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On What There "Is": Aristotle and the Aztecs on Being and Existence

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1. WHAT "IS" THERE?

A curious feature of Aztec philosophy is that the basic metaphysical question of the "Western" tradition cannot be formulated in their language, in Nahuatl. Aristotle, writing on what he variously called first philosophy, wisdom, and theology, formulates its subject matter thus: "There is a science [*epistēmē*] which investigates being *qua* being [*to on hē on*] and what pertains to it when considered in its own right."¹ What we now call metaphysics or ontology, then, is concerned with being just insofar as it is. W.V.O. Quine, writing more than two millennia later, expresses the same broad concern. He writes that the basic problem of ontology "can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: 'What is there?' It can be answered, moreover, in a word—'Everything'—and everyone will accept this answer as true."²

The difficulty in the case of the Aztecs is that Nahuatl has no word for "being" or "to be." As a result, there is no way to formulate the question, "What is there?" or to claim that the aim of first philosophy is to understand "being *qua* being." This point does not suggest that the Nahuas were unconcerned with metaphysics, or that even the traditional "Western" metaphysical question could not be expressed (imperfectly) through circumlocution in their language. Rather, it suggests the grounds for why the Nahuas, the pre-Columbian people who spoke Nahuatl in Mesoamerica, approached this question so differently.

The present essay thus argues for three closely related points: first, that the Nahuas may be understood to provide an answer to the fundamental character of reality, one which served to give content to the meaning of "wisdom" just as one finds in Aristotle; second, that their conception of reality consists in a conceptual couplet *teot* and *omefeotl*, which view rivals Aristotle's substance (*ousia*); and, third, that the Nahua answer is *prima facie* reasonable. To explain, a little, the significance of these claims and the motivation for the comparison with Aristotle, one might consider the following points.

Aristotle's metaphysics is a paradigm case of substance ontology, that is, the view which holds that the answer to the basic question of metaphysics "What is there?" is substance (*ousia*). He thinks this is a good answer, moreover, because it satisfies some apparently reasonable desiderata any account should provide. In the first place, we would like to know that the answer can explain what the basic subjects of the universe are, those in which other properties inhere, and those beyond which analysis is no longer meaningful. In the second, we would like the answer to explain *what* something is, and not simply how it is, or why it is. Intuitively, we sense that we know something when we know its "what." Substance, Aristotle argues, satisfies both these criteria.

The Nahuas' outlook may instead be taken as a paradigm case of process metaphysics, that is, a view which answers the basic question of metaphysics by holding that reality at base is a "process" in a sense to be described below. This view may be distinguished from the substance approach because it rejects not only the formulation of the basic question for metaphysics, since there is no "is" for the Nahuas, but also the desiderata which Aristotle thinks any good account should satisfy.

The comparison proposed is thus of interest for several reasons. A first concerns its consequence for the discipline of metaphysics itself. The Nahua view challenges the basic presuppositions of the ontological tradition in "Western" philosophy, whether that formulation is Aristotle's, or Quine's.³ The view proposed is also rather different from the handful of self-consciously styled process-based metaphysical accounts in the "West."⁴ It matters, then, whether such a view is at least *prima facie* coherent. If one cannot use the word "being" to answer the basic question of metaphysics, after all, just what is it that is left over, and why would it make sense?

It is also of interest to indigenous, Nahua philosophy to clarify just what is intended by their "process" metaphysics. Others have claimed that their metaphysics is "relational" or "process" based, but of course Aristotle could make sense of relations and process.⁵ In some reasonable sense, the *what* of something, its *to ti esti*, just is what it does.⁶ So it is unclear, if one uses only these terms, just in what way Aristotle and the Nahua outlooks are to be distinguished.

Finally, with respect to philosophers of classical Hellenic antiquity, the inquiry matters because it presents at least one new direction of study. The major scholarly controversy in the *Metaphysics*, for example, concerns just how to make sense of Aristotle's claim in book VII.13 that no universal is a substance, when he appears to have been arguing, up to this point, both that substance is form, and form is universal.⁷ Yet perhaps Aristotle has arrived at this position because the desiderata outlined previously are themselves problematic—this is, at least, an open question—and this would bear on all the further notions which Aristotle develops, including form and matter, potency and activity, and universality and particularity. In this way, comparative philosophy may help to raise new avenues for study in Hellenistic inquiry.

As the first comparative essay on this topic in any modern language, the discussion faces a few initial hurdles that might not otherwise exist. To avoid them, it proves easiest to begin with the way in which epistemic claims are related to metaphysical ones in the thought of both Aristotle and the Nahuas. The next sections, §§2-3, thus look to distinguish a variety of forms of knowledge, including knowledge by acquaintance, know-how, experience, practical wisdom, and theoretical wisdom. The argument matches the sorts of appeal that Aristotle makes in book I of the *Metaphysics* with the accounts provided about Nahua philosophers themselves. An important difference that emerges is that the Nahuas had no notion comparable to Aristotle's *epistēmē*. In one respect, this is unsurprising, because Aristotle's notion itself is quite specific to his

philosophical outlook and not shared, even, with Plato. In another, there is a larger philosophic reason why the Nahuas had no similar notion, namely, because they were not metaphysically realist in their outlook.

To explain what might be called their quasi-realism, the argument moves, in §§4-6, to the content of theoretical wisdom for Aristotle and the Nahuas, namely, *ousia* and (*ome*)*teotl*, respectively. The claim in this case is that *teotl* is the best answer to the question (posed in English), "What is there?" but that *teotl* is always expressed under a certain cosmological configuration as *ometeotl*. The cosmological configuration is what the Nahuas metaphorically call a "sun," and they hold that our cosmos exists in the fifth sun (explained below). The formula that thus emerges is that *teotl* only exists *qua* some sun as *ometeotl*, and *ometeotl qua* the fifth sun is our cosmos. Since it is thought that this fifth sun too will pass into another configuration, it is not possible to have eternal knowledge, much less scientific knowledge (the sort expressed by Aristotle's *epistēmē*) of *teotl*. The best that can be done is to provide more beautiful metaphors of this notion, i.e., *teotl*, which may explain why the Nahuas' highest metaphysical literature is expressed poetically and not in treatise form. Moreover, since only a provisional account of reality as *ometeotl* is possible, the Nahua metaphysical outlook is best thought to be a sort of quasi-realism. The argument concludes with further avenues for research.

2. WISDOM: SOPHIA

Aristotle begins *Metaphysics* I.1 with something that he takes will be readily accepted, "[a]ll humans naturally desire to know" (*Met.* I.1, 980a20).⁸ He proceeds dialectically, teasing through ways of knowing until he reaches wisdom (*sophia*). The line of reasoning runs as follows. A sign of our desire to know is our preference for the sense of sight, which enables us to know the look of things quickly.⁹ Animals too have faculties of sensation, but some among them also have memory, which enables them to learn. What they mostly lack, however, is connected experience (*empeiria*). Still, this sort of knowledge (*to eidenai*) is limited to individual matters. For humans, memory forms experience, and when this experience gives rise to many notable observations and a single universal judgment is formed concerning them, one has an art (*technē*). While experience may thus lead to effective action and production just as well as art, since actions and productions concern individual affairs, knowledge and understanding (*to epaiein*) properly belong to art. For the one who possesses an art knows the cause, the why, while the person of experience does not. The object of study for science (*epistēmē*), unlike art, cannot be other than it is, and so exists of necessity and is eternal.¹⁰ Science does not, moreover, aim at production while art is just this disposition to produce something which may or may not be (*NE* VI.4, 1140a20-25).

Two conclusions follow from these reflections. First, they explain why we do not regard any of the senses to provide wisdom, for while they give knowledge of particulars, "they do not tell us the 'why' of anything" (*Met.* I.1, 980b11-12).¹¹ Second, they explain why "all people suppose that what is called wisdom concerns the first causes [*ta prōta aitia*] and the principles [*ta archas*] of things" (*Met.* I.1, 980b28-29).¹²

For while art can explain the why, or cause, of a production or action, it cannot explain the why for what is eternal and could not be otherwise. Yet wisdom is thought most to consist in just this latter sort of topic.

To get a better sense of which science yields wisdom, Aristotle changes his approach in *Metaphysics* I.2. Rather than simply consider what is commonly accepted, he considers the wise person (*ho sophos*), as commonly understood, and develops five criteria from this reflection that any science would have to satisfy to yield wisdom. This person (1) knows all things, (2) knows what is most difficult, (3) knows the exact causes and is able to teach them, (4) knows what is complete, or desirable on its own account and not for something else, and, finally, (5) knows what is most authoritative, giving instruction to other branches and people (*Met.* I.2, 982a8-19).

What these criteria suggest is that the science which yields wisdom ought at least to have these qualities. This means that the science desired must (1) give knowledge of what is universal, which is also (2) the hardest to know since it is furthest from the senses; (3) give knowledge of first principles, which are most exact and which are teachable because they explain the why; (4) give knowledge of what is most knowable and not know for the sake of another subject, which is what the first principles do; and, finally, (5) give knowledge that specifies the end for each thing to be done, and in this way is most authoritative. This last point suggests especially that the science in question is one, rather than multiple sciences, so that the same name applies to each of the desiderata (*Met.* I.2, 982a24-b10). What Aristotle leaves unresolved at this point is just what that name is, and he instead considers what would not satisfy the inquiry, including productive arts and proposals by other historical figures.

3. WISDOM: TLAMATILIZTLI

What is interesting about the Nahua approach to wisdom is that it too worked to distinguish wisdom from other sorts of knowledge. There are, broadly, four sorts of knowledge at work in the Nahua understanding: *tlamatiliztli*, wisdom; *ixtlamatiliztli*, connected experience or prudence; *toltecayotl*, artisanal knowledge; and the sort of magical knowledge that a *nahual* (shaman) was thought to possess. Finally, one should note that the basic word from which many of these terms are derived is *mati*, which means both to know epistemically (*savoir, saber*) and to know by acquaintance (*connaître, conocer*).¹³

Some of the descriptions of various knowledge-workers from the *Florentine Codex* provide sound evidence for these distinctions. The description of the craftsman, *toltecatl*, reads in part as follows:

The craftsman [*toltecatl*] is well instructed [*tlamachtilli*], an artisan. There were many of them. The good craftsman is able, discreet, prudent [*mimati*], resourceful, retentive. The good craftsman is a willing worker, patient, calm. He works with care, he makes works of skill [*toltecati*]; he constructs, prepares, arranges, orders, fits, matches [materials]. (*FC* 10, 25)

One observes in this passage that the *toltecatl* is one who is learned, “*mach-*” is the base 4 stem of *mati* used in passive constructions, in various matters (*tla-*). His¹⁴ knowledge is a sort of prudence, *mimati* (more below), but it is also primarily focused on know-how. In fact, the term *toltecati* is later best translated as “skill.”

The philosopher *tlatimini*, by contrast, is the one who possesses *tlatimiliztli* (wisdom), but who, among the people described in the *FC*, does not possess *toltecayotl*, artisanal knowledge.¹⁵ The relevant portion for the description reads as follows:

The good philosopher is a knowledgeable physician, a person of trust, a teacher worthy of confidence and faith. [He is] a teacher [*temachtiani*] and adviser, a counselor [*teixtlamachtiani*] who helps one assume a face [*teixcuitiani, teixtoman*]; one who informs one’s ears [*tenacaztlapoani*]. [He] is one who casts light on another; who is a guide who accompanies one (*FC* 10, 29).¹⁶

This description largely highlights the role of the philosopher as a counselor (*te-ixtlamachtia-ni*), which was a bit like Socrates’s role as the gadfly of Athens, and this is identified as (part of) his know-how (*ixtlamatiliztli*).¹⁷ In this capacity the philosopher is one whom one sought out for consultation. And the specific goal of the philosopher was to aid the counseled in “assuming a face.” Two highly compounded terms, *te-ix-cui-tia-ni* and *te-ix-to-ma-ni*, appear juxtaposed. The construction indicates that they are intended to express a single thought. The initial ‘*te*’ in both cases means that the action is performed for an indefinite person, for someone else, while the ‘*ix*’ is the stem of *ixtli*, meaning “face” in the most literal sense. Yet the term is widely used in its more metaphorical sense to indicate an aspect of one’s psyche, namely, the seat of one’s judgment. Finally, the root concept of both words (*cui* and *ana*) means “to take.” As a result, the idea expressed is that the philosopher helps another person (*te*) take or assume (*cui, ana*) a “face” (*ixtli*), i.e., a basis for sound judgment.

The philosopher thus has a certain sort of *ixtlamatiliztli*, but it is not of the same quality as that of the *toltecatl*, the artisan. The latter has *ixtlamatiliztli* in the sense that he knows just how to execute his craft, how to work with gold, or arrange quetzal plumes in headdresses. In the philosopher’s case, *ixtlamatiliztli* consists in being able to act as a guide for the counseled, to lay out a path for one’s life, and to serve as a mirror to clarify one’s reflections. His *ixtlamatiliztli* thus consists in knowing how to lead a good life, and knowing how to enable others to do the same. It is thus much closer to Aristotle’s *phronēsis* than the *toltecatl*’s craftsmanship.

Finally, the philosopher’s knowledge is distinct from the knowledge that other wise men receive. Specifically, the soothsayer (*tlapouhqui*), who made predictions based on the day signs, and the shaman or sorcerer (*noaalli*) are also described as *tlatiminime* of a sort. The description of the sorcerer, for example, begins as follows: “The sorcerer is a wise man [*in noaalli tlatimini*], a counselor, a person of trust” (*FC* 31). Similarly, the soothsayer’s description begins, “The soothsayer is a wise man [*in tlapouqui ca tlatimini*], an

owner of books and writings" (FC 31). The term *tlamatini*, then, is generally used for wise persons of various sorts and not only philosophers. But the descriptions distinguish just in what their wisdom was thought to consist. The sorcerer's knowledge involves enchantment, and the soothsayer's wisdom is limited to counting or reading (*pouh*) the day sign calendar (*tonalamatl*). While it is possible that a single person could have served in all three roles, then, the Nahuas took care to distinguish among the sorts of wise men by the sort of knowledge that they had and would have recognized the differences among those roles.

How is it, then, that the philosopher has this sort of knowledge, has the *ixtlamatiliztli* which is essential to her *tlamatiliztli*? The answer, in part, is that she will have had enough life experiences to know how to counsel in specific ways. As Aristotle would have said, she has been brought up well and lived well. Yet, she also knows because the philosopher, *tla-mati-ni*, also has wisdom, *tla-mati-liztli*, the term most directly connected with her name, concerning the most important matters. This is to say, she knows because the philosopher knows about the character of reality, i.e., the way things are through their changes.¹⁸ What follows is an example that illustrates how philosophers, in this case Nezahualcoyotl, were preoccupied with the most fundamental way things are. He writes:

Are you real, rooted [*toteycneliya*]?
 Is it only as to come inebriated?
 The Giver of Life, is this true [*nelli*]?
 Perhaps, as they say, it is not true?
 May our hearts be not tormented!
 All that is real, that is rooted,
 they say that it is not real, not rooted.
 The Giver of Life only appears [*omonenequin*]
 absolute.
 May our hearts be not tormented,
 because he is the Giver of Life.¹⁹

The passage shows Nezahualcoyotl's doubts and desires to understand the fundamental character of reality. He gives it various names. Here it is the Giver of Life (*ipalnemohuani*), but in others, including the song recorded just above in the codex, it is he who is self-caused (*moyocoya*). It is by understanding this principle and its relation to our lives, its balanced harmony, that the Nezahualcoyotl hopes to avoid a "tormented" heart.

Like Aristotle, then, the Nahuas distinguished among sorts of knowledge, and a comparison is summarized as follows:

knowledge by acquaintance	<i>aisthesis</i>	<i>mati</i>
connected experience	<i>empeiria</i>	<i>ixtlamatiliztli</i>
prudence	<i>phronēsis</i>	<i>ixtlamatiliztli</i>
artisanal knowledge	<i>technē</i>	<i>toltecaoyotl</i>
science	<i>epistēmē</i>	
wisdom	<i>sophia</i>	<i>tlamatiliztli</i>

One notes first that Aristotle and the Nahua philosophers share many roughly similar terms for epistemic matters. Yet, second, and crucially, the Nahua philosophers had no corresponding term for *epistēmē*, which defines both Aristotle's specific objective of inquiry in the *Metaphysics*, and the character of *sophia* as he understands it. The reason for this is that *sophia* is a sort of *epistēmē* about first causes. Finally, Aristotle holds that *epistēmē* can be had of matters that are eternally true, so that *sophia* also concerns eternal truths, while the Nahuas did not think such knowledge was possible, so that *tlamatiliztli* only concerns the best or most important truths.²⁰

While both Aristotle and the Nahuas thus conceived of philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom (*tlamatiliztli*), where this wisdom consists in understanding the fundamental principles of what is real or true (*nelli*), they still thought of the matter differently. Aristotle's sense of philosophy is methodical, one which uses logical proof and, where this is not suitable, dialectical reasoning. His understanding of science, moreover, is a body of knowledge that seeks the eternally true. The Nahuas did not have a similar methodological focus, and this is tied to their sense that the character of reality as it is given to us is not eternal. Wisdom for them consists of the best sort of knowledge, but what makes it best is not that it is guaranteed by the seal of eternity. This point explains, moreover, why poetry would be more apt to express this wisdom than logical argument on the Nahuas' conception.

The differences between Aristotle and the Nahuas on wisdom thus turn in large part about the fundamental character of reality which they sought to investigate, so it is just to this topic which the argument now turns, beginning with Aristotle's account in the *Metaphysics*.

4. WHAT THERE "IS": OUSIA

In book III of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle develops a series of puzzles concerning the possibility of the universal science desired in book I. He writes:

We must, with a view to the science which we are seeking, first recount the subjects that should be first discussed. These include both the other opinions that some have held on certain points, and any points besides these that happen to have been overlooked. (*Met.* III.1, 995a24-7)

The statement is important, since it shows that Aristotle is still in search of this science and that having it is desirable. It also introduces the series of puzzles that follow. In a broad

way, these puzzles may be classed as (1) those concerning the possibility of this science, i.e., puzzles *about* this science, and (2) those concerning its character, i.e., puzzles *for* the science, such as those concerning substance, form, matter, and so on. It is possible to understand book IV as a response to the former puzzles about the science, while book VII, with special supplementation from books VIII, IX, and XII as a response to the latter questions.

The central puzzles about the universal science which Aristotle raises in book III, at least for present purposes, may be understood as a sort of dilemma. If the universal science studies causes, then it would appear to conflict with the special sciences, which also study causes (Met. III.2, 996a18-b1). Yet, if it studies substance, then at least two problems may be thought to follow. First, the science would not appear to qualify as the sort that studies first axioms, since it would need to take the truth of those axioms for granted as other sciences do (Met. III.2, 996b33-997a5). Second, it is difficult to understand how there could be a science of substances as such, since this science would have to discuss essence as well—a substance, in part, explains the what, or essence (*to ti esti*), of something. Yet, “there seems to be no demonstration of the essence [*to ti estin*]” (Met. III.2, 997a31-2).²¹ The universal science, as a result, would appear to take for granted what it was supposed to study.

To address the puzzles about the desired science, Aristotle begins book IV with a new approach; it is that the universal science ought to be that which seeks to understand being *qua* being.

There is some science [*episteme*] which investigates being *qua* being and the attributes which belong to it in itself [*kath' auto*]. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others deals generally with being *qua* being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attributes of this part—this is what the mathematical sciences do for instance. Now since we are seeking the first principles and the highest causes, clearly there must be something to which these belong in themselves. (Met. IV.1, 1003a21-28)²²

The approach is intended to avoid immediately falling into the pitfalls identified in book III. Adding “*qua* being” helps, because it shows why it is that this science does not study the same causes as the special sciences. They cut off a piece of being, but this science does not. Additionally, this approach suggests that the science studies what is truly universal, what any being must be, and so does not presuppose a set of axioms in the worried way.²³ Finally, this science does study essential properties of being, not those which are incidental, and so it does explain the what (*to ti esti*) of an entity.

Yet something additional emerges from Aristotle’s new approach, namely, a set of conditions for what this science must be. He begins IV.2 by recalling that there are many senses in which a thing may be said to be. Yet they are not homonymous, but are all rather related to a central term.

The term “to be” functions just as “health” does. Yet as the various forms of “health” are all studied by one science, because there is a basic and central meaning, so too it would follow that all the senses of “being” are studied by one science, because it too has one central and basic meaning. He concludes:

It is clear then that it is the work of one science to study beings [*ta onta*] *qua* being.—But everywhere science deals with that which is basic [*kuriōs*], and on which the other things depend, and on account of which they get their names. And so if this is substance [*hē ousia*], then it is of substances [*tōn ousiōn*] that the philosopher must have the principles and the causes. (Met. IV.2, 1003b15-19)²⁴

In addition to concluding that the science of being *qua* being is one, then, Aristotle also concludes that it must study that which is basic, and that this basic topic might turn out to be substance, *hē ousia*. As he develops the argument, however, he adds a second condition which substance must satisfy if it is to be the subject matter of the science of being *qua* being.

If, now, being and unity are the same and are one thing in the sense that they are implied in one another as principle and cause are . . . and if, further, the substance [*hē ousia*] of each thing is one in no mere accidental way, but with respect to the very what a being is [*kai hoper on ti*]—all this being so, there must be exactly as many species of being as of unity. And to investigate the essence [*to ti esti*] of these is the work of a science [*tēs epistēmēs*] which is generically one. (Met. VI.2, 1003b23-35)²⁵

Aristotle’s argument in this case is a little unclear, given the number of antecedents he uses before stating the consequent of the sentence. Yet his central point is that insofar as each being is one, in no mere accidental way, it is a what, an essence. And in making this case, moreover, he identifies *hē ousia* with the essence, the very what of a being, thus marking out a second condition which substance must satisfy if it is to qualify as the subject matter for the science of being *qua* being.

Collecting these points with the surrounding ones Aristotle addresses in the section, the following thesis emerges. If there is a science of being *qua* being, then it would be a single science with parts. The first among these parts is the study of *ousia*, substance, since the other parts would presuppose it. Moreover, since this is the proper topic for philosophy, the study of being *qua* being pursued in this way is first philosophy. Yet in order to supply the antecedent to this conditional claim, one must show that *ousia* both is the basic subject of intelligibility, and that *ousia* identifies the what or essence of a being. One must identify the basic subject, because otherwise one would not have reached the topic of first philosophy, and one must identify the essence, because otherwise the notion would not enjoy explanatory priority.²⁶

At the end of book VII.1, Aristotle claims to have completed the argument left unfinished at the end of book IV. He writes:

And indeed the question which, both now and of old, has always been raised and always been the subject of doubt, namely "what is being [*ti to on*]?", is just this question, "what is substance [*ti s hē ousia*]?" (*Met.* VII.1, 1028b2-4)²⁷

In short, the question which the pre-Socratic philosophers had asked, and for which they offered answers which included fire and water, has been answered instead with *ousia*. Yet in order for Aristotle to be satisfied with his answer, he needs to have shown that *ousia* is the primary subject and that it is an essence. How does he do that?

With respect to the first topic, his argument is that the doctrine of the categories, discussed earlier, shows that substance is primary because it retains the right sort of asymmetrical relation with the other categories: they depend on it. This is the case because the others are not self-subsistent, capable of being separated, and substance is that which underlies them. "Clearly then," Aristotle concludes, "it is in virtue of this category that each of the others *is*. Therefore, that which is primarily and *is* simply (not *is* something) must be substance" (*Met.* VII.1, 1028a29-31).

To show that substance is an essence, that it explains the what of a being, Aristotle argues that substance retains explanatory priority with respect to the other categories in three ways: in time, formula, and order of knowledge (*Met.* VII.1, 1028a31). Temporally, one must recall that only substance exists independently. With respect to the formula [*logō*] of each term, substance must be present to complete the definition. Finally, he provides two arguments for the order of knowledge. At the beginning of the section, he argues from our linguistic use:

While 'being' has all these senses, obviously that which is primary is the 'what,' which indicates the substance of a thing. For when we say of what quality a thing is, we say that it is good or beautiful, but not that it is three cubits long or that it is a man; but when we say *what* it is, we do not say 'white' or 'hot' or 'three cubits long,' but 'man' or 'God'. (*Met.* VII.1, 1028a13-18)

The argument here, then, is that we speak in such a way that we treat the what of something as its substance, but this may only be a manner of speaking. This is why, at the end of the section, he also highlights what might be called a phenomenological argument: we experience a sense of knowing something when we know its substance: "we think we know each thing most fully when we know what it is, e.g. what man is or what fire is, rather than when we know its quality, or its quantity, or where it is" (*Met.* VII.1, 1028a36-b1).

The progression of argument in the *Metaphysics* thus moves from a statement about the subject matter of *sophia* (wisdom) as the *epistēmē* (science) of being *qua* being, to an articulation of its first principle as *ousia* (substance), to

the basic criteria which an account of *ousia* must satisfy, namely, that it should identify both the basic subject of an entity and its what, or essence (*to ti esti*). Finally, in book VII Aristotle shows that *ousia* does satisfy these requirements, only to introduce the problematic relation of form and matter with their related notions, which will occupy him through books VIII, IX, and XII. Since the Nahuas conceive of wisdom rather differently, it is unsurprising that they should also understand the fundamental character of reality differently.

5. THE IMPLICATIONS OF OMNIPREDICATIVITY

Like Aristotle, the Nahua philosophers also sought to understand the basic character of reality. Yet the answer they proposed was not a form of being, suitably abstracted. One reason for this is that they had no word for "being" available to them. Considered semantically, the closest available term is *câ*, which means to be in some place or in some way. Nahuatl has several ways to abstract terms, so that it might have been possible to speak of *ca-yotl* as roughly equivalent to *hē ousia*, or *ca-ti-liztli* as close to *to einai*, but in neither case would the terms have been suitably general. One would only have a sense of being-in-place/way-ness, rather than being-ness (*ousia*).

The semantic deficiency, however, leaves open the possibility that "being" is in some way conceptually implicit in the syntax of grammatical constructions in Nahuatl. Surprisingly, this is also not the case, for Nahuatl is not only an omnipredicative language, it is *the* paradigm case of a strongly omnipredicative language.²⁸

In brief, an omnipredicative language is a bundle concept with eleven morphosyntactic features, where only one is necessary: that the language have no copula. To explain why Nahuatl lacks a copula verb or function, one must note first that in an omnipredicative language, as the name suggests, all lexical items can be used as (rhematic) predicates. As a result, even single nouns or pronouns can serve as a complete sentence. Yet, because nouns may function as predicates only in the present tense, it is necessary to supply a copular-type construction to broaden the tenses available. But in addition to forms of *câ*, one may use *neci* (to seem), *mocuepa* (to be turned into), *mochihua* (to become),²⁹ *monotza* (to be named), and a few other grammatical possibilities using the determiner *in* and the locative *ipan*. This range of possibilities shows that there is just no single copular verb or necessary copular construction.

A certain amount of the remaining properties are needed to establish that the language is sufficiently robust to be classed as omnipredicative, though it is not possible to produce a rule which states just how many. Yet one may imagine a scale of strength, so that at its far end one could claim that a language is paradigmatically strong if it exhibits all ten of the "optional" morphosyntactic features in addition to the necessary absence of a copula. Nahuatl is perhaps the only language which satisfies that strong requirement.

What this analysis suggests is that there is no notion in Nahuatl that is like "being" in the "Western" tradition of philosophy, whether that concept is taken to be expressed

either semantically or syntactically. While it is accurate, then, to claim that the Nahuas had an understanding of the basic character of reality, that they had a metaphysical outlook, it would be inaccurate to call it an onto-logy, where this term is understood etymologically to indicate the study of "being" (*ōn*). It is to spell out some of the features of this metaphysical but non-ontological outlook that the essay now turns.

6. WHAT THERE "IS": (OME)TEOTL

If the Nahuas did not think of "being" as the fundamental principle of reality, then what did hold that position? They had in mind two closely related notions, *teotl* and *ome-teotl*. To explain, the analysis develops five closely related points: (1) that the Nahuas took there to be one fundamental principle of reality; (2) that its name is *(ome)teotl*; (3) that it is fundamentally relational or "dualizing"; (4) that it is all of reality, entailing that the Nahuas were pantheists; and that (5) *teotl* and *ome-teotl* are related roughly as being and existence were related for some "Western" philosophers.³⁰

Beginning with the first point, recorded texts indicate that all the "gods" were taken, even by many commoners, to be a single being.³¹ In the *FC*, for example, we read the following, which is said after a child had been delivered.

The midwife addressed the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue, the water. She said: our lady of the jade skirt [*Chalchiuhtlicue*], he who shines like a sun of jade [*Chalchiuhtlatonac*]. The deserved one has arrived, sent here by our mother, our father, Dual Lord [*vme-tecuhtli*], Dual Lady [*vme-cihuatl*], who dwells in the middling of the nine heavens [*chicunauh-nepan-juhca*], in the place of duality [*vme-ioca*]. (*FC* 6, 175)³²

One perceives in this text that the same being is addressed as *Chalchiutlique* and *Chalchiuhtlatonac*, and then later as *Ometecuhtli* and *Omecihuatl*. This means that the single god, which is addressed, has a double gender. The singularity is underscored by the following reference to the place where the god dwells: the middling of the nine heavens, the place of duality. Despite the opinions of the Conquistadors, the Nahuas of the pre-conquest period did not believe in a pantheon of gods, but treated all as mere aspects of a single supreme being. There is, in short, just one principle of reality, just one god, who has a double gender, and who metaphorically "dwells" at the point where the nine (*chicunauh-*) heavens (*-juhca*) middle (*-nepan-*).

If the first important feature of reality for the Nahuas is that there is just one basic principle, then a second closely related point follows, namely, that this principle is best named *(ome)teotl*, by which is intended two closely related notions: *teotl* and *ome-teotl*. As a first approximation for this claim, one might focus on the support for "ome-teotl" as a basic name for the principle, leaving its relation to *teotl* for discussion with point 5 below.

That "ome-teotl" is a basic name for the fundamental principle of reality is already supported by the word for "two" or "double," i.e., "ome," included in all the significant names for the Nahua god. The passage just above, for

example, refers to this god as Dual Lord (*Ometecuhtli*) and Dual Lady (*Omecihuatl*). The conception itself appears in the *Historia Tolteca-Chichimeca*, which a linguistic analysis shows to be from a period prior to the Mexica empire, likely from or just after the nomadic (*chichimecas*) period of the people.³³ Appearing in a song of philosophical poetry, it reads as follows:

Which way shall I go? Which way shall I go

To follow the path of the god of duality [*ome-teotl*]?

Perhaps your house is

in the place of the fleshless?

Perhaps in the interior of the heavens?

Or is the place of the fleshless just here, on earth [*tlalicpac*]?³⁴

What this passage shows is that the *tlamatinime* seek to follow the path of the god of duality (*ome-teotl*), the single principle of existence. Unlike the many *ome-* uses one finds in the *FC*, moreover, this passage directly names the principle *ome-teotl*, so that one can have confidence that the notion is not a philosophical reconstruction, but something held explicitly.

If there is just one principle, one god (first claim), and its best single name is *ome-teotl* (second claim), then a third claim follows closely on these: the basic principle is characterized by a sort of duality. The texts identified so far amply support this notion, with the male-female doubling of each name for the god, and the not infrequent use of *ome-* prefixes for these names. Yet in the passage that follows, from the *Códice Matritense*, an earlier version of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*, one finds further support for the notion that the double is the consort or *inamic* pair. It reads as follows:

1. And the Toltecs knew
2. that the heavens are many,
3. they said that there are twelve superimposed divisions.
4. The rooted god [*nelli teotl*] lives there with his consort [*inamic*].
5. The celestial god [*ilhuicateotl*] is called the Lord of Duality [*ometecuhtli*],
6. and his consort the Lady of Duality [*omecihuatl*], the Lady of the Heavens,
7. which means:
8. he is king, he is lord over the twelve heavens.³⁵

A few words of explanation about the broader context of line 4, in which the *inamic* appears, may facilitate comprehension.

In line 1 the term "Toltec" appears. At the time of the conquest, the Nahuas, and especially the Mexica in Tenochtitlan, admired the predecessor culture they found when they, as a wandering group, came to settle on the swampy bog and found their city. They called this lofty culture the Toltec culture, and the term "Toltec" came to indicate refinement, skill, and (as noted above) a knowledge about crafts. The Mexica (especially) distinguished this culture from the culture of the wandering "Chichimechas," a term roughly equivalent to the Greek "barbarian," i.e., a people who spoke a different language and were considered rude, even though they were themselves such wanderers at one point.³⁶

With respect to lines 2-3, it is helpful to bear in mind that the Nahuas, like Aristotle, thought that there were multiple heavens, or spheres, which accounted for the movements of observable celestial bodies. Exactly how many heavens there were varies on the text consulted, ranging from nine to thirteen. What the Toltec wisdom conveys, then, is a general understanding about the structure of the heavenly bodies and our cosmos.

The remaining lines make two points. The first, in lines 7-8, is that the one god under discussion is the basic principle of the cosmos, of all reality. Here that understanding is expressed metaphorically as the god's rule over the twelve heavens. The second point, in lines 4-6, is that the one divine being, *teotl*, is identified in the singular, though it has a dual, reciprocal, aspect. In the singular, it is called the *nelli teotl*. The word *nelli* most basically means "rooted," as a tree is rooted to the earth, but in its broader sense it came to be used as the term for "truth" and "reality." This is the true god. Yet the very same line identifies this god as one that appears with his consort, *inamic*, which is why s/he always appears in doubles: the Lord of Duality, the Lady of Duality. As the context suggests, moreover, these doubles are related to each other in a reciprocal and complementary way, as are male and female, heaven and earth, day and night, hot and cold, life and death, cleanliness and filth, and so on.³⁷

These remarks support what is most important about *ometeotl*'s consorts. Though discussion of relations among pairs tends to predominate in the Nahua outlook, what matters is that a relationship of reciprocity is established among complementary aspects, so that in principle any number of consorts might be involved, from three (the underworld, the earth, and the heavens), to four (the number of cardinal coordinates), to nine or thirteen (the number of heavens). The claim that *ometeotl* is dualizing in character thus means more than that it is expressed in doubles. Most centrally it means that it is a principle that exists as a linking (coupling, or trilling, or quadrupling, *et cetera*) relation.

These points lead naturally to the next claim, namely, that the Nahuas were pantheists for whom *ometeotl* is existence. This point is supported variously, though one

finds it perhaps most clearly in the Nahua cosmological myths. The *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas*, which relates the character of the cosmos and the origin of human beings, especially as the Mexica in Tenochtitlan adapted the tale, runs as follows. It begins by stating that the Mexica had one god, *Tonacatecutli~Tonacacihuatl*, Lord and Lady of Sustenance, and that this being has always existed in the thirteenth heaven.³⁸ It had no beginning, and was not caused or created by another. Because it is dualizing, an *inamic*/relational being, it is the source of all the other gods and all the five Sun-Eras of cosmic history.

Tonacatecutli~Tonacacihuatl then "engendered four sons," which are identified with the cardinal coordinates: Red Smoking Mirror (*Tlatlauqui Tezcatlipoca*), Black Smoking Mirror (*Yayauqui Tezcatlipoca*), Quetzalcoatl (Plumed Serpent, also called "*Yohualli Ehecatl*," Wind and Night), and Bone Lord (*Omítecútlī*), whom the Mexica, with their penchant for rewriting myths, all called *Huitzliopochtli*, their city's specific patron deity.³⁹ These four gods are the forces which activate the history of the cosmos, as they relate, balance, and struggle with each other. They are, in brief, the first expression of the dual principle. In the second chapter, after six hundred years, the gods come together to put the world in motion and, in the following passages especially, Quetzalcoatl must undertake a series of actions to restore humans to the cosmos.⁴⁰

What one witnesses in this account, then, is a sequence of reasoning such that the primary dual principle comes to be expressed progressively as more complex sets of relations, as four forces, as time, as cosmic Era-Suns, and eventually as people, who are brought into existence through the life-force of the gods themselves. The account thus provides conceptually strong support for the claim that the Nahuas, especially their learned *tlamatinime*, were pantheists, for they held that the divine (*teotl*) pervades all things, is expressed through all of existence itself.⁴¹

This feature of the divine also explains several points concerning the names given to it. Why, for example, is its name Smoking Mirror (*Tezcatlipoca*), and how is that name related to the title Lord of the Near and Nigh (*Tloque Nahque*), or Wind and Night (*Yohualli, Ehecatl*)? For example, in the *FC* we read the following address during the rite of confession: "And can you, using human sight, behold the Lord of the Near and the Nigh, the Young Man, the Self-Creator, Our Lord, Smoking Mirror?" (*FC* 6, 33).⁴² How are we to understand statements like these?

One might begin to respond with the most straightforward of the names: Lord of the Near and the Nigh. The name is straightforward because it directly suggests that *Ometeotl* is always nearby, is omnipresent, and this is true because *Ometeotl* not only pervades all things, but self-expresses as all things. The next conceptual name, Wind and Night, evokes cases where our human vision functions poorly or fails altogether. It is hard to see the wind, because we only see what the wind moves, and it is hard to see during night, precisely because we have only outlines of those objects. The core idea at work in the name Wind~Night, then, is that *Ometeotl* is imperceptible, or at least not directly perceptible, since *Ometeotl* is everything. Stated

differently, Omēteotl is not a single object which might be the focal point of perception, and it is this imperceptibility which explains why the passage begins by asking whether human sight (*tic-tlacat(l)-itta*) will be sufficient to perceive the single and same being given all the following names. Turning to the last, and most puzzling names, Tezcatlipoca, the foregoing provides some context. Standardly translated as Smoking Mirror, the grammatically central and the uncontested portion of the name is *tezcatl*, mirror.⁴³ In Nahua literature a mirror is used as a metaphor for an object that illuminates an area. Yet the context here is cosmological, rather than local, so the suggestion is that Omēteotl is a source of light, the mirror, the sun, which is clouded, smoked, at night. This would be consistent, of course, with the panentheistic outlook of the *tlamatinime*, for whom Omēteotl is imperceptibly everywhere, and so is the cosmos and its heavenly motions.⁴⁴

The Legend of The Suns, recorded in the *Codex Chimalpopoca*, provides important details about the character of cosmogenesis as the Nahuas understood it, but it also introduces an important philosophical distinction for the fundamental character of reality, namely, the difference between existence (*Omēteotl*), and “being” or “reality” (*teotl*), which is the fifth claim for this section. The recorded text is a transcription in Nahuatl which relays the information that an indigenous *tlamatini* (philosopher) read to a scribe from an ideographic pre-Cortesian *amoxtli* (painting-book). He begins by pointing out the origin of the story: “Here is the wisdom-fable-discourse, how it transpired long ago that the earth was established, how each thing found its place. This is how it is known in what way all the suns began.”⁴⁵ The discourse records the first four suns as a complete unit, then interjects two tales, one about maize corn and another about Quetzalcoatl’s journey to bring humans back to life on earth, and then relates the story of the fifth sun, in which we are presently supposed to live.

The stories of the five suns often strike the modern reader as mythical curiosities, though it should be noted that the sense that humans had been created and destroyed, or lived and perished, multiple times was broadly shared in Mesoamerican culture.⁴⁶ Briefly, the story goes as follows (formatted for clarity).

With the first sun, named 4 Jaguar, the humans who lived survived 676 years, but were eventually devoured by Jaguars and so destroyed totally. During the period of this sun, the text tells us that the people ate “7 straw [*chicome malinalli*],” which would have been the calendrical name of a sacred food, such as corn or squash, but we are uncertain which exactly. (CC, slide 75.7)

Under the second sun, named 4 Wind, humans were blown away and became monkeys, though not totally destroyed. What they ate was 12 snake.

In the third sun, named 4 Rain, humans were rained on by fire, and turned into birds. Their food was 7 Flint.

In the fourth sun, named 4 Water, humans who ate 4 flower were inundated in a flood and became fish.

It is at this point that the two additional fables about maize and Quetzalcoatl are related, and then the story of the fifth sun, 4 Motion, is relayed. For its creation Nanahuatl throws himself into a fire, and his consort Nahuitecpatl threw herself into the ashes. Yet, because Nanahuatl would not move, the other gods living in the paradise garden Tamoanchan sacrificed themselves so that he would continue in his orbit.

This is our age, and though it is not stated in the text now entitled *Legends of the Sun*, in a companion text, *Annales de Cuauhtitlan*, the retelling of the five suns relates the following:

This fifth sun, 4 Movement [*ollin*] is its day sign, is called Movement Sun [*olintonati*], because it moves along and follows its course. And what the old ones say is that under it there will be earthquakes and famine, and so we will be destroyed. (CC, slide 2.42)

As with the previous suns, ours too will come to an end, and as was the case with those suns, it is the basic character of the cosmic organization, jaguars, rain, and so on, that spells the end of the living people. Since our sun is a sun of movement, specifically *ollin* movement, which is associated with undulating or wave-like motion, our end will be through earthquakes with famine.

What matters about the *Legend of the Suns* for philosophical purposes is that it can explain the relationship between *teotl* and *omēteotl*. For it makes clear that what happens to exist now is an expression of a specific configuration of the divine, i.e., *teotl*. Each sun is a special configuration of the *teotl* in a cosmic order, complete with the sorts of food that are appropriate to the kind of being which lives in that order. *Teotl* is thus expressed *qua* sun as *omēteotl*. Yet *omēteotl* exists only *qua* a specific sun, such as 4 Movement, which happens to be our specific cosmic configuration.

To contextualize the matter more broadly in Nahua thought, one might put it as follows. Though the Nahuas occasionally spoke of *teotl* simply as what there is, in general they spoke and wrote of it as *teotl* under some aspect, as a specific god such as *Tezcatlipoca*, or by a specific characteristic, as the Wind and Night, or most generally as *omēteotl*. Yet what the legend of the suns shows is that any of the specific configurations we witness, the way in which *teotl* takes concrete form through doubling, through balancing or rooting consorts, could have been otherwise. In fact, it was otherwise at some point, and will be again later. This is why Nezahualcoyotl claims that we live fundamentally “in a house of paintings,” in the painting book of the divine, wherein the slightest brush movement may blot us out (RS, fol. 35r). “The earth,” that is, the place where humans live, “is slippery, slick” as a famous Nahua saying goes (FC 6, 228).⁴⁷ But the cosmos itself, and not only our human condition, is fragile in its balance and ephemeral at its core.

This is why, if 4 Movement is our cosmic order, *ometeotl* may be thought of as “existence,” and *teotl*, the reality of all possible cosmic expressions, as “being.”

7. DIVINITY: OUSIA AKINĒTOS AND TEOTL

Before concluding, the argument considers what would appear to be an important difference in the accounts of reality as one finds it in Aristotle and the Nahuas. Aristotle’s presentation in the central books of the *Metaphysics*, books IV through IX, roughly, appear to proceed by way of a naturalist directive, i.e., they do not require any specific sort of religious commitment, while the Nahuas’ directive, at first blush, appears to be fully theological. (*Ome*)*teotl* may be taken as the basic character of reality, but it never loses its connection with divinity. The foregoing argument does provide grounds to understand *teotl* as “the way things are through their changes,” but it does not suggest that the term, which is most often translated as “god,” is unconnected to divinity in the Nahuatl mind. Two points should be noted in response.

A first is that certain authors, Nezahualcoyotl, for example, do question the existence of the divine and the specifics of religious belief. In a philosophic poem entitled “I Am Sad,” he writes:

I am sad, I grieve
 I, lord Nezahualcoyotl.
 With flowers and with songs
 I remember the princes,
 Those who went away,
 Tezozomocztzin, and that one Cuacuahtzin.
 Do they truly live,
 There Where-in-Someway-One-Exists?⁴⁸

Nezahualcoyotl is in these lines clearly expressing doubt about life in a place after death. Must it be a place where one in some, non-fleshy way exists? This doubt in the afterlife, further, explains Nezahualcoyotl’s ongoing preoccupation with death, since he is little comforted by the ordinary stories. Yet, beyond this and similar instances of doubt, it is important to recognize that the Nahua conception of *teotl* is hardly a personal god. *Teotl* is rather more like a universal energy which is formed into our specific cosmos for a time. As pantheists, their conception of *teotl* was closer to the Buddhist Nirvana or Benedict Spinoza’s substance than the personalist conceptions of the divine that often trouble those who would like philosophy to be strictly naturalist. Taken together, these remarks suggest that the Nahua *tlamatinime* did not think of a personal god as the fundamental source of reality, but rather argued for a view of the world that recognized a divinity to be present in all features of the natural world.

A second response is that the matter is not so straightforward in Aristotle either. One may think of the project of the

Metaphysics to be completed in either of two ways. One way is as a general theory of substance, one that articulates how substance satisfies the requirements for a science of being *qua* being, and just in what the characteristics of that substance consist. Another way is to consider substance’s most exemplary case, the first mover or uncaused cause. In the opening chapter of book VI of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle suggests that the latter is closer to his understanding. He writes:

if there is no substance other than those which are formed by nature, natural science [*physikē*] will be the first science; but if there is an immovable substance [*ousia akinētos*], the science of this must be prior and must be first philosophy, and universal in this way, because it is first. And it will belong to this [discipline] to consider [*theōrēsai*] being *qua* being—both what it is [*ti esti*] and the attributes which belong to it *qua* being. (Met. VI.1, 1026a27-32)

Aristotle not only states that the study of this immovable substance is best named first philosophy, its consideration uses the Greek word *theōrēsai*, which is composed of the terms *theos*, divinity, and *horaō*, to see. It would be too much, in general, to take the etymological origin of the word as its meaning, namely, “to see the divine,” but in this case, Aristotle is explicitly supporting just this outlook.

What, then, is one to make of Aristotle’s approach in the *Metaphysics*? Some have suggested that this is but a holdover from Aristotle’s earlier Platonic education in the Academy.⁴⁹ Others have argued that we should rather excise the offending passage from our interpretation of the *Metaphysics* so that Aristotle completes a naturalist account of substance in book IX, and in XII undertakes a special investigation into a substance which is divine and with a mind.

Yet the most natural reading would be to take Aristotle at his word: he understands the arguments of book XII, which investigation he also explicitly calls theology, first philosophy *par excellence*. The idea would appear to be that the first mover is a model of substance, and in that way an answer to the general question of being *qua* being.⁵⁰ This would make Aristotle’s outlook generally consistent with his arguments in the NE that theoretical contemplation is the only way that we humans can act as immortalizing beings, and that this is one of the reasons why the contemplative life is the best and accompanied by the best pleasure (*hēdonē*).⁵¹

What these points suggest is that there is likely not so great a distance between Aristotle and the Nahuas in taking the basic character of reality to be divine. Similarly, neither view is committed to understanding the divinity of reality to be of the sort that is guaranteed by a personal and soteriological god.

8. CONCLUSION: WISDOM AND METAPHYSICS

The basic question of “Western” metaphysics cannot be put into words in Nahuatl, whether three or more, because the language has no concept of “being,” understood

either semantically or syntactically. Yet the pre-Columbian *tlamatinime* (philosophers) did ask about the fundamental character of reality. Like Aristotle who called this knowledge *sophia*, “wisdom,” the Nahuas called it *tlamatiliztli*, which is also best translated as “wisdom.” For Aristotle, however, *sophia* consists in grasping the first principle of the science (*epistēmē*) of being *qua* being, which he argued was identified when one understood just in what substance (*ousia*) consists. For the Nahuas *tlamatiliztli* consists in understanding the way things are through their changes, *teotl*, and giving it the most adequate expression one can, namely, in poetry. The reasons for this conclusion are two: first, one can neither grasp *teotl* directly, She-He is the Wind and Night, and, second, *teotl* is nothing but the ways of cosmic (punctuated) radical transformation. Finally, for Aristotle, any account of the substance of an entity ought to explain why it is a basic subject, and why it is an essence (*to ti esti*). For the Aztecs, *teotl* is doubly expressed, as some cosmos generally, as *ometeotl*, and as a cosmos specifically, for example, ours, which is 4 Movement—these are, if not the criteria, then at least the character of *teotl*’s intelligibility.

The present essay thus bears several fruits for scholarship. It is not only the first to undertake the comparative task in thinking through the relations among Aristotle’s ontological project and the Nahuas’ metaphysical outlook, it is the first to look seriously at the epistemic terms used and the specific epistemic claims each project implies. Aristotle is traditionally taken to hold a metaphysically realist view, since for him we can both know what there is, perhaps by induction (*epiagōgē*) or intuition (*nous*), and what there is, *ousia*, is intelligible and eternal. The Nahuas, by contrast, were quasi-realists. They did not deny that we could know, in some sense (as *mati*), the cosmic order in which we live, but they did deny that this cosmic order was the basic character of reality itself. That reality, the *nelli teotl* (true/rooted being), is only ever expressed as a cosmic order, *ometeotl*, which undergoes radical, punctuated transformations. Wisdom (*tlamatiliztli*) thus consists in grasping the limits of our knowledge (*mati*), in understanding the evanescence of the cosmic order itself.

A final and important fruit concerns the adequacy of these outlooks. The philosophic task for historical works shares something in common with anthropology and history, namely, that it aims to describe accurately the notions and basic frameworks which were held by historical persons or traditions. Unlike these other disciplines, however, philosophy also aims to evaluate the character of the frameworks under discussion for their reasonability. As Socrates might have asked: Are they true? The topics of the present essay are difficult to answer generally, and especially so in the space of a single essay. What it is hoped is that the foregoing provides the grounds for concluding that while quite different from Aristotle’s substance ontological, the Nahua’s process metaphysics is at least *prima facie* reasonable when considered alongside his. Moreover, it approaches the fundamental question of metaphysics in a way that does without the two basic criteria which Aristotle thinks any good answer should meet, namely, that the account address basic subjects and essences. If the Nahua approach is the correct one, then it

would appear that not only is Aristotle’s approach likely to be inaccurate, but much of the “Western” tradition, which follows him to some degree, is as well. Whether the Nahua account holds up under further scrutiny may form a task for future research.

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NOTES

1. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. W. D. Ross, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), book IV.1, 1003a20-1. To be abbreviated *Met.* hereafter. When not using the English translation, or when modifying it, I have used *Aristotelis Metaphysica*, ed. W. Jaeger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957) for the Greek source.
2. Willard Van Orman Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1.
3. The same point holds for Martin Heidegger as well, but his case is different insofar as he sought not so much to engage in the tradition of “Western” metaphysics as to dig beneath it. This is just the point that he makes in the “Introduction” to *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1972), available in English as *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996). In light of Heidegger’s aim, one might wonder whether a better way to his goal might not have been simply to undertake work in comparative philosophy.
4. I of course have in mind Alfred North Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), and Gilles Deleuze’s work in *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Épiméthée Press, 2013), available in English as *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), and *Logique de Sens* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1982), available in English as *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
5. See, for example, James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2014), 23. I do not, of course, disagree with Maffie. The purpose of the present essay is to clarify just what is intended by a “process” metaphysics when faced with an articulate account which would appear to take the substance of an entity to be just that, a process, *energeia*.
6. I mean only to support the tradition notion here, to write for a moment as the schoolmen did, that the essence (*to ti esti*) of an entity is its first actuality.
7. The views on this topic are vast, but two that are of interest are those who develop some form of the answer that forms are particulars, including Wilfred Sellars, “Substance and Form in Aristotle,” *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 54 (1957): 688–99, and Charlotte Witt, “Aristotelian Essentialism Revisited,” *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 27 (1989): 285–98, and others who maintain that only some universals are not substances (rather than no . . . are), including G. E. L. Owen, “Particular and General,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 79 (1978): 1–21, and Michael J. Loux, *Primary Ousia: An Essay on Aristotle’s Metaphysics Z and H* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1991).
8. Translation is my own.
9. The connection with sight and knowing in this passage is much closer in the Greek, since the word Aristotle here uses is “*eidenai*,” which is related to the word “*idea*,” literally, the look of things.
10. Aristotle here references his discussion of science and art in *Aristotelis Ethica Nicomachae*, ed. I. Bywater (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), book VI.3, 1139b22-23, and so the present development takes these points from that work to complete the argument. Hereafter abbreviated as *NE*.

11. Translation is my own.
12. Translation is my own.
13. The present study uses Bernadino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: A General History of the Things of New Spain*, vols. 1-12, ed. and trans. by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe: The University of Utah Press, 1953–1981), hereafter abbreviated *FC*. For an example of “*mati*” in its use as knowledge by acquaintance, see the description of the old merchants who have already visited other places “*in inphilhoan in ie onmatia veca*” (*FC* 4, 65).
14. Although it is possible that a *tolteca*tl could have been female, this would not in general have been the case among the Nahuas, as women who were trained in practical affairs would have learned different skills such as weaving. The Nahuatl educational system was more gender equal with schooling for the arts used in governing, literature, philosophy, history, law, astronomy, and religion. I have thus used the male pronoun, since this is a more accurate gender representation of the Nahuatl culture.
15. Or perhaps they might, but it would be incidental to their role as a *tlamatini*.
16. Translation is my own.
17. Recall that “*mach-*” is the base 4 stem of *mati* used in passive constructions so that the word for counselor *te-ix-tla-mach-tia-ni* is a compound term indicating that the agent (*ni*) causes (*tia*) another (*te*) to gain experience (*ix* and *mach*) about things (*tla*). It is thus the same sort of knowledge as experience (or prudence) that *ix-tla-mati-liztli* means, namely, connected experience (*ix* and *mati*) about things (*tla*) -ness (*liztli*).
18. This phrase, the way things are through their changes, is my best translation of “*teotl*.”
19. *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain: The Codex Romances de los señores de la nueva españa*, transcribed by John Bierhorst (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), fol. 19v-20r. Hereafter abbreviated as *RS*.
20. The topic of truth and knowledge is a difficult one in Nahuatl thought, and it is not directly the focus of the present essay. The following may suffice for the present. The present account is likely closest to Miguel León-Portilla’s in the first and third chapters of *La filosofía nahuatl: Estudiada en sus fuentes*, seventh edition (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1993), originally published in 1956. He argues there that poetry is this highest form of knowledge and truth available. What the present account adds is that this is the case because of a metaphysical conception of the universe, and not our epistemic access to this reality. This approach stands at some distance from two further accounts. A first is Willard V. Quine’s in “Heidegger and the Aztecs: The Poetics of Knowing in Pre-Hispanic Poetry,” in *Recovering the World: Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 85–112, argues that the Nahuas had an understanding of truth and knowledge that was close to Martin Heidegger’s sense of *alétheia*, as he develops that notion in some of his later writing, such as “*Vom Wesen des Grundes*,” in *Wegmarken, Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976), 73–108. A second approach is James Maffie’s in “Double Mistaken Philosophical Identity in Sahagún’s ‘*Colloquios y Doctrina Cristiana*,’” *Divinatio* 34 (Autumn-Winter 2011): 63–92, argues that the Nahuas had a path-seeking understanding of truth and knowledge, rather than a (traditionally “Western”) truth-seeking understanding.
21. Translation is my own.
22. Translation modified.
23. There is, additionally, the thornier problem concerning the methodological status of the *Metaphysics*: Is it dialectical, or is it somehow the demonstrative science Aristotle develops in the *Organon*, or perhaps neither? Perhaps, as Terence Irwin suggests in *Aristotle’s First Principles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Aristotle is using a sort of “strong” dialectic here. Or perhaps the character of demonstrative science in the *Organon*, as it is generally understood, is not accurate, as Patrick Byrne suggests in *Analysis and Science in Aristotle* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997). There is also the possibility that Aristotle modified his position, and that the best resources for his methods may be found in his biological works. This is a view that Gorgios Anagnostopoulos supports in “Aristotle’s Methods,” in *A Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Gorgios Anagnostopoulos (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2013). For the present work, I set this problem aside as either solution would suffice, though I note that some such position is necessary for Aristotle’s argument here.
24. Translation modified.
25. Translation modified.
26. That Aristotle’s argument in the *Metaphysics* turns on showing that the desired science of being *qua* being study a matter which specifies both a basic subject and an essence is uncontroversial. Aryeh Kosman, for example, in *The Activity of Being: An Essay on Aristotle’s Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 23, notes that the whole argument of the *metaphysics* follows these two criteria into Aristotle’s discussion of subject and predicate, form and matter, and so on. What the present account does suggest is that Aristotle establishes these criteria much earlier than is typically identified, neither in book seven, as is often argued, or (even) in book five, as Kosman holds. The result supports the contention that the main chapters of the *Metaphysics* be read as a single, coherent argument.
27. Translation modified.
28. Michel Launey is the first to have coined the term “omnipredicative” to characterize the specific features of Nahuatl grammar in his *Une grammaire omniprédicative: Essai sur la morphosyntaxe du nahuatl classique* (Paris: CNRS Press, 1994), but similar insights were made by others at about the same time, for example, J. Richard Andrews in the first edition of his *Introduction to Classical Nahuatl* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975). Launey’s first grammar book appeared in 1979 in French as *Introduction à la langue et à la littérature aztèques*, vol. 1: *Grammaire* (Paris: L’Harmattan). For a development of the grammatical scholarship on Nahuatl, see James Lockhart’s “Editorial Preface” to the bilingual edition of Horacio Carochi’s *Grammar of the Mexican Language With an Explanations of Its Adverbs (1645)*, ed. and trans. by James Lockhart (Stanford: Stanford University Press (2001), vii–xxii. The primary and most updated account of omnipredicativity, which the present essay uses, is Launey’s explanation in “The Features of Omnipredicativity in Classical Nahuatl,” *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung* 57 (2004): 49–69.
29. The root of this word, *chihua*, means “to act” or “to do,” and has a reflexive prefix *mo-* added. It is not, then, related to the system of verbs deriving from *câ*. Any connection between being and becoming, conceptually and linguistically present in English, is thus artificial, resulting from translation of Nahuatl into English.
30. The analogy is not exact, but I have in mind Thomas Aquinas in *De ente et essentia* in English translation as *Thomas Aquinas on Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968).
31. This is against Jacques Soustelle’s claim, which he develops in chapter seven of *La vie quotidienne des aztèques à la veille de la conquête espagnole* (Paris: Hachette, 1955), that this sort of knowledge was confined to an elite or at least selective class of individuals in Nahuatl culture.
32. The translation is my own. The reader should recall that “*o*” is often recorded as “*u*,” and “*u*” is sometimes recorded as “*v*,” so that “*vme*” is here a transcription for “*ome*,” meaning “two” or “dual.”
33. Angel Garibay, *Historia de la literatura náhuatl*, vol. 1 (Mexico City: Porrúa Press, 1953), 128–30. Alfonso Caso makes a case for this in his *La Religión de los Aztecas* (Mexico City: Enciclopedia Ilustrada Mexicana, 1936), 8.
34. *Historia-Tolteca Chichimeca*, ed. and trans. by Luis Reyes García, Paul Kirchoff and Lina Odena Güemes (Puebla: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1976), 166. I have followed Miguel León-Portilla’s Spanish in *La filosofía Nahuatl*, 149.
35. *Código Matritense de la Real Academia*, VIII, fol. 175v, which is available online <http://bdmx.mx/documento/bernardino-sahagun-codices-matritenses>. Last accessed June 20, 2018. The present translation follows Miguel León-Portilla’s Spanish translation in *La filosofía nahuatl*, 151.
36. See especially chapters three and seven of Soustelle’s *La vie quotidienne des aztèques à la veille de la conquête espagnole*

for a more careful analysis of the relationship of the Mexica to their predecessor cultures, and the Toltecs and Chichimecas in particular.

37. For further development, see Alfredo López Austin, *Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciones de los antiguos Nahuas*, vol. I (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de México, 1984), 55–68.
38. *Historia de los Mexicanos por sus pinturas*, originally published by Joaquín García Icazbalceta in *Teogonía e Historia de los Mexicanos: Tres Opúsculos del Siglo XIV*, ed. Ángel Garibay, (Mexico City: Porrúa Press, 1965), 23.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 25.
41. This line of argument stretches back at least to Hermann Bayer's "Das aztekische Götterbild Alexander von Humboldt," in *Wissenschaftliche Festschrift zu Enthüllung des von Seiten S. M. Kaiser Wilhelm II, dem Mexicanischen Volke zum Jubiläum, seiner Unabhängigkeit Gestifteten Humboldt-Denkmal's...* (Mexico City, Müller hons., 1910), 116. It is a line of argument of course continued in Soustille's *La vie quotidienne des aztèques*, Miguel León-Portilla, even in his more recent *Aztecas-Mexicas: Desarrollo de una civilización originaria* (Mexico City: Algaba Press, 2005), and also James Maffie's *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*.
42. Translation is my own.
43. This translation of *Tezcatlipoca* is a contentious one. Frances Karttunen, in the entry to the name in her *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), notes that although the stem *poc*, from *poch-tli* for "smoke" exists, there is no corresponding verb *poca*. It might rather be related to the word *ihpotza*, which would have the intransitive verb *ihpoca*, meaning to belch, or perhaps even give forth smoke. What is critical for the present analysis, however, is the uncontested term *tezcatl*, mirror, which is amply attested as metaphor for an object which lights up another.
44. This analysis follows, *grosso modo*, the analysis León-Portilla provides in chapter three of *La Filosofía Nahuatl*.
45. *Codex Chimalpopoca: The Text in Nahuatl with a Glossary and Grammatical Notes*, ed. John Bierhorst (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 87. Hereafter abbreviated as CC. All translations of this text are my own, though in this case, because it accepts Bierhorst's corrections, the resulting translation is close.
46. See, for example, the stories of the four creations of humans in parts one and three of the *Popul Vuh*, Dennis Tedlock (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
47. Translation is my own.
48. *Cantares Mexicanos*, fols. 25r and v. Translation is slightly modified for readability from Miguel León-Portilla's in *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, 93.
49. This is especially Werner Jaeger's view as expressed in *Aristoteles: Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung* (Berlin, Weidmann, 1923), English translation by Richard Robinson, *Aristotle: Fundamentals of the History of his Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1934).
50. This is the view developed in different ways by Günther Patzig in "Theologie und Ontologie in der 'Metaphysik' des Aristoteles," *Kantstudien* 52 (1960–1961): 185ff; reprinted in *Articles on Aristotle: 3 Metaphysics*, ed. J. Barnes, M. Schofield, and R. Sorabji (London: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 33ff, and chapter seven of Kosman's *The Activity of Being*. The unified view likely finds its earliest source, among "Western" commentators, in Thomas Aquinas' *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. John Rowan (Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books, 1961).
51. This is the view of Aristotle's contemplative life that C. D. C. Reeve develops in chapter six of *Action, Contemplation, and Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Dance as Native Performative Knowledge

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Over the past few decades, there has been an upsurge in Native American performance arts to revisit and remember—to tell through retelling—stories of the past and how they have shaped Native identities and knowledges as those stories, identities, and knowledges have struggled to survive continued expropriation, abuse, and erasure. Native dance, specifically, has experienced a revitalization through a number of Native artists' endeavors to interweave the traditional with the contemporary. Native performance arts companies such as Native American Theatre Ensemble, DAYSTAR, Institute of American Indian Arts, Dancing Earth Contemporary Indigenous Dance Creations, Oxlaval Q'anil, Native Earth Performing Arts, Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble, Spiderwoman Theater, and Red Arts Performing Arts Company have utilized embodiment and motion as a way of accessing and extracting blood memory to communicate such knowledges to Native and non-Native audiences. In the Foreward of *Native American Dance: Ceremonies and Social Traditions*, Richard West explains that

Dance is the very embodiment of Indigenous values and represents the response of Native Americans to complex and sometimes difficult historical experiences. Music and dance combine with material culture, language, spirituality, and artistic expression in compelling and complex ways, and are definitive elements of Native identity.¹

Beyond the articulation of identity, dance within the Native American worldview is deeply entrenched in and as ways of knowing. Charlotte Heth explains: "Indeed, in Indian life, the dance is not possible without the belief systems and the music, and the belief systems and the music can hardly exist without the dance."²

In 1921 the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs issued the following Circular decree:

I have, therefore, to direct you to use your utmost endeavours to dissuade the Indians from excessive indulgence in the practice of dancing. You should suppress any dances which cause waste of time, interfere with the occupations of the Indians, unsettle them for serious work, injure their health or encourage them in sloth and idleness. You should also dissuade, and, if possible, prevent them from leaving their reserves for the purpose of attending fairs, exhibitions, etc., when their absence would result in their own farming and other interests being neglected. It is realized that reasonable amusement and recreation should be enjoyed by Indians, but they should not be allowed to dissipate their energies and abandon themselves to demoralizing amusements. By the use of tact and firmness you can obtain control and keep it, and this obstacle to continued progress will then disappear.³