

## **BARTOLOME DE LAS CASAS ESSAY SERIES**

### **Fourth Essay: A Friend as “Other Self”**

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#### **Other Selves in Public**

Aristotle said that, in a true friendship, each friend regards and loves the other as his 'other self'. Christ taught that each of us is to love his neighbor as himself. The two ideas converge, if we suppose that we are to treat everyone as a friend.

This Aristotle denied: we should aim to befriend, he said, only those we can reasonably love; but since love is reasonably directed only at goodness, and few people are good, we can reasonably love and befriend only a few persons. In fact, he said, it would be wrong to try to love everyone. If we love those who are not good, Aristotle warned, then we risk becoming corrupted, since people become similar to what they love. Anyone who loves a bad person, and therefore associates with him, is liable to become bad himself.

Aristotle's reasoning seems entirely correct, and there are only two ways to escape it. The first way, more difficult, is to say that there is some respect in which all human beings are good, even if their characters are bad, and that this respect serves as a foundation for universal love. Christianity achieves this through teaching that everyone is a child of God, either naturally, through creation, or supernaturally, through baptism.

The reason this is a difficult view to hold is that it imposes a standard on our affections. If the basis for our love for any other person considered at random, is that he or she is a child of God, then our affection has to be governed by that end: we can reasonably wish that person to have only those things that contribute to his relationship with God, and we should oppose those things opposed to that relationship. This requires that we make judgments about behavior, which many people are loathe to do, and which in any case can be unpopular. What is our judgment on, say, sleeping around outside of marriage, or abortion, or pornography, or satisfying one's whims, or creating unnecessary needs, or being complacent about one's own ignorance? If such things hinder another person's relationship with God, then, on this picture, we will have to oppose them.

The logic is irresistible: if our love for others, generally, is rooted in their relationship to God, then, by that very love itself, we will need to form a judgment about what is in

their true interest. And then we need to be prepared not to consent to they want, and in some cases even to resist it, when what they want is against their true interest.

The easy way to love others universally, in contrast, is to abandon the requirement of forming judgments, by holding, in effect, that there is no objective difference between good and bad character. In modern society, this denial of objective goodness and badness takes two forms.

The first is relativism, which we have several times mentioned already. Relativism is the view that each thing is as it seems to the person involved. If abortion (say) seems like the right thing to you, then—for all I know—it is the right thing. No one else can be in a position to gainsay your opinion. (What is called ‘the right to privacy’ in modern discussions frequently ends up being no more than the finding that relativism is to be adopted as regards a domain. ‘Abortion falls under the right to privacy’ means, simply, ‘What seems correct to the woman involved is correct; there is no gainsaying her opinion.’) Obviously, if what seems correct is correct, and since people generally choose what seems correct to them, then all people are good. Relativism is the easy way to love others universally, because it automatically confers infallible goodness on everyone.

Another easy way to love others universally, by denying an objective difference between goodness and badness, is to let others decide for you which things are wrong, through their anger. It is to refrain from judgment, by deferring judgment. No one decides for himself, but others decide, yet not on evident principle. We say such things as that, 'Your liberty should be limited only by the liberty of others,' or 'The law should constrain only harm done to others', or 'Your right to move your hand stops at the point of my nose.' These maxims presuppose that the only standard for judging an action wrong is someone else's taking offense. We do not ourselves look at the action directly, and judge it to be wrong, but we take on the viewpoint of the person offended, and hold it to be wrong, because it offended.

This viewpoint makes everyone good by presumption. The 'love' for them that is based on this view takes the form of using reason instrumentally, to satisfy their wants and inclinations maximally, to the extent that others do not take offense. This is the viewpoint of modern liberalism, which springs from 19<sup>th</sup> century utilitarianism.

The great flaw in this approach, however, is that it cannot distinguish between justified and unjustified offense. One person is offended by a cross displayed in public; another by an abortion clinic in his neighborhood. One parent is offended by prayers in school; another is offended by lack of prayers in public school. Homosexual troop leaders for the Boy Scouts cause disgust in some persons; but the banning of homosexual troop leaders seems equally disgusting to others. In truth, there is no real

resolution of these differences, apart from some genuine conception of objective human good.

“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”. But no one, in his own case, takes what seems good to him, actually to be good. And no one, in his own case, regulates his actions solely by the negative condition of not causing offense to others around him. (Suppose that those around him are bad and take offense at good things. And the people who happen to be around us change.) But then neither can universal love be based on relativism or the Harm to Others Principle. Love for others generally must take the form of extending the same criteria to them, that a good person naturally applies to himself.

### **Other Selves in Private**

That love takes the form of extending to others the relationship that a good person has to himself, leads Aristotle to draw a remarkable conclusion in Aristotle about the nature of intimate friendships.

What is the highest form that love can take? Most people, I think, would say that love, at its height, takes the form of giving. Mother Teresa, for instance, gave food and

shelter to poor people in Calcutta. Parents give nourishment and an education to their children. In the extreme, a friend may even give up his life for his friend.

But Aristotle points out, sensibly, that giving is not something that characterizes a good person's relationship to himself. It's not possible, in fact, for a person to give himself anything: you already have what you think you might give. —Well, there is a sense in which a person gives something to himself, when, through foresight and prudence, he plans for something in the future. A retirement savings plan, then, is in a sense a gift from a man, in his youth, to himself, in his old age. But such actions are gifts only in a metaphorical sense, and hence giving, although necessary and important, is ultimately an imperfect expression of love.

But then, how do we most properly love others? Aristotle argues that we do so when we simply spend time with them and enjoy their company. This is the highest expression of love. Being with is greater than giving, just as being is greater than having.

Here is his argument. Aristotle claims that a person is in some sense identifiable with his activity of living. But the activity of living consists in some kind of perception, either sensing or thinking. So, in a sense, a person consists of his sensing and his thinking.

But now consider that both sensing and thinking have a reflexive component. That is, to see a chair is, at the same time, to perceive that you see a chair. To think about that chair is, at the same time, to be aware or to perceive that you are thinking about that chair. All sensation and thought is complex, because it has a reflexive character. Hence, in every sensation and thought, a person adopts a relation to himself. When he thinks, he is related to himself as perceiving that he thinks. When I see a flower, I am related to myself as perceiving that I see a flower.

Can this relation, then, be extended to others, so that they share in it, and become related to us as we are to ourselves? Yes, Aristotle says, it can be so extended, when we share in their sensing and thinking. The sharing is more perfect in the case of thinking. You tell me something that you are thinking about, and I become aware that you are thinking about it, just as you are aware of it. I becoming so aware, I become related to you, as you are to yourself. But then you become aware that I am aware of what you are thinking about (this kind of mutual awareness is essential to friendship), and thus you also become related to me, as I am to myself. As a result of this mutual awareness, you and I become, so to speak, mirror images of each other. Each of us thinks something, and is aware of what he is thinking, and this relation is extended to, and reflected in, the other.

Aristotle's conclusion, then, is that, in this kind of sharing of thought and sensing (which he calls 'living life together', compare the Spanish word, *convivencia*) two

persons most fully share in the life that each has on his own. If love is an extension of self-regard to others, then this is the fullest form of love. At the same time, Aristotle points out, the relation of giving is unsatisfactory, for two reasons. First, it implies an inequality: the person who gives, insofar as he gives, adopts a position of superiority over the person who receives. Second, giving cannot be shared simultaneously: when the one person is giving, the other person must be receiving. They can take turns, perhaps, but they cannot both be doing the same thing at the same time.

Yet it is not so with sharing in thought and sensing. This phenomenon is entirely equal and simultaneous as between friends. In fact, Aristotle holds, giving is meant to give way to spending time together. Suppose that two persons who, initially, are unequal in their possessions, become friends. By impulses natural to friendship, their possessions would overtime become more equalized or at least managed jointly for the good of both. But the point of this sort of equalization, and sharing in possessions, is not merely that the friends be equal. This result might, indeed, be enough to gratify the envious; but in fact, the real point of their equality in possessions is that, if they are thus equal, they can better enjoy each other's company and spend time together. Aristotle's argument is very sound. The main points are found in *Nicomachean Ethics* book 9, chapter 9, and I encourage all readers of this essay to examine the passage directly. The conclusion which he draws, of the priority of being with to giving, applies to all human affairs. It applies to relations between peoples and nations (by analogy), as much as to intimate relations between friends.

Stepping back, we may say that Aristotle's argument, in essence, is that human life is inherently ordered to sociability, because of the reflexive character of sensing and thought. ("True personality consists in an orientation to communion", as Jacques Maritain once commented.) What all of us want, in virtue of our common humanity, is to live life side-by-side with others. We do not want to enjoy our existence, alone and separately, but we want to enjoy life through enjoying the existence of others as well, and through having them enjoy the fact that we exist also. This is the end of human life, and a necessary feature of human happiness. It is therefore the proper goal to which assistance and giving should be directed. A vision of human solidarity, then, should govern our dealings with others, both in public and in private.

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