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**NAHUA ETHICS: KEY CONCEPTS**

**Mexica Ethics: Defining Problematic**

Mexica *huehuetlatolli* (“ancient words or speeches” or “speakings of the old ones”) played an important role in Mexica society in cultivating and promoting proper conduct. Among those recorded by Sahagún is one delivered by a noble mother to her coming-of-age daughter.

“Behold the road thou art to follow. In such a manner thou art to live. Thy lords, our lords, the noble women, the old women, the white-haired ones ... they gave one, they left, ... their words. “Take heed. On earth it is a time for care, it is a place of caution. Behold the word; heed and guard it, and with it take your way of life, your works. We travel, we live along a mountain peak. Over here there is an abyss, over there is an abyss. If you goest over here, or if thou goes over there, thou wilt fall. Only in the middle doth one go, doth one live.”

The mother goes on to instruct her daughter regarding the proper way to live: how to speak, walk, dress, eat, bathe, marry, treat others, etc. Her instruction would have undoubtedly included the Mexica *tlatolli* (“adage”), “*Tlaalahui, tlapetzcahui in tlaticpac*” (“The earth is slippery”), explaining that people say this of someone who has lived an upright, well-balanced life only to slip into wrongdoing, as though in slick mud. The consequences of improper behavior included imbalancedness, disequilibrium, and *disease*. The Mexica conceived these in terms of both mind and body (since they drew no sharp metaphysical distinction between the two) *and also* in terms of the individual agent, her family, community, and ultimately, the entire world.

**What is the problem Mexica ethics aims to help us solve?**

How ought we live? How can we maintain our balance while walking down the path of life upon the slippery surface of the earth, and how can we creatively extend this path into future?

**(1)** According to Mexica *tlamachiliztlatolzanilli* (“wisdom tellings”), the history of the cosmos consists of a series of five Ages or Suns. The succession of the first four Ages consists of the creator beings, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, taking turns creating their own and destroying the other’s Age. Each of the four ages was populated by its own

particular kind of human being who was also destroyed. Upon the destruction of the Fourth Age, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca decide to join forces and work together in creating a final Fifth Age and fifth kind of human being. Present-day humans are of this fifth kind and inhabit this Fifth Age.

**(2)** *Legend of the Suns* tells us that as a consequence of the monumental effort (*tequitl*) and expenditure of life-energy (*chichahualiztli*) involved in fashioning Sky, Earth, and moving Sun of the Fifth Age, Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl, and the other creator beings become enervated, 'hot' with hunger, imbalanced, and in life-threatening need of nourishment. In order to remedy their condition, *Quetzalcoatl* decides to undertake a series of hardships. He travels to *Mictlan* (the Place of the Dead below the earth's surface) where he successfully locates and retrieves the bones of Fourth Age humans despite the strenuous opposition of *Miclantecuhli* (Lord of the Place of the Dead). *Quetzalcoatl* brings the bones to *Cihuacoatl* who then grinds them into meal and places the meal into jade bowl. *Quetzalcoatl* then fashions the new human beings from the bone meal of Fourth Age humans mixed with the life-energy contained in blood drawn from his own virile member. The other creator beings join in and do the same.

The creator beings' *gift* Fifth Age human beings life so that humans will cool, refresh, and rebalance them by nurturing, nourishing, and feeding them. The Mexica see feeding and nurturing as ways of respecting, worshipping, loving, and honoring other beings (creator or otherwise). Such nourishment consists of well-spoken words, song, dance, music, ceremony, incense, and blood (human and animal).

What's more, the continuing existence of the Fifth Age after its initial creation also requires the vital energies of creator beings. Because sustaining the world continually enervates them, they are continually in need of nourishing from humans. In short, although the initial and continuing existence of Fifth Age is wholly dependent upon creator beings, creator beings themselves turn out to be wholly dependent upon human beings. The continuing existence of creator beings depends essentially upon humans' nourishing, nurturing and caring for them.

Providing for the continuing existence and reproduction of the Fifth Age (along with its human inhabitants) with their vital energies continually exhausts the creator beings who, as a consequence, depend crucially upon being continually nourished by human beings. Preeminent among this nourishment is the vital energies of human beings themselves (i.e., human blood and hearts). Creator beings constantly require the nourishment of human life forces and cannot exist without this nourishment. They continually thirst, hunger, pant, and cry out for the life-energies of human beings.

**(3)** The continuing existence and continuing reproduction of Fifth Age human beings -- both as individuals (ontogenetically) and as a kind of being (phylogenetically) -- depend crucially upon humans' being continuing fed and nourished by the energies of creator beings in the form of foodstuffs (such as maize, amaranth, and chia seed), sunlight (*tonalli*), and water. Humans continually thirst, hunger, pant, and cry out for the life-energies of creator beings.

**(4)** Humans and creator beings feed their vital energies to one other as well as eat one another's vital energies. Feeding and eating is the relevant mode of energy transmission between them. Contemporary Nahuatl-speakers of San Miguel, Sierra del Pueblo, Mexico, express their relationship with the creator beings in this way:

We live HERE on the earth (stamping in the mud floor)  
We are all fruits of the earth  
The earth sustains us  
We grow here, on the earth and lower  
And when we die we wither in the earth  
We are ALL FRUITS of the earth (stamping in the mud floor)  
We eat the earth  
Then the earth eats us.

Or, more generally, as David Carrasco puts it, "We eat the gods, and the gods eat us," and as I propose, its complement, "We feed (ourselves to) the gods and the gods feed (themselves to) us."

**(5)** Humans and creator beings are *mutually dependent*, their relationship being aptly characterized "mutualist symbiotic" or "obligate mutualism" (meaning one or both symbionts depend entirely on the other for survival). Fifth Age creator beings and Fifth Age human beings rely equally upon consuming one another's life-energies. Creator beings are accordingly said to be "mothers and fathers" to humans, while humans are said to be "mothers and fathers" to the gods.

This mutual dependency is not gainsaid by the obvious disparity in their respective amounts of power. As insignificant as it appears in comparison to the world-creating life energies of creator beings, human life-energy nevertheless suffices to sustain the creator beings. In sum, each depends essentially upon the other for their continuing existence.

**(6)** Since creator beings sustain the Fifth Age and all its inhabitants, and since human beings in turn sustain creator beings, the Mexica regarded the ongoing reproduction of the Fifth Age as a *social* process involving the contribution of both human and creator beings as well as their cooperation and "co-activity". The Fifth Age is the joint product of their social and interactive relationship of mutual feeding and eating. By participating in the ongoing existence and reproduction of each other, humans and creator beings co-participate in the ongoing existence and reproduction of the Fifth Age itself.

Human beings, therefore, have a unique task and unique responsibility among inhabitants of the Fifth Age, viz. sustaining creator beings and the world. Indeed, this is expressly why creator beings made humans in the first place.

Yet the unique responsibility of humans to sustain the world does not confer upon humans a privileged or superior moral status vis-à-vis other inhabitants of the world. Humans are not given dominion over the world nor does creation exist for their benefit.

**(7)** By reciprocally feeding their life energies to one another and by reciprocally consuming one another's life energies, humans and creator beings thus actively "participate in each

another.” Adopting for heuristic purposes a parlance common in Western theology but alien to Mexica metaphysics, humans become ‘divine’ and creator beings become ‘human’ (i.e., if one were to assume that Mexica metaphysics sees creator beings as divinities and that it sees the humans and creator beings as distinguished by a qualitative ontological gap, neither of which it does); and humans become ‘supernatural’ and gods ‘natural’ (i.e., if one were to assume that Mexica metaphysics distinguishes between the ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’, which it does not.)

**(8)** By dint of their reciprocal feeding and eating, humans and creator beings behave as mutually interdependent, mutually arising, alternatively dominating, complementary pairs – what Mexica referred to as *inamic* pairs or “matched partners.” Humans and creator beings act as *inamic* pairs alongside other more commonly recognized *inamic* pairs such as life~death, light~darkness, male~female, hot~cold, order~disorder, and above~below.

**(9)** The human~creator-being relationship of reciprocal feeding and reciprocal eating is *nepantla-defined process*. Just as male and female cooperate and co-participate as *inamic* partners in the continuing reproduction of humankind, so likewise humans and creator beings cooperate and co-participate as *inamic* partners in the continuing reproduction of the Fifth Age.

**(10)** The ongoing reproduction of the Fifth Age is not only consequent upon but also *constituted by* human~creator beings’ *nepantla-defined* reciprocal eating and feeding. As the constitutive product of their co-activity, the Fifth Age consists of an interwoven fabric of human and creator being energies. Or, adopting for heuristic purposes the misleading parlance of Western metaphysics and theology, the Fifth Age consist of a dual human~creator unity and unified human~creator duality that is: neither human nor ‘divine’ yet at the same time both human and ‘divine’, and; neither ‘natural’ nor ‘supernatural’ yet at the same time both ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’. (Here we see why these Western notions make no sense to the Mexica.) Just as the interweaving of warp and weft yields woven fabric, a tertium quid consisting of both warp and weft yet neither warp and weft, so analogously the mutual feeding and eating of humans and creators yields the tertium quid of a Fifth Age consisting of both human and ‘divine’ and yet neither.

**(11)** The foregoing helps us resist the stubbornly longstanding *misconception* of Mexica religion according to which the ‘gods’ are monstrously insatiable consumers of human hearts and blood while the Mexica are groveling sycophants terrorized into murdering hundreds of thousands of innocents. This misconception is rooted in the conquistadors’ and later settler colonialists’ deliberate efforts to portray the Mexica (and other indigenous peoples) as savages engaged in human sacrifice (along with cannibalism and sodomy) with the aim of morally and legally justifying their unprovoked war of aggression and conquest as well as genocide and enslavement of indigenous peoples. Today, it continues to be perpetuated by apologists for genocide, sensationalist popular historians, and profit-hungry cable television history channels.

**(12)** Human beings are *always already* born into a complex fabric of moral relationships with other agents that obligate them to reciprocate for gifts they have received. As a species

(phylogenetically), humans are born with an obligation to reciprocate or gift-back to creator beings. They are born with what we might cautiously call “original indebtedness” or “original obligatedness.” (This must not be confused with the Christian notion of “original sin”, a moral wrongdoing for which human must spend their lives atoning.) As individuals (ontogenetically), humans are born into a complex fabric of moral relationships obligating them to reciprocate for gifts they have received from ancestors (who although deceased are still alive), parents, family, neighbors, and other-than-humans such as sun, rain, earth, maize, animals, houses, farming tools, and cooking utensils. These obligations do not depend upon an individual’s consent.

**(13)** Mexica ethics is *non-anthropocentric*. The moral community of humankind is not confined to human beings; it includes other-than-human persons such as “creator beings,” lightning, water (hail, ice, rivers, lakes, rainfall), mountains, trees, plants, animals, agricultural fields (*milpas*), houses, cooking pots, statues, jewelry, pyramids, sleeping mats, roads, farming, hunting, military and fishing tools, and the painted figures in books called “tonalamatl.”

While humans are uniquely responsible for the future well-being of the 5<sup>th</sup> Age and all its inhabitants, humans are *not* conceived as superior to and entitled to disrespect and abuse other-than-humans. The world is not the Mexica’s rubbish bin.

**In sum: How shall we live? How do we maintain our balance while walking down the path of life upon the slippery surface of the earth? What is our path?**

Mexica ethics enjoins *nepantla*-defined reciprocity: i.e., that we participate in, sustain and initiate well-balanced relationships of mutual gifting and regifting and mutual respect between other humans and between humans and other-than-human beings.

Mexica ethics enjoins us to model our lives upon *teotl*, and therefore enjoins us to interweave the the various inamic forces and processes of the cosmos into a well-balanced fabric.

*Teotl-qua-nepantla*-process serves as the ideal normative model for human behavior: humans ought to live their lives in a *nepantla* manner *vis-à-vis* other humans as well as other non-human (other-than-human) beings.

Nepantla-defined reciprocity is the beating, pumping heart of Mexica metaphysics and ethics.