



On the Just Causes for War against the Indians
Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda (c. 1545)

Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda was a Catholic priest and scholar connected to the Spanish royal court. He wrote the treatise excerpted here to defend Spain's wars of conquest in the Americas; he felt this defense had become necessary due to criticisms made by other Catholic priests, who were appalled by Spanish colonists' treatment of indigenous people. Sepúlveda's chief opponent was fellow priest Bartolomé de las Casas, who, after serving as a bishop in Mexico in the 1540s, returned to Spain intent on persuading the Spanish government that they had no right to wage wars of conquest against indigenous Americans. In 1550, Sepúlveda used the arguments from this treatise, which was still an unpublished manuscript, while formally debating Las Casas before a council appointed by the Spanish king. The council who heard the debate refrained, in the end, from endorsing Sepúlveda's arguments in favor of conquest; indeed, the government banned publication of his treatise. Nevertheless, Spanish wars of expansion continued in the Americas and the Philippines.

Sepúlveda's treatise is written in the form of an imaginary dialogue between a noble named Leopold and a philosopher named Democrates. The treatise is often called, in Latin, Democrates alter ("The Other Democrates") or Democrates secundus ("The Second Democrates") because it was the second treatise on war that Sepúlveda wrote in this form.

Leopold: [...] A few days ago, while I was strolling with some other friends in the palace of Prince Philip, Hernán Cortés, the Marquis del Valle, happened to pass, and upon seeing him we began to speak at length about the deeds which he and others of the Emperor's captains had accomplished in those lands to the west which were completely unknown to the ancient inhabitants of our world. These events surprised me mightily because of their grandeur and novelty and for being so unexpected; but thinking about them further, I was seized by a doubt, to wit, whether it was congruous with justice and Christian charity that the Spaniards should have made war on those innocent mortals who had caused them no harm. [...]

Democrates: [...] You can well understand, Leopold, if you know the customs and manners of different peoples, that the Spanish have a perfect right to rule these barbarians of the New World and the adjacent islands, who in prudence, skill, virtues, and humanity are as inferior to the Spanish as children to adults, or women to men; for there exists between the two as great a difference as between savage and cruel races [on the one hand] and the most merciful [on the other], between the most intemperate [on the one hand] and the moderate and temperate [on the other], and, I might even say, between apes and men.

You surely do not expect me to recall at length the prudence and talents of the Spanish, since, as I believe, you have read Lucan, Silius Italicus, the two Senecas, and after these St. Isidore, inferior to no one in the field of theology, as in philosophy Averroes and Avempace excelled, and King Alfonso in astronomy, omitting many others who would be too many to enumerate. And who can ignore the other virtues of our people: strength, humanity, justice, and religion? [...W]hat can I say of temperance, in greed as well as in lust, when there is hardly a nation in Europe which can be compared to Spain as concerns frugality and sobriety? [...] And what can I say of the gentleness and humanity of our people, who, even in battle, after having gained the

victory, put forth their greatest effort and care to save the greatest possible number of the conquered and to protect them from the cruelty of their allies?

Compare, then, these gifts of prudence, talent, magnanimity, temperance, humanity, and religion with those possessed by these half-men (*homunculi*), in whom you will barely find the vestiges of humanity; who not only do not possess any learning at all, but are not even literate or in possession of any monument to their history except for some obscure and vague reminiscences of several things put down in various paintings; nor do they have written laws, but barbarian institutions and customs. Well, then, if we are dealing with virtue, what temperance or mercy can you expect from men who are committed to all types of intemperance and base frivolity and eat human flesh? And do not believe that before the arrival of the Christians they lived in that pacific kingdom of Saturn which the poets have invented; for, on the contrary, they waged continual and ferocious war upon one another, with such fierceness that they did not consider a victory at all worthwhile unless they sated their monstrous hunger with the flesh of their enemies.

[...F]urthermore, these Indians were otherwise so cowardly and timid that they could barely endure the presence of our soldiers; and many times, thousands upon thousands of them scattered in flight, like women, before Spaniards so few that they did not even number one hundred. [...]

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. And as for the way of life of the inhabitants of New Spain and the province of Mexico, I have already said that these people are considered the most civilized of all, and they themselves take pride in their public institutions, because they have cities erected in a rational manner and kings who are not hereditary but elected by popular vote, and among themselves they carry on commercial activities in the manner of civilized peoples. But see how they deceive themselves, and how much I dissent from such an opinion, seeing, on the contrary, in these very institutions a proof of the crudity, the barbarity, and the natural slavery of these people; for having houses and some rational way of life and some sort of commerce [...] only serves to prove that they are not bears or monkeys and are not totally lacking in reason. But on the other hand, they have established their nation in such a way that no one possesses anything individually, neither a house nor a field which he can leave to his heirs in his will; for everything belongs to their masters, whom, with improper nomenclature, they call kings, and by whose whims they live more than by their own, ready to do the bidding and desire of these rulers and possessing no liberty. And the fulfillment of all this not under the pressure of arms, but in a voluntary and spontaneous way, is a definite sign of the servile and base soul of these barbarians. [...] If this type of servile and barbarous nation had not been to their liking and nature, it would have been easy for them, as it was not a hereditary monarchy, to take advantage of the death of a king in order to obtain a freer state and one more favorable to their interests; by not doing so, they have stated quite clearly that they have been born to slavery and not to civic and liberal life.

Therefore, if you wish to reduce them, I do not say to our domination, but to a servitude a little less harsh, it will not be difficult for them to change their masters, and instead of the ones they had, who were barbarous and impious and inhuman, to accept the Christians, cultivators of human virtues and the true faith. [...]

Leopold: Do you think, consequently, that pagans can be compelled to receive the faith, in spite of the fact that St. Augustine denies this [...]?

Democrates: If I were so to believe, there would be high authorities who would support my views; and I would still maintain that this was a great work of charity, for what greater benefit can one give a man than to communicate to him the faith of Christ? But since the will, as I have pointed out before, without which there is no room for faith, cannot be forced, it does not please St. Augustine and other great theologians to see undertaken this work, so great but sometimes so pernicious, of demanding the baptism of those who refuse it or of their children, who, for the most part, are accustomed to follow the will of their fathers. I do not say, then, that they should be baptized by force, but that, as far as it rests with us, they be brought back from the edge of the precipice and be shown the way of truth by means of pious teachings and evangelical preachings; and as this does not seem possible to accomplish by any other way than first subjecting them to our rule, especially in times such as these, when preachers of the faith and miracles are so rare, I believe that the barbarians can be conquered within the same right which makes them compelled to hear the words of the Gospels. [...] How can [someone] preach to these barbarians if they are not sent to them, as St. Paul says; and how are they to be sent if these barbarians are not conquered first?

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Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Additional paragraph breaks inserted for readability. The presentation, in parentheses, of the Latin word *homunculi*, translated into English as *half-men*, replicates the source publication. Spelling, punctuation, and dramatic formatting emended.

These edited excerpts from Sepúlveda's treatise are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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