

Human Rights and the Power of Classical Latin

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Note: The purpose of this essay is to give an idea of the force of the classical Latin language in expressing ideas, and in this case particularly, the rationale for human rights, in tandem, needless to say, with the philosophical underpinnings.

This essay attempts briefly to suggest that classical Latin is a forceful means in itself to generate persuasive understanding of ideas, in this case, human rights. Considerations of human rights are found in classical Latin, notably in the texts of Cicero.

Texts from the first century BCE when Cicero wrote his letters and essays, and delivered his profound oratory in the Roman Forum, made their way into the Middle Ages and beyond, long after Latin had been relegated to the erudite circles of the universities and the church. Among reasons for this are the highly inflected structure along with comprehensive and highly developed grammatical and syntactical forms leading to disciplined and precise meaning and content.

De Republica is a dialogue written by Cicero along the lines of the Plato's *Republic*. The following text gives an insight into the essence of his thought:

*Est quidem vera lex recta ratio naturae congruens, diffusa in omnes, constans,
sempiterna nec vero aut per senatum aut per populum solvi hac lege possumus
nec erit alia lex Romae, alia Athenis, alia nunc, alia posthac, sed et omnes gentes et omni
tempore una lex et sempiterna et immutabilis continebit*

(De re publica III.33 from Lactantius Inst. Div. VI, 8.6-9)

In the following translation I use terms or expressions intended to illustrate the particular richness of certain words:

There is a certain true law, right reason, congruent with nature, poured out onto everyone, constant, eternal . . . and in truth we are not able to be released from this law by the senate or by the people . . . nor will there be one law in Rome, another in Athens, another now, another in the future, but one law eternal and immutable will bind together all nations at all times. . . .

The full Latin text is quite complicated, making use of classical paradigms such as gerunds for nouns and the subjunctive mood for verbs. Nevertheless this text, cogent in meaning, typifies from the pure language and communication perspective the power of Latin by virtue of its word and grammar structure to express ideas in a forceful and gripping manner. The word order of the translation is proper English usage. In the Latin text the word order is different based upon case (nouns and adjectives) and tenses (verbs), causing the reader or listener to maintain a constant sense of the entire expression. Thus, for example, we have:

Naturae congruens . . . “congruent to/with nature” . . . where *congruens* is a participle of the verb word *congruo, congruere*, implying a continuous action. Our word “congruent” seems, in contrast, static. Likewise, *constans* is a participle form of *constare*, “to stand with.”

The verb *continebit*, translated above as “binds together,” may also be translated “holds together,” in keeping with the root *tenere*, meaning “to grasp, to hold, to be master of.” In word order the placement of the Latin verb is at the end or toward the end of the sentence. In the clause stating “. . . not being released,” the word for “to be able,” that is, *possumus*, appears at the very end of the sentence, intensifying the assertion of an immutable law from which we will not be released.

Admittedly this is only a very small illustration, but perhaps enough to cause some reflection over the value of an ancient language in human rights dialogue. Cicero, in other of his writings we might point out for historical relevance, tended to have an elitist orientation.

Nevertheless, sixteen centuries after Cicero, Francisco de Vitoria (circa 1485-1546), a Spanish Dominican Friar, wrote a series of *Reflectiones*, in Latin, concerning the rights of indigenous peoples, as Spain set out to colonize South America. He is acknowledged today to be a pioneer in international law. In *De Indis* and *De jure belli* (Concerning Indigeneous People and Concerning the Law of War) de Vitoria makes the case that indigenous nations are true owners of their lands. He also extended his ideas into the realm of trade with indigenous people, and addressed the role of proselytizing, reaching therefore into the activities of the Roman Catholic missionaries, the office of the papacy, and commercial interests. A single quote from his writings, here for space purposes given only in English, yet echoing Cicero, demonstrates the force of de Vitoria’s initiative:

Nature has established a bond of relationship between all men, and so it is contrary to natural law for one man to dissociate himself from another without good reason. “Man,” says Ovid, “is not a wolf to his fellow man, but a man.”

In Ovid's Latin, the expression is: *Non enim homini homo lupus est, sed homo*. Ovid, who was born about the time Cicero died, expands and contradicts the observation made nearly two centuries earlier by the playwright Plautus, i.e., *homo homini lupus*, comparing humans to wolves in their predatory treatment of each other.

Admittedly this brief essay barely skims the surface of the history and language from Cicero to de Vitoria, yet the implications for today are nevertheless quite evident, and attest to the richness of Latin as a means of expressing the human condition.

And, when we think of the contemporary situation in the world with respect to human rights, it is not cynical to ask: "What else is new?" Or, in Latin, *quae alia novi?*

An Afterword: Cicero praising the value of Classical Studies

As a teacher of Latin I take the case a bit further with the following quotation from *Pro Archia*, Cicero's defense of Archias, a poet accused of not being a Roman citizen. The text speaks for itself:

Haec studia adolescentiam alunt, senectutem oblectant, secundas res ornant, adversis perfugium at solacium praebent, delectant domi, non impediunt foris, pernoctant nobiscum, perigrinantur, rusticantur. . . .

These studies nourish youth, delight in our old age, embellish our successes, offer refuge and consolation in misfortune, delight us at home, are not a hindrance away from home, stay with us through the night, travel with us, go abroad with us, spend time with us in rural retreats. . . .