**2021 APA Essay Prize Honorable Mention:**

**Reconsidering the Epistemological Problematic**

**of Nahua Philosophy**

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My aim in this paper is to raise some concerns about efforts by scholars like León-Portilla and, especially, Maffie to recover and reconstruct important aspects of the philosophical outlook of Aztec thought and culture.[[1]](#endnote-1) More specifically, I will criticize their attempt to read off, from the extant Nahuatl poetry, an epistemological problematic that they think had its roots in the metaphysical outlook of the Nahuas.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The discussion on this topic revolves around the Nahuatl definition of *neltiliztli,* a term that is standardly translated as “truth”. Although the views of these interpreters do not align completely, they both share the conviction that *neltiliztli* should not be understood through the dominant western framework that—influenced by the Cartesian problematic of securing a genuine connection between mental representations and the way the world really is—tends to interpret the notion of truth in terms of correspondence theory. According to such theory, some X—usually some mental item like a belief or a proposition—is true, if and only if, the descriptive content of X succeeds in corresponding to or matching the way the world really is.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Given the metaphysical outlook of the Nahuas, which conceives of the world as being in perpetual flux, understanding *neltiliztli* as “truth” in this standard (western) way, runs the risk of erasing the unique epistemological meanings that the term had for them; meanings that are more properly associated with the idea of something being “firmly or well-rooted”. After all, as León-Portilla explains, “the word ‘truth’ in Nahuatl, *neltiliztli*, is derived from the same radical as ‘root’, *tla-nél-huatl*, from which, in turn, comes *nel-huáyotl*, ‘base’ or ‘foundation’. The stem syllable *nel* has the original connotation of solid firmness or deeply rooted. With this etymology ‘truth’, for the Nahuas, was to be identified with well-grounded stability.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Set against the background of a processive metaphysics that allegedly impresses some kind of “illusory” quality on empirical existence in general, this etymology suggests to these writers that *neltiliztli* must preclude notions of correspondence and should be instead understood to consist in apprehending reality in a more stable, more genuine, and well-grounded way.[[5]](#endnote-5)

While León-Portilla does not develop an epistemological theory out of these considerations, his analysis does seem to suggest that a kind of epistemological problematic can be attributed to the Nahuas, but one that should be interpreted principally along an ontological axis: for the Nahuas the philosophical problem of truth consisted in finding a stable basic principle for both man and the universe in some other, more real metaphysical realm that is not subject to instability and change.[[6]](#endnote-6) The mantle of articulating a problematic that is more clearly epistemological is picked up by Maffie, who argues that—pace León-Portilla—for the Nahuas the problem was not really to access a different and truer ontological realm, but rather to perceive this reality more genuinely given that we systematically misperceive it in everyday life because of the deceptive quality of *teotl*, the animating principle that the Nahuas believed continuously transforms itself in a self-generating and self-regenerating process that is responsible for creating and sustaining all of reality.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In what follows I will problematize these readings, focusing mostly on Maffie’s account, but doing so in a way that carries over to León-Portilla’s arguments and, in general, to those defended by commentators who wish to extract epistemological lessons from the concept of *neltiliztli* to advance non-western theories that can rival the supposedly dominant model furnished by correspondence theory.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Before I raise my worries, however, let me briefly say something about the nature of the evidence from which we interpret Mesoamerican thought. This evidence consists mainly of some fifteen extant Mesoamerican codices on which were drawn paintings and glyphs that the Nahua sages and poets would interpret by a process of following with their eyes—usually during ritual—the sequence of characters and paintings depicted, while they recited or said their meanings out loud. During the colonial era these pictographic texts or song-poems became committed into linear alphabetic writing with the help of indigenous translators and informants under the supervision of Spanish friars. Many questions can be raised about the legitimacy and reliability of the testimony these texts provide to those who wish to draw lessons from them concerning the content and form of Mesoamerican cultures.[[9]](#endnote-9) But this is not really the source of my contention with interpreters of Nahua epistemology. Accordingly, I will assume that the translated texts in question are reliable enough for us to productively use them in our reconstructions of Nahua philosophy.[[10]](#endnote-10) My criticism will focus instead on the interpretations that have been made of some of these texts and the assumptions that underlie them. So that we can have a referent for the discussion that follows, allow me to cite some of the song-poems that both León-Portilla and Maffie rely on to advance their interpretations of Nahua philosophy.[[11]](#endnote-11)

e.g.1:

*Do we speak the truth here, oh Giver of Life?*

*We merely dream, we only rise from a dream.*

*All is like a dream…*

*No one speaks here of truth…*

e.g.2:

*Is there perchance any truth to our words here?*

*All seems so like a dream, only do we rise from sleep,*

*only on earth do our words remain.*

e.g.3:

*So has it been said by Tochihuitzin,*

*so has it been said by Coyolchiuhqui:*

*It is not true, it is not true*

*that we come to this earth to live.*

*We come only to sleep, only to dream.*

*Our body is a flower.*

*As grass becomes green in the springtime,*

*so our hearts will open, and give forth buds,*

*and then they wither.*

*So did Tochihuitzin say.*

e.g.4:

*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*.

e.g.5:

*We say nothing true here, Giver of Life,*

*But speak only as from dreams,*

*from which we shall soon awaken;*

*we tell the truth to no one here.*

….

*We tell the truth to no one here.*

*The Giver of Life mocks us.*

*We express only a dream, oh friend;*

*Our heart knows—*

*In truth, He, God, mocks us.*

Both Maffie and León-Portilla interpret dream-talk in these texts as indicating that, for the Nahuas, everyday life was deceptive or illusory.[[12]](#endnote-12) As mentioned above, León-Portilla takes this to signal that concern with *neltiliztli* (truth) revolved around the need to gain access to a different, more real metaphysical realm from which an enduring truth could be secured. Maffie rejects this kind of reading principally for foisting onto Nahua philosophy a dualist ontology that, he believes, a careful consideration of the evidence belies. For Maffie the metaphysical commitments of the Nahuas are more properly understood to have been monistic and pantheistic: all reality is composed of a single, dynamic, eternally self-generating and perpetually changing sacred power or force that the Nahuas called *teotl*.[[13]](#endnote-13)

However, since he acknowledges that the song-poems appear to relegate everyday life to the status of being dreamlike and illusory, Maffie is forced to find a way to account for the ostensive dualism that employment of the dream metaphor apparently invokes. Because ontological monism does not admit the existence of a plurality of things, it cannot relegate illusion to an inferior grade of reality. Accordingly, the solution is to give these concepts an epistemological significance. As Maffie puts it: “Nahua *tlamatinime* [sages] employed the concepts of dreamlikeness and illusion as epistemological categories in order to make the epistemological claim that the natural condition of humans is to be deceived by *teotl’s* disguise and misunderstand *teotl*”.[[14]](#endnote-14) In this way, the dreamlike quality of everyday life becomes a function of *how* humans perceive the single, undifferentiated reality around them: this illusory quality springs from our perceptual judgments and interpretations, from our de dicto perceptions of the world; i.e. from our perceiving the world under a description—as seeing a tree, or a house, or a person, and so on. Strictly speaking none of those de dicto perceptions are correct—hence their illusory, dreamlike status—since, in each of those instances, we are always perceiving only one and the same thing, namely, *teotl*. Because we cannot help but perceive *teotl* under some description, we seem condemned to constantly misapprehend *teotl* in ordinary experience. As Maffie succinctly puts it, “[human beings] perceive and conceive *teotl's nahual* (self-disguise) and consequently perceive and conceive *teotl* in a manner that is *ahnelli*—i.e. untrue, unrooted, inauthentic, unconcealing, and nondisclosing. It is humans’ misperceiving and misunderstanding *teotl* as its disguise (*nahual*) which prevents them from seeing *teotl* (reality) as it really is”.[[15]](#endnote-15)

For Maffie, then, the epistemological problematic of the Nahuas consisted in trying to secure a firmly rooted disclosure of the undifferentiated, processive nature of reality. *Neltiliztli*—the opposite of dreamlikeness or illusion—is about genuinely disclosing *teotl* by coming to experience it directly and not under a description: “Nahua epistemology claims the only way for humans to experience *teotl* knowingly is to experience *teotl* sans description. Humans know *teotl* by means of a mystical-style union between their hearts and *teotl* that enables them to know *teotl* directly and immediately (i.e., without recourse to or mediation by language, concepts, or categories).”[[16]](#endnote-16) Ritual, which included practices of self-sacrifice and the performance of song-poems, allowed the Nahua philosophers to obtain true cognition by facilitating the kind of mystical union in which they became well-rooted in *teotl* and enabled *teotl* to disclose itself directly to them.

Against this account of Nahua epistemology, it can be said, first, that it is not obvious that attempting to interpret *neltilitzli* as firmly rooted disclosure completely eschews the kind of considerations animating correspondence accounts of truth. After all, if the fundamental problem of Nahua epistemology is to perceive *teotl* as it really is, and not as it disguises itself as being, then it is hard to see how that concern does not translate itself into the desire to match the mind’s experience or perception of the world with the way the world truly is—in this case, processive. Part of Maffie’s reasoning for arguing that *neltiliztli* is better translated as well-rooted disclosure and not correspondence is that reality, for the Nahuas, is an undifferentiated processive totality that lacks the kind of “worldly things” that could serve as the requisite truth-makers in a correspondence relation. For the Nahuas, *teotl* does not really consist of discrete facts, state-of-affairs, structures, or the like, and to the extent that we are perceiving such objects we are in fact misperceiving *teotl*. Consequently, Maffie thinks that, metaphysically speaking, there seems to be nothing that our beliefs or sentences could correspond to or indeed represent.[[17]](#endnote-17) But, pace Maffie, there still *is* something in this worldview that can serve as truth-maker and to which our mental experience can correspond: namely, *teotl* itself, in all its undifferentiated, processive splendor. The mere fact that our direct experience of *teotl* cannot be captured semantically or that it must not be mediated by words and categories (since doing so would amount to perceiving *teotl* under some description and, hence, misperceiving it), does not belie the need to ensure that the mental states in which it is to be encoded or experienced *must match* the way the world truly is, which just amounts to the need to secure a correspondence between the perceiving mind and reality. To obtain true cognition by enabling *teotl* to disclose itself directly and authentically *is* to match my experience of *teotl’s* well-rooted disclosure with the way the world truly is.

However, in truth, my qualm with these interpreters is not really about whether they succeed in articulating a non-correspondence notion of *neltiliztli*. My real worry reaches a bit deeper and has to do with whether we are even entitled in the first place to read off any kind of epistemological concerns from the song-poems in question. For even if we are successful in cashing out a non-correspondence epistemological problematic associated with *neltiliztli*, the reality is that this whole view rests on an interpretation of “dream-talk” in Nahua poetry that might have been foreign to the way the Nahuas felt about dreams or the associations that “dream-talk” naturally conjured up for them.

In our modern imagination employment of the dream metaphor to suggest a resemblance between our waking life and the imaginings of the mind during sleep is usually meant to convey the idea that there is an “illusory” quality to our everyday experience; that what we take to be real might in fact more closely resemble the *unrealities* and *fancies* of the imagination that are the stuff of dreams. This was certainly the impetus behind Descartes’s use of the dream metaphor in his *Meditations* to suggest that perhaps all our experience is nothing but the elaborate dream an evil demon has dreamt up for us; or as Calderón de la Barca put it more poetically in his famous play, “La Vida es Sueño” (Life is a Dream): “that all life is a dream, and dreams themselves are a dream”. But while this association is well-cemented in our modern imagination, we are not entitled to project it into the mind of the ancient Nahuas. When the Nahuas compare waking life to a dream in their song-poems they need not have intended to convey the notion that our everyday experience is in any way deceptive or illusory: not in the ontological way León-Portilla has in mind, nor in the more properly epistemological way that Maffie proposes. And, consequently, *neltiliztli* might not be about true cognition or the proper disclosure of reality, well-grounded or otherwise. In fact, it might not be about cognizing reality at all.

But if not illusion or deception, what significance could the dream metaphor have had for the Nahua mind and what difference would that make to the philosophical lessons we might be able to extract from these song-poems? Let me suggest two aspects of dreams that might have been part of the associations that the dream metaphor in these song-poems was meant to elicit. The first is that dreaming is the state in which we are “awakened” to a kind of conscious life during sleep. Falling asleep involves the natural and complete suspension of consciousness, which is why we are not able to remember what happens to us while we are asleep and why sleeping is often associated with death. But in dreams our conscious mind becomes active again in a way that we can, and often do, remember. Thus, when the song-poems suggest that life is like a dream they might have simply intended to convey the idea that coming into existence is like the process in which the mind is aroused into conscious activity from its senseless, unconscious state of sleep. After all, in both cases (dreaming and existing) the person is brought out of a passive nothingness—in the case of existence, the nothingness of non-being—into a kind of active somethingness.

The other aspect of dreams that might have been especially salient to the Nahuas has to do with the peculiar quality that this state of conscious activity for the most part has for those who experience it: namely, that it seems haphazard, random, unorganized, and lacking a clear meaning. Thus, another way in which life is like a dream, is that we come into existence without a clear purpose and unable to ascertain why we are going through the motions of living or even in what way we should do so. When the poets claim that we say nothing true here and that we come only to dream, or when they appear to complain that the Giver of Life mocks us because he has given us an existence that expresses only a dream, they might be intending to covey the notion that life is not just fleeting and short, but also lacking any coherence and purpose.

Interpreting the song-poems with these associations in mind suggests that more than setting up an *epistemological* problematic for the Nahuas, dream-talk seems to have been intended to convey an *existential* one instead. If all life is like a dream because it consists of conscious activity that lacks organization and meaning, then the problematic surrounding *neltiliztli* was not that of cognizing the world correctly, but that of finding a way to make the world well-grounded and stable by giving life meaning, direction, coherence, and the like. It seems to me that this reading not only jibes well with the etymology of *neltiliztli*, but also with other features of this word that commentators like Maffie often highlight to advance their epistemological readings. For instance, noting that *neltiliztli* applies equally to persons, objects, and utterances, Maffie argues that it is incompatible with correspondence theory, since it makes no sense to speak of a person or an object corresponding to the way things really are.[[18]](#endnote-18) I agree, but not because *neltiliztli* is better understood as epistemic well-rooted disclosure of truth—as Maffie wants us to believe—rather, perhaps it is because *neltiliztli* is about impressing meaning and significance (also, enduring stability) to the things that lack them. People, objects, utterances, and the like start out being chaotic, senseless and not at all well-rooted on this earth, but they can acquire coherence and become well-rooted through the sorts of practices—usually sacrificial—recommended by the Nahua sages.[[19]](#endnote-19) In these practices, the truth of the objects is not in question, what is in question is how they fit into a system of meanings and purposes that impresses said objects with significance.

In conclusion, interpreters should tread more carefully when trying to imagine what epistemological concerns might have animated the thought of Nahua poets in order not to import their own unwarranted associations into the metaphorical analysis that engagement with these sources necessarily requires. In our efforts to recover and legitimize forgotten and marginalized philosophies such as that of the Nahuas—efforts that I judge to be appropriate—we must guard against getting too carried away with our speculations. While Nahua culture is clearly animated by philosophical concerns, it is by no means necessary to imagine that they must encompass all the traditional, paradigmatic branches of philosophical inquiry. In the end, the Nahuas might have been less concerned with the epistemological problem of how to cognize the world correctly than they were with the existential one of how to give their fleeting and senseless lives some stability and meaning.[[20]](#endnote-20)

1. See, Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, trans. J.E. Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990); and James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding the World in Motion* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2014); “Why Care about Nezahualcoyotl: Veritism and Nahua Philosophy” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32, no. 1, (2002): 71-91; and “Aztec Philosophy” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-002, accessed 2021, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Aztecs were one of the many Nahuatl-speaking groups of people that inhabited the great Valley of Mexico and its environs. Prior to colonial times they had managed to build an empire that stretched from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean, and were, thus, the most dominant Nahua group at the time of the Spanish conquest. Since the reflections that follow have to do with Nahua culture broadly construed, I will be referring principally to the Nahuas and to Nahua philosophy. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I am giving a very simple and narrow definition here. There is, of course, a rich debate about how to understand correspondence theory. Some of this debate is usefully summarized in places like the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. See, David Marian, “The Correspondence Theory of Truth”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., accessed 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/truth-correspondence/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought*, 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Here is León-Portilla: “convinced of the transitory nature of all things existing on earth and of the dreamlike quality of life, the *tlamatinime’s* [the Nahua philosopher’s] approach to the truth couldn’t have been the Aristotelian ‘identification of the mind who knows with existing reality’” (Ibid., 75-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 8; and 71-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Maffie, “Why Care”, 75-77. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For another example of this approach see Philip T.L. Mack, “Should a Concept of Truth Be Attributed to Nahuatl Thought? Preserving ‘the Colonial Difference’ between Concepts of the West and Nahua Philosophy” *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 14, no.2, (2015): 11-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Miguel León-Portilla, “Have We Really Translated the Mesoamerican ‘Ancient World’?” *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*, B. Swann, ed. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); Cf. Alejandro Santana, “Did the Aztecs do Philosophy?” *APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy* 8, no.1, (2008): 2-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. In “Have We Really Translated the Mesoamerican ‘Ancient World’?”, León-Portilla discusses some of these worries and defends the view that we can be confident that the texts in question have reliably translated at least part of the worldview of ancient Mesoamerica. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Of the following, the first three samples of song-poems can be found in León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought*, 7, 71, and 72, respectively; I have complemented these with a couple more examples taken from Miguel León-Portilla and Earl Shorris, *In the Language of the Kings: an Anthology of Mesoamerican Literature—Pre-Columbian to the Present*, (London: W.W. Norton &Company, 2001): 78 and 93-4, respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Maffie appears to have tempered somewhat his position, arguing that we are not entitled to interpret dream-talk in these song-poems as implying that the Aztecs regarded dreams as by definition unreal, illusory, false, or untrustworthy (Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*, 59-62). For Maffie this reading betrays a western prejudice which, under the influence of our scientific understanding, sees the content of dreams as unreal. Such understanding of dreams need not have been part of the Nahua mind. Thus, Maffie prefers in the end to see the function of dreams in these song-poems as “a trope for that which is obscure and mysterious—not for that which is unreal” (Ibid., 62). Still, since in this work he continues to uphold the view that the epistemological problem of the Nahuas was that human beings systematically misperceive reality or *teotl* (Ibid., 40-42) and, thus—as he has argued elsewhere—that their epistemological challenge consisted in attempting to perceive *teotl* more genuinely through ritual, it seems as if Maffie would be probably still inclined to see the mysterious or obscure quality being reference by dream-talk in these song-poems as indicating that everyday life has the character of being in, some sense, *misleading or* *deceptive* and, to that extent, still *illusory*. In any case, this is certainly the interpretation Maffie gives to Nahua dream-talk in the other works I will be referencing below. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Maffie, “Why Care”; and “Aztec Philosophy”. For his more detailed defense of this view, see Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Maffie, “Aztec Philosophy”, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Maffie, “Why Care”, 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. On the centrality of the sacrificial paradigm for organizing the cultural universe and practices of the Aztecs, see Kay A. Read, “The Fleeting Moment: Cosmogony, Eschatology, and Ethics in Aztec Religion and Society,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 14, no.1, (1986): 113-138. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ideas for this paper were first presented at the 5th Latinx Philosophy Conference in 2020. I wish to thank the audience for their questions and feedback. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)