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José de Acosta and
The Ends of Empire

And what shall we say of the vast Magdalena River, which enters the sea between Santa Marta and Cartagena and is rightly called the Great River? When I sailed upon it I was amazed to see that its currents could be observed clearly as far as ten miles out to sea, and even the waves and immensity of the ocean could not obliterate them. But, speaking of rivers, that great river that some call the river of the Amazons, others the Marañón, others the River of Orellana, which our Spanish compatriots first discovered and navigated, silences them all; indeed, I do not know whether to call it a river or a sea.

José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*

At a seemingly innocuous moment of his *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, the Jesuit father José de Acosta tells of the surprise he encountered during his first journey to the New World. Worried over the allegedly uninhabitable torrid zones of the earth lying across the equator, he was perplexed and delighted at what he found: “As I had read the exaggerations of the philosophers and poets, I was convinced that when I reached the equator I would not be able to bear the dreadful heat; but the reality was so different that at the very time I was crossing I felt such cold . . . I will confess here that I laughed and jeered at Aristotle’s meteorological theories and his philosophy, seeing that in the very place where, according to his rules, everything must be burning and on fire, I and all my companions were cold.” Acosta wrote these meditations on the distinct character of the New World in the last decades of Spain’s sixteenth-century conquest of the Americas. At that time, a continent-wide campaign of cultural colonization, economic subjugation, and religious conversion was well
under way. His story, however, represents the closing stage of a more distinct process whereby Spanish thinkers made the New World’s natural environment familiar to European sensibilities for various imperial ends.

This final chapter focuses on Acosta’s empirical and intellectual contributions to the development of the early Spanish Empire. What I seek to reconstruct is the ethos of his magnum opus, the *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, as a philosophical and experimental exploration of the natural landscape of the New World. Acosta greatly valued his experience in the Americas, seeing the study of natural history as an analytic narrative informing both the Spanish imperial project and the scientific development of a natural philosophy. In recent years, his contributions to the early colonial literature of Latin America, as well as to what was a maturing form of missionary science, have been increasingly documented. Yet Acosta’s work as a philosopher and theorist of political culture does not enjoy similar attention. The chapter therefore examines an often-overlooked dimension of Acosta’s thought: the distinctly modernist conception of judgment he employs to differentiate between the cultural, scientific, and theological lenses Jesuit missionaries were to employ in their readings of the New World.

For Acosta, proper judgment—or what he describes as “discovering the true features of Nature”—is not defined by mere naturalistic or theological study; rather, judgment emerges from the reconciliation of Scripture and experience, a synthesis made possible by the world historical encounter between Europe and the Americas. For the development of this conception of judgment to emerge, however, one had to first endure the disorienting experiences of philosophical wonder. My argument here is that in challenging the theses of both classical and biblical sources, Acosta’s natural history lays the groundwork for an experimental conception of judgment based on philosophical observation. As he maintains in chapter 3 of the text, “Persons who enjoy discovering the true features of this Nature, which is so varied and abundant, will receive the pleasure that history gives and history that is all the greater insofar as the events in it are made not by men but by the Creator. Anyone who goes further, and comes to understand the natural causes of effects, will be exercising good philosophy.” In the various vignettes he employs to “understand the natural causes of effects,” contemporary observers can also find in Acosta an interpretive sensibility that is far more advanced than in earlier Spanish missionaries (for example, Bartolomé de Las Casas and Bernardino de Sahagún), and that will later be echoed by proponents of the Scientific Revolution.
Although Acosta was committed to defending the spiritual objectives of the empire, the range of analytic tools he employs to make sense of what is on the ground surpasses what his predecessors were able to accomplish. To that end, the style and content of his narrative demand greater attention from political theorists concerned with excavating the imperial commitments and ideals of early modern European thought. Doing so, however, also entails broadening definitions of what is “canonical” in the history of political thought and how Acosta redefines the interpretive standards of the early modern period.

I begin the chapter by situating Acosta’s reception in early modern intellectual circles at the cusp of a wave of narratives exposing greater numbers of Europeans to American nature. Written for more than just missionary explorers, Acosta’s writings benefited from a growing voracity for information about the New World, as well as mounting disputes between Catholics and Protestants over the bases of the New World’s colonization. Natural history became for Acosta a vehicle to explain both the radical newness of the American landscape and its implicit moral potential for imperial theology. I follow this contextual background by discussing the narrative structure of Acosta’s Historia Natural and its approach to the interpretation of New World nature. Long regarded as a systematic defense of Catholic theology against indigenous idolatry, the book contains elements that simultaneously challenge and accommodate classical teachings with the seeming incommensurability of the Americas. In this process, Acosta exhibits a kind of narrative dissonance from the narrative elements I have so far discussed, weaving together indigenous and European explanations of natural events as his empirical evidence and developing an experimental science in the defense of Christian faith. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Historia’s merits for its inclusion in the canon of early modern political thought, specifically, its relation to the project of empire building. More than any of the other authors I have considered thus far, Acosta effectively bridges two critical traditions in the spectrum of early modern thinkers: the religious and the rational. In clarifying the links between these two realms, one can say more about the New World than either camp can in isolation.

Once upon a Time: A Narrative History of the Conquest of Nature

Toward the end of the long sixteenth century, Acosta’s conception of natural philosophy was disseminated across Europe through English-, Italian-, and French-language translations of the Historia Natural. His work was picked up
by early modern political theorists such as Francis Bacon and John Locke (in addition to chroniclers, missionaries, and naturalists from the continent such as Pierre d’Avity and Georges Louis-Leclerc, Comte de Buffon); both Bacon and Locke developed their theoretical projects in the early throes of British imperialism and used Acosta’s observations to develop a vision of the Americas as backward and undeveloped. As competition between European powers coincided with the emergence of national literary cultures and a complex climate of religious rivalry, the work of Spanish naturalists such as Acosta was marginalized. Natural history was deemed antithetical to the pursuit of unencumbered knowledge. Despite the plurality of voices emerging from this period, the rebuttal and appropriation of Spain’s New World knowledge by its European competitors left Acosta an afterthought in efforts to build a new natural philosophy.

To illustrate but one example of this trend, historians of political thought have generally regarded the question of America’s place in world history to be a matter first taken up by John Locke. While Locke is a revolutionary thinker in his own right, the assertion that it is his conceptual appropriation of America that acts as one of the foundational moments of early modern thought, and not the empirical work that Acosta (among others) successfully disseminated, ignores the influence of Acosta’s work as a natural historian and philosopher. Chiefly important for Locke and other early modern thinkers were Acosta’s accounts of American nature and its range of effects on the faculty of judgment. Whether it was his observations on the changes in the human faculties according to height and climate, or the ethnographic observations on the civilizational development of Amerindian peoples, Acosta was a standard reference for seventeenth-century thinkers, particularly in the British Isles.

As Barbara Arneil writes, the empirical evidence early modern thinkers such as Locke used to develop their accounts of “natural man” and “the state of nature” is clearly acknowledged as coming from Acosta. Despite Locke’s claim that knowing “how to make a judgment on the actions of men” is indispensable to gaining a useful prudence in the study of history, his application of Acosta’s insights serves rather paradoxical (if not altogether ulterior) motives:

Locke’s state of nature presupposes individual savages whose decision to enter into a state of war is contingent upon the protection of their individual lives and property. . . . One of the greatest flaws of the state-of-nature device, when it is used as a mirror to European civilization, is its complete obliteration of any specific characteristics of the individuals themselves. Thus natural man belongs to no nation and has no political or ethical codes
associated with that collectivity. Rather he is an individual amongst an un-
differentiated and ahistorical mass of non-European, non-civil savages.\textsuperscript{9}

Such a description clearly takes issue with Locke’s theories of property, labor, and industry.\textsuperscript{10} As Acosta and others before first explored it, however, the so-
cial contexts of Amerindian peoples ranged from the highly diffused to the
highly stratified. That much is clear when Acosta, describing the history of the
Mexica peoples, writes: “There are no peoples so barbaric that they do not have
something worthy of praise, nor are there any people so civilized and humane
that they stand in no need of correction. And so, even if the account or history
of the Indians were to have no other result than that of being an ordinary his-
tory and account of events that indeed took place, it deserves to be received
as a useful thing.”\textsuperscript{11} Arneil never pushes the point concerning the misuse of
Acosta’s observations; she only concludes that “the notion that Amerindians
did not properly use God’s gifts . . . was a common belief amongst those English
involved in settling the New World.”\textsuperscript{12} Why the scholarly impasse, then, on the
misappropriation of Acosta’s work?

Throughout the \textit{Historia Natural}, Acosta navigates the jungles, waters,
mountains, and deserts of the New World with a candor that perhaps explains
some of his work’s obscurity. Though the book was initially intended as a
field guide for Jesuit missionaries—and was subsequently treated as such—it
is more than just an academic treatise on the New World’s natural history.
Acosta begins Book II of the \textit{Historia Natural}, for instance, by describing “such
an abundance of natural waters that nowhere in the world are there more riv-
ers, or larger ones, or more swamps and lakes.”\textsuperscript{13} What at the outset is an em-
pirical description of the uninhabitable character of the Americas, however,
soon spurs philosophical admiration for its grandeur. The multiple “fountains,
brooks, wells, pools, and lakes” strewn across the landscapes are juxtaposed
first with the powerful Magdalena River, which “even the waves and immen-
sity of the ocean could not obliterate”; and second, they are dwarfed by the
“Emperor of Rivers,” the Amazon, which, despite its plurality of names and
voyagers, unfailingly manages to “[silence] them all.”\textsuperscript{14}

Early in his work Acosta thus makes it plain that the prospects of properly
observing the New World should put any observer among the most learned
company:

If it were possible to write fully about natural things in the Indies, and with
the consideration required for such notable things, I do not doubt a work
could be written equal to those of Pliny, Theophrastus, and Aristotle. But
I do not find that vein in myself, nor would it agree with my aim if I did, for I intend only to take note of some natural things I saw and contemplated while in the Indies . . . which I believe are not commonly known in Europe.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite Acosta’s deflection of any unwarranted adulation, the \textit{Historia Natural} goes into great detail to document the biological, medicinal, and anthropological ways in which the New World challenged what Europeans knew about the world, at least up to this point. Acosta, then, seems to be making the opposite of a revolutionary argument. Beyond its informational value, however, the book quickly became an invitation for European audiences to discover the redemptive powers of the New World and embrace natural history’s intellectually liberating potential.\textsuperscript{16}

Acosta’s experiences and insights came to serve as lasting lessons for modernizing the Spanish Empire. Yet many of these lessons came about through significant challenges, objections, and transformations in the form of physical gauntlets, indigenous revolts, and the threat of spiritual disenchantment. Indeed, Acosta’s flexibility in negotiating these trials is partly what defines his experimental approach. Retrieving Acosta’s labors, particularly at the dawn of the Scientific Revolution, is therefore crucial for re-evaluating the Spanish experiences of the sixteenth century and its intellectual significance for European modernity. Before the perverted conception of “torturing nature” was popularized across Europe, Acosta extolled explorers, merchants, and missionaries to “escape from the bonds placed on them by greed, and if they would abandon useless and irksome pretensions, they could undoubtedly live a very carefree and pleasant life in the Indies.”\textsuperscript{17} Those perks would only come through greater attention to the interpretive challenges of a world unknown to European eyes. Acosta’s goals may have started as part of a benign field guide; they gradually became, however, part of a more paradigm-shifting spiritual agenda that spans centuries and locales across the Western Hemisphere.

Indeed, in the decades following Acosta’s work, Jesuits like Bernabé Cobo and Joseph-François Lafitau would push for a model of natural philosophy in the Americas that would, in the words of Anthony Pagden, make it possible “to be a cultural relativist without being a sceptic . . . to see that every explanation of alien cultures had to be securely grounded in [the] local and empirical study of behavior.”\textsuperscript{18} This was the Jesuit Order’s greatest contribution to imperial science: developing a narrative device to study the New World’s environments and peoples, while teaching and stimulating wonder for distant audiences. According to recent evaluations of this narrative model, “far from reducing itself to a mere phi-
losophy of language, the oratorical culture of the fathers of the Company of Jesus also welcomed a kind of anthropological comparative method, where incessant parallels between the Ancients and the moderns, so central to the Jesuit imagination, promoted the exercise of a critical view based on comparison. The point then was not merely to establish the superiority of modern times and thinkers over the past, but rather relaunch Cicero’s ideal form of political judgment, where the force of persuasion could supplant the violence of military domination:

As a theory, rhetoric has sought since ancient times to understand speech as a force that is affirmed through an energy capable of acting on others and the self, one having the ability to change ideals and acts, wishes and desires. Rhetoric, therefore, views the exercise of language as a civilizing force, that is, a power inviting recourse to persuasion, even seduction, in order to better contain excessive violence and abuses of physical restraint . . . if one cannot consider rhetoric a mere theory of language or doctrine, it is because it deploys as well a practice of discourse that places the enterprise of seduction at the heart of the exercise of speech. This more strict literary dimension of oratorical tradition determines a narrative regimen in which lived-experience, historical testimony, and travel accounts are related and re-related as both an epic rich in models to imitate and a story of adventure that recounts the conversion of hearts and the transformation of societies. To teach, to delight and to move . . . the essential component of all eloquence.

This noteworthy tradition of Jesuit natural philosophy spans the Order’s history, as well as Acosta’s magnum opus. The Historia Natural emerges in this context and embraces many of the concurrent trends within early works of natural history. The work posits a picture of the New World that is sensitive to its distinct cultural and biological diversity. At the same time, it espouses a kind of naturalist theology against the alleged presence of demonic forces within the very landscape. Acosta was part of a generation of scholars who shifted attention away from studying nature as an object of universal and unchanging laws, to a realm that demanded learned description and classification. Like Las Casas and other great missionaries of his time, Acosta was interested in getting a personal sense of Amerindian societies and especially their natural environment. “[Although] the New World is not new but old,” he writes in the Prologue, “I believe that this history may be considered new in some ways because it is both history and in part philosophy and because it deals not only with the works of nature but with problems of free will, which are the
deeds and customs of men.” So Acosta takes the wedding of his empirical and philosophical objectives to be the distinct mark—the “useful knowledge”—of a project worthy of scholarly and popular consideration.

Acosta and the New Natural History

Intellectually, Acosta was a product of the humanistic curriculum of the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares. His scholarly upbringing, moreover, coincided with his initiation into the newly formed Society of Jesus, which was only established in 1540. Sent in 1569 as part of the third Jesuit mission to the Viceroyalty of Peru, Acosta’s first experience in the Americas was as chair of theology at the University of Lima. His academic duties, however, soon brought him to political office, and he was sent on expeditions across the Andes to compile ethnographic and naturalist records for the notorious viceroy Francisco Álvarez de Toledo. Having no qualms in the defense of religion as the foundation of civil society, Acosta nevertheless carefully distanced his work from the emblematic tenets of dominant schools of thought, aligning his efforts instead with the will of the crown. This shift, Sabine MacCormack argues, corresponded to the “method of accommodation,” a way of “expounding scripture by extending its meaning to topics the scriptural author did not mention and could not have known about . . . [increasing] the understanding and joy of those who were sincerely committed to the faith.” An example of this can be found in the book’s title page and dedication to King Philip II’s daughter, Isabel Clara Eugenia (see figure 6), where Acosta outlines the work’s vast contents and complex social context: “In which are discussed the remarkable things concerning the sky, and elements, metals, plants and animals of [the Indies]; and the rites, and ceremonies, laws, and government, and wars of the Indians.”

Here Acosta presents his disagreements with Scholastic ideals in naturalistic and pragmatic terms:

[Because] knowledge and speculation concerning the works of Nature, especially if they are remarkable and rare, cause natural pleasure and delight in persons of exquisite perception, and because news of strange customs and events also pleases by way of its novelty, I believe that my book can serve your Highness as honorable and useful entertainment. . . . And my desire is that all I have written may serve to make known which of his treasures God Our Lord divided and deposited in those realms; may the peoples there be all the more aided and favored by the people of Spain, to whose charge divine and loft Providence has entrusted them.
Here Acosta seems to repeat some of the same tropes as Las Casas, focusing attention on the divine demands placed on the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Yet there is a pragmatic dimension behind his desire to classify the “remarkable and rare . . . treasures God Our Lord divided and deposited in those realms.” Acosta challenged earlier Church readings of the natural world by appealing to the written logs and records of Spanish cosmographers, pilots, and cartographers, as well as his own observations. In doing so, he arguably raised one of the most important challenges to the Church’s jurisdiction over scientific erudition, basing his insights on a humanist conception of knowledge against the dominant natural law tradition.26 Through a kind of narrative dis-
sonance between what he knew and what he saw, Acosta rejected the privilege of *a priori* speculation over empirical observation, much like Oviedo and Las Casas’s privileged eyewitness testimony. Early in the text, Acosta outlines the method he employs in collecting information, and how he adjudicated between the accounts of others, who had more experience:

Because I wanted to have more specialized knowledge . . . I resorted to experienced men who were very knowledgeable in these matters, and from their conversation and abundant written works I was able to extract material that I judged sufficient to write of the customs and deeds of those people and of the natural phenomena of those lands and their characteristics, with the experience of many years and my diligence in inquiring and discussing and conferring with learned and expert persons.²⁷

Acosta’s contributions have historically been characterized as adding little beyond the accumulation of pre-Columbian anthropological data.²⁸ Read only as a chronicler of novelties, Acosta’s place in the history of political thought is typically relegated to being a minor player in the modern (and imperial) conceptualization of nature. One way of remedying this neglect is by reading his natural philosophy within a longer intellectual arc, situated in the maturing field of natural history. Acosta was central to the development of key themes at the height of natural history’s maturation, bringing vast amounts of empirical information and philosophical scrutiny to bear on existing visions of the Americas and the changing European imagination.

In my reading, Acosta forms part of a third moment in the development of natural history. Encompassing both anthropological and soteriological concerns, his *Historia Natural* employs an ethnographic sensibility that helped move the study of natural history toward a kind of natural philosophy. In the following section, I discuss Acosta’s development as a natural philosopher, specifically focusing on the narrative structure and exemplary representations of nature developed in the *Historia Natural*. According to Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, Acosta was interested “both in explaining the conquest as a preordained event and in identifying signs of providential design in the many natural wonders of the American continent.”²⁹ The tension between these two goals is evident in the book, as Acosta discusses matters of both scientific interest and theological debate. Yet in doing so, Cañizares-Esguerra goes on, Acosta frames his goals from the outset as “a pragmatist interested in how things work and how colonial peoples thought, so as to use and manipulate the former to convert and govern the latter.”³⁰ The *Historia Natural* is in effect an attempt to shift the social and moral ethos of European thought away from the demonic
conception of New World nature that had prevailed since the Franciscan ethnographers (of which Sahagún was an exemplar) began archiving Amerindian customs. Acosta’s evidence in these arguments are his own observations, reasoned debate against the wisdom of the Ancients, and an unshaking curiosity over the nature of things that demanded the careful exercise of his judgment.

In this regard, as Andrés Prieto writes, “The importance of philosophical reflection on the nature of America transcended its immediate use as a source of ammunition against those who believed the Amerindians to be intellectually inferior. . . . Acosta aimed to define a clearly delimited field for Jesuit science—a field in which philosophical and scientific research was firmly subordinated to the pastoral and spiritual goals of the Society of Jesus.” Thus the interpretive methodology employed in the Historia Natural served a specific political objective: a more effective mode of spiritual cultivation. That path, however, underwent an alternate, seemingly dissonant, narrative transformation. In the process of defining the limits of a missionary science, Acosta also expanded the relation between naturalist knowledge and empire.

Narrative Dissonance, Empire, and Natural Philosophy

Long read as a mere manual for religious conversion, the Historia Natural advocates for a syncretic interpretation of nature that emerges through what I consider to be a kind of narrative dissonance. Unlike those of his Spanish contemporaries, Acosta’s accounts of the New World were received with glowing admiration, curiosity, and passion across the Americas and Europe. The esteem for and reliance on his work are evident in the many translations and appeals to his authority made across the history of political and scientific thought. Thinkers as distinct as Locke and Alexander von Humboldt, for example, drew on his work in order to lay claim to the historical uniqueness of the New World’s natural environment. In its own time, however, the Historia Natural also generated critical and unsympathetic imitation. Having developed a systematic structure for the writing of natural histories, Acosta’s work spawned competing accounts of the effects of nature on New World societies. Central to the work’s appeal was Acosta’s narrative approach which, as I mention above, was committed to a pastoral ethos.

The Historia Natural was published after almost two decades of exploration. It also emerged at the crossroads of two prominent cycles: the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of the Americas and the recovery of the Greco-Roman tradition in Renaissance Europe. The two periods brought significant challenges and opportunities to intellectual traditions on both continents. While
the realms of science and faith are considered separate fields of inquiry in our contemporary horizon, Spaniards and many early moderns did not draw the kinds of distinctions between experience, knowledge, and philosophical thought that we do today. For example, Acosta is singled out today more as an ethnographer and a geographer, than a natural philosopher interested in the purpose of things. The kind of work he inaugurated, however, as Cañizares-Esguerra maintains, was no less than an attempt at “modifying dominant narratives of marvels . . . constantly [seeking] to frame natural phenomena and the seeming inversion of physical laws in the Indies with a discourse of providential design and lawful regularities.”

As I will discuss below, Acosta’s sense for divine order, tied to his proclivities for empirical deduction, were vividly on display through his deliberations over the “origins” of the New World.

In their journeys across the American landscape, imperial agents pioneered a wide range of innovative (though no less political) empirical practices in their study of nature. These included highly specialized activities that were seen as part of defending Spain’s patriotic glory and the empire’s intellectual achievements: the systematic observation of changing meteorological patterns; thorough geographic surveys; the cataloguing and classifying of social differences; and the observation of changes in the natural landscape. Visions of early modern Spanish “science” took on a patriotic character as descriptions of the natural world of the Americas were increasingly framed against Black Legend narratives. For example, cosmographers were represented in Spanish paintings as knights, illustrating that “the Iberians saw knowledge gathering as an expansion of chivalric virtues.” Depictions of imperial agents were themselves even inverted, as knights and warriors were represented as cosmographers equipped with both sword and compass, a “markedly aggressive notion of the role of knowledge in the expansion of empire.”

By integrating these distinct enterprises into a natural and moral framework, Acosta’s efforts, according to Walter Mignolo, “represented the intersection of philosophy and theology: philosophy because understanding nature, for Acosta, was not just a question of describing minerals, plants, and animals, but of understanding the order of the universe and the chain of being, of which the human being was the point of arrival of God’s creation; and theology, because understanding nature was a way of knowing and revering God, its creator.” The Historia Natural itself, therefore, follows a progressive division that begins with descriptions of the physical heavens and ends by telling the history of Christianity’s arrival into a declining Mexican society. The trope here is that the study of New World nature followed an inverted “chain of being”; beginning with the natural heavens, especially through the inventories of
natural history, the European observer could trace a path toward the *spiritual* heavens. This is unsurprising since the *Historia Natural* is also a work a *moral* history. Therefore, the book's title captures both the structure of the narrative—via naturalist and theological observations—and, arguably, what Mexican philosopher Edmundo O’Gorman would describe as “the dominant mental frame at the end of the sixteenth century.” That clarity of vision and purpose made Acosta a prominent religious authority throughout his activities in Peru; it also prompted a more critical philosophical exploration of indigenous myths and rituals—as compared to their European analogues—than what previous interpreters of the Americas had achieved.

A large part of Acosta's popularity can be attributed to his ability—analytic and rhetorical—to weave a narrative where science, faith, and the politics of moral authority were deemed essential to European experience in the Americas. Indeed, the wonder over the New World's context and contents was a result of these intertwined ideals. During the first 100 years of Spain's conquest and colonization of the Americas, the experience of wonder over the status and character of the New World underwent several stages. Particularly in the many works of natural history, one finds sustained efforts to formalize the newness of the natural world into distinct opportunities for the production of historiographical knowledge. Arguably, these same attempts have been considered as the origins of the development of a self-conscious science of man. While the question of the New World's novelty has been treated by political and literary theorists as justifying an ideology of domination, I am more interested in how Acosta interpreted said novelty in naturalistic terms. That is to say, if one reads natural history as a field of narrative inquiry, what stories did Acosta privilege in his account of the New World's “remarkable and rare” treasures? Moreover, what did Acosta have in mind in his appeal to the “natural pleasure and delight” that the objects of nature were capable of generating, especially in “persons of exquisite perception”? Finally, how did this narrative appeal to pleasure fit into the division of “God's treasures” that Acosta hoped would aid people in Spain and the Americas?

For Acosta, the salient narrative tropes and themes of his work are framed by three distinct political developments: the foundation of the Society of Jesus in 1540; the investiture of Francisco Álvarez de Toledo as Viceroy of Peru in 1569; and the arrival of the Inquisition in 1570. Each of these respective moments shaped Acosta's conception of a missionary science: first, the Jesuit Order blended humanistic study and experiential analysis of the New World with unsurpassed rigor; second, the new Viceroy arrived in a time where infighting between rival Spanish factions had come to an end and the work of governing
the Peruvian highlands had begun; and third, by targeting his scientific inquiries at the extirpating of indigenous idolatry, Acosta was able to employ his analytical skills in a political context where judicious observation of the native population was deemed essential. This last objective was especially suited for the Jesuits, who in addition to being concerned with developing the proper means of spiritual cultivation for the new kingdom’s governance, were also trained as independent scholars. Acosta was not seeking to persuade any royal authorities on the value of his mission, nor was he interested in using indigenous knowledge to buttress his anthropological observations.

In terms of his narrative framework, one finds in Acosta the inheritance and transformation of traditional demonological tropes into a language more akin to the nascent scientific spirit of the age. If we place Acosta’s analytic scheme within the typology I developed in chapter 1, the interpretation of nature (and the role of the natural historian) takes on the following distinct trajectory: natural history begins as a science of description (as in Oviedo), it follows certain paradisiacal and exotic analogues (as popularized by Las Casas), but it matures into an anthropological exercise in the extirpation of evil (for example, as in Sahagún’s demonology). Ultimately, the study of natural history culminates in the presupposition that nature itself, as a bearer of secrets (as Hernández had conceived of it) could be read as a Great Book that led its readers to the greatness of God’s creations.

Yet there is also a curious inversion underlying much of the Historia Natural, at least from what one may find in the visions employed by other natural historians: according to Acosta, nature needs human observers for its greatness to be conveyed. The “moral” component of his Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias may be the exhortation to overcome satanic visions of the Americas and spread the Gospel to its farthest reaches. Such daring exploration, however, required great naturalistic knowledge of biogeographical and social landscapes. It also required a kind of practical wisdom made possible through the comparative method. My point here is that the “remarkable and rare” treasures of the New World are only deemed remarkable for those who are willing to experience the dissonance of nature’s wonders. Acosta’s loyalty to the crown, for example, should therefore be read as a testament of his willingness to strategically question Church dogma and appeal to the “exquisite perception” of those who share (or whom he thinks may be willing to share) his pragmatic conception of naturalist exploration for the greatness of the empire and faith.

To illustrate this last point, many of Acosta’s analyses of natural phenomena in the Americas are curiously framed in the typical Scholastic style of opinions and summaries, prefaced in the name of some of the Church’s established tex-
tual authorities. Yet his own entanglement with narrative dissonance becomes evident, for example, as he considers why anyone would deny the now-conventional observation that the earth was round. In his striking introduction to the issue concerning the extension of the heavens to the New World, he writes how the Church Fathers resisted and mocked the astronomical theories of the earliest natural philosophers, even as scientific observation increasingly confirmed their insights:

For, although it is true that most of the philosophers, the best of them, believed that heaven was all round, as in fact it is, and that hence it surrounded the earth everywhere and enclosed it within itself, despite all this some of them—and no small number, or those of least authority among the holy doctors—had a different opinion, imagining the fabric of this world like that of a house in which the roof that covers it encircles only the upper part and does not surround it everywhere. They offered as a justification for this that otherwise the earth would be hanging in the midst of the air, which seems a thing devoid of all reason, and also that in every building we see that the foundations are in one place and the roof opposite of them; and thus logically in this great edifice of the world, all the heavens must be in one place above and all the earth in a different place. . . . But we need not be astonished that the aforesaid authors [that is, Chrysostom, Procopius, and St. Augustine] believe and say things like these, for it is well known that they did not pay great heed to the sciences and demonstrations of philosophy, being engaged in more important studies.40

It is difficult to say how genuine Acosta’s position is against the “more important studies” of the empire’s most revered intellectual figures. After all, he goes on in this same chapter to castigate natural philosophers for what he considers their vain obsession with the baser things of the world, neglecting the greatness of God. His sentiments toward a one-sided approach to either enterprise, therefore, seem to coalesce into a key methodological distinction for the production of natural history.

The shape of the heavens and the earth, the existence of America as a separate continent, and even the possibility of life in the torrid zones were all subjects whose status was taken for granted by Church doctrine as it evolved alongside the conquest. Not surprisingly, however, Acosta was able to offer sustained support of scientific observations, while couching his narratives in the interpretation of articles of faith. While discussing meteorological phenomena, Acosta refutes classical interpretations that envision the earth as suspended by
“pillars,” framing the balance between heaven and earth as mediated by water. In an impressive passage blending naturalist observation within a scriptural framework, he makes the following syncretic claim:

But elsewhere that same Divine Scripture, to show us that the earth is joined to and in large part encompassed by the element of water, says elegantly that God founded the earth upon the seas and in another place that he established the earth above the waters. And, although St. Augustine does not wish to have this passage interpreted as an article of faith, that earth and sea form a globe in the midst of the universe, and hence tries to give another explanation of the words of the Psalm, their plain meaning is doubtless what I have stated and that is to give us to understand that we need to imagine no other foundations or supports of the earth but water, which, because it is so ductile and changeable, is caused by the wisdom of the Supreme Maker to uphold and enclose this immense machine of the earth.41

A second element of Acosta’s representations of nature becomes evident here: while he has no qualms arguing against the prejudiced positions of Catholic faith in favor of describing the world in terms of rational causes, his goal is also to reorient the status of the sciences from a realm of textual interpretation to one that includes empirical observation. The vision of a world encompassed by water can be read here as fulfilling both biblical and navigational expectations. But it is the doubtless “plain meaning” of the earth as a giant machine at the center of the universe that helps Acosta prompt a vision of New World nature as always hiding more than is self-evidently given, something in need of interpretive experience. Indeed, as he points out within the same chapter:

And we say that the earth is established and held above the waters and above the sea, although it is true that the earth is rather more under the water than above it; for in our imagination and thoughts what is on the other side of the earth where we dwell seems to us to be under the earth, and thus we imagine that the sea and the waters that bind the earth on the other side are below the earth and above them. But the truth is that what is actually below is always that which is more nearly in the middle of the universe.42

The newness and pleasure of observing and interpreting nature always points to a greater object of contemplation. In the context of sixteenth-century exploration and imperial expansion, Acosta’s syncretic visions of the natural world
served as key justifications in the development of more efficient commercial and scientific practices. Acosta’s writings on minerals and their distribution across the earth, specifically mercury, were used by miners at Potosí and inventors who sought to patent tools, gadgets, and testing practices. In Antonio Barrera-Osorio’s account, “Acosta translated empirical information into theory,” as the amalgamation process of using mercury to extract finer metals served to render the chemical into “a marvel of nature that responded to God’s laws and thus glorified the creator of the world.” The link between naturalistic observation and the political economy of the empire becomes evident with this and many other examples. At the end of the sixteenth century, though, the empire thrived just as natural history matured into a science of biogeographical, ethnological, and narrative innovation.

The Case for a Canonical Reading of the Historia Natural y Moral

The goal of this chapter has been to bring together various themes in a narrative that traces the work of a handful of Spanish naturalists and their attempts to understand the New World and its peoples. Throughout this portrait of Acosta, and within the larger story, I have maintained that there are political reasons behind the curious exclusion of Spanish naturalist writings, and the study of natural history, more broadly, from the metanarratives of the Scientific Revolution and European Enlightenment. By unpacking the actual context and writings of prominent figures from sixteenth-century Colonial America, a different picture emerges concerning the origins of the metadebates and disputes that early modern political theory is known for.

Despite the efforts of Anthony Pagden in the 1980s and 1990s to document their centrality, political theorists today seem to find very little that is interesting in the sixteenth-century writings of Spanish thinkers wrestling with the past, and future, of what was then a New World. However, especially for political theorists interested in the links between empire and the history of ideas, Spanish efforts to naturalize their experiences in the Americas via different narratives and tropes can be quite revealing. This is important because the portrait we currently have of sixteenth-century Spanish America is one of brutal conquest, where little seemed to be happening in terms of scientific thought, political ideology, and intellectual transformation. As I have shown, there was far more intellectual adaptation and innovation than those myths of conquest may initially suggest. The point is not to vindicate Pagden or any of the scholars from whom I borrow to make a case for a canonical reading of Spanish natural history. Rather, the point is to consider the accrued value of Spanish experi-
ences in the New World in an age of greater social, ecological, and spiritual interdependence.

More pertinent to what I have described in relation to José de Acosta, the entire natural landscape where the New World’s conquest took place seems to be missing from the conversations of early modernists excavating the origins of empire. In fact, however, that natural world was regarded as an ever-present foil to Spain’s imperial endeavors. Acosta’s theoretical work gained prominence in a political context that needed empirical information concerning the elements and diverse properties of natural resources. Turning to the spiritual and scientific historiography on early Colonial America seems critical here, at least if one is to understand how different visions of empire coexisted with the larger set of normative, and more familiar, questions brewing in the aftermath of the Americas’ military conquest. Spanish Empire—a misnomer for a large swath of decentralized outposts—was the banner under which significant innovations in the fields of map making, geography, history, hermeneutics, ethnographic observation, medicine, and navigation were made. I want to argue that the same can be said for the study of political philosophy, by way of a distinct civilizational narrative that was deployed not just against people, but also against the strangeness of the natural world.

For Acosta, natural philosophy may have served to better train missionaries for the challenges of converting a radically diverse continent; but faith, science, and empire were to be understood as joint enterprises. Nature was made attractive through a pragmatic lens that did not dismiss Church doctrine, but carefully distanced itself from its reluctance to empirical experimentation. By failing to acknowledge the contributions of Acosta’s writings to early modern conceptions of judgment—indeed, those “great and useful instructions of prudence” that Locke so imaginatively portrayed—the links between early modern empire and political theory therefore remain distorted. Notable in the reconstruction of these links is how sixteenth-century natural philosophy gave rise to seminal debates between Ancient and Modern sources of knowledge, as well as heated disagreements over the boundaries of nature, society, and religion.

Acosta’s greatest contribution to these early conversations is the synthesis between theological and experimental descriptions of nature found in his writings on Colonial America. His Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias was written to redirect the efforts of Spanish natural history and colonization toward a greater engagement with the New World’s human and biological diversity. The engagement itself, however, was tensely negotiated between the political
demands of empire and the theological demands of religious salvation. Acosta’s legacy, I conclude, can therefore be read as part of the longer intellectual history of political judgment, where a civilizational ideal was forged in the Spanish encounter with New World nature. The work’s greatest strength lay in Acosta’s ability to weave an incisive and experimental narrative, in the service of both a natural philosophy and a Universal Empire. Also notable is the enduring emphasis on good judgment as the product of exposing the mind to conditions that help individuals distinguish between what is new, true, or deceptive.

Indeed, contemporary political theorists have continued to wrestle with how to develop the right skills and words to practice good judgment. Far from being mere ideologues of the empire, Spanish natural historians like Acosta struggled with questions that set the stage for what today might be called the dilemmas of reason. As Leslie Paul Thiele points out, judgment is never only about output, for the point of exercising good judgment is to employ multi-faceted and reflective forms of learning. He goes on to highlight how “every good judgment has its reasons. But a judgment does not have and cannot give all the reasons that brought it into being. . . . The termination to the rationalizing process is, among other things, a matter of practicality. . . . Eventually an appeal to an authority is heard. . . . Alternatively, one might simply appeal to a habit or decision rule that has been developed over time. One might adopt the heuristic: once fatigued to the point of irritation in the search for sufficient reasons, choose the most appealing alternative produced thus far. In any case, something other than reason must be called upon to end the interrogation.”44 What made the efforts of Spanish missionaries like Acosta unique was an environment that demanded both strength of spirit and mind, in order to convey never-imagined possibilities.

While Acosta himself was convinced, as Barrera-Osorio explains, that “the study of nature led to the understanding of the order of nature and, in turn, to the glorification of God,” his wider interpretive context was part of a larger network of official chroniclers and merchants eager to make sense of the Book of Nature for a new, modern age.45 At this point, while I feel confident to acknowledge that Acosta used his own experiences as the foundation of a new way to interpret the practices and realities in the New World, many questions nevertheless remain. For example, while earlier generations of Spanish natural historians used ancient texts and novel ideals to undermine Spanish prejudices, Acosta broke away from these traditions altogether by emphasizing empirical observation over pure speculation. That his writings were sanctioned by imperial authorities and published widely across Europe adds to his significance in
emerging cultures and imaginaries of the Atlantic world, particularly beyond Spain. What then does Acosta’s impression of the New World say about the coming history of imperial science?

To gain a clearer portrait of those future liaisons, one would need to take seriously Acosta’s place within the canon of early modern political thought and read his Historia Natural y Moral as part of a larger conversation over the changing bases of scientific thought and political theology. The interpretive horizons generated via the study of nature pushed Spanish thinkers to adapt religious, political, and interpretive ideals onto rather outlandish circumstances. Events in Europe may have led to the emergence of new administrative mechanisms and philosophical systems that reflect the changing political landscape of the continent. The colonies did not reflect the same rate of change. Not knowing the scope of change in the Americas, however, should not be grounds for its exclusion; rather, as I have argued, the proper terms and limits of historical writing, sovereignty, development, and civilization were all actively debated from within the New World. Those occurrences alone should make the study of the New World’s natural history a ready-made venture. Instead, it remains a marginalized curiosity.

While on the surface this may seem spurious, academic scholarship is far more divided in this last regard than one may imagine. In a recent survey on the link between natural science and the origins of British imperialism, for example, Sarah Irving has documented the ways English thinkers reacted to writings emerging from the New World. She specifically points to Francis Bacon’s condemnation of Spanish colonial policy and the better alternatives he and others allegedly developed to overcome the “natural limits” of the American context:

Bacon deliberately encouraged the English to rule their colonies justly in order to raise themselves above the barbarism of the Spanish conquistadors. The violent Spanish encomiendas and dispossession of the Amerindians met with dissent even among their own scholars, including Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolomé de Las Casas. It is entirely possible that knowledge of these men’s writings reached England. Regardless of whether Bacon had read Vitoria and Las Casas, he was certainly aware of the violence of the Spanish, which was at odds with his own classical ideal of government through the laws, and over men who were taught to reason and use knowledge. The intended contrast between the English and the Spanish is clear: the Spanish colonial policy of encomiendas relied upon the idea that the American Indians were barbarous slaves
rather than reasonable men. I would suggest, therefore, that the best context for understanding Bacon's views on colonization is the context of Spanish violence in the New World. Where the Spanish used violence and dispossession, the English were to adopt a policy of granting civic laws to their colonies, and incorporating the indigenous people into the English Commonwealth.46

What Irving reproduces here, perhaps unintentionally, is the Black Legend narrative of conquest, whereby Spanish colonization rested entirely on material domination. As I have shown above, however, the context to which she refers was not so one-sided. Moreover, of the Spanish writings that did make it out of state archives, Bacon relied heavily on the prominent work of Acosta.47 The conclusions Bacon reached over the New World, according to Irving, “indicate that Bacon relied upon information sourced in the Atlantic. He knew well that there was an intimate connection between knowledge and the New World, but he did not conceive of any relationship between colonies and the collection of knowledge.”48 Yet if one looks carefully at Acosta’s work, its context, and particularly how his writings on the colonization of Peru influenced both Jesuit and imperial policy, that relationship is more than evident.

Indeed, as Stephen Gaukroger argues, accounts such as Irving’s, “[show] convincingly that Bacon’s understanding of the notion of restoration of man’s empire [over the natural world] involved no connotations of territorial pursuit: rather, the exercise is a purely cognitive one—namely, the building up of a more comprehensive body of knowledge about the world by taking full advantage of the discoveries in the New World.”49 What Irving does not show is how Bacon regarded, or borrowed from, the various experiential accounts of natural history, ethnography, and missionary theology that framed those discoveries. Missing from the conversation, therefore, are the deeper connective tissues informing early Spanish chronicles.

Legacies of Empire: Closing the Long Sixteenth Century

Less ambivalent than Las Casas, Sahagún, and Hernández over the possible links between nature and local forms of knowledge, natural historians like Acosta defended the Spanish imperial project as a modernizing force. The Book of Nature may require sympathetic interpreters, but the lessons drawn from its volumes should all confirm the greatness of God and the Christian faith. In the development of this interpretive framework, however, Acosta also
exhibited a kind of narrative dissonance. The more he explored the natural worlds of the Americas, the less sanguine he became about the ability of classical and biblical sources to offer explanations for the New World’s cultural and biological diversity. Acosta henceforth questioned and interrogated the extent to which Old World ideas could account for New World realities. The result is a revolutionary call for greater engagement with empirical and experimental principles, in the name of bringing Imperial Spain’s faith into greater communion with science.

Acosta’s legacy is enlightening here in order to interpret the changing character of the Spanish Empire in the late sixteenth century. Although he was far less oppositional than Las Casas when it came to implementing an imperial order (Acosta had no problems classifying the Amerindians as barbarians to be dominated and disciplined [see figure 7]), his work carried significant implications for the development of science and empire as liberatory ideals. To explain why Acosta’s legacy has evaded the attention of historians of empire would go far beyond the task I have set up here. As Cañizares-Esguerra and others have pointed out, however, much of Acosta’s philosophical legacy has been left behind due to the ways Spanish imperialism was portrayed across Europe. Unpacking the history of that imperialism requires a closer look at the intersection of faith and empire, and how these two processes were bridged in the works of Spanish naturalism.

Within Acosta’s accommodation of conquest, newness, and experimentation, he posits a picture of the New World that is both sensitive to its distinct cultural and biological diversity, and espousing a kind of naturalist theology for the alleged improvement of both colonizer and colonized. Acosta’s natural history thus lays the groundwork for an experimental conception of natural science, though not as a fully conscious project of dominium over the natural world. Written toward the end of his life, Acosta’s Historia Natural is the product of conflicting sentiments.

The potential cognitive and material riches that the New World offered, coupled with the conceptual challenges it posed to a man who saw spiritual salvation as his primary objective, proved difficult to reconcile in a single volume. That dissonance did not stop the dissemination of the Historia Natural across multiple translations and revised editions. Acosta’s work was picked up by early modern political theorists on the continent, giving rise to numerous debates over empire, empiricism, and the philosophical value of experiential knowledge. Particularly important in the appropriation of Acosta’s accounts was the New World’s novelty, not only as a source
of great pleasure, but as an object that appealed to exquisite perceptions and judgments. His insights and their accompanying narrative tropes were critical to natural history’s development as part of a larger imperial ethos, and Spanish imperialism’s relevance to historical readings of the New World’s natural environments.