

Review of James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*

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This is a book with a double interest, philosophical, and metaphilosophical: James Maffie teaches us interesting things about Aztec philosophy, defending the thesis that the Aztecs ‘advanced a systematic, coherent, and sophisticated metaphysics’ (12), and he also argues there is such a thing as Aztec philosophy (that is, he takes issue with the notion that only Western philosophies count as genuine philosophy, non-Western philosophies being something else, for example ‘thought,’ ideology, worldview, *cosmovisión*, or *Weltanschauung*). Maffie makes solid, detailed, and thought-provoking cases worth discussing at length. This review will identify some aspects of each case that could be improved.

Maffie aims to reconstruct Aztec metaphysics ‘as a systematic, unified, and coherent corpus of thought, worthy of consideration in its own terms and for its own sake’ (3), a task he prepares with a background discussion of intrinsic interest. First, Maffie’s ethnological object of study is the Aztecs, that is, ‘the Nahuatl-speaking peoples... residing in Mexico-Tenochtitlan’ (area in today’s Central Mexico) (1), specifically ‘at the time of the Conquest [by the Spaniards in 1519, I.G.]’ (2). While Maffie uses the term ‘Aztec’ instead of ‘Nahua’ because of its greater recognition, he warns us that the former picks up a group more restricted geographically than the latter.

Second, Maffie’s philosophical object of study is metaphysics, that is, the branch of philosophy that ‘investigates the nature, structure, and constitution of reality at the broadest, most comprehensive, and most synoptic level’ (1), and he motivates this focus with what can be called a metaphysics-priority claim, i.e., that ‘one cannot adequately understand Nahua [i.e. Aztec] theology, religion, and ritual as well as ethical, political, epistemological, and aesthetic thinking and activity without first understanding Nahua metaphysics’ (2).

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Third, Maffie's methodological approach is multidisciplinary, drawing on 'anthropology, archeology, archaeoastronomy, art history, history, linguistics, literary theory, and religious studies' (3). There seems then to be a tension between Maffie's philosophical focus and his multidisciplinary approach, given the argumentative and conceptual nature of the first and the historical and anthropological (that is, empirical) nature of the second, tension which is arguably inherent to any reconstruction of non-Western philosophies and possibly of Western philosophy as well.

Two more influences in Maffie's methodological approach are worth mentioning. Maffie is inspired by the 1956 'groundbreaking' study *La filosofía náhuatl (Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind)* by Miguel León-Portilla, a text which argues that 'Nahua culture included individuals who were every bit as philosophical as Socrates and the Sophists' (5). On the other hand, Maffie accepts two tenets of W. V. O. Quine widely endorsed by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of science: the conception of total science as a web of belief and the idea that theory is underdetermined by sense experience (9). The thrust of these two tenets is that rarely or never does piecemeal empirical evidence, by itself, refute or confirm a theory; rather, rival theories are chosen by scientists in terms of *non*-empirical criteria such as logical consistency, simplicity, conservatism, unification, etc. (9). Analogously, Maffie argues, there is no 'direct empirical evidence of our interpretative claims about Aztec metaphysics' (11), but there is 'indirect evidence for deciding between better and worse interpretations relative to the foregoing criteria of theory choice [i.e., logical consistency, simplicity, conservatism, unification, etc.]' (11).

In Chapter 1, Maffie argues that Aztec metaphysics is monistic in two distinct senses, first by claiming that 'there exists only one *numerically countable* thing: *teotl*' (21) (henceforth all italics in quotes are Maffie's) and second by claiming that 'this single existing thing –*teotl*– consists of just one kind of stuff, to wit, force, energy or power' (22). Moreover, '*teotl* is a process like a thunderstorm or flowing river rather than a static, perduring *substantive entity* like a table or a pebble' (23), so 'Aztec metaphysics ... embraces a *metaphysics of becoming* instead of a *metaphysics of being*' (25), i.e., '... is what Western philosophers call a *process metaphysics*' (27). In Chapter 2, Maffie argues that Aztec metaphysics is better understood as pantheistic rather than polytheistic. One may wonder why a metaphysics needs to be theistically characterized at all, Maffie's answer being that for the Aztecs *teotl* was sacred (this sits uncomfortably with Maffie's statement in p. 30 that 'the sacred versus profane dichotomy, venerated by the metaphysical systems underlying many religions, simply does not obtain [in Aztec metaphysics]'). In Chapter 3, Maffie explores a notion he calls 'agonistic inamic unity' (13), i.e., patterns of struggling opposites such as male and female, life and death, dry and wet, hot and cold, etc. whose 'nonteleological struggle (agon)' is what 'the transformation and reality of reality and cosmos' consist in (13) (the 'inamic' part of the formula is Maffie's neologism for 'opposite-like,' presumably from Latin *inimicus*). In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, Maffie analyzes three patterns of motion and change in which inamic partners struggle against and unite with each other: *olin*, *malinalli*, and *nepantla*. In Chapter 7, Maffie argues that Aztec metaphysics conceives time and space as a single, seamless unity, i.e., time-place. In Chapter 8, Maffie argues that weaving is one of the chief organizing metaphors of Aztec metaphysics, since the Aztecs saw *teotl* as simultaneously the weaver, the weaving, and the woven of all existing things.

Maffie's work is solid, detailed, and thought-provoking, an excellent read not only for those interested in pre-Columbian American philosophies but also for metaphysicians and philosophers in general. Philosophically, I wish the exact route going from the evidence Maffie draws on to his particular reconstruction of Aztec metaphysics were discussed more explicitly; his considerations on that score are many times ad hoc rather than principled. Metaphilosophically, Maffie's contention that Aztec philosophy counts as genuine philosophy can be seen to be confused rather than, as Maffie would prefer his opponents to say, empirically false: Maffie raises the question whether Aztec philosophy counts as genuine philosophy at all (one might argue) in terms that, adequately spelled out, cannot help but revealing a whole pattern of Western conceptual legacy (for instance, the family of concepts 'self-conscious,' 'critical,' and 'general,' 'reflection' in p. 5 with which Maffie aims at assessing the achievements of the Aztecs), which is self-defeating. These two lines of criticism (the philosophical and the metaphilosophical) could be pursued further, but the fact remains that *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* is a major study on its topic and a powerful contribution to comparative philosophy.