

Article

Aztec Metaphysics—Two Interpretations of an Evanescent World

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Abstract: This paper contrasts two contemporary approaches to Nahua metaphysics by focusing on the stance of the Nahua *tlamatinime* (philosophers) regarding the nature of reality. Miguel León-Portilla and James Maffie offer the two most comprehensive interpretations of Nahua philosophy. Although León-Portilla and Maffie agree on their interpretation of *teotl* as the evanescent principle of Nahua metaphysics, their interpretations regarding the *tlamatinime* metaphysical stances diverge. Maffie argues that León-Portilla attributes to the *tlamatinime* a metaphysics of being according to which being means permanence and stability and thus, since earthly things are continuously changing, being cannot be predicated of them, hence earthly things are not real. I present textual support to show that León-Portilla does not read Nahua metaphysics through the lens of a metaphysics of being and thus that León-Portilla does not interpret the *tlamatinime* as denying the reality of earthly things. I then provide an exegetical analysis of León-Portilla's texts to show that, in his interpretation, metaphysical concerns are intimately linked to existential questions regarding the meaning of human life. Ultimately, I argue that, in León-Portilla's interpretation, the *tlamatinime* conception of art functions as *poiesis*, that is, as the process of aesthetic creation that gives meaning to human life.

Keywords: Nahua philosophy; *teotl*; metaphysics; metaphysics of being; epistemology; Nezahualcoyotl; aesthetics; existential; *in xochitl in cuicatl*; *poiesis*

1. Introduction

*Cuando muere una lengua,
ya muchas han muerto
y muchas pueden morir.
Espejos para siempre quebrados,
sombra de voces
para siempre acalladas:
la humaidad se empobrece.*

—Miguel León-Portilla

This paper¹ contrasts two prominent contemporary approaches to Nahua metaphysics² by focusing on the Nahua *tlamatinime* (philosophers) stance regarding the nature of reality. Miguel León-Portilla

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² Although we commonly refer to the Nahua philosophical tradition as “Aztec philosophy”, the Aztecs are only a part of the broader Nahua culture. King and philosopher Nezahualcoyotl (1402–1472), for example, belonged to the city-state of Texcoco which is part of the Nahua culture but does not belong to the Aztec city-state. In the following, I thus use the term “Nahua philosophy” to refer to the philosophical tradition most commonly known as “Aztec philosophy”.

and James Maffie offer the two most comprehensive contemporary interpretations of Nahua philosophy. The publication of León-Portilla's *La Filosofía Nahuatl Estudiada en sus Fuentes* in 1956 is important because, on the one hand, it opened Nahua thought as a philosophical field of study formerly restricted to ethnography and history. On the other hand, León-Portilla's *Filosofía Nahuatl* raised meta-philosophical debates regarding the appropriateness of attributing philosophical status to Nahua thought (León-Portilla 1966, pp. 5–11). By giving philosophical status to Nahua thought, León-Portilla thus defied the boundaries of the Western monopoly of philosophy (Villegas 1993, p. 152). Like León-Portilla, Maffie's recent *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (2014) breaks new ground in Anglo-American philosophy both by offering original interpretations of key Nahua metaphysical concepts and by challenging the Western monopoly of philosophical production (Maffie 2014, pp. 5–8). The recent publication of Maffie's *Aztec Philosophy* thus opens an ample field of research for those of us who continue the work of challenging the Western philosophical monopoly through non-Western philosophies.

Clarity about the *tlamatinime* stance regarding the nature of reality is important for two reasons. First, clarifying the *tlamatinime* metaphysical stance can help in discerning other Nahua philosophical and non-philosophical positions. As Maffie puts it, "Nahua metaphysics served as the backdrop of Nahua religious, theological and philosophical thought (including moral, political, epistemological and aesthetic thought) as well as Nahua ritual praxis" (Maffie 2014, p. 1). Understanding the Nahua conception of reality is then helpful to understand how other aspects of the Nahua world "hang together" (ibid., p. 7). Second, focusing on the *tlamatinime* stance regarding their conception of reality highlights the intellectual activity required to formulate conceptual resources that regulate and give meaning to individual and social life. This is important when confronting the question of whether Nahua philosophy *is* philosophy. As Maffie argues, "Like León-Portilla, I maintain the Aztecs not only had a philosophy but also *did* philosophy. They engaged in self-consciously reflective and critical endeavors" (ibid.). Nahua thought regards not only a world view, most importantly, it involves formulating conceptual resources that regulate and give meaning to human life.

Despite sharing in the meta-philosophical challenge to the Western philosophical monopoly, Maffie's and León-Portilla's interpretations regarding the *tlamatinime* metaphysical stances diverge. Although both Maffie and León-Portilla agree in their interpretation of *teotl* as an ever-changing evanescent principle of reality, Maffie argues that León-Portilla interprets the *tlamatinime* stance as denying the existence of earthly reality. Maffie charges León-Portilla with attributing the *tlamatinime* a metaphysics of being according to which being means permanence and stability à la Platonic forms. On this view, since earthly things are constantly changing, being cannot be predicated of them and thus earthly things are not real. In the following, I argue that Maffie's critique that León-Portilla attributes a metaphysics of being to the Nahua is misguided. I present textual support to show that León-Portilla does not read Nahua metaphysics through the lens of a metaphysics of being and thus León-Portilla does not interpret the *tlamatinime* as denying the reality of earthly things. Second, I argue that León-Portilla reads the *tlamatinime* stance regarding reality in existential rather than simply metaphysical or simply epistemological terms. I provide an exegetical analysis of León-Portilla's texts to show that, in his interpretation, metaphysical concerns are intimately linked to questions regarding the meaning of human life. Lastly, I argue that in León-Portilla's interpretation, the *tlamatinime* conception of art functions as *poiesis*, that is, as the active production of meaning. The meaning of human life is thus not a given in León-Portilla's interpretation but it arises from a process of aesthetic creation.

2. The Evanescent Principle of Reality and the Metaphysics of Being

Understanding the metaphysical background of Nahua intellectual theorizing is important to understand other philosophical positions developed by the *tlamatinime*. The metaphysical views of the Nahuas gives rise to a series of concerns that lead to important conceptual theorizing regarding the nature of knowledge and the possibility of living stable, meaningful lives. Central to the metaphysical views of the Nahuas is the concept of *teotl*, which is the dynamic principle of generation and regeneration

and the ultimate constitutive element of reality. Two important aspects of *teotl* as a metaphysical principle are: (1) that reality is ultimately reducible to it and thus, that everything is *teotl*; and (2) that *teotl* is a dynamic, rather than a stable principle. Maffie characterizes these two aspects of the Nahua metaphysical view as a process metaphysics involving ontological and constitutional monism. In the following, I expand on these two aspects of the Nahua metaphysical view and explain the epistemological implications that arise from it. I then introduce Maffie's charge that León-Portilla attributes the *tlamatinime* a metaphysics of being that leads them to deny the reality of earthly existence. I later offer an alternative reading of León-Portilla's interpretation that can respond to Maffie's charge.

Central to Nahua metaphysics is the view that everything is made of and is reducible to a single principle of generation and regeneration called *teotl*. *Teotl* is both the constitutive element of things and things are identical with *teotl*, while, at the same time, *teotl* is the dynamic principle that generates and regenerates things. As a metaphysical principle, *teotl* thus involves two aspects that are central to other Nahua philosophical positions. Maffie calls the first aspect of the Nahua metaphysical view ontological and constitutional monism (Maffie 2014, p. 22). Ontological monism is the view that reality is reducible to only one thing, in this case, *teotl*. This does not mean that the total sum of things amounts to *teotl* but that *teotl* is identical with individual things and with reality as a whole. The multiplicity of entities, including human beings, are then identical with *teotl*. Constitutional monism is the view that reality is made of only one kind of stuff. In the case of Nahua metaphysics, reality is made of *teotl*. The multiplicity of things one encounters in the world is then not only identical with *teotl*, it is also made of *teotl*. Importantly, this sort of metaphysical monism excludes the possibility of dualistic distinctions like between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* common in modern Western philosophy. This is particularly important when considering the epistemological views developed by the *tlamatinime*.

The second central aspect of Nahua metaphysics is that *teotl* is a dynamic, ever-changing principle. The ever-changing movement of *teotl* has no stable origin or end and thus it is not a teleological principle. Rather, *teotl* is a perpetual process of self-becoming. This aspect of *teotl* cannot be captured by the categories of being and non-being familiar to Western metaphysics because they are stable, rather than dynamic categories. As we shall see, under Western metaphysical categories of being, either *teotl* is or it is not. *Teotl* is rather an ever-changing, evanescent principle. Maffie characterizes this aspect of the Nahua metaphysical view as process metaphysics (ibid., p. 27). Process metaphysics is the view that the stability of objects is only a pattern in a continuous process of change and becoming. As such, things are not stable, they are continuously changing, fading and re-emerging. Dynamism thus underlies the stability of objects, instead of stable essences or substances. Moreover, since reality is identical with *teotl*, the generating and regenerating movement of *teotl* is the dynamic force that vivifies reality. The Nahuas thus conceive of *teotl* as *Tloque Nahuaque* or "the giver of life," that is, as the non-personal, divine force of life (León-Portilla 1992, p. 82). The dynamic aspect of reality raises serious issues for the *tlamatinime* regarding their (epistemological, religious and ethical) relation to the divine.

The Nahuas characterize the ever-changing aspect of *teotl* in two seemingly deceptive ways that raise important issues pertaining to the possibility of knowing reality. One of these ways is through the creative, aesthetic concept of in *xochitl in cuicatl* or "flower and song." The Nahuas thus conceive the generating and regenerating activity of *teotl* as an artistic creation. Accordingly, the world and entities within it are the artistic creation and recreation of *teotl*. Nezahualcoyotl expresses this view through the metaphor of a "book of paintings" that is the world in which we live (ibid.). Entities in the world, including human beings, are thus paintings in the book of *teotl*. The second seemingly deceptive way in which the Nahuas conceive the generating and regenerating aspect of *teotl* is through the concept of *nahual*, which is a shamanic form-changing transformation. Maffie explains that, "the word *nahual* derives from *nahualli* meaning both form-changing and the being into which a shaman transforms" (Maffie 2014, p. 39). *Teotl* thus transforms and re-transforms itself into different guises such as animals, human beings and other entities in the world. This seemingly deceptive artistic and shamanic conceptions of *teotl* raise questions regarding one's epistemic access to reality. That is because

teotl not only appears as illusory, as in the case of paintings, it also appears as disguising, as in the case of its shamanic transformations. In both cases, reality thus appears as other than itself—therefore the disguising characterization of *teotl*.

One way of interpreting the illusory and disguising aspects of *teotl* is in metaphysical terms. The metaphysical interpretation of the illusory aspect of *teotl* would distinguish between seeming and being, where what seems is not that which is. This view is similar to the Platonic view of earthly things as the un-real manifestation of the real, that is, Platonic forms. Maffie calls this view a metaphysics of being, meaning that reality and being mean permanence. On this view, being cannot be predicated of an ever-changing and illusory world. Thus, since earthly things are illusory and evanescent, they are not real. Maffie argues that León-Portilla interprets the Nahuatl *tlamatinime* through the lens of a metaphysics of being that leads them to deny the existence of earthly things. Particularly, Maffie argues that León-Portilla interprets the following poem by Nezahualcoyotl according to the metaphysics of being:

- (1) I, Nezahualcoyotl, ask this:
 Is it true one really lives on the earth?
 Not forever on earth,
 Only a little while here.
 Though it be of jade it falls apart,
 Though it be gold it wears away,
 Though it be quetzal plumage it is torn asunder.
 Not forever on earth,
 Only a little while here. (León-Portilla 1992, p. 81)

Maffie argues that León-Portilla interprets Nezahualcoyotl's poem as capturing the ephemerality of earthly things, which not only causes Nezahualcoyotl, "profound sorrow and anguish, but, more significantly, causes him to doubt the very reality of everything earthly" (Maffie 2014, p. 44). In Maffie's view, León-Portilla ascribes Nezahualcoyotl the view that being is permanent and thus, if something is evanescent, it is not real. As Maffie writes, "León-Portilla must supply quite specific premise drawn from the metaphysics of Being: 'If something is evanescent, etc., then it is not real'" (ibid.). Hence, Maffie concludes, "[b]ecause earthly existence is evanescent, León-Portilla's Nezahualcoyotl reasons, it is not real" (ibid., emphasis in the original). Thus, according to Maffie, in León-Portilla's portrayal of Nezahualcoyotl's poem is an operative concept of reality as being.

Indeed, cashing out the illusory and disguising characterizations of *teotl* according to a metaphysics of being would lead the Nahuatl *tlamatinime* to serious consequences. The metaphysics of being that Maffie attributes to León-Portilla distinguishes between seeming and being, where what seems is not that which is and thus what seems is not real. On this interpretation then being cannot be predicated of transitory appearances. Moreover, since the Nahuatl characterization of earthly things is as illusory and transitory, then earthly things would fall under seeming and not being. This means that being cannot be predicated of the illusory and transitory earthly existence. Therefore, on this view earthly things, including human beings, are not real. The most obvious and practical consequence that follows from this interpretation is that the *tlamatinime* would be led to nihilism regarding human life and the world around them—a view that, as we shall see, León-Portilla rejects. The less obvious consequence is that this interpretation would lead the *tlamatinime* to introduce a split between real reality and mere appearances but this split is unwarranted by the ontological monism of Nahuatl metaphysics. The ontological monism of the Nahuatl metaphysical view reduces all things to *teotl*. Denying reality to earthly things would mean that real reality is beyond earthly existence and thus, that earthly things are not *teotl*. But that is absurd given that, for the Nahuas, everything is *teotl*.

Maffie argues that the deceptive character of *teotl* can better be understood in epistemological terms. Maffie introduces the distinction between *de re* perception and *de dicto* perception to explain that

the illusoriness of earthly existence regards the human inability to fully conceive *teotl* (ibid., pp. 41–42). *De re* perception is perception of a thing as it is itself and *de dicto* perception is perception of a thing under some description. Thus, for example, I might *de dicto* perceive a man entering a building, without *de re* perceiving that it was my friend Luis who entered the building. Similarly, one *de re* perceives *teotl* through its multiple manifestations without *de dicto* perceiving *teotl*. In his *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Aztec philosophy, Maffie puts it as follows, “As an epistemological consequence of *teotl*’s self-disguising, when humans customarily gaze upon the world, what they see is *teotl* as a human, as a tree, as a female, etc.—i.e., *teotl* self-disguised—rather than *teotl* as *teotl*” (Maffie 2005, sct. 2d, emphasis in the original). Maffie’s distinction between *de re* perception and *de dicto* perception then places the illusory characterization of *teotl* in epistemological rather than metaphysical terms. It is not as if earthly existence is illusory, disguising and therefore not real, rather, the illusoriness and disguise arise from *de dicto* perceived reality. Maffie writes as follows:

- (2) Nahua *tlamatinime* 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*—not the metaphysical claim that as *teotl*’s disguise all earthly existence is ontologically substandard and not genuinely real. (Maffie 2005, sct. 2f)

Thus, in Maffie’s view, for the *tlamatinime* earthly reality is illusory in an epistemological sense, rather than a metaphysical one. To conceive the illusoriness of earthly reality in metaphysical terms implies an ontological dualism that would distinguish between being from seeming, where what seems is not what is. However, the constitutional and ontological monism of Nahua metaphysics prevents that interpretation. Rather, Maffie argues that while *teotl* is metaphysically immanent, it is epistemologically transcendent (Maffie 2002, pp. 76–77). Hence, instead of interpreting the illusoriness of reality according to a metaphysics of being as Maffie claims León-Portilla does, Maffie offers an epistemological alternative that places the illusoriness in the human inability to fully understand *teotl*.

3. An Exegesis of León-Portilla’s Interpretation of Evanescent Reality

Maffie’s charge that León-Portilla interprets the Nahua stance regarding the illusory and evanescent aspects of reality according to a metaphysics of being raises important questions regarding other Nahua philosophical positions. León-Portilla’s alleged interpretation of the Nahua *tlamatinime* as denying the reality of earthly things would also regard their views about the possibility of acquiring knowledge of reality and the possibility of deriving principles that regulate human life. On that interpretation, León-Portilla would posit a stable, alternative reality from which to derive normative epistemological and ethical notions. In the following, however, I present textual evidence to support the claim that Maffie’s charge regarding León-Portilla’s interpretation is misguided. I argue that León-Portilla reads the *tlamatinime* stance regarding reality in existential rather than in simply metaphysical or simply epistemological terms. The Nahua *tlamatinime* stance regarding the reality of earthly things is thus intimately linked to concerns regarding the meaning of human life in its religious, epistemological, ethical and aesthetic manifestations.

Above, I showed that Maffie bases his case against León-Portilla on the latter’s interpretation of a poem by Nezahualcoyotl. In the poem, Nezahualcoyotl conveys a sense of sorrow and anguish regarding the fleetingness of earthly existence, both of the world and of the self. Maffie provides various textual sources to support the reading that given the evanescent aspect of earthly existence, “León-Portilla’s Nezahualcoyotl reasons, it is *not* real.” That is because, Maffie continues, “Nezahualcoyotl yearns for something enduring and stable—that is, something genuinely real” (Maffie 2014, p. 44, emphasis in the original). The relevant passages from León-Portilla’s interpretation are the following:

- (3) Life in *tlalticpac* [earth] is transitory. In the end everything must vanish; even rocks and precious metals will be destroyed. *Is there anything, then, that is really stable or true in this*

world? Such is the question the Nahuatl poet asks of Ipalnemohuani, the supreme god, the Giver of Life. (León-Portilla 1963, p. 7, my emphasis)

The second passage is the following:

- (4) With the denial of all stability and permanence in *tlaltípac* [earth], there arises the profound and anguished question: *Has man any hope for escape from the unreality of dreams—from this evanescent world?*. (Ibid., my emphasis)

The third passage reads as follows:

- (5) Their quest for rational answers ultimately led them [the *tlamatinime*] to question and to formulate problems in a philosophical manner about the very things the people accepted and believed. They expressed poetically some of the first difficulties they had come upon through rational inquiry. Consciously seeking knowledge “concerning what transcends our powers of understanding, the beyond,” the *tlamatinime* compared their metaphysically directed knowledge with the ideal of true knowledge, to the extent that man is able to grasp it. (ibid., p. 71, my emphasis)

Lastly, the fourth passage is the following:

- (6) Since what one finds on earth (*in tlaltípac*) is transitory, “Is one able to find anything on earth which endures?” *The question expresses dubious value of that earthly knowledge which aspires to reach out from the world of illusion in search of a rational explanation for “what transcends our understanding, what might be beyond”*. (ibid., my emphasis)

I will first deal with passages (5), (6) and (3) in that order since they share the concern regarding knowledge about reality. I will deal with passage (4) separately because it is the only passage that makes an explicit metaphysical claim.

There is a way to interpret passages (5) and (6) in metaphysical terms. On this interpretation, the passages would suggest that true knowledge of reality lies beyond fleeting existence and thus stability and being would lie beyond earthly existence. This interpretation gains support in passage (3), where Nezahualcoyotl doubts that there is anything stable and true in the earth. Again, this interpretation would make Nezahualcoyotl close to Plato for whom the stable bases of knowledge are not fleeting appearances but the forms that lie beyond earthly appearances. Thus, Nezahualcoyotl would be denying the reality of earthly things and positing the stability and reality of things beyond earthly appearances.

However, there is another way of interpreting these passages that would make León-Portilla’s interpretation closer to Maffie’s epistemological reading. On this interpretation, the *tlamatinime* would be asking if there is knowledge beyond their limited understanding. The “beyond” here would not mean “beyond earthly things,” but beyond our cognitive capacities. Passages (5) and (6) lend themselves to this reading. Passage (5), for example, reads, “concerning what transcends our powers of understanding, the beyond.” Similarly, passage (6) reads, “what transcends our understanding, what might be beyond.” In Maffie’s terms, the *tlamatinime* would be asking whether there is knowledge of reality beyond the knowledge one derives from *de dicto* perceiving *teotl*, beyond its different guises. Passage (3) can then be read in terms of a search for stable knowledge of the world, beyond the fleetingness and disguise of individual appearances. This interpretation gains additional support when one considers passage (4), in which León-Portilla seems to read Nezahualcoyotl as explicitly denying the reality of earthly things.

Passage (4) explicitly reads in metaphysical terms as concerning “the unreality of dreams,” that is, as denying reality to the illusory earthly existence. This passage would then clearly support Maffie’s reading of León-Portilla as attributing the *tlamatinime* a metaphysical view according to which what seems is not that which is. However, Maffie’s reading relies on the English translation of León-Portilla’s text in Spanish, which does not read as straightforwardly metaphysical as Maffie suggests. Here is the passage in question:

- (7) Negándose todo cimientto y permanencia a lo que existe en *tlaltípac* (sobre la tierra), surge una de las interrogantes más ondas y angustiosas—¿hay alguna esperanza de que el hombre pueda escaparse, por tener un ser *más verdadero*, de la ficción de los sueños, del mundo de lo que se va para siempre?. (León-Portilla 2006, p. 60, emphasis in the original)

Whereas the Spanish version reads as Neahualcoyotl yearning to escape from the “fiction of dreams,” the English reads as the “unreality of dreams.” Here, it is important to remember that, as Maffie argues, “Nahua *tlamatinime* employed the concepts of dreamlikeness and illusion as epistemological categories” (Maffie 2005, sct. 2f). Thus, while the English version clearly supports the metaphysical interpretation that what seems, that which is dreamlike, is not real, the Spanish version simply suggests that Nezahualcoyotl aims for a kind of knowledge that would give true meaning to human life, faced as we are with an evanescent reality. Thus, whereas the English version of the passage would explicitly support a metaphysical interpretation, the Spanish version reads closer to Maffie’s epistemological reading.

Moreover, León-Portilla’s *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* provides further support for rejecting the view that the *tlamatinime* deny reality to earthly things. León-Portilla writes as follows:

- (8) Above and beyond the doubts and the mystery that surround the Giver of Life, *it is necessary to accept His reality*. This is the only truth that can bring peace to the heart. This appears to be Nezahualcoyotl’s conclusion in his effort to comprehend the mystery of divinity. Although Tloqueh Nahuaqueh is absolute and incomprehensible, He is also the Giver of Life in whose book of paintings we exist. Human beings must accept the mystery, invoke and pay homage to Him, for in this way it is possible to live on earth. (León-Portilla 1992, p. 85, my emphasis)

The foregoing exegesis thus offers elements to reject Maffie’s charge that León-Portilla attributes the Nahuas a metaphysics of being according to which if something is illusory then it is not real and since earthly existence appears as illusory, then earthly existence is not real. Rather, I am suggesting that one can read the foregoing passages at least in a way that is closer to Maffie’s epistemological reading. On this reading, the illusoriness does not belong to the world but to our limited perception and knowledge of it. I suggested that it is in this sense that the *tlamatinime* yearn for a beyond, that is, beyond our illusory knowledge, rather than the real beyond seeming existence. In the following section, I go further and argue that León-Portilla’s interpretation is neither simply metaphysical nor simply epistemological—as Maffie suggests—but it regards existential concerns about the meaning of human life.

4. An Existential Interpretation of “*In Xochitl in Cuicatl*”

Not only is Maffie’s charge against León-Portilla’s interpretation of the *tlamatinime* regarding the reality of earthly things misguided. There is an alternative way to read León-Portilla’s interpretation that is neither purely metaphysical nor purely epistemological. I want to suggest that León-Portilla reads the *tlamatinime* stance regarding the nature of reality in existential terms. By existential, I mean the view according to which existence precedes essence. Reality does not consist of stable, essential meanings but meaning requires creative human activity. I refer to the creative activity of meaning production as *poiesis*. In support of this interpretation, I first provide an exegesis of León-Portilla’s texts to show that metaphysical concerns are, for the *tlamatinime*, intimately linked to questions regarding the meaning of human life. I then elaborate on the concept of “*in xochitl in cuicatl*” as the aesthetic aspect of Nahua philosophy that involves a process of meaning creation. I suggest that *in xochitl in cuicatl* is *poiesis* in the sense of the production of meaning that sustains and regulates human life.

In *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, León-Portilla offers an interpretation of Nezahualcoyotl’s poems. Important for León-Portilla’s interpretation is that, given that we ignore the dates of composition of Nezahualcoyotl’s individual poems, he does not follow a chronological order but a “logical” one in

his presentation (León-Portilla 1992, p. 79). By a logical interpretation, León-Portilla means that he establishes thematic relations, particularly between those poems dealing explicitly with metaphysical concerns and those dealing with existential concerns. In this way, León-Portilla argues, Nezhualcoyotl, “encompassed the problems of an instinctively metaphysical thinking that includes anguish and doubt as attributes to one’s existence” (ibid.). In León-Portilla’s “logical” interpretation, the metaphysical themes in Nezhualcoyotl’s poetry are thus intimately linked to the existential concerns regarding the meaning of human life. León-Portilla is not uncritical about how his “logical” interpretation might be tainted by his subjective views. Nevertheless, he argues that his attempt is to, “unveil what appears to have been Nezhualcoyotl’s own way of thinking” (ibid., pp. 79–80). What I want to highlight here is the metaphysical-existential link that León-Portilla’s interpretation establishes in Nezhualcoyotl’s poems.

León-Portilla’s interpretative arch moves from a conception about the nature of reality to considerations regarding the meaning of human life. The fleetingness and evanescent aspect of reality thus raises doubts about the stability of human life, “If jade and gold fall apart and wear away, then faces and hearts, which are more fragile, however noble they may be, will dry up like flowers and be erased like paintings” (ibid., p. 80). Nezhualcoyotl then searches for something that would give a stable meaning to human life. León-Portilla argues that the *tlamatinime* rejected two solutions to the problem regarding the meaning of human life. One solution has to do with religious offerings, a response that, León-Portilla argues, was rejected by the *tlamatinime*. León-Portilla writes that, “[t]he popular and public cult of the gods as expressed in sacrifice and mystical militaristic vision of the Aztecs was differentiated from the *tlamatinime*’s search for a new form of knowledge which might embody the truth” (León-Portilla 1963, p. 74). The second option that the *tlamatinime* rejected is the hedonistic one. León-Portilla suggests that, “[t]his reaction to the possibility of arriving at transcendent truth at least mentally was not the only answer suggested by the Nahuas, nor was it the one the most intensely imbedded in their spirit” (ibid., p. 73). Rather, Nezhualcoyotl finds a way of making sense of human life in an evanescent world, “He proclaims he has discovered the ultimate meaning of ‘flower and song,’ the Nahuatl metaphor for art and symbolism” (León-Portilla 1992, p. 82). “Flower and song” or *in xochitl in cuicatl* is the Nahua concept of poetry and art generally through which the Nahua *tlamatinime* found “‘the only truth on earth’” (León-Portilla 1963, p. 75).

Most analyses of Nahua ethical, epistemological and aesthetic conceptions reproduce two issues—first, they analyze these views separately, as compartmentalized conceptual formulations and, second, they give priority to the epistemological and the ethical, thereby relegating the aesthetic to the realm of art. León-Portilla, however, reads the aesthetic aspect of Nahua thought as closely related to the Nahua metaphysical views and the stances the *tlamatinime* adopt regarding the nature of reality. In this sense, the Nahua concept of *in xochitl in cuicatl* is key to understanding the *tlamatinime* conceptual formulations that regulate other aspects of their life. The existentialist interpretation of *in xochitl in cuicatl* responds to the lack of stable, essential meanings one can derive from “the way things are,” as is the case of natural law theory. Their metaphysical views make the Nahuas, “aware of the problems involved in an attempt to establish values in a changing world” (ibid., p. 5). *In xochitl in cuicatl* then does not refer to our contemporary conception of art for art’s sake but rather responds to the necessity of making human life meaningful.

In xochitl in cuicatl allows the *tlamatinime* to approximate the divine in two ways. One way in which *in xochitl in cuicatl* approximates the divine is by allowing artists to perceive beyond what one ordinarily sees. León-Portilla writes that, in the *tlamatinime* conception, “Poetry ‘enraptures man,’ and by intensifying his emotions and his perceptive powers, it enables him to perceive what he ordinarily would not” (ibid., p. 77). *In xochitl in cuicatl* allows the *tlamatinime* to perceive beyond immediate perception and thus to perceive beyond the particular guises of *teotl* as individual objects and to approximate *teotl* as *teotl*. The other way in which the *tlamatinime* approximated the divine through *in xochitl in cuicatl* is by becoming divine themselves, that is, by engaging in the activity of creation and recreation they attributed to *teotl* itself. León-Portilla writes as follows:

- (9) Their [the *tlamatinime*'s] final answer was that 'flower and song' placed God in man's heart, making it true and causing it to create what today we call art. So, for instance, in the description of the painter, the artist appears as a man with God in his heart, a man in possession of the truth and of the very roots of his being. Having a deified heart, he converses with it so that he can "give a divine quality to things". (ibid., p. 180, my emphasis)

One might be tempted to think of artistic creation here in representational terms. León-Portilla rejects this view based on the linguistic construction that Ángel María Garibay calls "*diafrismo*." *Diafrismo* consists in the conjunction of unrelated words that express a new, metaphoric meaning (León-Portilla 1963, p. 75). Linguistic constructions in Nahua poetry do not aim at mapping onto individual things, as if names were tags but at generating a new symbol and thus, a new meaning. León-Portilla thus attributes metaphoric constructions like "*in xochitl in cuicatl*" the power to generate a new meaning that cannot be reduced to either one of its terms. Thus, "*in xochitl in cuicatl*" does not refer only to flower nor does it refer only to song. Rather, "*in xochitl in cuicatl*" refers to a new semantic construction, namely, poetry. The *diafrismo* aspect of *in xochitl in cuicatl* then allows the *tlamatinime* to transcend perception of individual things and thus their disguising perception of *teotl* through individual appearances while, at the same time, it allows them to generate new meanings. In León-Portilla's interpretation then *in xochitl in cuicatl* functions as *poiesis*, that is, as the creative activity of meaning production. León-Portilla thus concludes that, "poetry, as a vehicle of metaphysical expression relying on metaphors, is an attempt to vitiate the transitoriness of earthly things, the dream of *tlalticpac*" (León-Portilla 1963, p. 79).

León-Portilla's interpretation of *in xochitl in cuicatl* as the productive activity of meaning creation helps to clarify that, for the Nahua *tlamatinime*, metaphysical questions are intimately linked to questions regarding the meaning of human life. This means that in León-Portilla's interpretation, the Nahua *tlamatinime* do not posit a stable, alternative reality from which to derive knowledge and ethical principles. Rather, León-Portilla's interpretation shows that *in xochitl in cuicatl* is for the Nahuas a source of meaning that gave sense to their lives confronting an evanescent reality. Hence, the foregoing analysis shows that León-Portilla's interpretation of Nahua metaphysics neither leads to the denial of earthly existence nor posits an alternative reality as the source of meaning and knowledge. *In xochitl in cuicatl* or Nahua *poiesis* allows the *tlamatinime* access to knowledge about reality through the metaphoric creation of new meanings. *In xochitl in cuicatl* thus transcends the *tlamatinime* limited perception of reality while it gives meaning to their lives.

5. Conclusions

In his article "Why Care about Nezahualcoyotl? Veritism and Nahua Philosophy," Maffie offers an extended analysis of *in xochitl in cuicatl* along the lines of León-Portilla's interpretation. Maffie interprets *in xochitl in cuicatl* as allowing the *tlamatinime* to participate in the creative activity of *teotl* and thus as intimately linked to metaphysical concerns regarding one's access to the divine. Maffie writes as follows:

- (10) Finally, in light of the metaphysical nature of *teotl*, the inapplicability of ordinary language and concepts to *teotl* and the nonlinguistic nature of knowing *teotl*, Nahua *tlamatinime* turned to what they called *in xochitl*, *in cuicatl* ('flower and song')—that is, art, poetry, music, symbolism and metaphor—to present (rather than represent) *teotl* ... The multiple functions of 'flower and song' included the following—genuinely presenting *teotl*, authentically embodying *teotl*, preserving existing cosmic equilibrium and purity, creating new cosmic equilibrium and purity and participating alongside *teotl* in recreation and regeneration of the universe. Its functions did not include depicting, describing or representing *teotl*. When engaged in artistic creativity, Nahua sage-artists both imitated and participated in the creative

artistry of *teotl*. In so doing, they participated in the recreation-regeneration of the universe itself. (Maffie 2002, p. 83)

Like León-Portilla, Maffie reads *in xochitl in cuicatl* as closely related to issues regarding the way in which the *tlamatinime* gained access to *teotl*. Maffie's reading thus highlights the view that *in xochitl in cuicatl* is not simply an aesthetic concept in Nahua thought. Rather *in xochitl in cuicatl* is intimately linked to metaphysical concerns for the Nahua *tlamatinime*. This means that Maffie and León-Portilla ultimately agree about the function of *in xochitl in cuicatl* regarding the metaphysical concerns of the Nahua and that they both agree in that *in xochitl in cuicatl* is the way in which the Nahua gain access to *teotl*. It is through the process of aesthetic creation which I refer to as *poiesis* that the *tlamatinime* give meaning to earthly existence and thus avoid nihilistic views regarding the reality of earthly existence.

To conclude, I want to suggest that there might be two reasons that led Maffie to charge León-Portilla with attributing a metaphysics of being to the Nahua. The first reason has to do with a problem in translation. In Section 3 of this paper, I showed that Maffie bases his charge against León-Portilla on the English version of León-Portilla's text. I showed that whereas the English version of León-Portilla's text reads in metaphysical terms (i.e., as denying the "unreality of dreams"), the Spanish version does not read as straightforwardly metaphysical (i.e., as transcending the "fiction of dreams"). Following Maffie's epistemological characterization regarding the Nahua use of "fiction" and "illusion," I argued that León-Portilla's interpretation can be read in terms of the *tlamatinime* search to transcend their limited understanding of earthly existence. More generally, I argued that in this way not only can one avoid the reading that León-Portilla attributes a metaphysics of being to the Nahuas, I also argued that León-Portilla's interpretation is neither simply metaphysical nor simply epistemological but it regards existential concerns about the meaning of human life.

The second reason that might have led Maffie to charge León-Portilla with attributing a metaphysics of being to the Nahua has to do with the compartmentalized way of reading the philosophical views of the Nahuas. In Section 4, I suggested that most analyses of Nahua thought reproduce two issues—the issue of compartmentalizing the views of the Nahua in terms of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, etc.; and the issue of giving priority to the epistemological and ethical views, thereby relegating the aesthetic to the realm of art. In his *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Aztec philosophy, Maffie cautions against this compartmentalized way of reading Nahua philosophy:

(11) I assume Nahua philosophy to be a coherent body of thought consisting tentatively of four interrelated divisions—metaphysics, epistemology, theory of value and aesthetics. In hermeneutical fashion, understanding the Nahua philosophy as a whole depends upon understanding the other divisions as well as the whole.

Approaching Nahua philosophy in these terms is not without hazard. Although mainstays in European philosophy, they demarcate categories for which there are no precise, noncontroversial synonyms in Nahuatl. Nahua *tlamatinime* ("knowers of things," "sages," "philosophers;" *tlamatini* [singular]) do not appear to have analyzed philosophical thought in these terms. Rather, they conceived metaphysics, epistemology, theory of value and aesthetics in conceptually overlapping if not equivalent terms. (Maffie 2005, sct. 1c)

Although Maffie is aware of the issues involved in compartmentalizing the views of the Nahuas according to Western philosophical categories, in trying to parse out the metaphysical from the epistemological views, Maffie compartmentalizes the metaphysical views in a way that León-Portilla does not. Whereas for León-Portilla the metaphysical concerns of the Nahuas imply more general existential questions regarding earthly existence, Maffie distinguishes the metaphysical concerns from the epistemological ones, thereby treating these questions as related but separate. The result is that Maffie's compartmentalization of Nahua philosophy according to Western categories creates a problem that is not there in León-Portilla's analysis and for which Maffie provides a solution. This argument does not rest value to Maffie's original analyses of key Nahua concepts but it does dismiss Maffie's

charge against León-Portilla regarding the latter's interpretation of Nahua philosophy according to a metaphysics of being.

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