

Aztec Philosophy

UNDERSTANDING A WORLD IN MOTION

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(i.e., perception of the thing) and perception *de dicto* (i.e., perception under a description; perception that the thing is such-and-such; perception of what is said or of the proposition).⁹⁸ Successful *de re* perception does not entail successful *de dicto* perception. For example, I may have seen *de re* President Obama entering a black limousine earlier today without having seen at the time *that* it was Obama, that is, without having seen Obama *de dicto*. What I saw *de dicto* was simply a tall, thin man entering a black limousine.

Applying this distinction to the present case, humans perceive *teotl de re* via ordinary sense perception. Why? Because according to ontological monism there exists only one thing to perceive *de re*: *teotl*. When humans look about themselves, there is only one thing: *teotl*. However, from this it does *not* follow that humans perceive *teotl de dicto*, that is, that they *recognize* what they see around themselves *as teotl*, as *fitting the description of teotl*, or that it is *teotl*. What they see *de dicto* are sun, birds, flowers, and flint knives. What they ordinarily see *de dicto* is *teotl's* natural. But since they do not know that the cosmos and *teotl* are one and the same (just as I did not know that the man entering the limousine and Obama were one and the same), they do not see *de dicto* *teotl*. Deception is thus understood *epistemologically* in terms of what a perceiver is able to recognize or discern when she perceives. Deception is *not* understood *metaphysically* in terms of the existence of two distinct things: mask and person behind the mask.

That Aztec metaphysics understands *teotl* in terms of shaman transformation and artistic creativity is not accidental, for shamanism and artistic creation commonly go hand-in-hand in Mesoamerica thought. Shamans commonly double as artists whose creations reflect their out-of-body visions. In their study of papermaking and cut-paper figures among contemporary Nahuá, Otomí, and Tepelhua peoples, Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Effein Sandstrom discuss “shaman-artists” who create the various paper figures used in religious rituals.⁹⁹ Regarded as a “person of knowledge” (*tlamtiyueli* in modern Nahuatl), the shaman cuts paper figures that reflect his out-of-body visions of the life-and-death forces operating in the cosmos.¹⁰⁰ The ritual efficacy of a shaman’s paper-cut figures depends largely upon the accuracy of his or her visions. Sandstrom and Sandstrom write, “No shaman can establish a positive reputation without first becoming a master paper cutter.”¹⁰¹ Stacy Schaefer explains how Wixárika women weavers conceive weaving as a shamanic-like creative process that relies upon the weaver’s out-of-body visions and apprehensions of sacred forces operating in the cosmos. Schaefer writes, “Weaving and shamanism share a basic element in common: transformation.”¹⁰²

14. SOME IMPLICATIONS OF AND OBJECTIONS AGAINST SEVERAL ASPECTS OF THIS INTERPRETATION OF AZTEC METAPHYSICS

METAPHYSICS OF BECOMING: AN IMPLICATION

I consider now some implications of and objections against the preceding interpretation of Aztec metaphysics. First, Aztec philosophy’s metaphysics of Becoming maintains that that which is real is that which becomes, changes, transmutes, and moves. Reality is characterized essentially by becoming – not by being or *is-ness*. Aztec metaphysics embraces flux, evanescence, expiry, and change by making them defining characteristics of reality – rather than marginalizing them as mere illusion and unreality. This implies that Aztec metaphysics does not condemn something as unreal, semi-real, or illusory solely on the grounds that it is impermanent, evanescent, and changeable.

To think that Aztec metaphysics *does* condemn something as unreal or illusory solely on the grounds that it is impermanent is to attribute a Platonic-style metaphysics of Being to Aztec philosophy. Unfortunately, this is precisely what Miguel León-Portilla does when interpreting several song-poems collected in the *Cantares mexicanos* and *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*.¹⁰³ Consider the following two song-poems commonly attributed to Nezahualcoyotl:

I, Nezahualcoyotl, ask this:
Is it true one really lives on the earth?
Not forever on earth,
only a little while here.
Though it be of jade it falls apart,
though it be gold it wears away,
though it be quetzal plumage it is torn asunder.
Not forever on earth,
Only a little while here.¹⁰⁴

And:
I comprehend the secret, the hidden:
O my lords!
Thus we are,
we are mortal,
humans through and through
we all will have to go away,
we all will have to die on earth . . .
Like a painting
we will be erased.

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Like a painting
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Like a flower,
 we will dry up
 here on earth.
 Like the plumed vestment of the precious bird,
 that precious bird with the agile neck,
 we will all come to an end
 Think on this, o lords,
 eagles and tigers,
 though you be of jade,
 though you be of gold,
 you will also go there,
 to the place of the fleshless.
 We will have to disappear,
 no one can remain.⁹⁵

León-Portilla interprets these and other song-poems attributed to Nezahualcoyotl as expressing Nezahualcoyotl's doubt about the reality of earthly existence; doubts based on the widespread observation that everything earthly is evanescent, perishable, and impermanent. Quetzal plumes are torn asunder. Jade is broken. Gold is crushed. All earthly things appear and then quickly disappear like a delicate flower in the hot summer sun. Nezahualcoyotl's "keen awareness of time and change" and of the ephemerality of everything earthly, writes León-Portilla, not only causes him profound sorrow and anguish, but, more significantly, causes him to doubt the very reality of everything earthly.⁹⁶ Because earthly existence is evanescent, León-Portilla's Nezahualcoyotl reasons, it is *not* real. Nezahualcoyotl yearns for something enduring and stable – that is, something genuinely real.⁹⁷

León-Portilla thus attributes the following syllogism to Nezahualcoyotl:

1. PREMISE: Earthly existence is evanescent, impermanent, perishable.
2. PREMISE: If something is evanescent, etc., then it is not real.
3. CONCLUSION: Hence earthly existence is not real.

Note that in order to make this song-poem express any syllogism at all, León-Portilla must supply a conclusion indicator such as "hence." In order to make it express the specific syllogism he wants, he must supply a suppressed premise: premise 2. And in order to make this song-poem express a syllogism with the conclusion he wants, León-Portilla must supply a quite specific premise drawn from the metaphysics of Being: "If something is evanescent, etc., then it is not real." None of these, however, is present in the original text.

I do not dispute León-Portilla's claim that Nezahualcoyotl expresses sorrow and anguish over the facts that human life is fleeting and that human beings ineluctably perish. Nor do I dispute León-Portilla's claim that Nezahualcoyotl yearns for a way to escape this destiny; that he yearns for something ever-lasting. What I do dispute however is the legitimacy of León-Portilla's interpretation of these song-poems in terms of a metaphysics of Being, that is, that in these song-poems Nezahualcoyotl advances a syllogism with a premise that equates reality *per se* with being, immutability, imperishability, and permanence. These song-poems state nothing that logically implies a metaphysics of Being. After all, Nezahualcoyotl can wish things were otherwise while woefully acknowledging that they are not. He can wish that reality were not defined by change while painfully acknowledging its inevitability. Indeed, doing so is an even greater source of sorrow and anguish than finding an escape.

León-Portilla and John Bierhorst attribute the selfsame metaphysics of Being and syllogistic reasoning to a song-poem attributed to Tochihuitzin Coyolchihqui.⁹⁸ It reads:

We only rise from sleep,
 we come only to dream,
 it is not true, it is not true,
 that we come on earth to live.
 As an herb in springtime,
 so is our nature.
 Our hearts give birth, make sprout,
 the flowers of our flesh.
 Some open their corollas,
 then they become dry.⁹⁹

They interpret the song-poem as advancing the metaphysical argument that human life on earth is a dream (or dreamlike) and therefore not fully real: life is not real, for life is but a dream. León-Portilla reconstructs Tochihuitzin Coyolchihqui's reasoning as follows: "We have come to earth only to dream, and our dream vanishes quickly."¹⁰⁰ That which is transitory is illusion.¹⁰¹ And "[s]ince what one finds on earth (*in tlalhuicac*) is transitory," it follows that what one finds on earth is "a world of illusion."¹⁰² That is:

1. PREMISE: Life (human existence on earth) is a dream.
2. PREMISE: Dreams are transitory.
3. PREMISE: If something is transitory, then it is illusion (illusory).

4. CONCLUSION/PREMISE: Therefore dreams are illusions (illusory).
5. PREMISE: If something is an illusion, then it is transitory.
6. PREMISE: If something is transitory, then it is not real.
7. CONCLUSION/PREMISE: Therefore illusions and dreams are not real.
8. CONCLUSION: Therefore life (human existence) on earth is not real.

In order to make this song-poem express any kind of syllogism whatsoever, León-Portilla and Bierhorst must supply conclusion indicators such as "therefore." And in order to make it express the specific syllogism they desire, they must supply several suppressed premises: premises 2, 3, 5, and 6. In order to make the song-poem express a syllogism with the precise conclusion they seek, Bierhorst and León-Portilla must supply a premise drawn specifically from the metaphysics of Being, namely premise 6: "If something is transitory, then it is not real." Yet none of this is present in the original text.

Interpreting the song-poems collected in the *Cantares mexicanos* and *Romances de las señoras de Nueva España* is a dicey business into which I prefer not to enter at this time. As Bierhorst observes, in their present form the song-poems gathered in the *Cantares* appear to derive mostly from the generation beginning around 1550.¹³ Before being gathered and written down, the song-poems were orally transmitted. Many clearly refer to post-Conquest events and persons, treat Christian themes, and so appear to be colonial compositions. Others clearly appear rooted in the precolonial past. As scholars recognize, teasing out the pre-Conquest from the post-Conquest is a daunting task. I suggest that drawing conclusions about the metaphysical views espoused by their composers is equally if not more daunting.

Defending a new interpretation of these song-poems is not my aim. Rather, my aim is simply to cast sufficient doubt upon León-Portilla's and Bierhorst's interpretation so as to defuse the song-poems as a potential objections against my reconstruction of Aztec metaphysics as one of Becoming rather than Being. It is still possible, of course, that León-Portilla is correct when asserting that Nezahualcoyotl and Tochihuitzin Coyolchihqui are Socrates-like skeptics questioning the reigning ideas of their age (which if I am correct, would be a metaphysics of Becoming). And it is possible, too, that in so doing they presupposes a metaphysics of Being.¹⁴ However, León-Portilla gives us no reasons for thinking that Tochihuitzin Coyolchihqui and Nezahualcoyotl were such skeptics. Furthermore, nothing stated explicitly in the song-poems entails a metaphysics of Being. I thus suggest León-Portilla and Bierhorst are guilty of unwittingly importing their own metaphysics of Being into their interpretation of these poems. Rather than doubting the reigning metaphysics of their

day, Nezahualcoyotl and Tochihuitzin Coyolchihqui might have been doing nothing more (or less) philosophically profound than agonizing over the consequences for human existence implied by that metaphysics. With no after-life obvious, yet also caught in a world beset by famine, disease, and war, they wished to live as long as possible. And so they bemoaned the fragility, evanescence, and brevity of life.

Before moving on, let's revisit Natalio Hernández Hernández's song-poem. It continues:

We are all transient,
all of us will go;
for this reason we must respect,
for this reason we must work;
for this reason we must gather,
respect and conserve
the things of life:
the flower and the song.¹⁵

Here is a response to the observation that earthly existence is transient that differs significantly from the response attributed to Nezahualcoyotl and others by León-Portilla and Bierhorst. Life is transient; therefore we must work, gather, respect, and conserve "the things of life: the flower and the song." Hernández Hernández suggests an alternative way of interpreting the song-poems of the *Romances* and *Cantares*.

In conclusion, if Aztec philosophy embraces a metaphysics of Becoming as I maintain, then it appears we may well have to revisit existing interpretations and translations of Aztec song-poems as well as many of the assumptions underlying contemporary scholarship regarding Aztec thought.

Constitutional Monism: Implication 1

Aztec constitutional monism claims reality and hence the cosmos and all its contents consist of *essentially one kind of stuff*: always active, actualized, and actualizing energy. Aztec metaphysics thus rejects constitutional dualism, that is, the thesis that reality consists of *two essentially distinct and mutually exclusive kinds of stuff*: for example, mind versus matter, soul versus body, or spiritual versus physical. Unlike most versions of constitutional monism in world philosophy, Aztec constitutional monism does not maintain that reality consists of one *or* the other of the foregoing dualities. Unlike materialism, it does not claim reality consists exclusively of matter and does not aim to reduce mind to matter. Unlike idealism, it does not claim reality consists exclusively of mind and