

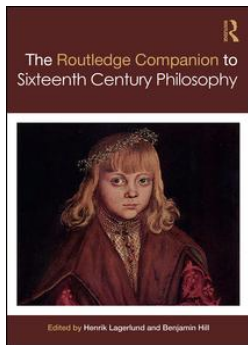
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Henrik Lagerlund, Benjamin Hill

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Joan-Pau Rubiés

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2

THE DISCOVERY OF NEW WORLDS AND SIXTEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

Joan-Pau Rubiés

The Global Geography of the Humanists and the Idea of Modernity

It is not easy to pin down what the *philosophical* impact of the discoveries was in the sixteenth century, because what the learned men of the period understood as philosophy could be much broader than more recent academic usages would lead us to assume. Philosophy, in effect, embraced any branch of learning. Interestingly, this very definition was offered by the geographer Strabo (c.63 BC–c.25 CE), who was influenced by Stoicism: Only a philosopher—that is, a man curious about everything—could be a geographer, an idea that was not lost on his humanist readers. Geography (or, more broadly, cosmography) and history (whether natural or moral history) were therefore both imbued with philosophical ideas, which, in turn, could not be dissociated from religious concerns. More generally, it was difficult to separate ‘science,’ which encompassed any theoretically informed body of learning, whether on natural or moral topics, from philosophical ideas. Finally, the humanists were often responsible for a revival of ancient philosophical traditions by finding, editing, and commenting on Greek and Latin texts, creating a deep bond between classical philology and philosophy. In this context, the discovery of new lands and peoples had a diffuse and pervasive philosophical impact in a number of genres and disciplines that ranged from cosmography and the philosophy of science to moral and political thought. Although this diffuse impact also touched the scholasticism taught at the universities, notably (as we shall see) in Spain, it was most apparent in the contribution of humanistic culture to a broad moral and scientific learning that became the concern of many lay people. Hence, although it is hard to single out a sixteenth-century philosophical discussion of the geographical discoveries in abstract terms, detailed analysis displays a deep interaction between philosophical concerns and new empirical evidence about newly discovered lands and peoples, in a variety of historical and scientific genres.

There was in particular one idea, closely bound with the widening geographical horizons of this period which, over time proved to have deep, wide-ranging philosophical implications. This was the idea of modernity. There would seem to be a paradox in the fact that humanists focused on ancient learning would end up developing such a theme. However, it was precisely because they were in permanent dialogue with the ancients that humanist writers could appreciate novelty more sharply. The idea of modernity that crystallized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was essentially built on two themes: the idea that experience had proved many ancient authorities wrong, and the emergence of a cosmopolitan consciousness that projected the cosmological and anthropological assumptions of Christian universalism onto a global scale. These two modern ideals—one scientific, the other moral and political—do not appear as necessarily connected to a specific philosophical system. However, we could argue that the global consciousness that found a providential design in the full habitability of the Earth was imbued with Christian Platonism and, closely following in its tracks, with Christian Stoicism, which were particularly influential among the cosmopolitan humanists of the sixteenth century.

These themes emerged clearly in Spain and Italy in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Peter Martyr of Anghiera, humanist historian of the Columbian expeditions to ‘the Indies’ and of the subsequent conquests, already drew a dramatic contrast between the old, sterile vision of the unreachable antipodes and the modern perspective of a New World full of promise, when, he dedicated his first three *Decades of The New World* (*De Orbo Novo Decades*, Alcalá, 1516) to the young successor to the Spanish Crown, Charles (later to become Emperor Charles V). The theme was amply echoed in Italy a few years later. In the midst of his account of the traumatic series of events that brought a prosperous and learned Italy under foreign domination, the Florentine historian Francesco Guicciardini allowed himself a brief excursus about the geographical discoveries of the Portuguese and the Spanish, on the grounds that, besides their negative impact on Venice’s trade with the Orient, they also constituted one of the most memorable developments in the history of the world in many centuries. After reviewing the image of the terrestrial globe as understood by cosmographers, and its division into latitudinal zones and degrees, Guicciardini noted many of the opinions of the ancients about its limited habitability, all of which had been challenged by the ‘marvellous’ navigations of the Portuguese to India and of the Spanish to previously unknown islands and continents, including, most remarkably, the circumnavigation of the whole world. Praising Columbus and other navigators for their skill, tenacity, daring, and effort, he concluded:

By way of these navigations it became evident that the ancients had deceived themselves about many things concerning their knowledge of the earth. It is possible to cross the equatorial line, and to live in the torrid zone; similarly, against their opinion, other navigations have shown that it is possible to inhabit the areas near the Poles, which they claimed were too cold for human life on account of the position of the Heavens, so remote from the course of the sun. By means of these voyages it has also been confirmed what some ancients believed but others questioned, namely that under our feet there exist other peoples, called by them “antipodes.”

(Guicciardini 1981, II: 614–19)¹

Guicciardini's astronomy was obviously pre-Copernican—he envisaged the Sun circling around the Earth—but he was in no doubt that, by the means of modern geographical discoveries, an important transformation had taken place in the way men of “our hemisphere” (by which he meant the ancient *oecumene*, the inhabited world that extended from Europe and the Mediterranean to India) understood the world. It was, above all, a discovery that opened a chasm between the ancient and the moderns. Furthermore, it also had some potentially troubling implications for religion. In a passage that was quickly suppressed by the ecclesiastical censors, Guicciardini went on to note that interpreters of sacred scripture had also had to adjust their interpretation of Psalm 18, which was understood to declare that the Christian message had reached the whole world: *Their sound has gone forth into the whole earth: and their words to the ends of the world.*² Clearly, this could not mean that the Gospel of Christ had been heard everywhere (Guicciardini 1981: II, 619).³

Guicciardini was not alone in noticing the scientific, religious, and philosophical implications of the discoveries. In Venice, his contemporary Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485–1557), secretary to the Republic's Senate, made the theme of the full habitability of the world central to the philosophical significance of his landmark collection of travel accounts, *Navigations and Travels* (*Navigazioni et Viaggi*, published in three volumes in the 1550s, but largely composed, like Guicciardini's *History of Italy*, in the late 1530s). Here, the theme of plenitude, fully supported by a vast amount of modern empirical observations, nevertheless revealed its providentialist and Platonic undertones. It was indeed Plato in the *Timaeus*, noted Ramusio in a discourse dedicated to his friend Girolamo Fracastoro that prefaced the volume of his collection devoted to the New World, who had first understood that, given that the structure of the universe had been designed so that the “divine animal” that was man would learn of God's providence, it made no sense that vast stretches should lay empty of people. Therefore, the myth of Atlantis was no mere fable, but an expression of a philosophical necessity, that is, the principle of cosmological plenitude in a created world:

Rationally it cannot be believed that the maker of such a beautiful and perfect structure as are the heavens, the sun and the moon, having made all with such marvellous order, would only have wanted the sun to illuminate a fraction of this globe called earth, and the rest of its course be in vain over empty seas, ice and snow.

(Ramusio 1978–1985: V, 8)

Hence, the discovery of the New World, together with a better understanding of how the seasons alternated in different parts of the Earth (notably towards the arctic), was simply a confirmation of a philosophical truth, by which men could be found anywhere:

I think there can be no longer any doubt that beneath the equator and below both poles there is the same multitude of inhabitants that there are in all the other parts of the world.

(Ramusio 1978–1985: V, 9)

The humanist geographer was not simply targeting the assumptions of ancient writers about the empirical lack of accessibility of those unknown continents that might exist as separate *oecumenes* beyond the torrid zone, that is, in the southern hemisphere, but also

their inability to fully comprehend the implications of the philosophical principle that the cosmos had been rationally designed. In fact, the Stoic tradition, albeit less emphatically theistic than Christianity, assumed that nature was ruled rationally by a Divine Providence, whose laws humans could apprehend precisely because they were rational creatures. Geographers influenced by Stoicism such as Strabo (whose first-century *Geography* was eagerly read by European humanists following its translation into Latin by Guarino of Verona in 1458) described the known oecumene as an island in the shape of a rectangle with rounded edges, and accepted that other inhabited landmasses might exist across the ocean (Strabo 1917: I, 435).⁴ However, Strabo doubted that these lands could be reached: If men existed there—and the hypothesis was reasonable—they were not like the men of “our own” oecumene, which only occupied one quarter of the Earth (Strabo 1917: I, 455). Not only was it impossible to live in the torrid and frigid zones, but Strabo, like most ancient writers, also lacked confidence that the ocean could be crossed along its longitude, owing to its vastness (although his main sources, Eratosthenes and Posidonius, admitted as a purely theoretical hypothesis that, by sailing west across the ocean, one might reach India, given enough time: Strabo 1917: I, 243, 393).⁵ Hence, the consensus among ancient geographers was that each of the hypothetical oecumenes was likely to be isolated from the others. An influential late antique discussion (c.400) by the Neoplatonist philosopher Macrobius (in his *Commentary to the Dream of Scipio*, the cosmological vision offered by Cicero at the end of his *The Republic*) visualized the Stoic theory of various isolated landmasses in temperate zones surrounded by vast oceans and hostile climates as a symmetrical system of four “islands” (Macrobius 1952: 200–216), two in each hemisphere, and raised a problem for his many Christian readers, namely that a complete lack of communication between four inhabited continents posed an obstacle to the physical and moral unity of mankind. As far as Macrobius was concerned, what kind of men lived beyond the torrid zone was impossible to know—but he was no Christian or Jew, and need not worry about mapping the myth of Genesis onto the whole Earth.

The generation of Christian scholars that from the 1470s read Ptolemy and Strabo in print (usually in Latin translations) also witnessed those very transoceanic navigations that the ancient geographers had ruled out. Ramusio’s discourse, which must be placed in the immediate context of a circle of Venetian humanists that included Girolamo Fracastoro and Cardinal Pietro Bembo, solved the paradox by making the new navigations both prove that the other lands and hemispheres were perfectly accessible, and that they were actually inhabited. The only remaining issue was to find out how exactly the descendants of Adam and Noah had travelled there, a subject to which Europeans soon turned their minds. In the meanwhile, Ramusio and his humanist contemporaries had drastically relegated the scientific significance of the legacy of ancient geography in the name of modern discovery. Only modern Europeans had, through the practice of navigations, brought about a full understanding of the providential design in the cosmos. A cosmopolitan consciousness that transcended the ancient oecumene to embrace the whole globe immediately led to a new imperial vision that also surpassed in scope the Hellenistic and Roman construction (Headley 2008). Indeed, as Ramusio understood it, bringing together the different parts of the world under the umbrella of Christian civilization was the historic task of modern Europeans, driven by commerce to travel to all the parts of the world. As he explained in a “Discourse on the Spice Trade” (1547), the new navigations had opened up many possibilities for colonization in the southern hemisphere, only a fraction of which had been

exploited, while, in the north, new routes to Cathay awaited discovery, whether towards the west from Canada, or eastward via Muscovy. Like the Romans in antiquity, Europe's Christian princes were called to colonize all savage areas, bringing civility and preaching Christianity, and yet, for the first time in history, on a truly global scale. Indeed, history suggested that trade, the arts, and the sciences prospered together, and together declined (Ramusio 1978–1985: II, 967–990).⁶

In this way, the reception of the discoveries in Italy, and especially Venice, crystallized around what we might call a philosophical myth charged with global and imperial themes. And the myth soon found its heroes, humble travelers such as Marco Polo or Christopher Columbus, whose journeys pushed the frontiers of the known world and replaced fables with empirical observations. With little regard for historical accuracy, Pietro Bembo, in his *History of Venice* (*Historia Veneta*, Venice 1551), made Columbus the very spokesman for the philosophical necessity of the world's full habitability in terms almost identical to those expressed by Ramusio. Although Bembo consulted the *General and Natural History of the Indies* (*Historia General Natural de las Indias*, Seville, 1535) by their mutual Spanish friend Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo for his description of the New World (or, at least, was eager to declare this influence to Oviedo in their correspondence), in fact he was alone in making the argument of plenitude central to Columbus' own justification of the feasibility of the expedition:

It would almost be necessary to consider God improvident if he had so fashioned the world that by far the largest part of it was empty of men because of the extremes of climate, and offered them nothing useful. The terrestrial world was so made that men had the capacity of traveling through every part of it.

(Bembo 2008: II, 89)

This was, of course, a completely invented speech, very much at odds with the actual rhetorical repertoire of the Genoese sailor, who (beyond his appeals to material profit and new possibilities for spreading the Gospel) relied on a massive miscalculation of the oceanic distance between West Europe and East Asia (Randles 1990). Interestingly, Bembo's argument of plenitude was connected to a human faculty to visit any part of the world—a faculty that potentially intersected with the 'right to travel' (*ius peregrinandi*) emphasized, as we shall see, by Francisco de Vitoria in his novel analysis of the natural law foundations for colonial dominion.

The philosophical universalism of the global geography of the humanists was not without important contradictions. The imperial theme underlying the idea that Europeans had mastered the common destiny of mankind by creating a global community often assumed a perspective that was more national than cosmopolitan—or, at the very least, one that subjected the cosmopolitan project of realizing the moral and religious unity of mankind by means of travel, trade, and colonization to the immediate interests of particular European nations. If Venetian humanists such as Ramusio and his circle were imbued with a subtle form of Venetian patriotism, connected to the commercial business of the Republic in the trade of Eastern luxury goods, their friend and informer in Santo Domingo of Hispaniola, the royal official and chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, clearly promoted a Castilian-centered discourse of imperial legitimacy. The intellectual conquest of the Americas through natural history, in imitation of Pliny, might be something one wished to share with the wider Republic of Letters—after all, the courtly culture of the Spanish Renaissance to which

the chronicler of the Indies belonged was modeled on the Italian experience, and indeed, before settling in the Indies, Oviedo had himself spent crucial formative years in Italy. It therefore made perfect sense that he would be eager to see his landmark *Summary of the Natural History of the Indies* (*Sumario de la Natural Historia de las Indias*, Toledo, 1526) translated into Italian by the Venetian ambassador to Charles V, Andrea Navagero, and divulged among the learned by Ramusio, who published it in Venice in 1534. However, the merit of the discovery belonged to the Spanish nation and its Catholic rulers, who had sponsored Columbus and brought the true faith to a land where it had been unknown (or perhaps forgotten), and, when it came to assigning rights to dominion, the case was made for Spain alone, as Charles V, to whom the work was dedicated as a memoir of his “western empire of the Indies,” only ruled those lands as king of Castile, notwithstanding his many other sovereign titles. Oviedo even argued that the West Indies had been ruled in remote antiquity by the king of Spain, Hesperus (an apocryphal figure), so that even the idea of a papal donation could be circumvented if necessary (Oviedo 1959: 17–20). Rather than Bembo’s philosophical cosmographer, let alone the ambitious sailor of modern historiography who underestimated the size of the Earth’s perimeter, Oviedo’s Columbus was driven by his supposed knowledge of celestial navigation and by secret reports of forgotten lands to reassert a preexisting right to dominion.

Whereas Ramusio’s philosophical target, to assert the full accessibility and habitability of the Earth, was characteristic of his Venetian circle of Platonic humanists, his target as historian was shared by direct observers such as Oviedo: to correct Ptolemy and other ancient cosmographers in the light of modern experience. Although Ptolemy’s mathematical system for locating any place on a regular grid of latitudes and longitudes remained an essential inspiration to Renaissance mapmaking, his actual lists of place names with their coordinates belonged to the late antique (or, in the case of accompanying maps, possibly Byzantine) world, and there was no doubt that the new discoveries made radical updating urgent. As a matter of fact, the need to correct Ptolemy and Strabo had already been perceived in fifteenth-century Florence, and both George Pletho and Paolo Toscanelli had engaged in the task (Gentile 1992: 165–68). Most of Ptolemy’s locations in the East were anachronistic or incorrect (the Portuguese utterly transformed the picture about the size and shape of Africa and Asia), and, of course, the New World had to be mapped *ex novo*, without the aid of any ancient models. If, for his philosophical interpretations, Ramusio had relied on conversations with his patrician scholar friends, for the technical task of replacing the old with the new, he worked closely with an innovative cartographer, Giacomo Gastaldi, the Republic’s foremost cosmographer, whose maps for the *Navigations and Travels* reflected much of the new information provided by humble travelers. Gastaldi’s skilful placing of a wide range of new empirical observations onto a Ptolemaic system of latitudes and longitudes was to become a model for the erudite cosmographers who flourished in northern Europe in subsequent decades, notably Gerard Mercator and Abraham Ortelius. Interest in Ptolemy, whose arrival in fifteenth-century Italy had stimulated a geographical Renaissance, did not disappear as a result of these modern revisions—he had, after all, first understood the challenge of representing a spherical Earth on a plane without distorting distances—but his work mainly remained important for its conceptualization of cosmography as a systematic and mathematical subject (Shalev and Burnett eds. 2011). Eventually, Ptolemy’s maps became an object of antiquarian curiosity, as the late edition by Gerard Mercator in 1578 reveals (Crane 2008: 213). Homage to the genius of antiquity, often accompanied by adherence to the Neoplatonic vision of cosmic harmony, was closely connected to the

project of mapping the world anew, providing a homogenous spatial foundation for a truly universal oecumene (Besse 2003). The geographical authorities of the ancient world, in other words, became monuments of the past, whose practical utility as a repository of learning had been largely replaced by the more symbolic role of reminding Europeans that now they were moderns.

As we have seen, the idea of modernity that crystallized in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries combined the idea that experience had proved many ancient authorities wrong with a new cosmopolitan consciousness that projected the assumptions of Christian universalism onto a global scale. As proclaimed by Francisco López de Gómara, chaplain of the conqueror of Mexico Hernán Cortés and also the most influential of the early historians of the Indies, the experience of the Spanish navigations had contradicted many philosophical theories, confirming, among other things, that the world was one, not many (Gómara 1554, 6r). But the potential for a global human community was more than a geographical fact, now fully revealed: It was also a cultural project that had its center in Western Europe. In this respect, the cosmographers and travel collectors of the Renaissance were also fully implicated in the emergence of a Republic of Letters that kept alive an ideal of shared learning and morality across political and confessional borders; hence, not unlike Strabo at the time of Augustus, Ramusio understood that the natural audience for his geographical project included men of learning driven by philosophical curiosity, as well as lords and princes with practical political concerns. The balance between the universality of learning and the needs of empire—often conceived nationally or along confessional lines—was not without tensions in a politically divided Europe. However, the scholarly ideal had a philosophical core that was never completely neutralized by the constraints of local patronage, economic rivalry, or national or religious identities. It could be argued that, beyond the cultural practices of sharing letters, books, maps, globes, and cabinets of curiosities, the members of the Republic of Letters that emerged in the sixteenth century were also connected by a rather eclectic philosophical thread that took as its starting point the Florentine Marsilio Ficino's rediscovery of Plato as a moral teacher, was generally inspired by Erasmus's ideal of spiritual renewal through classical learning, and survived the religious divisions brought about by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation—divisions that meant that Europeans could not always agree about theology—by insisting on universalist ideals that were ecumenical, irenic, and cosmopolitan, culminating, for example, in the Christian Stoicism of Justus Lipsius or Pierre Charron. As expressed by the French historian Louis Le Roy in his *On the Vicissitude of Things in the Universe* of 1575, after reviewing with admiration the journeys, navigations, and geographical discoveries of modern Europeans:

We can truly assert that the world has as of today been fully manifested, and all of humankind known, so that all mortals can commerce with each other and cover their mutual needs, like inhabitants of a single city and world republic.

(Le Roy 1988: 418)

Le Roy's exaggerated claim that the whole world had been mapped, factually incorrect in the mid-1570s notwithstanding the world's circumnavigation by Magellan's expedition, is not simply an example of the confidence Europeans entertained in relation to their capacity for future navigations: More importantly, it is symptomatic of the way in which a cosmopolitan vision, built upon global trade but also inspired by moral ideals, preceded its full empirical verification.

The cosmopolitan emphasis relied on the new geographical consciousness made possible by the great works of compilation and synthesis of the humanist geographers, not only the great travel collections by Ramusio or (before him) Simon Grynaeus and Johann Huttich, *New World of Lands and Islands unknown to the Ancients* (*Novus Orbis Regionum ac Insularum Veteribus Incognitarum*, Basel, 1532), but also collections of maps produced in subsequent decades, such as the *Theatre of the World* produced by Abraham Ortelius (*Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, Antwerp, 1570, and many subsequent editions), and the *Atlas* by Gerard Mercator (Düsseldorf, 1595). These various works reveal that, in the sixteenth century, Christian anthropological universalism, the Stoic moral ideal of world citizenship, and the Platonic theme of cosmological plenitude came together through the theme of providential design. In turn, this providentialism found expression in a new historical consciousness—made especially clear in Le Roy’s own work—imbued with the theme of modernity and a new concept of civilization (*la civilité*) that assumed the possibility of scientific progress. “There has never been a happier century for the advancement of letters than the present one,” Le Roy wrote in conclusion to his analysis of diversity and change in the world, adding that, in the same way that the ancients, for all their learning, were ignorant of many things discovered in his time, many things still hidden would become clear to future generations. Le Roy was himself a humanist who appreciated Greek philosophy, notably as translator into French and commentator of Aristotle’s *Politics* and Plato’s *Timaeus* (whose cosmological providentialism was, here again, a key influence). Hence, the essential point was not to dismiss ancient learning, but rather to understand that such learning could not be a fixed legacy from the past (not even the complete library of antiquity would suffice); instead, it required a continuous process of refinement, research, and adaptation to a changing world (Le Roy 1988: 429–441). The augmentation of learning by subjecting ancient philosophy to the critique of modern observation, often through comparisons, was closely connected to the practical needs of a new age distinguished by the progress of civilization.

The history of civilization was, thanks to the new discoveries, the history of the modern fulfillment by European Christians of a providential design that, for all their achievements, the ancients had failed to fully understand. The coherence of this vision in the late Renaissance—on the assumption that human reason could apprehend the order of nature in history, politics, and morality no less than the physical world—is today hard to appreciate, because the century that followed would be marked by the corrosive effects of philosophical scepticism. Through the impact of the sceptical crisis, the Platonic assumptions of Christian providentialism and confidence in European modernity would be forced to part ways, giving way to a revival of Augustinian fideism on the one hand and to the emergence of neo-Epicurean and Cartesian alternatives on the other. Of course, this parting did not nullify the cosmopolitan project, but, as the connection between human reason and cosmological providence was tested, post-sceptical cosmopolitanism became more secular, and therefore more dependent on its sheer historical feasibility.

The Problem of Impact

Assessing the discoveries in terms of intellectual impact can be problematic. Previous generations of historians often emphasized that, considering how important the discoveries were in the long term for Europeans, and indeed for world history, many sixteenth-century intellectuals—primarily humanists—were slow to focus their attention on the New World

and to come to terms with the implications. A key criterion in this kind of analysis is “absence of influence,” rather than explicit dismissal (Elliott 1970). As evidence, it has been noted that, throughout the sixteenth century, twice the number of books were published in France on the Turks than on the Americas (Atkinson 1935: 10). In fact, it makes little sense to set publications on the Americas in stark opposition to the literature on the East. For Europeans in the sixteenth century, many parts of Africa and Asia were exotic ‘new worlds’ no less than Hispaniola or Brazil—what made them ‘new’ was the fact that the ancients did not know them (hence, the term ‘new world,’ *mundus novus* or *novus orbis*, was sometimes applied to areas reached via the Portuguese navigations).⁷ The Indies, East and West, were all places where one might travel, trade, conquer, or conduct a religious mission, but not all routes were transoceanic, and journeys by land (or by land and sea) from the Levant to Persia, India, and beyond often constituted a single itinerary. The emphasis on the Ottomans in books published in France throughout the sixteenth century in any case made perfect sense, as they constituted the most immediate military threat to Christian Europe and a fairly accessible space for diplomacy, trade, pilgrimage, and antiquarian research (some very high-profile diplomatic missions were sent there in the middle of the century). The key point is that the genres of travel writing did not discriminate according to separate regional compartments, and, throughout the century, the geographical focus of the publications shifted variously to the Levant, Persia, India, the Caribbean, the Spice Islands, Mexico, Siam, Peru, Ethiopia, Brazil, Japan, the Mughal Empire, China, Virginia, or Canada, as different opportunities for exploration and interaction became available. There was no humanist bias in favor of the familiar world of ancient writers at the expense of the supposedly disturbing presence of newly found lands and peoples. As we have seen in the cases of Ramusio or Le Roy, those geographers and historians who were involved in interpreting the importance of the new geographical discoveries were also humanists imbued with classical culture, or men, such as Oviedo, who aspired to connect to humanist culture.

In this respect, a simple opposition between elite humanism geared towards classical culture and the popular world of sailors, traders, and conquerors involved in the practical business of making profit in the Indies is highly misleading. The very genre of travel writing, including, not only the great collections by Grynæus, Ramusio, Hakluyt, and De Bry, but also, more generally, natural history, ethnography, and cosmography, was deeply mediated by the concerns of humanistic culture, and, for example, it was through the Latin epistles of Peter Martyr of Anghiera—later to become the eight *Decades of the New World*—that the experiences of Columbus and his companions in newly discovered islands and continents were known across Western Europe throughout the sixteenth century (Anghiera 1516; 1530). The way these humanists reported the discoveries bears some detailed analysis. For example, a famous passage by Anghiera concerning Columbus’s second voyage (1494–1495) referred to men who had no private property and lived in a “Golden Age,” clearly echoing a common theme of the Latin poets of the Augustan age, who wrote about that mythical early time when men could lead a simple and peaceful life without hard toil or any need for private property, government, or laws. The passage has often been taken as a mere ethnocentric projection of a classical motif upon the New World, but on closer inspection, it turns out to have been directly inspired by the writings of Columbus about the simplicity of the naked inhabitants of Cuba and Hispaniola. Columbus noted that their *caciques* had no property and held things in common, because the land produced more than

enough; Peter Martyr clearly took this description almost literally as a starting point, and then elaborated the passage by referring back to the Golden Age (*aetas aurea*) of the Latin writers (Rubiés 2006: 155–60).

This is not to argue that Europeans, infused with their peculiar cultural preconceptions and pursuing their commercial and religious agendas, were adequately prepared for a sophisticated understanding of the different cultural assumptions of the various peoples they encountered. The point, rather, is to suggest that classical culture was not deployed *at the expense* of any practical engagement with local cultural realities, but rather *in dialogue* with it. In fact, some observers of distant natural and cultural realities were themselves highly educated men who placed their knowledge, classical and modern, at the service of interpreting natural and human diversity. This is especially clear in the late decades of the sixteenth century: Consider men such as Filippo Sassetti, a Florentine patrician (and reader of Ramusio) who spent some time in Malabar (South India) in the mid-1580s and, while acting as commercial agent for the pepper trade, collected botanical specimens, researched Hindu writings, and compared the Sanskrit language with Latin and Greek (Sassetti 1995: 179–80). Consider also the mathematician Thomas Harriot, who, in the same years, was employed by Walter Raleigh to conduct research into the natural history of “Virginia” (on the coasts of modern North Carolina) during the first (failed) English attempt to create a permanent settlement in North America. In 1588, he published a report in defense of the colony’s feasibility that deployed a Machiavellian analysis in order to prove that the Algonquin natives were, under English guidance, capable of civility and true religion, but also powerless to oppose the colonists; here, any nostalgia for the Stoic virtues of the primitive inhabitants, their simplicity, austerity, freedom, and courage, was quickly swept aside in order to argue for the prospects of a superior civilization (Rubiés 2009: 125–27). Similarly, missionaries such as the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who, also in the same period, studied the language and culture of China intensively in order to plant Christianity in what he interpreted to be a Gentile civilization, were eventually able to connect Stoic ethics (that is, moral philosophy according to natural reason) to Confucian moral philosophy. This was, of course, only possible in Ricci’s case because he had received, within his own order, a solid classical education (Ricci 2009). Medical doctors who collected and studied plants and drugs in India or New Spain—men such as García da Orta or Francisco Hernández—faced a comparable challenge when assessing botanical novelty, not only in terms of classical culture, but also in relation to various non-European linguistic systems. A great deal of local knowledge had to be filtered down before this material could meet the expectations of a European audience, but fieldwork researchers often confronted the issue of cultural translation creatively. At the same time, many historians and ethnographers of the Spanish conquest in the Americas employed the model of Roman imperialism and its civilization in order to interpret—positively or critically—the nature both of Spanish rule and of the peoples they had conquered (Lupher 2004). Rather than a mere projection of the old on the new, therefore, we need to think in terms of an intense interaction between classical culture and new observations. Not all armchair cosmographers and naturalists were able to handle the tension of the old and the new, and many (such as Sebastian Münster) leaned heavily towards the former. However, notwithstanding the abundance of anachronisms and superficial analogies that characterized early modern cosmography and natural history, it was this interactive process that led historians such as Le Roy to the idea that systematically correcting the ancients was the very basis for a more perfect natural and human history.

In addition to the crucial role of humanist writers active in editing, collecting, translating, and interpreting primary accounts about the various areas of the world explored by Europeans, and of a number of ‘philosophical’ travelers who conducted ethnography and natural history through the lens of a classical education, a pervasive culture of popularized humanism in the vernacular in courtly and urban contexts also led many early observers of more limited education to set their works in relation to higher learning. From the Florentine Amerigo Vespucci, who observed the stars of the southern hemisphere, reflected on the relations between skin color and latitude, and saw Epicureans in the naked cannibals of Brazil living in a natural state, unconstrained by any laws or the anxieties of owning property, and having sex promiscuously: to Antonio Pigafetta of Vicenza, who travelled with Magellan around the world, drawing charts of islands and compiling lists of foreign words (and, unlike the Portuguese navigator, lived to tell the tale); to a man such as L Gonzalo Oviedo, who aspired to become the Pliny of the newly discovered Indies by emphasizing his authority as a vocational observer—many of the key vernacular narratives of the age of discoveries were written by men whose cultural horizons were expanding with the rise of the various classically inspired popular genres of the Renaissance. Hence, at the crossroads between elite and popular discourses, while many humanists valued the testimony of the more popular writers and assimilated their narrative weight, the latter were subtly influenced by the concepts and strategies formulated by the intellectual elites.

Assessing intellectual impact is therefore primarily a question of perspective—it is only from the vantage point of what the Americas eventually became that the impact of the discoveries may seem to have been slow during the first few decades of the century. In reality, there was a geography as well as a chronology of impact. When Johannes Boemus, a German priest who was canon of Ulm Cathedral, published his influential ethnological compendium *Manners, Laws and Customs of all the Nations* (*Omnium gentes mores, leges et ritus* Augsburg, 1520, with a revised edition in 1536), he primarily relied on classical, humanist, and medieval Latin sources. His account of the origins of civilization, a theme of significant philosophical import, sought to reconcile ancient Stoic (and Epicurean) theories of the progress from savage life to civil society with the emphasis on the fall of Adam and mankind’s cultural and geographical dispersion in the biblical book of Genesis: however the evidence of travelers such as Vespucci, who had described the savages of Brasil, did not inform his thinking (he did not even mention him by name, although he knew of some other travel accounts recently published). Entirely focused on gathering information scattered in books, Boemus did not feel that information about newly discovered lands was sufficiently authoritative and excluded it from his synthesis. However, his Spanish translator, Francisco Thámara, a professor of rhetoric in Cadiz, a port city closely connected to the Castilian system of monopoly trade with its colonies (as all goods and passengers had to pass through Seville), thought otherwise. Writing in the 1550s, after the books by Martyr, Oviedo, and Francisco López de Gómara had become available in print, he had both the local perspective and the authoritative sources to make the New World part of universal history. Therefore, he composed his own summary of the ethnography of the Indies, adding a substantial new chapter to Boemus’s treatise (Thámara 1556).

Commercial and political associations meant that news in Europe circulated quickly, often in the form of letters that were sometimes copied, edited, translated, and published (it is for this reason that it is hard to pin down an authentic Vespucci—what he wrote to patrons in Florence and what was offered to the public in the Latin version, *Mundus Novus*, differed

considerably). The center of gravity of impact thus moved from Portugal and Spain to Italy, Flanders, and southern Germany, where many commercial houses originated. During the first decades of the sixteenth century, Italy was the heartland of humanistic culture, not least in terms of publications, and, albeit politically fragmented, its commercial agents (from Florence, Genoa, and Venice) had a strong presence in both Lisbon and Seville. The Italian Peninsula also fell under the political influence of Emperor Charles V, who, as sovereign ruler of the Spanish kingdom and its Indies, Southern Italy, Milan, Austria, and Flanders, collected titles and extended his international influence in bitter rivalry with France. In that context, it is not surprising that many of the key geographical publications originally written in Portuguese or Castilian exerted their strongest impact through Italian (often Venetian) editions, such as Ramusio's collection: institutional constraints and the lack of a strong book market meant that the prospects of profitable printing in the Iberian kingdoms were rather more limited.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the connection between the Jesuits and their headquarters in Rome, manifested for example in regular letters sent from the overseas missions, also contributed to channeling much of the impact of the discoveries towards Italy, increasingly as an expression of the global aspirations of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. However, towards the end of the century, there was also a shift towards northern Europe, as England and the Dutch Provinces (after their revolt against Philip II) became more directly active in overseas trade. In the context of the religious conflict that divided Europe, Protestants developed their alternative vision for colonial expansion in direct rivalry with, and polemic against, Philip II, who, after 1580, had successfully brought together the Indies of Castile and Portugal under his rule. Caught between the Catholic South and the Protestant North, and indeed deeply divided about its own religious future, France remained at the crossroads, unable to launch a sustainable colonial policy despite some timid efforts in Brazil (*France Antarctique*) and later Canada (*Nouvelle France*), yet always central to European international politics. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, as a regime of limited religious toleration on political grounds slowly gained ground, it was in France that some of the more philosophically charged manifestations of the impact of the discoveries were felt, by authors such as Le Roy, Montaigne, and La Popelinière. By that time, reading about the various 'new worlds,' whether the despotic Ottoman sultans, the cannibals of Brazil, the capture of Atahualpa in Peru, the (Buddhist) monks who worshipped 'Amida' in Japan, or the amazingly prosperous great kingdom of China, had become an essential part of the cultural horizon of the educated.

That this was the case had a lot to do with the authoritative status that the genres of travel writing had acquired. Travel collections treated documents of discovery, even those written by humble merchants and soldiers, as texts that deserved the same philological respect as classics—in this respect, Ramusio and Hakluyt set the highest standards. At the same time, the possibility of verification through repeated travel neutralized the potential for fraud and fictionalization. Although the problem of how to distinguish the authentic certainly persisted well into the eighteenth century, by 1600 it was far more obvious than it had been a few decades earlier that, for example, the fourteenth-century English traveler John Mandeville was not to be trusted.

The principle that knowledge based on experience could trump the authority of books—and especially Aristotle, the greatest philosophical and scientific authority of the late Middle Ages—had even deeper epistemological implications. Not only did it enshrine the

idea of modernity through intellectual progress in relation to the ancients, it also sharpened the sense that even the greatest religious authorities could get it entirely wrong when it came to natural science. When faced with the Bible as an authority, Galileo's key argument in defense of his espousal of the heliocentric model was that, as he explained in a famous letter to Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany in 1615, sacred scripture was meant to teach men and women how to go to heaven, rather than how the heavens go (Finochiaro 1989: 96). The argument, however, was far from new: In previous decades, many writers, including perfectly orthodox ones such as the German cosmographer Peter Apian or the Spanish Jesuit José de Acosta, had already argued that the reason why the leading fathers of the Church could get it totally wrong about the shape of the Earth and the sky over it (flat, according to Lactantius) or the antipodes (nonexistent, Augustine asserted) was because these were natural truths that depended on reason tested by experience, rather than on faith (hence, Acosta piously added, those venerable men who occupied themselves with sacred matters could be excused when they made mistakes about philosophy and natural science). Although the Bible was still treated by Acosta and many others as a valid *historical* source, its statements about the cosmos had to be interpreted in the light of natural science. The consolidation of a sharper separation between rational truth and religious truth was therefore one of the key philosophical outcomes of the impact of the discoveries.

History as Science

The *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* by José de Acosta (1539–1600), a Jesuit of New Christians origin who was active in the missions of Peru and New Spain in the 1570s and 1580s, offers a vantage point of how these ideas came together in a work that had huge influence over many generations. First published in Castilian in 1590, and within 15 years translated into all the important languages of the European Republic of Letters (Italian, French, English, Dutch, German, and Latin), it drew together two kinds of history, natural and moral, that corresponded to the realms of the physical, on the one hand, and to human beliefs and behavior, on the other.⁸ Both belonged to the humanist genre of *historia*, that is, broadly conceived, an empirically informed narrative that served as factual foundation for any scientific or philosophical speculation about the natural world and about mankind. In this respect, it is worth emphasizing that the Renaissance—here understood as a unique cultural moment rather than just a chronological period—saw a rise in status of history: What scholastics had considered *incomplete*, noncausal knowledge of how things are in particular became a *foundational* mode of knowledge, describing things as experienced, which could support or challenge any theory about the world (Pomata and Siraisi 2005). From cosmography to anthropology, Acosta's systematic work encompassed all those phenomena whose rational analysis might be relevant to understanding the intellectual impact of the New World: why latitude alone did not determine climate; new observations about volcanoes, earthquakes, winds, and tides; the effects of geography and climate on the diversity of minerals, plants, animals, and humans; the relativity of time according to the new navigations; the genealogical connection between the peoples of the New World and the Old; the progress from barbarism and civilization; and last but not least, religion, true and false.

Acosta's epistemological position is particularly interesting, as it tested Aristotelian notions about the soul against the scientific novelty of the New World. There was nothing

special in claiming that there was a realm of the natural that belonged to reason, as many Catholic theologians, following Thomas Aquinas, accepted this: The revealed truths of religion—the truths of grace—perfected, but did not deny, nature, which was after all a providential order regulated by the will of the Creator. However, Acosta went further than many in exploring the dialectic between reason and experience in the light of the discoveries. He was especially emphatic in asserting that it was necessary to subject reason to the test of experience in order to correct simplistic, common-sense explanations. This, paradoxically, required the help of the imagination, which alone could offer the kind of counterintuitive explanations that fit all the observed facts (such as the spherical shape of the globe, or the relativity of ‘up’ and ‘down’ on the surface of a sphere, or even the relativity of time according to the direction of travel across the Earth’s circumference). “It is remarkable,” he pondered, “that human understanding, on the one hand, cannot perceive and reach the truth without using imaginations, and on the other, it cannot fail to fall into error if it simply follows the imagination” (Acosta 2008: 18). The imagination had to arrange the observed facts, but it was bound to a particular time and place; reason—by thinking universally—could correct the imagination; experience, in turn, had the potential to correct reason (by proving, for example, that the vast ocean could be navigated, or that the torrid zone between the tropics was not so hot as to prevent human habitation). Experience, in other words, was not a simple criterion of truth: it worked in tandem with imaginative reason, and together they could replace the authority of the ancients, even the most pious and clever, such as Augustine, or the greatest philosophers, such as Aristotle. Acosta’s emphasis on the imagination was conventional in terms of Aristotle’s psychology, but, in the context of a discussion of the New World and its peoples, it acquired a particular tinge, because he, like most of his contemporaries, also believed in the Devil as an active historical agent (how else explain the irrational, idolatrous cults of the peoples of the New World?)—and the Devil exerted its power with special effectiveness upon the human imagination, generating false visions and delusions in order to foster idolatry (MacCormack 1991). Hence, beyond the mere opposition between reason and experience, it was the disciplining of the imagination that became the key to both natural and religious knowledge. (It may be worth noting that Acosta ignored Copernicus and imagined a geocentric system of spheres; he was also adamant that his experience as a traveler only enhanced his sense of Divine Providence. Neither of these positions affected his epistemology; they only reveal what his assumptions were.)

Acosta’s efforts to explain why the climate of the torrid zone was, contrary to expectation, moderately warm, took the historical observation of actual conditions as the starting point for a modern theory of the specificity of the tropical climate, establishing a connection between solar heat, evaporation, and humidity in those equatorial latitudes that was contrary to the patterns observed in the more temperate zones. (In passing, Acosta also offered an explanation of why the Nile rose in the summer, inspired by a similar observation in the River Paraguay.) “A thousand natural effects follow from contrary causes, depending on the diverse mode,” he concluded—that is, the same cause, such as solar heat, can produce opposite effects depending on other variables, such as the quantity of rain, the presence of regular winds, or the length of the day (Acosta 2008: 50–2). The realization that, even within the same latitude, there could in fact be different climates, simply according to changing altitude, led Acosta to one of his most dramatic moments, when he laughed at Aristotle’s imagined “torrid zone” as he felt the bitter cold of the mountains of Peru.

In his theory of tropical climates, Acosta proceeded from observed conditions to a new theory. Similarly, in his explanation of why the Spanish who reached the Philippines by sailing from Mexico arrived a day earlier than the Portuguese who came from India to Macao—a fact already commented on by Pigafetta after his circumnavigation of the world—the role of theory was to explain that the startling observation was no mistake, but entirely logical (Acosta 2008: 91). However, in what is possibly his most famous disquisition, his account of how the Indies came to be populated, he did the opposite, taking the Christian assumption about the genetic unity of mankind, on the authority of the book of Genesis, as starting point for geographical speculations that future navigations would have to confirm. We could say that, here, the ideological principle (one connected to the philosophy of plenitude) crucially inspired the use of the method, rather than the method being allowed to freely generate new ideas. Given that the unity of mankind could not be questioned, any theories that divided mankind into originally separate species had to be rejected as heretical, even if, at the same time, it was observed that there were racial variations that one might explain through the gradual assimilation of environmental influences. How the American Indians reached the New World without compass navigation, unknown to the ancients, was the problem that required an explanation. After a thorough analysis of the various possibilities, Acosta's answer was to discard any supernatural explanation and postulate the gradual and unconscious migration of savage peoples (as well as wild animals) through land, or at most through a narrow strait by means of canoes. Where exactly the crossing had taken place was still unclear, but he was confident that future geographical exploration would provide an answer. Following Mercator and Ortelius, who, for their own philosophical reasons (the Stoic and Neoplatonic idea that, for the sake of cosmological harmony, there should be a balance of continental masses between the two hemispheres), had postulated a large 'Australian' continent in the South Pacific in their maps, Acosta suggested that the straits of Magellan were a distinct possibility (Zuber 2011). However, further exploration of the coasts on North America—for example, from California along the northwest, towards the eastern extremities of Asia—might easily reveal an alternative land bridge. "There is no contrary reason or experience to unmake my imagination, or opinion, that all the land [the continental landmass of the Old World and the New] is connected at some point, or at least reaches very near," he concluded, thus reasserting the role of reasonable speculation in his scientific method (Acosta 2008: 37).

The rise in status of empirical observations in the European system of knowledge did not originate in the sixteenth century, nor was it exclusively tied to the discovery of new worlds. However, the practical needs of geographical exploration, diplomacy and conquest, long-distance trade, religious mission, and colonial administration certainly stimulated a substantial increase in practices of information gathering, and the printing press facilitated much of this information entering the world of learning. In addition, humanistic concerns with the reform of dialectics inspired the emergence of new methods that helped organize all this new information in ways that seemed clear and logical. The impact of Peter Ramus and his reform of method, through a system of tree-like tables that systematized the exposition of any subject or theoretical argument from the general to the particular, was significant in the latter decades of the century. These kinds of methodical concern came to reinforce what was already a practical tendency in vernacular descriptive genres such as the *relation*, fundamental to all kinds of travel writing. This was true of travel overseas, where the organization of information according to logical categories was highly valued by different

institutional agents, but also of travel within Europe. In a Europe divided along national and religious lines, but nevertheless kept together by civil ideals of a cosmopolitan Republic of Letters, the practice of educational travel rose in importance, especially in northern Europe, connecting the *peregrinatio academica* of the late humanists to the origins of the aristocratic grand tour. More important than the specific recommendations (often rather awkward) of any of the various educational treatises that, sometimes following Ramus directly, sought to offer in tabular form blueprints for what to observe and how to record it, was the convergence of moral and philosophical ideals with the emphasis on systematic observation. Scientific empiricism was, in this way, closely associated to the cultivation of a “universal spirit”—to use Pierre Charron’s expression—that aspired to citizenship of the world.

The work of Francis Bacon at the turn of the seventeenth century may serve to illustrate how the rise in status of empirical observations, and the need to manage the vast amounts of information that had become available, eventually reshaped the very conceptualization of the European system of knowledge. What had been a largely spontaneous process of gathering new observations that often contradicted ancient claims now had to be organized as a systematic effort at collection, critical assessment, and ordered exposition that would provide the foundations for an entirely modern science. Bacon’s frontispiece for his summative work, the *Instauratio Magna* (1620), depicting a ship sailing into the ocean between the two columns of Hercules, gave a new twist to an emblem of imperial power earlier adopted by Charles V. Where the ruler of many kingdoms and principalities in Europe and the Indies, including the title of Holy Roman Emperor which carried universalist undertones, offered *plus ultra* (‘further beyond’) as his motto, Bacon’s *multi pertransibunt et augebitur scientia* (‘many will pass through, and knowledge will increase,’ echoing a verse in the book of Daniel) shifted the emphasis from the political project that had failed to the scientific one that was emerging, and to which his *new organon* (where he presented his inductive method) became a key contribution. Travel to new worlds had become a symbol for a philosophical project—although one with a plausible biblical justification—that defined modern European civilization. In Bacon’s new vision, earlier articulated in the *Advancement of Learning* (1605), all previous knowledge was flawed, and only a new method, inductive and experimental, could neutralize the corrupting “idols” of the human mind, language, and culture. The Baconian scientific ideology carried an implicit dose of scepticism in relation to both Platonism and Aristotelianism, and marked a shift from the humanists’ eclectic ideal of correcting ancients with moderns while still seeking a continuity, perhaps even a better understanding of a foundational ‘ancient philosophy’ (usually a version of the monotheistic *prisca theologia* of the Neoplatonists), to the idea that it was better to rebuild from new foundations through empirical observations. What separates Bacon from Acosta is a deeper scepticism about the human capacity to accumulate and improve knowledge through ordinary means—because human reason, undisciplined, leads to opinion, dogma, and error. In other words, Bacon’s sailing ship pointed towards a more systematic effort to discipline the imagination, a sharpening of the willingness of early modern Europeans to question ancient authorities, and a more utilitarian, goal-oriented vision of natural science. Although Bacon saw his scientific instauration as complementary to religious reform (it certainly was not incompatible with an idealization of mythical origins, as revealed by the Solomonic themes of his *New Atlantis*), his emphasis on a completely modern philosophy de facto invited a suspension of the kinds of philosophical assumptions about (for example) the unity of mankind and the providential character of the cosmos that Acosta would have made on the

grounds of religious orthodoxy. This tension between philosophical modernity and Christian orthodoxy would become the focus of the *crise de conscience* of the late seventeenth century.

Ethnography, Moral Philosophy and Political Thought

The impact of the discoveries was felt to be particularly strong in relation to moral philosophy and political thought. This was in part because colonial imperialism posed urgent and controversial questions about political legitimacy that were made more acute by the lack of religious consensus in Europe and the commercial rivalry between different nations. More generally, ethnography, the description of peoples, their customs, and their religious rites, was at the heart of the empirical turn of the period, often connecting natural history—men and women as physical beings in relation to their environment—to moral history—men and women as free historical agents in relation to God’s providential plan. The combination of political and religious tension with the proliferation of new evidence about human diversity meant that anthropology was at the heart of the philosophical impact of the discoveries.

The first and possibly most far-reaching debate concerned the rational capacity and political rights of the American Indians in the light of natural law. It might seem paradoxical that this debate took place in the Spain that also saw the expulsion of Jews, discrimination against *moriscos* (Spanish Muslims forced to convert to Christianity), and persecution of heretics and New Christians by the Inquisition, but in fact it was precisely the same religious imperative that explains both the uncompromising persecution of the heterodox and a paternalistic concern for the salvation of the souls of Gentiles. From the start, the colonial empire in the Indies was legitimized on the grounds that the naked but apparently innocent and carefree inhabitants would become subjects of the Crown and taught Christianity (the papal bulls that divided the Indies into two separate spheres of influence for the Spanish and the Portuguese made this religious task explicit). The actual dynamics of the conquest, fueled by European greed and a huge technological gap, were marked by extreme brutality and provoked a demographic catastrophe (whose biological roots could not at the time be understood) that quickly destroyed the facile image of willing servants entertained by Columbus and the Catholic kings. The Spanish Crown soon pursued a policy of paternalistic exploitation, seeking to balance the interests of Spanish settlers, as well as its own sources of extraordinary revenues (all of which required forced labor), with the project of evangelization and civilization, which was placed in the hands of the religious orders. But the two aims proved incompatible, at least in the short term, and critics of the vast gulf between Christian humanitarian ideals and colonial practices eventually provoked a crisis of imperial legitimacy. Apologists of empire—men such as Oviedo—appealed to the natural and moral deficiencies of the Indians, and to the need to create the necessary conditions for evangelization, but these arguments were fiercely questioned. In particular, the idea that the American Indians were ‘natural slaves’ like Aristotle’s barbarians, or cruel cannibals incapable of self-rule, was negated by the obvious capacities of the Mexicans and the Incas, who had created vast urban empires and were, therefore, rational to a very significant extent. Notwithstanding their idolatry or other practices contrary to natural law, such as human sacrifices, they had to be treated as rational moral beings fully capable of salvation, missionaries insisted.

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566), in particular, a settler in Cuba who experienced a kind of conversion to a new life mission as defender of the Indians, joined the Dominican

order and conducted a long and often incendiary campaign, over more than four decades, against the colonial order. Directly appealing to the emperor's Christian conscience, his key arguments were that the Indians were innocent victims of European aggression, that they were rational beings perfectly capable of a moral and political life, and that the only kind of preaching that was legitimate was entirely peaceful. The usual method for conquest, which was to read a formal invitation to accept Christian preachers and Charles V as overlord (a *requerimiento*) before beginning an attack, was only a charade, and the institution of *encomienda*, by which the natives were placed under the 'protection' of a Spanish settler who would provide Christian instruction in exchange for some services, was a carte blanche for a deadly system of labor conscription. The rulers of Castile were morally obliged to nullify the legislation that had permitted both violent conquests and labor exploitation, should seek to compensate the Indians for their loss of property (in fact, colonial settlers were to be denied confession unless they did so), and might only aspire to rule the native communities as voluntary self-governing subjects of a multinational Christian commonwealth. Spanish settlers, he thought at first, could use African slaves as an alternative source of labor (he later changed his mind about this, realizing that Africans were traded without regard for the principles of just war). Las Casas expressed no doubt that, if preached to peacefully and allowed their political liberty, the Indians were perfectly capable of becoming excellent Christian subjects.

The utopian vision of Las Casas was harshly tested by reality—he was, in fact, rather ineffective as bishop of Chiapas, and his radicalism alienated the very missionaries who had originally sympathized with his aims. Franciscans such as Toribio de Motolinia, for example, also known for his ethnography of Mesoamerica, did not believe that dismantling the structures of colonial authority would facilitate more authentic conversions. However, back in Spain, Las Casas remained an influential campaigner (after all, some of his allies, such as Archbishop Bartolomé Carranza, were the emperor's confessors), and his writings and public disputations not only affected decisions of the Council of the Indies that advised Charles V, but also helped sharpen a debate about the justice of wars of conquest in the light of natural law that was taking place in the universities—that is, in the faculties of theology rather than law. That a man such as Las Casas was able to exert so much influence as to inspire actual changes in legislation (albeit later reversed) is best explained by his close intellectual alignment with the most impressive Thomistic theologians of his order, notably Francisco de Vitoria and Domingo de Soto.

Unlike Las Casas, who was an activist for Indian rights, Vitoria's engagement with the conquest of the Americas came in the academic context of his lectures on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, delivered in 1539, and his thought can be seen as a decisive contribution to the neoscholastic theory of just war in terms of *ius gentium* (the law of nations), which he derived directly from natural law. Although Vitoria's discussion of just and unjust titles for the conquest was offered in abstract terms, we know from his private correspondence that, just a few years before he delivered his famous lectures on the Indians, he was incensed by the conquest of Peru, as everything about it—the rational capacity and civil achievements of the Incas, the lack of any previous aggression against the Spanish, and the duplicitous treatment of Atahualpa by Pizarro—went against the principles that were supposed to regulate the behavior of the Spanish when they met natives. Even if one could grant that the emperor had a just right to conquest, the actual events amounted to armed robbery of innocent vassals (Vitoria 1991: 329–333). Vitoria's formal discussion, however, was conducted at a more

abstract level, with far-reaching consequences: Prudently avoiding the particulars of the case, he systematically questioned the principles by which the right to conquest had been generally conceptualized. In this respect, his questioning of the jurisdiction of the papacy (or, through papal delegation, of any Christian princes) over Gentiles was fundamental. Whatever their religious beliefs, the Indians were to be treated as rational creatures who were capable of understanding natural law and had legitimate rights to dominion. No less than Christians, they owned their land, and their governments were legitimate. Occasional crimes contrary to natural law could only be punished by their own natural leaders, and it was certainly not correct that barbarians could be conquered so that they would become Christians, as any genuine conversion had to be a voluntary act. Under *ius gentium*, there were only limited grounds for a legitimate conquest: when barbarians unreasonably refused any opportunities for human communication (under a natural right to travel, trade, and preach Christianity without impediment), when they systematically committed crimes against innocents—and this included the customs of human sacrifice and anthropophagy, which required fraternal admonition and, if necessary, intervention—and, finally, when barbarians persecuted genuine converts to Christianity, whose salvation might otherwise be endangered.⁹ The combination of the right to travel (*ius peregrinandi*) and its corollary, the right to preach (*ius praedicandi*), together with humanitarian intervention and the protection of Christians, left sufficient loopholes for the Spanish to continue their conquests, or even to keep those territories that they had acquired by illegitimate means (as those who had converted to Christianity now had to be protected, whatever the original circumstances). Nevertheless, Vitoria accomplished a significant shift in the theory of legitimate imperialism, weakening the simple connection between the spread of the Gospel and a supposed right to conquer, settle, or set up exclusive commercial rights.

The success of this doctrinal shift is apparent in the terms of the famous controversy in Valladolid between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Bartolomé de Las Casas in 1550–1551. Although the grounds for disputation between the humanist lawyer and the Dominican friar remained extremely polarized, both sides sought to appeal to Vitoria's natural law principles, which the jurists (regular apologists of the Spanish empire) could not totally ignore, and in the end the dispute could only be resolved in relation to factual points. Vitoria, for example, had been hesitant about the extent to which the most savage of the American Indians, those who lived no better than beasts, were fully capable of ruling themselves—in that respect they arguably could be treated like children, provided it was done for their own good (Vitoria 1991: 290–1). However, against Sepúlveda's assertion that the Indians were ignorant savages in need for instruction, Las Casas relativized the concept of barbarism, noting different degrees of civility in the Americas, and emphasizing that even the simplest of the Indians were rational and, indeed, not morally worse than the greedy and violent Spanish. Against Sepúlveda's emphasis on the need to punish crimes against natural law, Las Casas emphasized that the Indians had their own legitimate rulers and might also be excused some ignorance of natural law on historical grounds. Any humanitarian intervention to protect the innocent in cases such as cannibalism and human sacrifice had to be peaceful, or, if unavoidable, any use of violence had to be proportionate, yet, in actual fact, peaceful teaching had not been given a proper chance. Finally, the argument that the conquest was necessary to create the conditions for successful Christian preaching was questioned by Las Casas on the grounds that the history of the spread of Christianity in late antiquity suggested otherwise.

To sum up, the extent to which barbarians were rational and civilized, had been given an opportunity to peacefully receive the Gospel, or were willing to contemplate the reform of their most inhuman customs without coercion, and indeed the very question of whether Christianity could spread successfully without political support, were more historical than theoretical. Similarly, the interpretation of Vitoria's rules of proportionality in the case of humanitarian intervention, the pursuit of free communication, and the opportunity to preach the Gospel all required a judgment of particular historical circumstances, rather than a debate about principles. This was made manifest during a debate in the 1570s and 1580s concerning a proposal to conquer China from the Philippines: whether the Chinese unreasonably restricted travel, trade, and preaching became crucial. Whichever position one took, in the Catholic monarchy the authority of Vitoria and the theologians of the school of Salamanca reigned supreme, and throughout the century successive generations of primarily Dominican and Jesuit writers refined the renewed scholastic tradition on natural law and *ius gentium*, culminating in the work of Francisco Suárez.

The debate on the rights of the Indians was essentially an internal debate within the Crown of Castile about its legal and moral obligations under natural law, one that was resolved with a typical compromise between the useful and the honest. Vitoria's restrictions on the legitimate grounds for conquest were generally accepted, but, in practice, loopholes were found and exploited that allowed the Spanish colonists to continue with business as usual. Not surprisingly, Las Casas's proposals for new laws that limited the exploitation of Indian labor had to be quickly revised in the face of determined settler opposition, and even rebellion. It was not the law, full of paternalistic concern, but how it was selectively applied to favor Crown and settlers over Indians that really mattered in the colonial world. However, some of the writings of Las Casas denouncing, in sensationalist detail, the brutal behavior of the Spanish conquerors were published in Spain without royal license (1552) and circulated abroad, creating the basis for the Black Legend that emerged in northern Europe during the reign of Philip II, strengthening, for example, resistance to his rule in the Netherlands. At the same time, at the turn of the seventeenth century, Hugo Grotius, a Dutch Protestant humanist lawyer, was strongly influenced by Vitoria, and in particular his denial of papal jurisdiction over Gentiles, when he developed his own theories of just war and free navigation and commerce. In his *De Indis* (1604–1605)—only an extract of which was published as *Freedom of The Seas* (*Mare Liberum*, 1609)—nobody could claim exclusive rights over the sea, and commercial monopolies may only be based on contractual agreements between sovereign parties, rather than on any exclusive right to evangelize or conquer; later, in *The Rights of War and Peace* (*De Iure Belli ac Pacis*, 1625), only unoccupied (uncultivated) lands could be settled by colonists, widening the range of application of the Roman concept of *res nullius*, or things without owners, beyond traditional usage. Unwittingly, Las Casas and Vitoria together provided the ideological foundations for a theory of international rights that, with a few clever twists, helped justify Dutch (and British) colonial imperialism at the expense of Spain and Portugal.

Another consequence of the debate about the justice of the wars of conquest was a relativization of the concept of barbarism according to comparative ethnography. The arguments used by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda in his humanist dialogue on the justice of the war against the American Indians (*Democratius alter*, c.1545) were connected to a positive appreciation of the Roman imperialist tradition, interpreted as the subjection of ignorant barbarians to the rule of those who are more civilized, and therefore morally superior. In

his idiom, civility and human fellowship (*civilitas* and *humanitas*) were closely connected, and imperial rule, despite some initial costs, offered a net benefit to the conquered populations. Challenging this simplistic dichotomy, both Las Casas and, later (albeit with a different emphasis) Acosta made a substantial contribution to an understanding of different degrees of barbarism as equivalent to a hierarchy of levels of civilization. Their distinctions did not amount to a fully-fledged stadial theory of the history of civilization comparable to what would eventually emerge in the Scottish Enlightenment, but they certainly qualified the simple opposition of many classical writers between the barbarians and the civilized. Acosta, for example, offered the idea that societies of nomadic hunter-gatherers (as all American Indians originally were) might settle into agricultural communities and possibly give rise to urban civilizations. He also distinguished higher and lower urban civilizations, focusing on literacy and systems of writing, for example, in order to argue for the superiority of China over Mexico or Peru, but also of Christian Europe over China.

The extent to which Europeans could claim superiority over all non-European civilizations on grounds other than true religion was not, however, clear to all authors towards the end of the sixteenth century. European encounters with Japan and China, mainly recorded by Catholic missionaries, proved particularly challenging and helped consolidate the idea that modern Gentiles could be no less rational and civil than the ancient Greeks and Romans, notwithstanding their idolatry. Although some Jesuit writers, such as the Visitor of the oriental missions Alessandro Valignano, saw moral faults in those peoples (the Japanese were duplicitous, the Chinese cowardly) and emphasized instead European moral, technological, and scientific qualities, they also tended to class the Chinese and Japanese as equals to Europeans in most respects, even suggesting that they shared a superior racial type (as far as Valignano was concerned, a whiter color indicated higher rational capacity). After the publication of the Spanish Augustinian Juan González de Mendoza's influential *History of the Great Kingdom of China* in 1585, a timely synthesis of previous Spanish and Portuguese accounts that saw many editions and translations, Europeans tended to acknowledge that there was a huge deal to admire in a vast, prosperous, and remarkably ancient kingdom ruled by law, whose emperor was served by an elite of literati selected on merit through centrally organized examinations. Although the Chinese were idolaters, their civil achievements demonstrated political prudence and also knowledge of a vast range of subjects, including moral and natural philosophy, about which they wrote many books. This idealized image fulfilled many of the aspirations of a warring Europe traumatized by all kinds of social change and deeply divided along national and religious lines. It was also, however, an image of defensive stability or even isolation (the Chinese rejected wars of conquest and restricted foreign trade) that stood in some tension with the theme of European modernity through global navigations and the exercise of *ius peregrinandi*.

One interesting criterion that emerged in this period in order to distinguish different types of civilization referred to one of Aristotle's types of government, despotism. The concept, which in the *Politics* served to define the Persian monarchy as a kind of hereditary, and therefore legitimate, form of arbitrary rule by one man, a kind of systemic tyranny well suited to the slavish temperament of oriental peoples, reemerged in Europe most clearly in relation to the analysis of the Ottoman state, which, by the end of the century, had been largely contained as a military threat and was increasingly perceived as a monarchy in decline (despotic rule was often understood to work against the interests of society and the economy, hiding political fragility under the appearance of territorial greatness). However, the

description of many other non-European monarchies (including Mexico and Peru by Las Casas) often prompted a similar analysis. By the early 1590s, the concept of despotic government was being applied very liberally by the Italian cosmographer Giovanni Botero in his *Relationi universali* (1590–1595) in order to distinguish the great monarchies of Asia (Muslim or Gentile, but also the Christian kingdoms of Muscovy and—stretching the geography—Ethiopia) from the moderate kind of monarchy that prevailed in Europe. The key point was that, unlike Europe, where kings were, in various degrees, subject to civil laws, and their capacity for action was often balanced by the institutional power of landed and urban elites, despotic regimes were characterized by the lack of formal constraints on royal authority, so that oriental kings could freely dispose of the properties and even the lives of their subjects, or at the very least could claim ownership of the revenues from all lands. The full implications of the concept of despotism for the analysis of different types of civilization would only emerge throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, most powerfully in the work of Montesquieu, but, by 1600, it was already clear that the theme of despotism elsewhere was connected to the European debate about the limits of royal power. It often expressed an aspiration for the kind of mixed government or balanced constitution that would foster the republican ideal—the pursuit of the common good—through the definition of legal and political rights.

Although the impact of the discoveries for the political imagination also had a utopian element, as illustrated by the use of the trope of the newly discovered island by Thomas More in his philosophical dialogue *Utopia* (the Christian humanist work of 1516 that defined the genre), the actual contents of More's hypothetical discussion had more to do with Platonic and Epicurean themes than with the details of any actual overseas encounter. The dialogue depicted what a society regulated according to natural reason might look like if men were reasonable rather than proud and held things in common, but there was a vast gulf between the naked savages who lacked private property described by Vespucci and Anghiera and the urbanized civil society visited by More's traveler. More's *Utopia* was not a natural state, but rather an artificial human construction. The importance of the New World, or New Worlds, was in this respect indirect, albeit significant: The possibility of travel, discovery, and even colonial settlement stimulated a sense of new possibilities, and this in turn facilitated a critical exploration of the situation in Europe, which More found socially deplorable, as (for example) the rich were allowed to prey on the poor and enclose their common lands. Quite clearly, notwithstanding Christian teachings of charity, in Europe what was honest was often sacrificed to what was expedient. Whether these two could be truly reconciled was, in the end, More's central concern—or, in other words, what was actually possible to achieve in terms of a social and political order that emphasized the Christian ideals of equality and peace, taking account of the fundamental hedonism in human nature. Although More, ambiguous throughout, ended with a note of irony and caution (the values of the utopian commonwealth ran against the nobility and magnificence esteemed in popular opinion; hence, the model was unlikely to help improve European societies; More 2001), for many subsequent writers the description of alternative ways of life, from the savage to the civilized, implied rethinking the moral and political norms of European Christendom, its achievements, and its failings (More 2001).

The increase of information about non-Biblical religions also had implications for the philosophy of religion. For most of the sixteenth century, the majority of observers lacked detailed knowledge of the literary languages of the 'Gentile' religious elites—notably

Brahmans, Buddhist monks, and Confucian Mandarins—and access to their books was limited. Hence, notwithstanding isolated examples of independent curiosity (such as the letters of Filippo Sassetti to his Tuscan friends, which remained unpublished), the ethnography of religious diversity that reached the public was exoteric rather than esoteric, that is to say, it focused on rituals rather than doctrines. The term ‘idolatry,’ indicating worship of any creatures other than the creator God, was generally applied to all those cases, although occasionally it was noted that there seemed to present peculiar parallels with Christian teachings (for example, the Indian triad of major gods, Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu, was sometimes perceived as an echo of the Trinity). The idea of universal preaching—supported by the cult of the remains of Saint Thomas in Southern India—helped rationalize these analogies, although, in America, where the historical connection was very doubtful, ideas of natural religiosity and the Devil’s role as corruptor through perverse imitation came to predominate.

Catholic missionaries were an important exception to the lack of systematic engagement with Gentile religions. Both in the Americas and in Asia, they often sought to learn local languages and understand Gentile religions, however diabolical, primarily for apologetic purposes, that is, in order to better identify idolatrous customs among subject populations (notably in Spanish America), or in order to argue against rival intellectual elites when they could not assume Christian political control (which was the case in most of Asia). Although the Jesuits, and to a lesser extent the other orders, only fully engaged with Hinduism and Confucianism after the turn of the seventeenth century, led by talented practitioners of accommodation such as Roberto Nobili and Matteo Ricci, disputations with Brahmans and Buddhist monks began decades earlier, and some substantial information about the religions of Asia began to leave traces in the letters and histories written by various missionaries.

This is especially clear in the case of Buddhism in Japan, where the Jesuits were extremely active from the middle of the century. The general tendency of the missionaries was to seek to apply scholastic categories to religious traditions that refused to accept Aristotelian assumptions. In this respect, the Buddhist concept of emptiness or, more positively, Buddhahood (also ‘One Mind’) proved especially problematic: Valignano, for example, in his *Catechismus Christianiae fidei* (1586), understood the doctrine as a kind of esoteric monism, an eternal first principle inherent in all things that men might find within themselves through meditation, but he wrongly concluded that (apart from the folly of thinking humans might become perfect on Earth) the passivity of this universal principle, and its non-dualism, logically implied moral indifference (App 2012: 61–75). Valignano was not simply rejecting Buddhism: He clearly understood theistic providentialism and the Christian notion of afterlife to be incompatible with the paradoxes of mystic Neoplatonism. By contrast, the concept of natural law was often accepted as cross-culturally valid, comparable for example to Buddhist dharma, because the Jesuits recognized that, despite profound metaphysical differences, some fundamental ethical teachings could be rather similar (Rubiés 2012). Although religious disputations offered little hope for rational agreement (those who converted often did it for economic or political reasons), they helped Europeans rationalize complex traditions whose philosophical assumptions were alien but seemed to echo the ancient doctrines of Pythagoras (such as the transmigration of souls), the Stoics (when pantheism was detected), or Epicurus (in the case of atheists who focused on a worldly morality).

In the European deconstruction of Gentilism, it was generally agreed that the religious elites of the more civilized countries, from Peru to India, often understood that there was

one supreme God on philosophical grounds; in fact, Europeans assumed that monotheism was rational, and indeed part of natural law. However, either because they had been blinded by the Devil, or because they cynically sought to exploit popular beliefs, the priests and monks of those false religions also promoted the worship of other divinities, in some cases in connection to horrendous sacrifices, from hook-swinging, temple prostitutes, or juggernauts in South India, to the bloody rituals of Mesoamerica. From the earliest encounters, a key Jesuit strategy for interpreting both Hinduism in South India (strongly influenced by Shankara's Advaita Vedanta philosophy) and Japanese Buddhism (predominantly Zen) was the distinction between inner (esoteric) and outer (popular) teachings: Only the former, when pointing to a universal divine principle, could be taken seriously as rational doctrines. Paradoxically, the Jesuits in India and Japan soon engaged in the denunciation of a corrupt priesthood willing to condescend to the masses that was comparable to the critique received by the Catholic Church in Europe.

Attitudes towards the value of Gentile religions usually spread alongside a spectrum that had emphasized Platonic and Stoic universalistic analogies on the more positive end and devilish idolatry on the more negative one. Las Casas, for example, sought to value native religiosity as a positive force that only needed to be directed towards its true end, and he found hope in traces of monotheism and evidence of ethical virtue among the American Indians. Natural religion was, from this perspective, a solid foundation of rational belief upon which to build Christianity, and many native customs were often perfectly compatible with natural law and could be accommodated. In any case, Gentiles could not be faulted for their previous invincible ignorance. However, later in the century, a more sceptical approach prevailed in the writings of Acosta, where idolatry, analyzed according to the categories of the book of *Wisdom* in the Catholic Bible, could be more or less irrational, depending on the object of worship, but the Devil was always active behind it (hence, in Mexico, even the cult of the Sun, a natural heavenly object, was perverted into the bloody cult of an idol). From this perspective, superficial analogies were false friends, because the Devil liked to mix the good with the bad in order to pervert the truth. Acosta was confident that those perversions could now be undone, and might even have paved the way for the teaching of true doctrine (in the same way that the Inca empire, by imposing a common authority and language, prepared the ground for the spread of the Gospel). However, others, more critically, were soon to focus on extirpating idolatrous elements from apparently innocent behavior. In various mission fields, the boundary between what was idolatry and what was simply a civil custom would become a bitter subject of contention throughout the seventeenth century.

Although engagement with Gentile civilizations with literary traditions, such as India, Japan, and China, tended to challenge the assumption that Christians were always the most civilized, Europeans in the sixteenth century rarely departed from the comfortable assumption that universal rationality and the Christian faith went together and, indeed, reinforced each other. Even the most difficult historical problems, the connection between the American Indians and the Old World origins of mankind, or the existence of ancient historical records in China that seemed to challenge the accuracy of the fairly short chronology of the Hebrew Bible after the universal Flood, were quickly rationalized on the assumption that the universal claims of sacred scripture in the version of the Latin Vulgate could not be wrong. The Spanish Augustinian Jerónimo Román, for example, in one of the accounts of China that were published in the late sixteenth century, suggested that it was simply a matter of

understanding that, in ancient times, they counted years in different ways, not necessarily according to the Sun's rotation (this was also the kind of solution already proposed by the fathers of the Church, Eusebius and Augustine, in order to counter the claims to antiquity of Egypt and Babylon). It was only in the seventeenth century that evidence of astronomical observations in ancient China which correlated with a royal chronology extending to a period before the Flood closed this easy way out forcing Europeans to reassess the historical claims of the Bible and the different versions of the book of Genesis that existed.

By contrast, moral philosophy was one area where scepticism exerted an immediate impact in connection to the discoveries. This is especially clear if we consider Montaigne, whose reading of French translations of histories of the Spanish and Portuguese conquests (notably Francisco López de Gómara, Girolamo Benzoni, and Jerónimo Osorio, as translated by Martin Fumée, Urbain Chauveton, and Simon Goulart), and especially the rival accounts of Brazil by the Franciscan André Thévet (1557) and the Huguenot pastor Jean de Léry (1578), exerted a powerful impact on his *Essays*. Rather than genuine cultural relativism, what Montaigne presented to his readers was a new scepticism about the claims of European Christians to moral superiority (a theme previously explored by Léry from the perspective of religious reform). In his famous essay "On Cannibals," for example, first published in 1580, the theme of savage simplicity—which obviously echoed Seneca's late Stoic ideal of living simply according to nature—intersected with his scepticism about human reason in order to target the moral foundations of the edifice of civilization. It is worth paying some attention to the way Montaigne's argument progresses, as it reveals the connections between the epistemological crisis and the moral one.

Montaigne's starting point is the very discovery of the New World, something "worthy of reflection" that pointed towards the human capacity for error, rather than a triumph of modernity. In fact, the status of knowledge about the new lands and peoples emerged as an immediate concern: Untypically, rather than favoring the more erudite, educated observers, Montaigne declared that he preferred the testimony of intellectually simple ones such as his own informant (a man who had been to Brazil), because only they lacked the tendency to distort their observations in order to promote personal interpretations. Mistrusting cosmographers such as Thévet, who, having seen a small part of the world, sought to describe the whole and ended up writing about things they did not know, Montaigne preferred "topographers," that is, men who could offer detailed observations of particular places known directly.

These initial statements placed Montaigne within the critique of traditional knowledge in the name of experience, but with an additional sceptical twist that targeted the philosophical elites. The deep problem was that all knowledge, however universal in its pretensions, was culturally local:

I find (from what has been told me) that there is nothing barbarous or savage about that nation, but that everybody calls barbarous those things that differ from his own usage. This is because we have no other criterion of truth or reason than the example and the idea we form of the opinions and customs of our own country.

(Montaigne 2002: 318)

That this was epistemological rather than cultural relativism is made clear in the following passages, where Montaigne engaged with the classical myth of the Golden Age of primitive

mankind (the same theme that humanist writers such as Anghiera had been so quick to recall). Barbarism is not simply a matter of perspective, but also a substantial question of proximity to nature: The people of Brasil remain close to their original state of nature, and, like wild fruits, are governed by its laws rather than human ones. Hence their simple moral concerns, which can be reduced to courage in battle and love for their wives. However, crucially, Montaigne did not want to suggest that cannibalism, for example, was a good or acceptable thing: Here, the simple laws of nature did not amount to the kind of natural law according to right reason and providence that the Stoics and other philosophers had proclaimed. In other words, killing and eating one's enemies in order to exact revenge were barbarous in a nonrelativist sense of the word, that is to say wrong, because these aims and actions did not agree with right reason (*recta ratio*). In this respect, what Montaigne insinuated but failed to articulate was the fatal tension between Stoic primitivism—the desire to live more simply according to nature, without superfluous desires—and Stoic normativity—the assumption that the law of nature was rational and pointed towards *humanitas*, or love of mankind. The problem that interested Montaigne was that Christian Europeans were in no position to judge, because they themselves, with all their sophisticated laws and morality, committed similar or worse crimes. Hence, relativism was ultimately proclaimed on a shared failing that all human beings, however civilized, seemed to fall into: “we can indeed call these nations barbarians according to the rules of reason [*règles de la raison*], but not in comparison to us, who surpass them in every kind of barbarism” (Montaigne 2002: 326).

Montaigne's greatest philosophical essay, his *Apology of Raymond Sebond*, extended his critique of the power of human reason in a way that usefully illuminates the essay on cannibals and helps distinguish it from the mere denunciation of the moral corruption of the civilized previously articulated by Jean de Léry in his travel narrative (Léry 1994: 234), where the elaborate dress of European Christians was less innocent of sinful desires than the natural nakedness of savages. It was the whole edifice of natural theology that Montaigne subjected to his devastating critique, that is, the idea that one might learn of God's Providence by considering the works of nature. The critical point was, again, epistemological scepticism. It was not *recta ratio*, but rather unassisted human reason, as arrogant as it was flawed, that actually failed to interpret the law of nature as God intended. In other words, not only were European Christians unable to judge the savages of the New World because their twisted, artificial morality was no better: in reality, there was no escaping the fact that, however civilized, men were inevitably trapped in their own parochial prejudices—not least when considering theological differences (which is why there was no point in embracing a religious reformation: wars in the name of religion only made these failings more obvious).

Montaigne may be considered a disappointed Stoic, who saw that the connection between divine providence and human reason—the assumption that guided many of the cosmographers and natural law theorists of the sixteenth century—was far from unproblematic. The severe limitations of human reason, including philosophical reason, meant that, although it would be foolish to renounce the notion of ‘right reason’ and approve of cannibalism (much as it would be foolish to take off one's clothes and go all naked, like the Indians of Brazil), Europeans could not be confident that they truly apprehended natural law. Humility, rather than cynicism, was Montaigne's answer. His legacy, in the form of philosophical (as opposed to moral) libertinism, became an important undercurrent that, in subsequent centuries, tempered the triumphal proclamation of the cosmopolitan modernity of European civilization by other writers of his generation, such as Louis Le Roy.

Conclusion

The discoveries created a new perspective from which Europeans came to define themselves as civilized. At a time when religion could no longer remain the basis for an authoritative philosophical consensus, and the political unity of Latin Christendom appeared to be highly unlikely, the ideal of peace among the European nations was able to persist in connection to a distinctive idea of civility sharpened by multiple comparisons with a variety of extra-European societies. Beyond the basic elements of urbanization, industry, commerce, and a legal and political order that defined civilization cross-culturally, the new cultural practices of cosmopolitan learning, supported by the ideals of modern empirical science, global navigation and communication, and a degree of civil liberty (as opposed to despotism) created the foundations for a specific idea of European civilization. It was because modern Europeans, with their traffic and discoveries, had left nothing unknown in the universe, “looking for new worlds in this old world,” as the universal historian Lancelot du Voisin de La Popelinière put it, that they had created a global community where formerly barbarian nations, enemies to each other, now came together, civilly practicing all kinds of human exchange (La Popelinière 1989: 14). However, there was a sceptical counterpoint to this positive, almost triumphal image. Against those who placed Europe at the top of a hierarchy of levels of barbarism and civilization, such as the Jesuits Acosta and Valignano, or those who were confident that, despite the historical cycles of prosperity and decline, progress had occurred, such as Le Roy or La Popelinière, Montaigne’s essays questioned the European narrative of providential success. The New World was indeed young and lacking in many things, but the destruction of its most impressive polities by the peoples of the Old World was a tragedy, a view that stood in sharp contrast to those who asserted that the Spanish conquerors were the instruments of God’s Providence against the empire of the Devil. In reality, the conquests of Mexico and Peru through duplicity and technological opportunism could not hide the fact that the natives appeared to be very capable, and possibly more heroic and honourable than their conquerors, who in some cases—such as during the capture and execution of Atahualpa—had clearly acted in bad faith (Montaigne 2002: 1423–32). The depiction of those who had superior power and learning roasting a noble Mexican prince alive in order to obtain some extra vases of gold made it difficult to conclude that human reason was sufficient to lead mankind to a global community inspired by the love of fellow beings, according to the will of the Creator.

Notes

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- 1 Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia*, book 6, chapter 9.
 - 2 Psalm 18 (Vulgate numbering), verse 5. This was quoted (from the Greek version) by Paul in Romans, 10:19, as referring to the preaching of the gospel. Modern interpretations of the Hebrew verse (19, 4) differ radically by making the heavenly message a silent one.
 - 3 The first edition of the *History of Italy* appeared in Florence in 1561 heavily censored. Readers of the Geneva editions of 1621 and 1635 were able to see many of the suppressed passages (often critical of the Roman Church) in the first five books, but not this particular one. The author’s complete text from his final manuscript was only published in Italy in 1774.
 - 4 Strabo was greatly influenced by the Stoic philosopher Posidonius. His Geography was brought to Europe by the late byzantine Neoplatonic philosopher George Gemistus Pletho, whose arrival

- in Florence in 1439 to attend the famous ecclesiastical Council convoked by pope Eugene IV, in order to reunite the Greek and Latin churches in the face of the Ottoman threat, was also the occasion for the revival of Platonic philosophy in Europe. Strabo's influence amongst the humanists was immediate, and can be detected for example in the cosmography of Asia by Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, pope Pius II, whose work in turn was read by Columbus. A Latin version of Strabo's geography (combining versions by Guarino of Verona and by Gregorio Tifernate) was printed in Rome as early as 1469, and the Greek text in Venice in 1516.
- 5 At some point Strabo seemed to imply that navigation across the Ocean might be possible in the future (I, 437), but he thought the distance to be much vaster than Columbus, following Paolo Toscanelli, assumed.
 - 6 The passage in the sixth book of Pietro Bembo's *Historia Veneta*, first published in Latin in 1551 but written in the late 1530s, bears comparison with the similar passages in both Ramusio and Guicciardini, and it is very likely that the idea circulated between them before any publication. The book also appeared in Bembo's own Italian version in 1552.
 - 7 This is clear in the very title of the collection edited in Basel by Gynaecus, Huttich and Münster: *Novus Orbis regionum ac insularum veteribus incognitarum* – that is, 'New world of regions and islands unknown to the ancients'. The compilation, like its Italian model *Paesi nuovamente ritrovati* (1507), included accounts of the East as well as America, such as those by Marco Polo, Hayton of Armenia, or Ludovico de Varthema.
 - 8 There was a previous work in Latin, *De Natura Orbi Novis libri duo, et . . . de procuranda indorum salute* (Salamanca, 1588), that supplied the first draft of the *Historia*.
 - 9 If converts to Christianity formed a large constituency, then it was also legitimate to intervene so that they might have a Christian prince.

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