversations he had with the conquistador (*Democrites secundus*, p. 7). The eye-witness accounts of the conquering captain give credence to the historical
had similar facts, they came to entirely opposite conclusions about the nature of the Amerindians. This essay is thus a portrait of philosophy in the age of discovery in which I illustrate the extremes that characterized the intellectual understanding of humanity. The discovery of the New World marks the context in which contemplation of human nature led to the challenge of the bastion of Old World medieval philosophy — Aristotle — sparking the transition from viewing the Amerindian as natural slave to natural man.

**Sepúlveda and the Aristotelian ‘Indios’**

In his dialogue *Democrates secundus*, Sepúlveda attempted to deduce the unknown nature of the Amerindians. In spite of the novelty of the New World, namely that it was unknown to the ancients, he purported to situate it in the European cosmos by finding its proper place in the Aristotelian paradigm. Responding to the problem faced by the Spanish Crown of how to justify the conquest, he relied on the authority of Aristotle to demonstrate that the Amerindians were fit to be ruled by the Spanish *by nature* because they belonged to the category of natural slaves. Examining Sepúlveda’s ideas sets the context for understanding the changes seen in Montaigne because his ideas represent the stringent Aristotelian view, the classical example of Old World philosophy which marked the prevailing view of the indigenous populations.

accounts of the Amerindian customs that Sepúlveda utilizes, given that he himself had never been to the Americas. For a discussion of Sepúlveda’s relationship with Cortez, and of Sepúlveda’s own history of the New World, *De Orbe Novo*, which recounts Cortez’s exploits, see Ángel Losada, *Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda a través de su Epistolario y nuevos documentos* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1949). On Montaigne’s debt to Cortez through Gómara see Pierre Villey, *Les Livres d’histoire moderne utilisés par Montaigne* (Paris: Librarie Hachette, 1908).

The Amerindians as Natural Slaves

Sepúlveda proclaimed he would explain the ‘just and rational subordination’ of the Amerindians by referring to the ideas of the great philosophers and theologians of the canon, which were based on ‘natural law and common to all’. With regards to the Amerindians, his adherence to the theory of natural slavery was the product of the exercise of his reason in the manner of Aristotle, looking into Nature to judge the Amerindians. The perceived bestial nature of the indigenous was an important sign for Sepúlveda because it led him to classify them in a specific category of men found in Aristotle: the natural slave.

The classification of the Amerindians as natural slaves was deduced from the natural law. For Sepúlveda, reading into the natural law led him to conclude that the Amerindians were lacking in reason, just like Aristotle’s natural slave. Natural law structures man teleologically to his end, and is the standard by which society should be judged. The telos, or end of man, according to Sepúlveda, is virtue. The telos of society is living well, which is achieved by providing good laws that will lead the citizens to live virtuously. The extent to which a society is ‘civilized’ depends therefore on whether its laws are in accordance with the natural laws because man cannot reach his teleological end in a society whose laws are not in accordance with Nature. These societies, such as those of the Amerindians, are considered naturally inferior because their customs indicate that they cannot judge the good from the bad, which is an indication that they are lacking in reason.

For Aristotle, the teleological view of man resulted in different categories of men based on their rational capacities. In Book I, Chapters 5 and 13, of Politics, Aristotle discusses different types of human beings distinguished by different levels of reason. This gradient of reason provided a natural hierarchy of inequality which Sepúlveda exploited as a template for defining and categorizing the newly discovered Amerindians.

11 Sepúlveda, Democritus secundus, p. 2.
13 The conception that the Amerindians were inferior barbarians represents the most prevalent explanation of their nature in early sixteenth-century Spain. Sepúlveda was the first philosopher to systematize the argument that they were natural slaves, although the argument had been used as early as the Junta de Burgos in 1512. On the common views of the Amerindians in sixteenth-century Spain see Pagden, The Fall of Natural Man, pp. 27–37.
On the upper echelon there is the master. He is equipped with the ruling element, what Aristotle calls the deliberative element. He has complete virtue of character and is the perfect specimen offered by nature, the highest echelon of humanity. He can determine what is just and unjust and rule accordingly. All masters are equal among themselves and have the right to rule and be ruled in turn. On the next level are women. They are fully rational but lack, according to Aristotle, the power to command, which means they do not have the capacity to rule. They are followed by children, who do not have the deliberative element but will acquire it with time and education. On the final level is the natural slave. The natural slave is lacking in reason and is meant to be ruled by the superior master. For Sepúlveda, this represented the correct classification of the Amerindians who appeared to lack reason.

The conclusion that the Spanish were masters and the Amerindians natural slaves was contingent on Sepúlveda being able to show that the Spanish were superior and the Amerindians were inferior. He accomplished this by looking at the customs of each, placing the facts he received from Cortez about the 'Indios' into the parameters of the Aristotelian paradigm. He spent little time proving the superiority of the Spanish, deeming the process unnecessary. He simply offered as evidence the genius of Lucan, Seneca, and San Isidro, the courage of their valiant captains, as well as the force, humanity, justice, and religion of the Spanish people. The Spanish were seen as superior because they had the following qualities which made them so: prudence, wisdom, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion structured according to the natural law. These qualities reflected the virtues of the superior expressed by Aristotle and later by Thomas Aquinas which would allow them to lead a life of virtue in the temporal world and in the world beyond.

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The Amerindians, on the other hand, showed the opposite characteristics. Sepúlveda deduced from their customs that they were deficient in reason. Based on the accounts of Cortez, Sepúlveda learned that they had no sciences, no letters, no history, and no written laws. He read about how they ate the flesh of their enemies to satisfy their ferocity, and participated in idol worshipping, human sacrifice, and cannibalism. And he gleaned that the cowardice and ferocity of Mexicans revealed them to be men of extremes who were incapable of virtue, craven like their king Montezuma, and ferocious beastlike cannibals. These characteristics implied a lack of civilization.\textsuperscript{18}

Unlike Montaigne, who cited these characteristics as signs of the naturalness of the Amerindians, Sepúlveda interpreted them as a sign of underdevelopment and hence of inferiority. Their customs represented crimes ‘considered by the philosophers to be to the most ferocious and abominable perversities’ and were signs of inferiority because they demonstrated an inadequacy of reason for judging the good from the bad.\textsuperscript{19} He thus concluded that the Amerindians were ‘as inferior to the Spanish as children are to adults, women to men, the cruel and inhumane to the sweet, the exaggeratedly intemperate to the continent and moderate, and finally, that is to say, monkeys are to men’.\textsuperscript{20} The logical equivalent of such creatures according to the traditional paradigm was the natural slave, who also lacked in reason.

\textbf{The Political Consequences of Natural Slavery}

The logical conclusion of the natural slavery theory was that the Spanish, as the more civilized, should conquer the inferior Amerindians. By extending the scope of the natural law argument to the domain of war, Sepúlveda contended that the more civilized could dominate the less civilized by force. Citing Aristotle, Sepúlveda claimed that it is just to subdue those whose natural condition implied that they be ruled: ‘the perfect […] dominate over the imperfect’.\textsuperscript{21}

For Sepúlveda, the rational (hence more perfect) soul dominates over the irrational (imperfect) body. The former maintains ‘civil rule’ while the latter is ‘servile by nature’. The same relationship, he claimed, holds for reason over the

\textsuperscript{18} Sepúlveda, \textit{Democrates secundus}, pp. 35–36 and 62.
\textsuperscript{19} Sepúlveda, \textit{Democrates secundus}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{20} Sepúlveda, \textit{Democrates secundus}, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{21} Sepúlveda, \textit{Democrates secundus}, p. 20.
passions. For the depraved, the body dominates over the soul, a state which is against nature and akin to the position of the Amerindians qua natural slaves. Those who exceed others in ‘prudence’ and ‘wisdom’, though not in bodily strength, are those who ‘dominate by nature’ while those who are ‘underdeveloped in mind, but have strong bodies to complete necessary deeds, are servile by nature’.22 The echoes of Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery are clear. For Aristotle, the natural slave is strong in body, but weak in mind, and is among the class to be ruled.23

This guiding principle has political ramifications as it necessarily resulted in a natural hierarchy of rule. According to the natural law the barbaric, who are servile by nature, submit to the more civilized nations. In the case of the Americas Sepúlveda concluded that it was the natural order of things that the Amerindians submit to the Spanish. Such rule could be imposed by arms if necessary, as argued by Aristotle.24 Sepúlveda’s argument rested on the fact that the Spanish were helping the Amerindians reach their teleological end by bringing them Christianity, establishing good governance, and ridding them of their barbaric customs.25

The conclusion to be drawn from this analysis is that Sepúlveda remained wedded to his classical predispositions in interpreting the New World. He addressed the problem of the New World with a set of pre-formulated philosophical tools, namely a political paradigm of human nature drawn from Aristotle. His attempt to understand the Amerindians amounted to finding the likely correspondent in the philosophy of Aristotle, which turned out to be the natural slave, and then defining their position in the empire accordingly. The world was, for Sepúlveda, divided into the categories of civilized and barbarians, a natural hierarchy of inegalitarianism. Christianity represented the epitome of civilization, while the Amerindians represented the inferior ‘other’. In spite of the fact that his account seemed to deny the principles of Christianity in pointing to the inability of the Amerindians to receive the faith because they were deficient in reason, the humanist steadfastly defended it on the authority of Aristotle.26

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24 Sepúlveda is referring to the passage from *Politics*, 1.8, where Aristotle says that hunting ought to be practised ‘against men who, though intended by nature to be governed, will not submit; for war of such a kind is naturally just’ (p. 45).
26 In Aristotle, the natural slave participates in virtue, but not fully because he is deficient in reason. He is not capable of living the good life fully or of reaching his teleological end. In a
Montaigne represents the other end of the philosophical spectrum compared to Sepúlveda, describing the Amerindians not as inferior natural slaves but as the superior exemplar of natural man. The term **natural man** should not be confused with the concept of the noble savage. While some critics contend that Montaigne viewed the Amerindians as noble savages, this argument betrays Montaigne’s more nuanced impressions. For Montaigne, the essence of natural man is that he is not teleologically oriented. The Amerindians represented natural man in so far as they lived closest to Nature and vacillated between goodness and evil. They showcased the virtues Montaigne most respected, such as moderation, enjoyment of pleasure, and tolerance. They were devoid of dogma, and hence of biased judgements. In this sense, they were superior to Europeans in spite of what their customs might suggest to the patent Aristotelian. However, even to Montaigne, they were not completely idyllic. They had traces of evil in them, such as the cruelty of their sacrifices, and they showed the willing potential to become corrupted when exposed to the European way of life. They revealed the nature of man according to Montaigne, not as superior or inferior, not as directed toward the end of the perfection of their soul, but as potential, a being in motion vacillating between the good offered in Nature and the evil rampant in Europe, but with no fixed teleological direction.27

Faced with the same facts about the Conquest, Montaigne’s conclusions differed in two respects from Sepúlveda’s. First, instead of viewing the Amerindian customs as a sign of inferiority which made them subject to be ruled, Montaigne viewed their customs as signs of their naturalness, and hence of their virtue. They manifested the potential good qualities of human nature. Second, the Spanish conquistadors lauded by Sepúlveda manifested for Montaigne the evil potential of human nature. In the context of the New World, he constructed a dual portrait

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of human nature that combined these two characteristics and denied the teleological Aristotelian vision of man.

This view of man was made possible by Montaigne’s rejection of the classical paradigm, especially the authority of Aristotelianism. Stepping free from the auspices of philosophical convention, Montaigne reinterpreted the human condition through the lens of the New World. He rejected the teleological view which determined Sepúlveda’s conclusions, proffering an understanding of man as a radically individual and positively cultural being. The New World showed him that man is radically individual in the sense that he has a common beginning — a malleable potential, but no fixed teleological end determined by the natural law. He can thus be good and/or evil. He is positively cultural in that he is the product of his culture, which is judged not by natural law but by Nature, according to Montaigne. Montaigne’s conception of man depicted him as fundamentally equal in his nature, for nothing natural differentiates him from another man because of the diversity of legitimate customs. He is depraved only by the products of his own making — which are truly conventional and, in Montaigne’s view, synonymous not with the perceived savageness of the New World and its barbarians, but with the decadence and cruelty of Europe, personified by the conquistadors.

Montaigne’s Rejection of Authority

At the beginning of the essay ‘Of Cannibals’ Montaigne warned his reader to be wary of common opinions when judging others: ‘Thus we should beware of clinging to vulgar opinions, and judge thing by reason’s way, not popular say.’ With this statement, he challenged the authority of the classical paradigm, epitomized by Sepúlveda, to judge the nature of the Amerindians. He reiterated this challenge as a prelude to his reflections on Cortez’s conquest of the Aztecs in the essay ‘Of Coaches’: ‘[T]here is nothing unique and rare as regards knowledge, but there certainly is as regards our knowledge, which is a miserable foundation for our rules and which is apt to represent to us a very false picture of things.’ The authoritative paradigm used to justify Sepúlveda’s conclusions thus came into doubt.


29 Montaigne, Complete Essays, I.31, p. 150.

30 Montaigne, Complete Essays, III.6, p. 693.
because that kind of knowledge did not provide an accurate picture of the world or of man.

Challenging the authority of the classics shook the reader’s faith in their ideas, which allowed Montaigne to formulate his own interpretation of the Amerindiens without relying on the categories of the traditional paradigm. Unlike Sepúlveda, Montaigne denied all aspects of the Aristotelian view of human nature and the political structure of society. Montaigne’s argument against the current authority rested on a critique of the idea of universal truth. He indicated that the truths we hold to be universal are nothing more than convention, and thus have no standard of authority. Specifically, he criticized the conventional understanding of European superiority vis-à-vis the Amerindiens and showed that we can strip away what we think is natural — the scholastics’ understanding of natural law for example — to reveal that it is merely convention. In other words, the Aristotelian paradigm used by Sepúlveda to deduce his conclusions about the Amerindiens was not the ultimate standard, but a faulty standard. Thus, in the essay ‘Apology of Raymond Sebond’ Montaigne called the doctrine of Aristotle ‘a magisterial lie [that is] peradventure as false as another’.31 The thrust of Montaigne’s argument against authority was that no opinions in books ought to govern the way we act, or constrain our free judgement of the world, and no such opinions should serve as the standard by which to define human nature. Therefore, the conclusion reached by the likes of Sepúlveda that the cannibals are inferior because they eat human flesh or because they lack letters was placed into doubt.

Montaigne’s rejection of authoritative sources to judge the Amerindiens reflects a larger trend evident throughout the Essays, pointing to a systemic foundation not often attributed to the author of the Essays but one that is definitely present in the context of the Americas. In order to show the fallibility of the traditional paradigm in judging the customs of others, Montaigne showed how the customs of the New World are not against the natural law as Sepúlveda concluded. In a passage in ‘Of Custom’, he provided a list of such customs that directly implicate the New World: making gods out of whatever one wants including lions, fishes and idols that represent the passions (idolatry), ‘liv[ing] on human flesh’ (cannibalism), the prostitution of wives to house guests, infidelity ‘without sin,’ incest, and homosexuality.32 He took these examples from Gómara’s

31 Montaigne, Complete Essays, II.12, p. 403.
reproachful descriptions of the New World, but instead of condemning them he suggested that they were viable despite what the scholastic natural law said.

All of these customs are clearly against the natural law according to Christians, as Gómara pointed out, but Montaigne listed them as customs that were equally reasonable, and which would not seem so strange ‘if we consider what we regularly experience: how much habit stupefies our sense’. 33 This is the exact opposite of the natural law arguments, inspired by Aristotle, proffered by Sepúlveda. Whereas, for Sepúlveda, Aristotle was the master authority who provided the philosophical means to understand the novelty of the New World, for Montaigne he is but the fodder of parrots; of the sayings of the classical authorities such as Cicero, Plato, and Aristotle perceived as universal knowledge, ‘a parrot could well say as much’. 34 In sum, the dismissal of classical authority removed the standard of how to interpret humanity and consequently left Montaigne free to judge the Amerindians differently.

The Nature of Man in the New World

Montaigne’s own use of Gómara to valorize the customs and actions of the Incas and Aztecs and to criticize the European conquistadors reflected his own attempt to step out from the bounds of the traditional paradigm. His interpretations of the Amerindians and the conquistadors were exactly the opposite of those portrayed by the Spanish historian and painted a very different picture of man and politics than the one found in Sepúlveda.

Gómara praised the valour and magnanimity of the Spanish, the bringers of the Christian truth, and demonized the Amerindians as cannibalistic and idolatrous barbarians. Montaigne, however, aware of this pedantic bias, gave a very different account. Considering Montaigne’s borrowing from Gómara reveals that the Frenchman removed the denigrating statements regarding the Amerindians’ barbarity and the praise of the Spanish captains’ courage, emphasizing to the point of exaggeration the legitimacy of the Amerindian customs and vaunting their courage while criticizing Spanish vice and cruelty. For Montaigne, Cortez’s exploits were an example of the destruction of innocent and valiant societies justified by a false view of the world projected by the traditional paradigm.

33 Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 1.23, p. 78.
34 Montaigne, *Complete Essays*, 1.25, p. 100.
Recognizing Montaigne’s selective reading of the Spanish historian offers evidence of how Montaigne judged the New World. He was presented with all the ‘facts’ of the Amerindians’ cruelty and the bravery and the virtue of the Spanish, but because he did not judge them according to the Aristotelian paradigm, he came to different conclusions than Gómara, and thus than Sepúlveda.\footnote{For a comparison between Montaigne and Gómara see Raymond Esclapez, ‘Les Religions du Nouveau Monde dans les \textit{Essais}’, in \textit{Montaigne et le Nouveau Monde}, ed. by Claudes Blum, Marie-Luce Demonet, and André Tournon (Paris: Société internationale des Amis de Montaigne, 1994), pp. 209–25.} In a distinct change from Gómara’s view of the Amerindians, Montaigne stated clearly that the Aztecs and the Spanish were equal: the Amerindians may have been from an ‘infant’ world, but they were ‘not at all behind us in natural brightness of mind and pertinence’ or ‘in industry either’. Montaigne himself recognized the ‘awesome magnificence of the cities of Cuzco and Mexico’.\footnote{Montaigne, \textit{Complete Essays}, III.6, pp. 693–94 and 698.}

The equality of these two clashing civilizations defined the parameters of Montaigne’s natural man. In ‘Of Coaches’, he provided the reader with a two-faced portrait of the opposite ends of the human spectrum. The Spanish came to the New World under the guise of piety, to spread the ‘belief in one single God, and the truth of our religion, which they advised them to accept, adding a few threats’. As Montaigne emphasized, the Iberians’ vice drove them to other ends:

[S]o many cities razed, so many nations exterminated, so many millions of people put to the sword, and the richest and most beautiful part of the world turned upside down for the traffic of pearls and pepper […]. Never did ambition, never did public enmities, drive men against one another to such horrible hostilities and such miserable calamities.\footnote{Montaigne, \textit{Complete Essays}, III.6, p. 695.}

Their ambition, their presumption, and their greed enflamed by legends of unheard-of quantity of treasure compelled them to treachery and injustice, as is exemplified in the story of their treatment of the two captured Indian kings.

The Spanish captured and ransomed the King of Peru for gold. But when the huge fortune of ‘one million three hundred and twenty-five thousand five hundred ounces of gold, besides silver and other things that amounted to no less’ was not enough to satisfy their thirst for treasure, they ransomed him again to obtain what was left, and then executed him. A similar scenario of cruelty characterizes the story of the last king of Mexico. After his defeat and capture, when the Spanish
did not find the gold they were looking for, they tortured him and had him 'grilled before their eyes' in order to find the treasure they so desired.38

The conquistadors themselves did not see the cruelty of their actions, instead viewing them as if they were virtuous: 'we have these narrations from themselves, for they not only admit them but boast of them and preach them'.39 ‘This was symbolic of the sickness of Europe, deformed by the false truths of the traditional paradigm. The conquistadors envisioned themselves rendering a service to God by conquering the New World, paving the way for the conversion of the Amerindians and the salvation of millions of souls. Yet they were deceiving themselves with their own presumption and were blind to the effects of their imagination, so far were they removed from Nature. As Montaigne explained in the essay ‘Of Vanity’:

[W]henever boasts, in a sick age like this, that he employs a pure and sincere virtue in the service of the world [...] does not know what virtue is, since our ideas grow corrupt with our conduct (indeed, hear them portray it, hear most of them gloriying in their behaviour and making their rules; instead of portraying virtue, they portray injustice pure and simple, and vice, and present it thus falsified for the education of princes).40

However, the portrait of the Spanish was mirrored by the valiant conduct of the Amerindians. Montaigne described the ‘indomitable ardour with which so many thousands of men, women, and children came forth and hurled themselves so many times into inevitable dangers for the defence of their gods and their liberty’. Then he countered the vice of Pizarro with the virtue of the Incan king who bore his execution ‘without belying himself either by look or word, with a truly royal bearing and gravity’, just like the virtuous cannibal prisoner in the face of his captors in the essay ‘Of Cannibals’. He continued by contrasting the denatured state of Cortez with the ‘fortitude’ of the last Aztec king, ‘a great-souled prince,’ who cheekily replied to his compatriot who complained of the pain associated with being roasted alive: ‘And am I in a bath?’41

What purpose did Montaigne’s retelling of the conquest serve? Montaigne’s criticism of the conquistadors clearly served as a criticism of Europe, but his commentary was also linked to his understanding of human nature.42 The polar-

38 Montaigne, Complete Essays, III.6, pp. 696–97.
39 Montaigne, Complete Essays, III.9, p. 759.
40 Montaigne, Complete Essays, III.9, p. 759.
41 Montaigne, Complete Essays, III.6, pp. 694–97; for the virtuous cannibal, see I.31, p. 156.
42 See Edmund Duval, ‘Lessons of the New World: Design and Meaning in Montaigne’s “Des cannibales” (I.31) and “Des coches” (III.6)’, Yale French Studies, 64 (1983), 95–112; and James
opposite images he provided of the conquistadors and the Amerindians served to reveal his understanding of humanity. This portrait of human nature — vacillating between good and evil as opposed to being directed teleologically — defined natural man.

**Judging the Amerindians: Natural Man Revealed**

Montaigne’s questioning of authority, which framed his interpretation of Amerindians, led him to jettison the traditional view of human nature as teleologically structured, one which led Sepúlveda to label the Amerindians as rationally inferior and natural slaves. Turning to the New World and the two-faced portrait of the conquest, Montaigne reinterpreted human nature by defining man as ultimately malleable.\(^{43}\) His arguments for cultural relativism debunked the traditional view of man as the image of the civilized European in the Christian sense, painting instead a picture of natural man in the New World who had the potential to be innocent and happy (like the Amerindians) or cruel and corrupt (like Montaigne’s Europeans).

Man for Montaigne is a product to be determined, fundamentally equal at the core, but different according do his culture. Human nature is potentiality; potentiality not in the Aristotelian sense of developing reason and being able to thus achieve one’s end, but potentiality in the sense of being malleable, where the end is not living the contemplative life or attaining Christian salvation, but living according to one’s means, according to Nature.\(^{44}\)

Montaigne’s view of Nature is not the same as the Aristotelian view. Happiness is not found in reaching a preordained end fixed by the natural laws. For Montaigne, man is directed to no end at all. This was a complete break from the classical political paradigm, and offered a distinctly modern view of the human

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\(^{43}\) My argument counters the thesis of Todorov, who argues that Montaigne’s reflections on the Amerindians never escape the classical typologies which he borrows and upon which he frames his interpretation, whereas I make the claim that his reflections on the Amerindians led him to formulate a new view of human nature. See Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres: La Réflexion française sur la diversité humaine* (Paris: Seuil, 1989).

condition not found in Sepúlveda. As Montaigne exclaimed in the ‘Apology of Raymond Sebond,’ the Amerindians ‘enjoy happiness of a long, tranquil and peaceable life without the precepts of Aristotle and without acquaintance with the name of physics’. They enjoy happiness without recognizing the physical order of the universe explained by Aristotle and adapted by Christianity. Their happiness is not linked to a universal order and structure, to a specific political regime that will lead them to a fixed (Christian) end, or to any end whatsoever. Moreover, philosophy as the scholastics practised it is not useful in structuring one’s life. Natural law (and therefore the political laws such as Sepúlveda’s view that the perfect dominate over the imperfect) cannot be verified or validated. As the case of Europe showed, philosophy had not led the Old World to the best laws:

What then will philosophy teach us in our need? To follow the laws of our country — that is to say, the undulating sea of opinions of a people or a prince, which will paint me justice in as many colors and refashion it into as many faces, as there are changes of passion in those men? I cannot have my judgment so flexible.

In both ‘Of Cannibals’ and ‘Of Coaches’, Montaigne gave two opposite images of man which defined his nature. He juxtaposed Europeans and Amerindians as two potentialities of man, developing out of different cultures. The first image we have of the New World in ‘Of Cannibals’ is one of innocence. The New World is even more perfect than Plato’s Republic. The cannibals are not cruel, and their desires do not run amuck. They are lacking ‘neither anything necessary nor that great thing, the knowledge of how to enjoy their condition happily and be content with it’. They are ‘still in that happy state of desiring only as much as their natural needs demand’. In other words, they follow Nature’s rules which lead them to follow their ‘barbaric’ customs. The Aztec and the Incas share a similar life of simplicity, retaining their naturalness by living on only what their ‘nursing mother [Nature] has provided’.

Yet, the Aztecs have a sense of cruelty to their mores. At the end of the essay ‘Of Moderation’, Montaigne emphasized the cruelty of their human sacrifice by

45 Montaigne, Complete Essays, II.12, p. 404.
47 Montaigne, Complete Essays, I.31, p. 156.
48 Montaigne, Complete Essays, III.6, p. 693.
roasting a man and tearing out his entrails, a custom which they practised with regularity. This tempered his portrait of the cannibals, serving to demystify his idyllic discussion of the cannibals in the following essay. Given this revelation on Montaigne’s part, it becomes clear that they could not be seen as idyllic. Their cruelty marked them not as noble savages, but as men who had the potential to change to become even crueler. They are natural in the sense that this cruelty is only latent, but it is there.

The Europeans represented the contrasting view of human potential. In ‘Of Cannibals’, Montaigne implied that contemporary Europeans were not worthy to have discovered the New World. Why? Montaigne tells us later in the essay that the vice and corruption of Europe threaten to destroy the innocence of the New World. The Europeans, as Montaigne illustrated in his essay ‘Of Coaches’, were driven by greed for gold and stopped at no limits of cruelty to achieve their desires. The contrast with Sepúlveda is striking. Whereas for the Spanish Aristotelian human nature was a process of becoming, the perfection of one’s soul, the transformation from barbaric to civilized, Montaigne suggested that there is no such upward journey. Indeed, as Montaigne’s interpretation of Gómara reveals, the civilized became the barbaric in the New World.

Montaigne’s portrait of the conquistadors, however, was not simply a mechanism to criticize Europe, but a means to describe human nature in its most natural setting, the New World. The conquistadors manifested the seeds of human nature running wild, without constraint. The potential for change was attributed to the cannibals, who willingly adopted Europe’s ways, to their own detriment. The story goes like this: ‘three of these men, ignorant of the price they will pay some day, in repose and happiness, for gaining knowledge of the corruptions of this side of the ocean; ignorant also of the fact that of this intercourse will come their ruin’ went to France to visit the Old World. The cannibals passed from ‘repose and happiness’ and the ‘serenity of their own sky’ to the corruption of Europe. This exchange, which Europeans no doubt saw as showing the superiority of the Old World — ‘our ways, our splendour, our cities’, all of which the cannibals did not have — resulted in the ruin of the latter because it led them away from Nature,

49 Montaigne, Complete Essays, I:30, p. 149.
51 Montaigne, Complete Essays, I:31, pp. 153 and 158.
52 Montaigne, Complete Essays, III:6, p. 696.
because it Europeanized them. The point is that man is in motion, and he is directed to various ends, even if these ends lead him to a corrupted state. The cannibals are transformed, and as they are, their natural virtues become artificial vice.

The transformation did not occur in 'Of Coaches' because the Incas and Aztec resisted the conquistadors to the death. Montaigne recognized that their self-defence is a choice which reflected their powers of judgement, which were still close to Nature. Their resistance was a sign of Montaigne's preferences, that the natural way of life was the best way, although it could not always be sustained. As he explained elsewhere, the Amerindians who had not adopted European customs 'retain alive and vigorous their genuine, their most useful and natural, virtues and properties.' However, these qualities had been debased in those who, after the arrival of the Europeans, had been adapted 'to our corrupted taste'. As the Europeans transported their ideas, which included most poignantly Christianity, a fact that Montaigne could not have missed, the cannibals would become corrupted, a state that Montaigne supposed was 'already well advanced' given that Europeans had been in the New World for more than eighty years at the time he wrote his essays. They become, in a sense, slaves of civilization, the civilization which Rousseau, inspired by Montaigne, would later vilify in his First and Second Discourses.

Contrary to Sepúlveda, for Montaigne the arrival of European mores in the New World would inevitably corrupt the civilizations there as opposed to leading them to a better condition. Montaigne's point in foretelling this transformation was to show that man is not inherently good or evil but, like the two-faced god Janus, has the potential for either state. As he remarked elsewhere, life is neither

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53 Montaigne, Complete Essays, 1.31, p. 158.
54 Montaigne, Complete Essays, 1.31, p. 152.
55 Montaigne, Complete Essays, 1.31, p. 158.
56 See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The First and Second Discourses, trans. by Roger D. Masters (New York: St Martin', 1964). In the Second Discourse, Rousseau viewed the Amerindians as noble savages, corrupted by the corrosive mores of European civilization. For Rousseau, they were naturally good, while European man represented a degenerate form of human nature. Montaigne's understanding was more nuanced, for he believed human nature to be a combination of good and evil. A more direct comparison is not possible in this context. On Rousseau see Arthur O. Lovejoy, 'The Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality', in Essays in the History of Ideas, ed. by Arthur O. Lovejoy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1960), pp. 14–37. For a comparison see Tzvetan Todorov, Le Jardin imparfait: La Pensée humaniste en France (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1998).
good nor evil in itself: it is the scene of good and evil ‘according as you give them room’.

Conclusion

The discovery of New World provided the impetus to reinterpret human nature in light of European contemplation of the strange, unknown beings living there. Medieval Aristotelianism, epitomized by Sepúlveda, stressed the natural inequality of man based on a Christian reading of Aristotle, leading the humanist to declare that the Amerindians were natural slaves. However, the rejection of this paradigm by Montaigne, who recognized the inadequacy of these categories, engendered an innovative mode of viewing humanity that departed from the teleological understanding of the human condition. Montaigne’s natural man served to equalize humanity, unifying the civilized and barbaric into one human potentiality.

Montaigne’s view of human nature was thus one based on an equal beginning, one of the potential of the human condition for multiple ends which would unfold according to the conventions of the context. His reading of Gómara showcased this twofold essence of man. Rather than dividing humanity into a dichotomy of civilized and barbarians or masters and natural slaves as Sepúlveda did, Montaigne recognized that human nature is a product of motion between good and evil.

The New World provided him a mirror to see the two faces of human nature, the potential to be good like the cannibals or evil like the conquistadors. The Amerindians were natural man — not the noble savage who is all good, but simply cannibals of the New World who lived the simple and noble life but were cruel and potentially the corrupt heirs of the conquistadors. The barbarians of the New World, when viewed in light of Montaigne’s purposeful scepticism, represented not the image of the inferior natural slave copied from the natural law as seen in Sepúlveda and Gómara, but the template of man in flux, a portrait of human nature and human potentiality, for better or for worse.

The discovery of the New World was thus a catalyst that sparked important philosophical reflection which ultimately resulted in the rejection of Aristotelianism and the naissance of modernity. Teleological man was replaced by natural man, although what actually defined this natural man remained in dispute. From Hobbes’s naturally self-interested and inquisitive man living in the state of nature to Rousseau’s noble savages, the essence of this natural man became a matter of important debate in modern philosophical thought. Montaigne may have been
among the first to break beyond the Aristotelian paradigm, and in doing so pro-
vided key elements of modern man’s essence, namely that he is non-teleological,
but his ideas, that filled the intellectual void created by the repudiation of tra-
dition, left a new landscape which later thinkers inherited, challenged, and
reworked. Modernity was a philosophical New World in itself and Montaigne’s
ideas were only the beginning of a new way of looking at human nature. Thinkers
such as Hobbes, Voltaire, and Rousseau turned to the natural man of the Amer-
icas to attempt to understand the philosophical contours that defined this new era
of humanity and to grapple with the identity of modern man.