The Great Debate at Valladolid, 1550-1551: The Application of Aristotle’s Theory of Natural Slavery to the American Indian

The most startling argument developed at Valladolid, certainly the most vigorously disputed then and now, was the second justification propounded by Sepúlveda for the Spaniards’ overlordship: the “natural rudeness and inferiority” of the Indians which, he declared unequivocally, accorded with the doctrine of the philosophers that some men are born to be natural slaves. Indians in America, he held, being without exception rude persons born with a limited understanding and therefore to be classed as servi a natura, ought to serve their superiors and their natural lords the Spaniards. But how can this be? innocently asks Leopoldo of Demócrates. Aren’t all men born free, according to the doctrines of the jurists? Have they been joking all the time? No, replies Sepúlveda through the mouth of Demócrates, the jurists refer to another kind of slavery which had its origin in the strength of men, in the law of nations, and at times in civil law. Natural slavery is a different thing.

Philosophers, he explains, use the term natural slaves to denote persons of both inborn rudeness and of inhuman and barbarous customs. Those who suffer from these defects are by their nature slaves. Those who exceed them in prudence and talent, even though physically inferior, are their natural lords. Men rude and backward in understanding are
natural slaves and the philosophers teach us, adds Sepúlveda, that prudent and wise men have dominion over them for their welfare as well as for the service given to their superiors. If inferior beings refuse this overlordship, they may be forced to obey by arms and may be warred against as justly as one would hunt down wild beasts.²

Spaniards have an obvious right to rule over the barbarians because of their superiority, of which he cites numerous examples. Everywhere Spanish legions have shown bravery—at Milan, Naples, in Tunis, Belgium, France, and more recently in Germany where the heretical Lutherans were defeated. No people in Europe can compare with them in sobriety, frugality, and freedom from gluttony and lasciviousness. As for their true Christian spirit, after the sack of Rome in 1527 the Spaniards who died of the pest, to a man, provided in their wills that the goods they had stolen should be restored to their rightful owners. The meekness and humanitarian sentiments of the Spanish soldiers there, whose first thought after victory was to save as many of the conquered as possible, are well known.³

The sack of Rome, as it happens, was a particularly unconvincing example of the benevolence and other virtues which Sepúlveda claimed for the Spanish soldiers, who imprisoned Pope Clement VII and joined the other troops of Charles V in plundering Rome. According to one modern historian, the city was subjected “... to horrors far more awful than those of barbarian days. Lust, drunkenness, greed of spoils and, in some cases, religious fanaticism, combined in truly hellish fashion to produce the worst outburst of savagery in the annals of the period.”⁴ Even after discounting the inevitable bias of many contemporaries against the powerful Charles V, the testimony of many eyewitnesses remains formidable. Monasteries and churches were burned, nuns violated, pregnant women put to the sword, and no one was
safe from the depredations of the unpaid and savage soldiers of many nations who made up the imperial army. Though Spaniards apparently respected holy places and sacred images, "in cruelty and perfidy they even surpassed the Germans", according to one eyewitness account of the revolting actions of the soldiers.\textsuperscript{5} Charles V was shocked, and one of his private secretaries, Alfonso de Valdés, hastened to compose a vigorous and eloquent defence of his king entitled \textit{Diálogo de Lactancio y un Arcediano}. Valdés "explained", with many reasons and examples from history, the justice of both the Emperor's political policy towards Pope Clement VII and the sack of Rome. Valdés did not attempt to deny that monstrous cruelties had been committed, but he adopted the attitude that Rome had received a merited punishment.\textsuperscript{6}

It is hard to understand today how anyone could have used the sack of Rome to demonstrate the clemency and sobriety of Spanish soldiers without being challenged by someone who knew the facts, and it is even more difficult to comprehend how Sepúlveda in particular could say such things, inasmuch as he had followed the army into Rome and could scarcely have been ignorant of what actually happened, even though he himself had taken refuge in the Castle of San Angelo.\textsuperscript{7} However this may be explained, he did in fact cite the sack of Rome as his culminating proof of the superiority of Spaniards over Indians.

He then proceeded to elaborate his version of Indian character. Indians were given over, he wrote, to all kinds of passions and abominations and not a few of them were cannibals.\textsuperscript{8} Before the Spaniards arrived they waged war among themselves almost constantly, and with such fury that they considered a victory empty if they were not able to satiate their prodigious hunger with the flesh of their enemies. The Scythians were cannibals too, he recalled, but were fierce fighters, whereas the Indians are so cowardly that they can
scarcely suffer the presence of Spanish soldiers, and many times a few Spaniards were able to rout thousands upon thousands of Indians "who fled like women". For example did not the brave and resourceful Cortez, with a handful of Spaniards, subdue Montezuma and his Indian hordes in their own capital? Sepúlveda also condemns the Indians' "incredible sacrifices of human beings, their horrible banquets of human flesh, and their impious worship of idols". And he asks: "How can we doubt that these people, so uncivilized, so barbaric, so contaminated with so many sins and obscenities...have been justly conquered by such an excellent, pious, and most just king as was Ferdinand the Catholic and as is now Emperor Charles, and by such a humane nation which is excellent in every kind of virtue?"

These inferior people "require, by their own nature and in their own interests, to be placed under the authority of civilized and virtuous princes or nations, so that they may learn, from the might, wisdom, and law of their conquerors, to practise better morals, worthier customs and a more civilized way of life". The Indians are as inferior, he declares, "as children are to adults, as women are to men. Indians are as different from Spaniards as cruel people are from mild people."

"Compare then those blessings enjoyed by Spaniards of prudence, genius, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion with those of the homunculi (little men) in whom you will scarcely find even vestiges of humanity, who not only possess no science but who also lack letters and preserve no monument of their history except certain vague and obscure reminiscences of some things in certain paintings. Neither do they have written laws, but barbaric institutions and customs. They do not even have private property."

Sepúlveda here manifested a strong nationalism, and was in fact the first great nationalistic writer in Spain according to
Rafael Altamira. For, boasted Sepúlveda, did not the deeds of Lucan, Seneca, Isidore, Averroës, and Alfonso the Wise testify to the intelligence, greatness, and bravery of Spaniards, from the time of Numantia to Charles V? “The mere fact that the Indians lived under some form of government by no means proved that they were equal to Spaniards. It simply showed that they were not monkeys and did not entirely lack reason.”

It is at this point in Sepúlveda’s argument that one is reminded of Gilbert Murray’s remark in his Greek Epic: “Unnatural affection, child-murder, father-murder, incest, a great deal of hereditary cursing, a double fratricide, and a violation of the sanctity of dead bodies—when one reads such a list of charges against any tribe or nation, either ancient or in modern times, one can hardly help concluding that somebody wanted to annex their land.”

It is also possible that Sepúlveda, who had spent many years in Italy and was looked upon as somewhat of a foreigner in Spain, was attempting by fulsome praise of his own countrymen to prove up to the hilt his own abounding patriotism.

Sepúlveda having drawn up this dismal judgment of Indian character without ever having visited America, Las Casas did not fail to stress that “God had deprived him of any knowledge of the New World”. Although Sepúlveda may have seen an Indian lurking about the royal court, he never mentioned the fact, and had depended on the knowledge of others for his views of Indian capacity and achievement.

The dogmatism of Sepúlveda’s utterances is the more striking when one considers the amount of information from many sources then available in Spain. In 1519, when Bishop Quevedo had applied the Aristotelian concept to the Indians, little was known about them, for the conquest had not spread far beyond the islands. It is true that a few European craftsmen
such as Albrecht Dürer appreciated the artistic booty despatched by Cortez to his sovereign. Dürer wrote in his diary in 1520, after a visit to Brussels where he saw the gifts presented by Montezuma to Cortez and now publicly exhibited for the admiration of the court: “Also I saw the things which were brought to the King from the New Golden Land: a sun entirely of gold, a whole fathom broad; likewise, a moon, entirely of silver, just as big; likewise, sundry curiosities from their weapons, armour, and missiles; very odd clothing, bedding and all sorts of strange articles for human use, all of which is fairer to see than marvels.

“These things were all so precious that they were valued at a hundred thousand gulden worth. But I have never seen in all my days what so rejoiced my heart, as these things. For I saw among them amazing artistic objects, and I marvelled over the subtle ingenuity of the men in these distant lands. Indeed I cannot say enough about the things that were brought before me.”\(^\text{11}\)

In 1520 few knew as much or judged as expertly as Dürer the artistic accomplishments of the New World, but by 1550 much of the Aztec, Maya, and Inca culture had come to the notice of Spaniards, and a mass of material had come to rest in the archive of the Council of the Indies. Of course the remarkable mathematical achievements of the Mayas or the art and the engineering feats of the Incas were not fully understood then, but much information was available. Even Cortez, whom Sepúlveda so greatly admired, was very favourably impressed by some of the laws and achievements of the Indians, which greatly surprised the conquistador himself when he considered the fact that they were “barbarians lacking in reason, and in knowledge of God, and in communications with other nations”.

So enthusiastic did Cortez wax over Indian virtues that one of Spain’s most enlightened and experienced officials in
America, Alonso de Zorita, asked why then Cortez described them as “barbarians”. Writing shortly after the Valladolid junta, Zorita enquired: “If these things be true, why call the Indians barbarous people without reason?”\textsuperscript{12} He also referred to the widespread idea that the Indians were believed to be human in appearance only, and stated that this “popular error” was even supported in the Spanish edition of the works of St Jerome, though readers could not be sure whether Jerome or his translator was responsible.\textsuperscript{13} Many capable and wise persons, Zorita remarked, who had never seen the Indians but who accepted the authority of others who likewise had not seen the Indians, had also fallen into this error.

Zorita himself saw admirable traits in Indian character, pointed out that they were not all alike, and even asserted that Spaniards too would be considered barbarians if some of the standards applied to the Indians were used to judge them. For example, Indians were charged with being childlike because they were willing to exchange valuable gold and silver for silly trifles. But, asked Zorita, were not Spaniards then doing the very same things in their civilized communities? Were they not trading with foreigners daily and getting in exchange unimportant trinkets from abroad?\textsuperscript{14} Here Zorita showed a spirit of enquiry completely alien to the attitude of Sepúlveda, who neither knew the Indians nor sought far for information on their customs and abilities.

Few Europeans had ever seen an Indian in the flesh. Columbus and other conquistadores usually brought a few natives to Spain to help dramatize their accomplishments at court. Cortez sent rich presents and two Indians dextrous at juggling sticks with their feet to Pope Clement VII in 1529, perhaps to assist the legitimization process for his four natural sons. As Bernal Díaz describes the scene, when the conquistadores’ special ambassador presented the precious stones
and gold jewels and the Indian jugglers, "His Holiness greatly appreciated them, and said that he thanked God that such great countries had been discovered in his days".15

In 1550 a troop of fifty Brazilian natives was brought to France and performed at Rouen before Catherine of Medici and her court ladies.16 The Tupinambas solemnly danced and carried on mock warfare on the banks of the Seine, but it was all an exotic ritual which brought the French ladies no more real knowledge of Indians than the acrobats sent by Cortez had given the pope a grasp of Indian character.

More Indians were to be found in Spain than elsewhere, but the total number cannot have been great. Indians loved litigation as much as Spaniards and sometimes even crossed the ocean to present their complaints directly to the Council of the Indies. Las Casas reported to the king in 1544 that he had found a number of Indian slaves in southern Spain,17 and shortly after the Valladolid dispute he was arguing at court on behalf of an Indian representative from Mexico named Don Francisco Tenamaztle who needed "shoes and a shirt and other things" to dress himself decently.18 The total number of such Indians must have been relatively small, and on the whole they must have presented a sorry sight to Spaniards. What few glimpses Europeans had of Indians in Europe provided no real basis for understanding them or assessing their cultural power and potentiality.

Even if Spaniards had seen many Indians in Spain and came to know them well, the conquest would still have been a shocking experience to both sides. The Spaniards, for example, made in America their first acquaintance with a matrilineal society. The queens and princesses they met both titillated them and scandalized their sense of propriety. The mores of a society in which the males did not make the rules were different from their own, and, as "civilized" persons have done around the world, they unhesitatingly condemned
the unfamiliar culture pattern and proceeded to break it down.19

Of course Sepúlveda, like many another European of his day and later, was judging the American Indians by his own standards. As Pál Kelemen has made clear, appreciation of Indian art was long delayed because it differed from European art.20 And exactly what constitutes the hallmarks of civilization is a matter on which many opinions have been expressed. Cortez, in his Third Letter, seemed to consider beggars in the streets as a sign of civilization. He observed that “there were beggars in Mexico as are found in Spain and in other places where there are cultivated people (gente de razón)”. A footsoldier of Cortez, the salty and knowledgeable Bernal Díaz de Castillo, in comparing the Indians he had encountered, arrived at the conclusion that the natives of Yucatán had a civilization superior to that of the Cuban Indians because they “covered their private parts”, whereas the Cubans did not.21 The veteran of many a fierce battle against the Indians was scandalized at their religious practices but admired their monuments, the bravery of their warriors, their imposing cities, their impressive ceremonies, and the intelligence of their chieftains.22

Sepúlveda also justifies the conquest on the basis of the good accomplished by Spaniards, which, he says, heavily outweighs the bad. In a long and detailed section of the Demócrates, he explains that great benefits sometimes involve losses, and here he quotes St Augustine’s dictum that it is a greater ill that one single soul should perish without baptism than that innumerable innocent men should be decapitated.23 At this point he launches into a laudatory account of benefits bestowed by Spain on America.24 The bringing of iron alone compensates for all the gold and silver taken from America. To the immensely valuable iron may be added other Spanish contributions such as wheat, barley,
other cereals and vegetables, horses, mules, asses, oxen, sheep, goats, pigs, and an infinite variety of trees. Any one of these greatly exceeds the usefulness the barbarians derived from gold and silver taken by the Spaniards. All these blessings are in addition to writing, books, culture, excellent laws, and that one supreme benefit which is worth more than all others combined: the Christian religion.

At this point Sepúlveda raised a paean of praise in honour of the kings of Spain for their generosity in making available all the many useful contributions bestowed upon the barbarians, from iron and fruits to wheat and goats. In this he may be following the lead of his hero Cortez who also saw the conquest as a great transfer of culture. How, asks Sepúlveda, can the Indians ever adequately repay the kings of Spain, the noble benefactors to whom they are beholden for so many useful and necessary things wholly unknown in America? Those who try to prevent Spanish expeditions from bringing all these advantages to the Indians are not favouring them, as they like to believe, but are really—in Sepúlveda’s view—depriving the Indian of many excellent products and instruments without which they will be greatly retarded in their development.

It may be remarked here that Europeans have often been reluctant to believe that other peoples, particularly “natives”, have ever discovered anything. The noted Swedish anthropologist, Erland Nordenskiöld, spent his life proving to reluctant colleagues that the South American Indians were ingenious inventors who discovered and developed all sorts of things—some of them never invented in the Old World. The Italian scholar Antonello Gerbi has demonstrated, too, that many examples are to be found of European disparagement of New World inhabitants and achievements.

Facing Sepúlveda’s wholesale denunciation of Indian character, Las Casas composed and presented to the judges
his 550-page Latin *Apologia*, which is his only major writing not yet published. This juridical treatise, consisting of sixty-three chapters of close reasoning and copious citations, was dedicated to demolishing the doctrine Sepúlveda had set forth in *Demócrates*. Las Casas also seems to have worked out a summary, designed perhaps for those who might find it irksome to plough through his detailed argument with its multitudinous proofs.

In his attempt to disprove Sepúlveda’s contention that the Indians had no real capacity for political life, Las Casas brought into court his long experience in the New World. Painting a rosy picture of Indian ability and achievement, he drew heavily upon his earlier anthropological work, the *Apologetic History*, a tremendous accumulation of material on Indian culture, begun as early as 1527 and completed some twenty years later in time to hurl against Sepúlveda at the Valladolid dispute. It was designed to meet the contention that the Indians were semi-animals whose property and services could be commandeered by the Spaniards and against whom war could be justly waged. It filled some 870 folio pages with many marginal annotations added, which perhaps explains why it is seldom read. Here he advanced the idea, which astonished the Spaniards of his day, that the American Indians compared very favourably with the peoples of ancient times, were eminently rational beings, and in fact fulfilled every one of Aristotle’s requirements for the good life.

Throughout this welter of fact and fantasy, Las Casas not only strives to show that the Indians fully meet Aristotle’s conditions, but also develops the idea that the Greeks and Romans were, in several respects, inferior to the American Indians. The Indians clearly are more religious, for instance, because they offer more and better sacrifices to their gods than did any of the ancient peoples. The Mexican Indians are superior to the ancient peoples in rearing and educating their
children. Their marriage arrangements are reasonable and conform to natural law and the law of nations. Indian women are devout workers, even labouring with their hands if necessary to comply fully with divine law, a trait which Las Casas feels many Spanish matrons might well adopt. Las Casas is not intimidated by the authority of the ancient world, and he maintains that the temples in Yucatán are not less worthy of admiration than the pyramids, thus anticipating the judgment of twentieth-century archaeologists.

Las Casas at last concludes, from a vast array of evidence, that the Indians are no whit less rational than the Egyptians, Romans, or Greeks, and are not much inferior to Spaniards. Indeed, in some respects, he declares them even superior to Spaniards.

One wonders why Las Casas felt it necessary to construct this truly monumental history on Aristotelian lines and to try to fit into the Philosopher’s definition the polity of the American Indians. Was Aristotelian influence so great in learned and court circles of Spain that such a feat was necessary to gain his point? Or did he use Aristotle merely because his opponent had done so and, like any skilful debater, sought to turn the argument to his advantage? Or did he see that the solution of the Indian problem lay, not only in legal protection but above all in establishing the Indians in the eyes of the Spanish community as human beings with a culture which it must respect?32

Aristotle indeed enjoyed great authority in sixteenth-century Spain, even though Hernando de Herrera challenged him as early as 1517,33 and his ideas constituted the “first major current of Renaissance thought”.34 Despite some significant modifications, “Renaissance Aristotelianism continued the medieval scholastic tradition without any visible break”.35 It preserved a firm hold on the university chairs in Spain and the New World, and was even prescribed for the
Indian students who attended the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Mexico.\textsuperscript{36} By the second half of the century scholars such as the Jesuit José de Acosta, as a result of experience in America, were laughing at some of Aristotle’s ideas, such as those on climate. It greatly amused Acosta and his companions to be in equatorial regions where according to Aristotle it must be blazing hot and to feel cold because of the altitude.\textsuperscript{37} In the late eighteenth century, Aristotle was to be condemned by some circles in Spanish America as a “servile sink of errors”.\textsuperscript{38} But in the sixteenth he reigned almost supreme in Europe and America. Acosta even while exposing Aristotle’s error on climate insisted that he would ponder long before questioning any of Aristotle’s other ideas. And Las Casas, who had declared before Charles V in 1519 that Aristotle was a gentile burning in hell whose philosophy should be accepted only when it proved consistent with Christian doctrine, was much more respectful towards Aristotle in 1550. At Valladolid he spoke out of years of study as a member of the Dominican Order, which had always emphasized Aristotelian doctrine. He was surrounded by able theologians in the Dominican convent of San Gregorio in Valladolid, and would probably have met opposition among his brothers had he attacked Aristotle directly. At any rate Las Casas denounced Sepúlveda for misunderstanding Aristotle and for failing to admit the diversity among the Indians, rather than the Philosopher himself.

One sympathizes with the struggle required for each contestant to get to the heart of the matter, for Aristotle himself appears to have formed several conceptions of the natural slave, and even such an able sixteenth-century scholar as Hernán Pérez de Oliva found him difficult to understand.\textsuperscript{39} In \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} he states that his idea of the slave in no way implies inferiority or inequality due to race or status.\textsuperscript{40} In the \textit{Economics} he appears to make a distinction between the
slave in theory and the slave in fact.\textsuperscript{41} As a recent re-examination of the natural slave concept brings out, however, the slave of the \textit{Politics} cannot know virtue. \textquote{He can have no share in happiness or free choice. . . . So long as he remains characterized by his function of bodily service, that function and that alone can give him a share in the common life of man.}\textsuperscript{42}

The variety of interpretations need not surprise us, for the Aristotelian conception was broad and not set out in exact detail by its author. Aristotle may not have made up his own mind definitely, or the difficulty may originate from the fact that we do not now have a definitive text of what he himself wrote but, apparently, only lecture notes made by a student. In any case, it is clear that every century has interpreted Aristotle anew. Even today the theory has its obscurities, and the literature of explanation and commentary on Aristotle is increasing today at an astronomical rate.\textsuperscript{43} One writer states flatly: \textquote{Aristotle in no place clearly indicates how a true slave may be known from a free man.}\textsuperscript{44}

Until recent years, however, it seemed quite certain that the main positions of both Las Casas and Sepúlveda were known. Now two radically new views have been developed which try to place even these matters in doubt. The first view would have us believe that all of Las Casas' thought was \textquote{fundamentally Aristotelian}.\textsuperscript{45} It is true that Las Casas in his argument at Valladolid appears to accept the theory, or at least admit the possibility, that some men are by nature slaves. It is also true that his \textit{Apologética Historia} was put together to prove that the American Indians fulfilled, and in a most convincing way, all the conditions listed by Aristotle as necessary for the good life. But Las Casas never attempts to defend the idea or seeks to extend its scope. Rather, he tries to confine its application to the smallest area possible. He not only denies vigorously that the Indians fall into the category
of natural slaves, but his argument tends to lead inevitably to the conclusion that no nation—or people—should be condemned as a whole to such an inferior position. Natural slaves are few in number and must be considered as mistakes of nature, like men born with six toes on their feet or only one eye.

Why then did Las Casas appear to accept Aristotle’s theory, even in a limited sense? One possible interpretation is that Las Casas here manifested that realistic and legalistic spirit which characterized a considerable part of his action. Part of his opponent’s attack rested upon the allegation that the American Indians were slaves by nature. The defence of Las Casas was not to attack Aristotle frontally but to show that the doctrine was inapplicable to the Indians. At the same time his exposition of what kind of person might fall into this Aristotelian category shows how irrelevant he considered the theory to explain the world at large. One might conclude, therefore, that Las Casas paid lip-service to Aristotle only to refute the application of his doctrine to the Indians. That Las Casas was fundamentally an Aristotelian thinker has yet to be established and this new interpretation of the Valladolid controversy has not gained support.\(^{46}\)

The second new interpretation concerns Sepúlveda, and requires careful consideration. The most recent writer on the subject propounds the surprising view that Sepúlveda did not mean to apply Aristotle’s doctrine of natural slavery at all but intended to recommend a sort of feudal servitude, and bases the argument on a distinction he finds between two translations of the word \textit{servus}.\(^{47}\) It must be observed at once that translating \textit{servus} as “serf” rather than as “slave” rests upon conjecture rather than upon what Sepúlveda wrote in his treatise. Sepúlveda had studied Aristotle intensively in Italy under the direction of Pietro Pomponazzi, the eminent Renaissance authority in the field, was painstakingly trans-
lating into Latin the *Politics* about the time he was writing his treatise *Demócrates*, and was probably the foremost Aristotelian in Spain.\(^{48}\) He praised the Philosopher repeatedly,\(^{49}\) knew many passages of his writings by heart,\(^{50}\) and specifically recommended to Prince Philip in 1549, while seeking royal support for the publication of *Demócrates*, that he read the *Politics*.\(^{51}\) At the time of the Valladolid controversy, he was considered one of Spain’s foremost scholars and was usually described by his contemporaries as “learned” and “erudite”. It thus seems reasonable to suppose that if he had meant the Indians to be classed as medieval serfs and not as Aristotelian “natural slaves” he would have said so unmistakably. Instead, he sets forth, with considerable detail, the proposition that the Indians were born so inferior—so rude, idolatrous, and ignorant—that they may be properly classified as natural slaves in accordance with the theory of the *Politics*.\(^{52}\) From this proposition flows a practical conclusion. These inferior Indians may be justly warred against and enslaved if they do not recognize that the Spaniards are their natural superiors—again in the Aristotelian sense.

Among the arguments adduced to support the interpretation that Sepúlveda meant serf is a linguistic one: the assertion that *servus* should be translated into Spanish as *siervo* in the sense of serf instead of *esclavo* in the sense of slave.\(^{53}\) But the standard Latin–Spanish dictionary of Antonio de Nebrija, printed in 1494 and presumably still authoritative in 1550, defined *servus*, the term used by Sepúlveda, as either *siervo* or *esclavo*. The first *Diccionario de la lengua castellana* issued by the Real Academia Española in 1726–1739 also gives *siervo* and *esclavo* as equivalents. And the numerous examples of the way these two words were used in Spanish literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as recorded in the imposing word catalogue of the Academia, all reveal that the words *siervo* and *esclavo* were used interchangeably.\(^{54}\) Thus the
translation of *servus* as *esclavo* or slave follows standard authorities, and Sepúlveda’s description of Indians indicates that he considers them natural slaves rather than medieval serfs.

Some sixteenth-century scholars attempted to “modernize” Aristotelian doctrine\(^5\) and others made an effort to bring it into consonance with Christian thought by judicious adaptation.\(^5\) Not so Sepúlveda. He had never seen the Indians of America but he knew his Aristotle and applied the natural slavery doctrine literally. The authoritative linguistic usages cited above are not really needed to establish the fact that Sepúlveda meant slave and not serf. His own words must be ignored if any other interpretation is adopted.

The assumption that Sepúlveda meant to recommend servitude rather than slavery rests also in part upon the fact that he supported the encomienda system, by which the Indians served Spaniards in a serf-like capacity.\(^5\) Towards the end of *Demócrates* he seems to approve encomiendas specifically: he favours the parcelling out of Indians among “honourable, just, and prudent Spaniards, especially those who helped to bring the Indians under Spanish rule, so that they may train their Indians in virtuous and humane customs, and teach them the Christian religion, which may not be preached by force of arms but by precept and example”.\(^5\) The important point to be understood here is that he recommends this benevolent arrangement only for those Indians who voluntarily accept Spanish rule and agree to become Christians. We know, from the discussion of Indian character in Book I of *Demócrates*\(^5\) and from his correspondence with Alfonso de Castro—to be described later—that Sepúlveda was convinced that the great mass of Indians would never voluntarily give up their own religion. Force would be required, therefore, for all such people. His approval of the encomienda system and his strong condemnation of the use of force thus apply only to that small number of Indians who would voluntarily accept Christianity
and Spanish overlordship. Unless this essential distinction, between the few who voluntarily submitted and the mass who must be warred against as a preliminary to their conversion, is kept clearly in mind, the true import of Sepúlveda’s doctrine will be missed.

It must be admitted, though, that the problem is difficult, largely because of Sepúlveda’s method of presenting his complex arguments. It is also true that sometimes in medieval Europe the serf had been thought of “in the Aristotelian way as a natural servus”, 60 and that consequently some confusion existed even in earlier centuries, as St Antonino explained about 1400 in his Summa Moralis. 61 But if Sepúlveda meant serf rather than slave he never made his viewpoint clear to any of his contemporaries. Domingo de Soto, the experienced theologian and jurist designated to draw up a summary of the argumentation on both sides, never shows in his résumé that Sepúlveda spoke in this vein, nor do any of his contemporaries who supported or opposed his doctrines. Therefore to establish the authenticity of this twentieth-century gloss—that Sepúlveda did not mean to invoke Aristotle’s doctrine of natural slavery—will require proof. Until such evidence has been produced, we must continue to believe that Sepúlveda meant what he said when he applied to American Indians, in meticulous and convincing detail, Aristotle’s theory that some men are born slaves, and that they were to remain in this condition as “animate possessions” of the Spaniards, their natural lords and permanent superiors. 62