



UNDERSTANDING A WORLD IN MOTION

# AZTEC PHILOSOPHY

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## 0.1 AZTEC METAPHYSICS

The indigenous peoples of what is now Mexico enjoy long and rich traditions of philosophical reflection dating back centuries before being characterized by their European “discoverers” as “barbarians” or “primitives” incapable of or unmotivated to think rationally, abstractly, or philosophically.<sup>1</sup> Pre-Columbian societies contained individuals who reflected systematically upon the nature of reality, human existence, knowledge, right conduct, and goodness. The Nahuatl-speaking peoples of Central Mexico – including those residing in Mexico-Tenochtitlan known today as the “Aztecs” – were no exception. Nahuatl societies included individuals called *tlamatinime* (“knowers of things,” “sages,” or “philosophers”; sing. *tlamatinī*) given to puzzling over such questions as, what is the nature of things? where did we come from? what is the proper path for us to follow? and what are we able to know?

Nahuatl metaphysics served as the backdrop of Nahuatl religious, theological, and philosophical thought (including moral, political, epistemological, and aesthetic thought) as well as Nahuatl ritual praxis.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, I argue one cannot adequately understand the latter without first understanding the former. More prosaic, everyday practices such as weaving, farming, hunting, and childrearing likewise presupposed (albeit perhaps only tacitly) metaphysical views. What is metaphysics? Metaphysics investigates the nature, structure, and constitution of reality at the broadest, most comprehensive, and most synoptic level.<sup>3</sup> It aims to advance our understanding of the nature of things broadly construed. Questions concerning the nature of reality, existence, being *qua* being, causality, time, space, personal

identity, the self, God, free will, mind, and body are among the questions traditionally assigned to metaphysics by Western philosophers. Nahua metaphysics thus consists of the Nahuas' understanding of the nature, structure, and constitution of reality.<sup>4</sup>

Because one cannot adequately understand Nahua theology, religion, and ritual as well as ethical, political, epistemological, and aesthetic thinking and activity without first understanding Nahua metaphysics, I devote this work to Nahua metaphysics. Nahua ethics, epistemology, political philosophy, and aesthetics will be the focus of a later work. This work's conclusion sketches in broad outlines how Nahua metaphysics shapes these latter areas of inquiry.

I aim to approximate Nahua views about the nature, structure, and ultimate constituents of reality at the time of the Conquest. Given its greater name recognition, I adopt the term *Aztec* in place of *Nahua* with the caution that it is both clumsy and inaccurate. *Aztec* refers specifically to the Nahuatl-speaking residents of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the Mexica-Tenochca, but not to the Nahuatl-speaking residents of Chalco, Cholula, or Tlaxcala, for example. The terms use also imposes an artificial unity upon Mexica-Tenochca thinking. Views about the nature of things were fragmented since they obviously differed between nobility and commoners; priests, warriors, merchants, artisans, and farmers; men and women; dominant and subordinate city-states; regional and ethnic subgroups; and finally, even between individuals themselves.<sup>5</sup> They were contested and resisted by various groups in various ways and in varying degrees. What's more, metaphysical views are living works in progress and thus are continually changing over time. Some scholars contend, for example, that at the time of the Conquest Aztec philosophy was becoming more hierarchical, militaristic, and masculinist – as evidenced by the increasing prominence of Huitzilopochtli (the Sun-War God) in Aztec religious affairs – due to the increasingly hierarchical social and political stratification of Aztec society, the emergence of a hereditary ruling elite, and the ruling elite's greater emphasis upon war and military conquest.<sup>6</sup> This contention notwithstanding, I submit that the central concepts and organizing metaphors employed by Aztec philosophers in thinking about the nature of things were rooted squarely in ordinary ways of thinking and speaking about everyday activities such as living, dying, eating, weaving, farming, hunting, sexual reproduction, and warfare. Therefore, while I consider the metaphysical views presented here as an approximation of the more or less shared understanding of the upper elite of Aztec priests, scholars, and educated nobility, I nevertheless maintain that these views were firmly anchored in non-elite views about the nature and way of things. The former group simply had more opportunity to refine and articulate their views

than did the latter. Their views accordingly differed in degree of refinement, not in substance.

Our current scholarly understanding of Aztec thought and culture is the product of a rich and sophisticated interdisciplinary conversation between anthropologists, archaeologists, archaeoastronomers, art historians, historians, linguists, literary theorists, and religionists. This book draws deeply and openly from this ongoing conversation. Noticeably absent from this conversation, however, is the voice of academic philosophy. This study seeks to fill this absence. How then does it differ from existing scholarship?

I come to Aztec metaphysics as someone trained in contemporary academic Anglo-American analytic philosophy, history of Western philosophy, and comparative world philosophy. What makes mine a *philosophical* rather than a historical, religionist, or anthropological examination and interpretation is the fact that I bring to bear upon our understanding of Aztec metaphysics the analytical tools, concepts, hermeneutical strategies, lessons, and insights of these areas of academic philosophy. Doing so, I hope, enables me to shed new light upon the Aztecs' views about the nature, constitution, and structure of reality. This project *reconstructs* Aztec metaphysics in the sense of presenting and explicating the concepts and claims of Aztec metaphysics in a manner not necessarily identical with the Aztecs' manner of presentation. Doing so inevitably involves highlighting and making explicit certain aspects of Aztec metaphysics at the expense of others. What's more, many of the terms and concepts I employ – beginning with the concept of metaphysics itself – are alien to Aztec thought. This is unavoidable in any explication that involves interpreting and translating one way of thinking about things into an alien system of thinking about things. Although alien, my hope is that the terms and concepts I employ are not hostile to and do minimal violence to Aztec metaphysics. I will let my critics determine the degree of violence my interpretative translation of Aztec metaphysics into non-Aztec metaphysics wreaks upon Aztec metaphysics.

I approach Aztec metaphysics as a systematic, unified, and coherent corpus of thought, worthy of consideration in its own terms and for its own sake (quite apart from what contemporary Western readers may find instructive or valuable in it). I accordingly aim to understand the internal logic and structure of Aztec metaphysics – that is, how its claims, concepts, metaphors, and arguments fit together – rather than *causally explain* Aztec metaphysics in terms such as genes, memes, collective unconsciousness, dietary needs, social-political function, mode of production, or physical environment. Before explaining *causally why* the Aztecs believed as they did, one must *first* correctly apprehend *what* they believed. I examine the internal logic of Aztec metaphysics in the

same manner that Euro-American academic philosophers engaged in "normal" (in the Kuhnian sense<sup>7</sup>) history of philosophy routinely examine the internal logic of the metaphysics of Plato, Spinoza, Hegel, or Russell. The project is cut from the same cloth as these projects; it is no more and no less a history of philosophy – or anthropology or intellectual history, for that matter – than are they.

Approaching Aztec metaphysics in this manner does not commit one to an idealist view of philosophy that sees philosophers and their views as operating autonomously from the exigencies of history, politics, economics, culture, and natural environment. Aztec philosophy, like all philosophies, emerges in response to everyday life problems and challenges and admits of naturalistic explanation in terms of these. However, naturalistic explanations of philosophies advanced by anthropologists and sociologists of knowledge, neuroscientists, intellectual historians, and evolutionary psychologists remain a thoroughly Western scientific project. And by forcing Aztec and other non-Western philosophies upon the Procrustean bed of Western metaphysical and epistemological assumptions in this manner, such naturalistic explanations inevitably privilege Western metaphysical and epistemological assumptions to the detriment of non-Western philosophies. Yet such privileging of the Western is a priori unwarranted and question-begging. By parity of reasoning we must be willing to give equal consideration to non-Western (e.g., Aztec or Daoist) explanations of Western philosophies.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, this study focuses upon what I consider to be the central tenets and concepts of Aztec metaphysics. It does not purport to be exhaustive. I see it as complementing the closely related and often times overlapping work of other scholars in the field.

## 0.2 AZTEC THOUGHT AS PHILOSOPHY

Contemporary Anglo-American and European academic philosophers routinely distinguish *having* a philosophy, in the sense of holding an implicit worldview, ideology, or "cosmology," from *doing* philosophy, in the sense of self-consciously and critically reflecting upon and speculating about the nature, structure, and constitution of reality, the nature of truth, the nature of right and wrong, the possibility of human knowledge, the meaning of life, and so on. They contend that while all cultures *have* a philosophy, not all cultures contain individuals who think philosophically and thus *do* philosophy. The former emerges haphazardly and un-self-consciously without systematic or sustained critical reflection. In contrast, doing philosophy – that is, philosophy *properly speaking* – is the sole invention and possession of Western culture beginning with

Socrates and the Sophists. As though channeling sixteenth-century European "discoverers," these modern-day schoolmen argue that non-Western peoples are in effect unreasoning, philosophical sleepwalkers. This view is crisply articulated by prominent Western philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, who claimed that the expression *Western philosophy* is tautologous while the expression *non-Western philosophy* is oxymoronic;<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, who once remarked, "I always say – but in private – that the Greeks and the Bible are all that is serious in humanity. Everything else is dancing";<sup>10</sup> and Richard Rorty, who claimed that looking for philosophy outside of the West is "pointless" since philosophy is unique to Western culture.<sup>11</sup> According to Robert Bernasconi, "[Western philosophy] is so similar to Western philosophy that it makes no distinctive contribution and effectively disappears; or it is so different that its credentials to be genuine philosophy will always be in doubt."<sup>12</sup> Either way, Western philosophers think and speak for all humanity. This view is not confined to academic philosophers, of course. Western anthropologists, religionists, and historians of ideas also commonly contend that while non-Western peoples are capable of religious and mythopoetic thought, they are clearly incapable of philosophical thought.<sup>13</sup>

In his groundbreaking 1936 book, *La filosofía náhuatl*, Miguel León-Portilla argued that Nahuatl culture included individuals who were every bit as philosophical as Socrates and the Sophists.<sup>14</sup> Nezahualcoyotl, Tochtliuhcizin Coyolichiqui, Ayocuan Cuetzpalzin, and other Nahuatl philosophers reflected self-consciously, critically, and generally upon the nature of existence, truth, knowledge, and the reigning mythical-religious views of their day. By attacking the dominant orthodoxy among Western academic philosophers and their epigones regarding the West's monopoly on philosophical activity, León-Portilla brought upon himself a firestorm of calumny and condemnation. In *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* Benjamin Keen, for example, scathingly upbraids León-Portilla for comparing "the highest thought achieved by an Upper Stone Age people" with the "climactic intellectual achievements" of the ancient Greeks.<sup>15</sup> Presumably under pressure from its North American publisher, the book's 1963 English title, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, backed away from this controversy and steered the book toward university courses in anthropology and history. Judging from the English title, León-Portilla's book was no longer a study of Aztec philosophy. It was now conceived more appropriately as a study of Aztec "thought." Fortunately, however, the text itself remained steadfast in its commitment to the heterodoxy that the Aztecs *did* philosophy.

Why does this issue generate so much heat? Why does it matter who is, and who is not, deemed a philosopher? As countless scholars have argued,



philosophy plays a vital role in the modern West's conception of itself and of the non-Western *Other*.<sup>16</sup> What is at stake here is nothing less than the modern West's self-image as rational, self-conscious, civilized, cultured, human, disciplined, modern, and masculine in contrast with the non-West as irrational, appetitive, emotional, instinctive, uncivilized, savage, primitive, nonhuman, undisciplined, backward, feminine, and closer to nature. Philosophy, "the queen of the sciences," as Aristotle so marvelously characterized it, represents the pinnacle of humanity's intellectual and rational achievement. For the European Enlightenment, philosophy represents the intellect's emancipation from the fantasies of myth and shackles of religious dogma. Western culture's philosophy versus nonphilosophy binary is thus a social-historical tool constructed to celebrate and legitimize the West and its imperial hegemony while at the same time denigrating "the Rest" and legitimizing its heteronomy.

The reaction to León-Portilla together with the West's attitude toward the philosophical capabilities of non-Western peoples is all the more puzzling in light of the fact that Western academic philosophers are unable to agree among themselves upon a suitable definition of philosophy. All they seem to be able to agree upon is that non-Western thinkers do not (cannot) do it! Even self-styled, antiphilosophical establishment rebels such as Richard Rorty who maintain that philosophy has no essence nevertheless join the chauvinistic chorus denying membership in Club Philosophy to non-Western thinkers.<sup>17</sup> Upon inspection, however, philosophy turns out to be infuriatingly difficult, if not impossible, to define. Indeed, defining philosophy is itself a *philosophical* issue: the sort Western philosophers call a "metaphysical problem."<sup>18</sup> Is philosophy to be defined in terms of its aims, subject matter, origin, or method? Is philosophy even the sort of thing that even admits of definition? How do we decide? And more to the point, who gets to decide? Whose definitions and answers count, and why? Whose standards govern the discussion? Who is included and who is excluded from the discussion, and on what grounds? Equally crucially, who poses and entertains as worthwhile questions such as, Are non-Western people philosophical? And why do they pose them? In short, it is far from clear that this issue can be resolved in a non-ethnocentric and noncircular way.

This is obviously not the place to resolve this issue. However, it would seem that those traditionally excluded from Club Philosophy may pursue either of two strategies. They may seek admission into the club by arguing that what they do sufficiently resembles what bona fide club members do. León-Portilla pursues this strategy on behalf of the Aztecs. Or they may reject the philosophy versus nonphilosophy binary — along with the entire debate — as a now discredited,

self-serving relic of Western colonialism (racism, modernism, paternalism, etc.), not worry about whether or not what they do qualifies as "real" philosophy, and continue doing what they have always been doing.

I reject the rational-civilized-masculine versus irrational-savage-feminine binary yet also refuse to cede philosophical inquiry to the West. 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 that satisfy the definition of philosophy advanced by North American philosopher Wilfred Sellars: "The aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term."<sup>18</sup> Their endeavors likewise satisfy William James' definition of philosophy as "the unusually stubborn attempt to think clearly."<sup>19</sup> Indigenous North American philosophers Thurman Lee Hester Jr. and Dennis McPherson claim the thought systems of indigenous North American peoples satisfy the basic definition of philosophy lying at the roots of the Euro-American tradition: "a thoughtful interaction with the world." Every culture has people who give themselves to reflecting upon the world in this manner. "These are their philosophers."<sup>20</sup> Granted, the Aztecs' philosophical journey took a different form and took them to a different set of answers.<sup>21</sup> Yet this is irrelevant. As John Dewey once noted, "I think it shows a remarkable deadness of imagination to suppose that philosophy [must] revolve within the scope of the problems and systems that two thousand years of European history have bequeathed to us."<sup>22</sup> Aztec and European philosophies represent two alternative philosophical orientations and trajectories rooted in two alternative forms of life or ways of being human in the world. Aztec philosophy need not ape European philosophy in order to count as "real" philosophy. There is no law of reason, thought, or culture requiring that all peoples think alike or follow the same path of philosophical development.

It is also sometimes argued that the Aztecs' religiosity precluded their thinking philosophically. Philosophy, as the West's self-narrative often goes, begins where religion ends. This view assumes, however, that religion and philosophy are mutually exclusive. The Aztecs' religiosity no more precluded their doing philosophy than did the religiosity of St. Augustine, Maimonides, St. Aquinas, Ockham, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, or Whitehead (to name only a few bona fide philosophers by Western lights). What's more, the possibility that Aztec metaphysical speculation operated within the bounds of Aztec religion and served as its "handmaiden" (to borrow Locke's telling phrase) no more disqualifies it as "real" philosophy than does the fact that the lion's share

of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy operates within the bounds of science and serves as *its* "handmaiden" disqualifies it as "real" philosophy.

Finally, the cogency of the interpretation of Aztec metaphysics advanced here does not hinge upon one's accepting the thesis that the Aztecs *did* philosophy. Regardless of one's view on this matter, it is undeniable that the Aztecs *had* a metaphysics, that is, a systematic and coherent understanding of how things in the broadest possible sense hang together.

### 0.3 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN INTERPRETING AZTEC METAPHYSICS

Metaphysical views about the nature, constitution, and structure of reality are by their very nature highly general, abstract, and theoretical. They seem far removed from what we like to think of as the pushes and pulls of everyday immediate experience and people's practical beliefs concerning farming, house-building, weaving, and cooking. And this distance, it seems, makes them all the more difficult to access.<sup>23</sup> How then does one access the Aztecs' metaphysical views, and how does one justify one's interpretation of them? Let's begin by taking a short stroll through recent Anglo-American philosophy of science.

The late North American philosopher of science, language, and logic, W.V.O. Quine, proposed that we think of the structure of what he called "total science" (including logic, mathematics, and the natural and human sciences) as a "man-made fabric" or "field of force."<sup>24</sup> Sense experience impinges upon this grand *web of belief* only along the edges. Our beliefs about the contents of our sense experiences also occur along the web's edge. More-general theoretical speculation and belief occur further within the interior of the web. The principles of logic (such as the law of excluded middle) and theoretical-speculative metaphysical beliefs about the world (such as those concerning quarks and dark matter, gravitational fields, and the relativistic nature of space-time) occur in the interior-most portion of the web, far removed from the concrete sense experiences we customarily associate with scientific testing and experimentation. What's more, no particular sense experiences are directly linked with any particular beliefs in the web's interior. They are linked only indirectly by means of considerations of "equilibrium" affecting the web as a whole. Conflicts with experience "occasion," as Quine puts it, readjustments within the interior of the web. Beliefs about sensory experiences, beliefs about physical objects, and beliefs about quarks, quantum phenomena, and the nature of causality all contribute to the makeup of the total web. As such they occur along an epistemological continuum. No in-principle epistemological distinction divides them.

Theory and data are united epistemologically within one and the same overall web of belief.

Quine's conception of total science as a web of belief has, to one degree or another, become widely accepted by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of science.<sup>25</sup> Also universally accepted by philosophers of science is another key tenet of Quine's philosophy of science: the underdetermination of theory by sense experience. Following the late nineteenth-century French philosopher of science Pierre Duhem, Quine argues that empirical evidence does not uniquely determine theory. Faced with unacceptable empirical consequences, scientists have a choice regarding how to respond. "The total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of a single contrary experience."<sup>26</sup> Empirical adequacy alone does not therefore suffice as an epistemological criterion in scientific decision-making. "The edge of the system must be squared with experience," writes Quine, "the rest, with all its elaborate myths or fictions, has as it objective the simplicity of laws."<sup>27</sup> Scientists accordingly appeal to non-empirical criteria when choosing between rival theories.

On what additional grounds do scientists choose between alternative scientific theories and webs of belief? On what additional grounds do they choose, for example, between alternative logics (e.g., two-valued as opposed to three-valued), alternative theories of space-time (e.g., relational as opposed to substantive), alternative conceptions of natural laws (e.g., deterministic as opposed to irreducibly probabilistic), or alternative theories of causality (e.g., allowing as opposed to not allowing causation backward in time)? The current consensus among philosophers of science maintains that scientists appeal to a variety of competing, non-algorithmically ordered values when making such decisions: empirical adequacy (how well does the theory capture the sense experience?); logical consistency; simplicity (Occam's razor, or to what extent does the theory provide a unified and common treatment of diverse phenomena as opposed to treating each phenomena separately and independently?); conservatism (how well does the theory preserve existing views?); unification (how well does it unify our beliefs into a coherent whole by bringing together apparently diverse phenomena under a single account?); generality; fecundity (how productive of new areas of inquiry is it? What new problems does it enable us to solve?); and explanatory power (how well does it explain why things happen as they do?).<sup>28</sup> Let's focus on the explanatory role of theory. Theory explains and makes intelligible empirical data. Theory without empirical data is, of course, empty, but empirical data without theory are blind. Whether a given sensory experience counts as information (data) and hence is evidentially significant, as opposed to

mere noise, depends upon whether or not the sense experience may be incorporated within a theory. All information is thus theory laden since theory cuts all the way down. Empirical input is not epistemologically self-standing.

As we saw, one criterion for selecting theories is explanatory power. Philosophers of science such as Richard Boyd defend what they call the principle of inference to the best explanation.<sup>29</sup> Given a choice between two competing theories, one is justified in adopting the theory that offers us the best explanation of the empirical data. For example, we are justified in adopting theories that posit the existence of unobservable (so-called theoretical) entities or forces such as quarks, antimatter, gravity, or even more humble middle-sized physical objects (such as rocks, skyscrapers, and trees) and hence justified in believing that these unobservables exist to the degree that the relevant theories offer us a better explanation of the relevant sense experiences than do those competing theories that do not posit their existence. Consider the prosaic example of middle-sized physical objects. We are justified in positing the existence of middle-sized physical objects (such as mountains, insects, and houses) and thus believing that middle-sized physical objects exist if doing so better explains the relevant phenomena (our sense experiences) than do rival theories such as that which posits the existence of a Cartesian-style, omnipotent, and malevolent devil who causes these experiences, or that which claims all our sense experiences are the products of dreams or hallucinations. Such an explanation, argue Boyd and others, increases the coherence and unification of our entire system of belief and thus increases our understanding of the phenomena.

How does this detour through contemporary philosophy of science bear upon justifying an interpretation of Aztec metaphysics? Given the general, abstract, and theoretical speculative nature of metaphysical views, we should expect Aztec views about the nature, structure, and ultimate constituents of reality to be abstract, general, and theoretical-speculative. Consequently, we should not expect them to be immediately apparent from the empirical evidence available to contemporary researchers.<sup>30</sup> We should not expect them to appear on the surface of what is immediately observable. As students of Aztec metaphysics we must therefore recognize the necessity of having to theorize about the Aztecs' theorizing on the basis of the available evidence. And what is our available evidence?

Generally speaking, our understanding of Aztec philosophy, religion, and culture is constrained by the fact that we lack pre-Contact Aztec primary sources written in Nahuatl. Reconstructing Aztec metaphysics therefore requires triangulating from a host of alternative sources. First, we have the ethnohistories and dictionaries of early Spanish and mestizo chroniclers such as Bernardino

de Sahagún, Diego Durán, Toribio de Benavente (Motolinía), Alonso de Molina, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl, Gerónimo Méndieta, Hernando Alvarado Tezozomoc, and Juan de Torquemada. Second, we have Aztec and other Conquest-era indigenous pictorial histories, ritual calendars, maps, and tribute records. Third, we have archaeological evidence such as architecture, statues, pottery, weaving tools, jewelry, tools, and human remains. Fourth, we have the correlations between ancient and modern astronomies culled by contemporary ethnoastronomers. And finally, we have ethnographies of contemporary Nahuatl-speaking and other non-Nahuatl-speaking indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica.<sup>31</sup> I avail myself of all these in constructing my interpretation of Aztec metaphysics.

How do we assess the evidential credentials of alternative interpretations of Aztec metaphysics? Our detour through contemporary philosophy of science suggests that we assess theoretical interpretations of Aztec metaphysics in such terms as empirical adequacy, conservatism, simplicity, internal coherence, unification, fecundity, and explanatory power.<sup>32</sup> We should expect a scholarly interpretation of Aztec metaphysics to capture as much of the empirical data as possible; to preserve as much previously established scholarship as possible; to suggest new questions and avenues of research; to be consistent in the sense of maximizing the internal, logical consistency of Aztec metaphysical beliefs; to be simple in the sense of providing a unified, common treatment of different phenomena; and to be coherent in the sense of attributing to the Aztecs an intelligible metaphysics, that is, one that makes sense of itself in its own terms. Finally, we should expect an interpretation of Aztec metaphysics to offer us an explanation of Aztec behavior broadly construed, that is, their ritual, religious, cultural, social, and, yes, even their agricultural, military, and craft practices.

Consequently, although there is admittedly no direct empirical evidence for our interpretive claims about Aztec metaphysics (just as there is no direct empirical evidence for our theoretical claims concerning, quarks, black holes, or curved space-time), there is nevertheless (as contemporary philosophers of science argue) indirect evidence for deciding between better and worse interpretations relative to the foregoing criteria of theory choice. The absence of direct empirical evidence should no more deter us from theorizing about the contents of Aztec metaphysics than it should deter physicists from theorizing about the nature of elementary forces, the Big Bang, and the deep structure of the universe.

It is therefore in the light of the aforementioned evidential criteria that we need to ask, to which did Aztec metaphysics subscribe: polytheism or pantheism? Ontological monism or pluralism? Constitutional monism or dualism?



Substantival or relational conception of time and space? Which of these offers us a better theoretical account of Aztec metaphysics? Which offers us a better explanation and understanding of Aztec practices broadly construed? Which provides a unified, common treatment of different phenomena? Which attributes to the Aztecs a metaphysics that makes sense of itself in its own terms? I contend the interpretation of Aztec metaphysics advanced here is justified by the foregoing evidential criteria.

#### o 4 CHAPTER OUTLINE

The Aztecs advanced a systematic, coherent, and sophisticated metaphysics. Chapter 1 argues that at the heart of Aztec metaphysics stands the ontological thesis that there exists at bottom just one thing: dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy. The Aztecs referred to this power as *teotl*. Reality and thus the cosmos and all its inhabitants are identical with and consist of *teotl*. Since *teotl* is constitutionally uniform, reality consists ultimately of just one kind of stuff: energy. Aztec metaphysics thus embraces an ontological and constitutional monism. Since only *teotl* exists and *teotl* is constitutionally uniform, it follows that Aztec philosophy also embraces a nonhierarchical metaphysics, that is, one that denies any principled metaphysical distinction between transcendent and immanent, higher and lower, or supernatural and natural realities, degrees of being, or kinds of stuff. Process, movement, change, and transformation define *teotl*. That which is real is that which becomes, changes, and moves. Reality is characterized by *becoming* – not by *being* or “is-ness.” To exist – to be real – is to become, to move, to change. *Teotl* and hence reality, cosmos, and all existing things are defined in terms of becoming. They are essentially dynamic: always moving, always changing. Aztec philosophy thus embraces what Western philosophers call a *process metaphysics*. Process metaphysics holds that processes rather than enduring objects, entities, or substances are ontologically fundamental. Lastly, chapter 1 anticipates and responds to several possible objections to this interpretation. Chapter 2 contends Aztec metaphysics is better understood as pantheistic rather than polytheistic. Everything that exists constitutes a single, all-inclusive, and interrelated unity. This single all-encompassing unity is substantively constituted by *teotl* and is ontologically identical with *teotl*. It is generally unified by *teotl* since it emerges from *teotl*. *Teotl* is not the “creator” *ex nihilo* of the cosmos in a theistic sense but rather the immanent engenderer of the cosmos. *Teotl* is not a minded or intentional agent, being, or deity. The history of the cosmos is nothing more than the self-unfolding and self-presenting of

*teotl*. This single, all-inclusive unity is sacred because *teotl* is sacred. Chapter 2 also anticipates and responds to several possible objections to this view.

*Teotl*'s ceaseless becoming and self-transforming are characterized by what I call *agonistic inamic unity*. Chapter 3 explores this notion. An *inamic* is a power, force, or influence that is by definition matched or paired with a second power, force, or influence. Each is conceived as the complementary polar opposite of the other. Each is the inamic of the other. Together, the two constitute an inamic pair, or set of paired inamic partners. Male and female, for example, are each other's inamic. Male is the inamic of female; female the inamic of male. Each is the inamic partner of the other. Since the concept of inamic is relational (e.g., like sisterhood), nothing can be an inamic by itself. Inamic partners by definition come in pairs. Other inamic pairs include life/death, dry/wet, hot/cold, being/nonbeing, and order/disorder. Each inamic is mutually arising, interdependent, and complementary as well as mutually competitive (antagonistic) with its partner inamic. What's more, each pair of inamic partners forms a unity, albeit an unstable one. Paired inamic forces perpetually struggle against one another. Because inamic partners coexist alongside one another, they are properly understood neither as contraries nor as contradictions as these relationships are standardly defined by Western philosophy. The transformation and becoming of reality and cosmos consist of the nonteleological struggle (agon) between inamic partners as well as the alternating dominance of each inamic over its partner. All existing things (e.g., suns, humans, trees, and corn) are constituted by the agonistic unity of inamic partners and consequently constitutionally unstable and ambiguous. Indeed, reality itself is irreducibly ambiguous. In keeping with Aztec philosophy's ontological and constitutional monism, inamic partners represent *dual aspects of teotl* – not two metaphysically distinct substances.

Inamic partners struggle against one another and unite with one another in three principal ways: *olin*, *mālnālli*, and *nēpanālli*. These represent three different patterns of motion and change or what I call *motion-change* (seeing as how Aztec metaphysics regards qualitative change as a species of motion broadly construed). They define the dynamics of reality and cosmos. *Teotl*'s sacred energy and agonistic inamic forces circulate throughout the cosmos in these three ways. I devote chapters 4, 5, and 6 to each (respectively). *Olin* is curving, swaying, oscillating, pulsating, and centering motion-change. It is exemplified by bouncing balls, pulsating hearts, respiring chests, earthquakes, labor contractions, and the daily movement of the Fifth Sun. *Olin* is also the motion-change of fourfold cyclical completion and transformation *within* and *across* *olin*-defined life-death cycles. Since all things in the Fifth Age are alive, all things are

29. Richard Boyd, "The Current Status of Scientific Realism," in *Scientific Realism*, ed. Jarrett Leplin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). See Newton-Smith, *Companion to the Philosophy of Science*, for discussion.

30. See Quine, *Word and Object*.

31. For further discussion of available sources, see David Carrasco, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures: The Civilizations of Mexico and Central America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); López Austin, *Human Body and Ideology*; López Austin, *Tamoanchan, Tlalocan*; and Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

32. I see no in-principle epistemological distinction between the natural and social sciences. For further discussion of the epistemology of the social sciences, see Brian Faye, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*; Quine, *Word and Object*; and Newton-Smith, *Companion to the Philosophy of Science*. Alison Wylie (*Thinking from Things*) applies these lessons from contemporary epistemology of science to archaeology.

Let's begin our examination of Aztec metaphysics. Western philosophy standardly defines *metaphysics* as the study of the nature, structure, and constitution of reality at the most comprehensive and synoptic level. Metaphysics aims to advance our understanding of the nature of things broadly construed. Metaphysicians seek answers to puzzles concerning the nature of existence, causality, consciousness, space, time, God, personal identity, and the relationship between human beings and the world. *Ontology* is a branch of metaphysics that focuses more narrowly on the nature of being per se and on what things exist and the kind of existence they enjoy.<sup>1</sup> Aztec metaphysics accordingly consists of the Aztecs' view of the nature, structure, and constitution of reality. Aztec ontology consists of the Aztecs' view concerning what exists and the kind of existence that existing things enjoy.

Section 1.1 sketches in broad strokes the general contours and fundamental features of my interpretation of Aztec metaphysics. My defense of this interpretation begins in section 1.2 and continues throughout the remainder of the book. Section 1.2 situates my understanding within existing scholarship on Aztec metaphysics. Section 1.3 discusses the artistic and shamanic elements of Aztec metaphysics, while section 1.4 explores several salient implications of along with several objections against my interpretation. Section 1.5 briefly summarizes the chapter's findings.

## 1.1. TEOTL

At the heart of Aztec metaphysics stands the ontological thesis that there exists just one thing: continually

*Teotl*

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dynamic, vivifying, self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy. The Aztecs referred to this energy as *teotl*. Teotl is identical with reality *per se* and hence identical with everything that exists. What's more, teotl is the basic stuff of reality. That which is real, in other words, is both identical with teotl and consists of teotl. Aztec metaphysics thus holds that there exists *numerically* only one thing – energy – as well as only one *kind* of thing – energy. Reality consists of just one thing, teotl, and this one thing is metaphysically homogeneous. Reality consists of just one kind of stuff: power or force. Taking a page from the metaphysical views of contemporary Mixtec-speaking Nuyootecos of the Mixteca Alta, we might think of teotl as something akin to electricity. Nuyootecos speak of a single, all-encompassing energy, *yñi*, which they liken to electricity.<sup>2</sup> What's more, the Aztecs regarded teotl as sacred. Although everywhere and in everything, teotl presents itself most dramatically – and is accordingly sensed most vibrantly by humans – in the vivifying potency of water, sexual activity, blood, heat, sunlight, jade, the singing of birds, and the iridescent blue-green plumage of the quetzal bird. As the single, all-encompassing life force of the cosmos, teotl vivifies the cosmos and all its contents. Everything that happens does so through teotl's perpetual energy-in-motion. Teotl is the continuing "life-flow of creation";<sup>3</sup> "a vast ocean of impersonal creative energy."<sup>4</sup>

Aztec metaphysics is therefore monistic in two distinct senses. First, it claims that there exists only one *numerically countable* thing: teotl. I call this claim *ontological monism*. Aztec metaphysics thus rejects *ontological pluralism* or the view that there exists more than one numerically countable thing. Second, it claims that this single existing thing – teotl – consists of just one *kind of stuff*, to wit, force, energy or power. Teotl is metaphysically uniform and homogeneous. I call this view *constitutional monism*. Since the cosmos and all its contents are identical with teotl as well as constituted by teotl, it follows that the cosmos and all its contents consist uniformly of energy, power, or force. Everything consists of electricity-like energy-in-motion. Aztec metaphysics thus denies *constitutional pluralism* or the thesis that reality consists of more than one kind of stuff (e.g., spiritual stuff and physical stuff). Together, ontological and constitutional monism entail that the apparent plurality of existing things (e.g., sun, mountains, trees, stones, and humans) as well as plurality of different kinds of stuff (e.g., spiritual vs. material) are both derivable from and hence explainable in terms of one existent and one kind of stuff: teotl. In the final analysis, the nature of things is to be understood in terms of teotl.

Teotl is nonpersonal, nonminded, nonagentive, and nonintentional. It is not a deity, person, or subject possessing emotions, cognitions, grand intentions, or

goals. It is not an all-powerful benevolent or malevolent god.<sup>5</sup> It is neither a legislative agent characterized by free will nor an omniscient intellect. Teotl is thoroughly amoral, that is, it is wholly lacking in moral qualities such as good and evil. Like the changing of the seasons, teotl's constant changing lacks moral properties.<sup>6</sup>

Teotl is essentially power: continually active, actualized, and actualizing energy-in-motion. It is essentially dynamic: ever-moving, ever-circulating, and ever-becoming. As ever-actualizing power, teotl consists of creating, doing, making, changing, effecting, and destroying. Generating, degenerating, and regenerating are what teotl does and therefore what teotl *is*. Yet teotl no more chooses to do this than electricity chooses to flow or the seasons choose to change. This is simply teotl's nature. The power by which teotl generates and regenerates itself and the cosmos is teotl's essence. Similarly, the power by which teotl and all things exist is also its essence.<sup>7</sup> In the final analysis, then, the existence and nature of all things are functions of and ultimately explainable in terms of the generative and regenerative power of teotl.

Teotl is a *phoroi* like a thunderstorm or flowing river rather a static, perduring *substantive entity* like a table or pebble. Moreover, it is continuous and ever-continuing process. Since there exists only one thing – namely, teotl – it follows that teotl is self-generating. After all, there is nothing outside of teotl that could act upon teotl. Teotl's tireless process of flowing, changing, and becoming is ultimately a process of self-unfolding and self-transforming. This self-becoming does not move toward a predetermined goal or ineluctable end (*telos*) at which point teotl realizes itself (like Hegel's absolute spirit) or at which point history or time comes to an end. Teotl's tireless becoming is not linear in this sense. Like the changing of the seasons, teotl's becoming is neither teleological nor eschatological. Teotl simply becomes, just as the seasons simply change. Teotl's becoming has both positive and negative consequences for human beings and is therefore ambiguous in this sense. Creative energy and destructive energy are not two different kinds of energy but two aspects of one and the same teotlizing energy.

Teotl continually and continuously generates and regenerates as well as permeates, encompasses, and shapes reality as part of its endless process of self-generation-and-regeneration. It creates the cosmos and all its contents *from within* itself as well as *out of* itself. It engenders the cosmos without being a "creator" or "maker" in the sense of an intentional agent with a plan. Teotl does not stand apart from or exist outside of its creation in the manner of the Judeo-Christian god. It is completely coextensive with created reality and cosmos. Teotl is wholly concrete, omnipresent, and immediate. Everything that

humans touch, taste, smell, hear, and see consists of and is identical with teotl's electricity-like energy. Indeed, even humans are composed of and ultimately one with teotl and, as such, exist as aspects or facets of teotl. Teotl's ceaseless changing and becoming, its ceaseless generating and regenerating of the cosmos, is a process of ceaseless self-metamorphosis or self-transformation-and-retransformation. In short, teotl's becoming consists of a particular kind of becoming, namely transformative becoming; its power, a particular kind of power, namely transformative power.

Since teotl generates and regenerates the cosmos out of itself, it would be incorrect to think that it creates the cosmos ex nihilo. Contrasting the Quiché Maya concept of creation in the *Popol Vuh* with the Judeo-Christian concept creation in the Bible, Dennis Tedlock notes that for the Maya the cosmos does not begin with a "maelstrom" of "confusion and chaos."<sup>8</sup> The same holds for Aztec metaphysics. The cosmos does not begin from chaos or nothingness; it burgeons forth from an *always already existing* teotl. Consequently Aztec metaphysics may aptly be described as lacking a cosmogony, if by *cosmogony* one means the creation of an ordered cosmos from nothingness or primordial chaos. There are no absolute beginnings — or absolute endings, for that matter — in Aztec metaphysics. There are only continuings. Death, for example, is not an ending but a change of status, as that which dies flows into and feeds that which lives. All things are involved in a single, never-ending process of recycling and transformation. There is furthermore no time prior to or after teotl since time is defined wholly in terms of teotl's becoming. Nor is there space outside of teotl since space, too, is defined wholly in terms of teotl's becoming.

Teotl continually generates and regenerates as well as permeates, encompasses, and shapes the cosmos as part of its endless process of self-generation-and-regeneration. It penetrates deeply into every detail of the cosmos and exists within the myriad of existing things. All existing things are merely momentary arrangements of this sacred energy. Reality and hence the cosmos and all its inhabitants are not only wholly exhausted by teotl, they are at bottom *identical with* teotl. That which we customarily think of as the cosmos — sun, earth, rain, humans, trees, sand, and so on — is generated *by* teotl, *from* teotl as one aspect, facet, or moment of teotl's endless process of self-generation-and-regeneration. The power of teotl is thus multifaceted, seeing as it presents itself in a multitude of different ways: for example, as heat, water, wind, fecundity, nourishment, humans, and tortillas. Yet teotl is more than the unified, kaleidoscopic totality of these aspects. It is identical with everything and everything is identical with it. Process and transformation thus define the essence of teotl. Teotl is becoming, and as becoming it is *neither* being *nor* nonbeing yet at the same time *both*

being *and* nonbeing. As becoming, teotl neither is nor is not, and yet at the same time it both is and is not. Aztec metaphysics, in other words, embraces a *metaphysics of becoming* instead of a *metaphysics of being*. Teotl *processes*, where *to process* is understood as an intransitive verb such as "to become," "to proceed," or "to walk in a procession." Teotl's processing does not represent the activity or doing of an agent. Nor does it have a direct object. Teotl's processing is a *nonagentive* process such as the changing of the seasons, the coming and going of the tides, and fluctuations in a magnetic field. Because identical with teotl, reality is essentially process, movement, becoming, change, and transformation. Because identical with teotl, the cosmos is processive and as a consequence lacks entities, structures, and states of affairs that are static, immutable, and permanent. Everything that teotl creates out of itself — from cosmos and sun to all earth's inhabitants — is processive, unstable, evanescent, and doomed to degeneration and destruction.

David Cooper proposes that we understand the term, *God*, in the mystical teachings of the Jewish Kabbalah as a verb rather than as a noun. He suggests *God* be understood along the lines of "raining" and "digesting" rather than "table" or "planet." Doing so better captures the dynamic, processive nature of the deity discussed in these teachings.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, David Hall argues in his study of classical Daoism that we better understand the term *dao* as "primarily gerundive and processive" rather than as nominative and substantive. *Dao* signifies a "moving ahead in the world, forging a way forward, road building."<sup>10</sup> Since doing so better reflects the dynamic nature of teotl, I propose we think of the word *teotl* as primarily gerundive, processive, and denoting a process (rather than as nominative and denoting a static substantive entity). *Teotl* refers to the eternal, all-encompassing process of teotlizing. Since the cosmos and all its contents are merely moments in teotl's teotlizing, they, too, are properly understood as processes.<sup>11</sup>

Aztec metaphysics' understanding of teotl is shaped by several further fundamental guiding intuitions. First, it subscribes to the notion that that which is real is that which becomes, changes, and moves. Reality is defined by *becoming* — not by *being* or "is-ness." "To be real is to become, to move, and to change. In short, Aztec metaphysics embraces a metaphysics of Becoming. It embraces flux, evanescence, and change by making them *defining* characteristics of existence and reality — rather than marginalizing them by denying them existence and permanence. It squarely identifies the real with the constant flux of things."<sup>12</sup> Since teotl is sacred, it follows that the sacred is defined by becoming, change, and motion as well.

The Aztecs' metaphysics of Becoming stands in dramatic contrast with the metaphysics of Being that characterizes the lion's share of Western metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle. The latter defines reality in terms of being or is-ness. On this view to be real is to be permanent, immutable, static, eternal, and at rest. (E.g., real love, as popular sentiment would have it, is eternal, immutable, and undying love.) That which becomes, changes, perishes, or moves is *not* real — or at least not wholly or fully so. Mutability, evanescence, and expiry are criteria of non- or partial reality, whereas immutability, permanence, and eternity are criteria of reality. Plato's metaphysics serves as a paradigmatic expression of this intuition. It denies complete reality, is-ness, and being to all things that change and assigns them to an ontologically inferior realm of semireality. Perishable and mutable things occupy his famous Cave where they suffer from semireality and semireal-ness. This is the realm of Appearances. Eternally unchanging things occupy his famous the realm of the Forms, where they enjoy complete reality and is-ness. This is the realm of the Real.<sup>13</sup>

One's view on this issue has important implications for one's understanding of the sacred. For example, if one upholds a metaphysics of Being and if one also defends the reality of the sacred (e.g., the gods), then one must a fortiori see the sacred as eternal, immutable, and defined by pure Being. The sacred cannot therefore be identified with that which becomes, changes, and perishes. The latter must be characterized as nonsacred or profane. Furthermore, if the world about us changes then the sacred must be metaphysically divorced from the world and instead identified with a transcendent, metaphysically distinct realm of Being. On the other hand, if one upholds a metaphysics of Becoming, then one may identify the sacred with the mutable, evanescent, and perishable, and hence with the changing world about us.

Second, Aztec metaphysics equates reality with the exercise of power, that is, being real with making things happen, influencing things, acting upon things, and effecting change in things. As always active, actualized, and actualizing power, *teotl* is continually doing, effecting, and making happen. Carl Jung articulates the intuition nicely: "Everything that exists acts, otherwise it would not be. It can be *only* by virtue of its inherent energy."<sup>14</sup>

A third intuition claims essence follows from function. That is, what something *is* follows from *what* it does as well as *how* it does it. This intuition replaces the traditional Western metaphysical principle *operari sequitur esse* ("functioning follows being") with its own principle *esse sequitur operari* ("being follows from operation").<sup>15</sup> *Teotl* therefore *is* what *teotl* *does*. And what does *teotl* do? *Teotl* makes everything happen as well as happen the way it does. *Teotl* is the happening of all things, the patterns in the happening of all things, and the

co-relatedness between the happenings of all things. It vivifies all things and is essentially vivifying energy. It energizes the life cycles of plants, animals, and humans; the cycles of the seasons and time; and the creation and destruction of the five Suns and their respective Ages or what I call (for reasons that will become clear in chapter 4) "Sun-Earth Orderings." *Teotl* is the power behind and the power of the becoming, changing, and transforming of all things above the earth, on the surface of the earth, and below the earth.<sup>16</sup>

The foregoing suggests Aztec philosophy embraces what Western philosophers call a *process metaphysics*.<sup>17</sup> Process metaphysics views processes rather than perduring objects, things, or substances as ontologically basic. What seem to be perduring things are really nothing more than stability patterns in processes. As the products of processes, entities are derivative. Process metaphysics treats *dynamic* notions such as becoming, power, activity, change, flux, fluidity, unfolding, creation, destruction, transformation, novelty, interactive inter-relatedness, evanescence, and emergence as central to understanding reality and how everything hangs together. What's more, processes *are* what processes *do*. Essence follows function. This intuition, like others we've seen, contradicts the dominant view in the history of Western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle, namely, *substance metaphysics*. Substance metaphysics views perduring things or substances as ontologically basic and processes as ontologically derivative.

*Teotl*, and hence reality, cosmos, and all existing things are processes. *Teotl* is not a perduring entity that underlies the various changes in the cosmos the way that say a table, according to Aristotelian metaphysics, underlies changes in its attributes (e.g., color). Nor is it a perduring substance that undergoes the various changes in the cosmos the way that say wood, according to Aristotelian metaphysics, undergoes changes from tree to lumber to table. We therefore need to resist the temptation to reify *teotl*. Sun, earth, humans, maize, insects, tortillas and stones are processes. What's more, *teotl* is a *transformational* process that changes the form, shape or "face" (*ixtli*) of things.<sup>18</sup> As such, it is simultaneously creative and destructive. Transformational processes involve the destruction of something prior in the course of creating something posterior.

Fourth, Aztec metaphysics sees reality as ex hypothesi ineliminably and irreducibly *ambiguous*. The ambiguity of things cannot be explained away as a product of human misunderstanding, ignorance, or illusion. *Teotl*, reality, cosmos, and all existing things are characterized simultaneously by inamic pairs such as being *and* nonbeing, life *and* death, male *and* female, and wet *and* dry. This contradicts the reigning intuition in Western metaphysics since Plato that holds that that which is real is ex hypothesi unambiguous, pure, and unmixed. It is only appearances and illusions that are contradictory, ambiguous, impure, and mixed.



Fifth, Aztec metaphysics views reality in *holistic* terms. Holism claims reality consists of a special kind of unity or whole: namely, one in which all individual components are *essentially* interrelated, interdependent, correlational, interactive, and thus defined in terms of one another.<sup>19</sup> Holists commonly cite biological organisms and ecological systems as examples of the kind of unity they have in mind, and accordingly liken reality to a grand biological organism or ecosystem. They claim wholes are ontologically primary and individuals are ontologically secondary, and that individuals are defined in terms of the wholes in which they participate. Houses, trees, and humans, for example, do not enjoy independent existence apart from the wholes of which they are *essentially* parts and in which they *essentially* participate. By contrast, atomism views reality as the summative product of its individual parts. Individuals, not wholes, are basic. Atomists commonly cite sets or collections of things such as the coins in one's pocket as paradigmatic examples of atomistic unities.

For holists, individuals cannot be properly understood apart from how they function in the constellation of interrelated and intercorrelated processes that define the whole and in which they essentially participate. Individuals' relationships with one another are *intrinsic* to them and exhaustively *define* them. What's more, an individual's relations extend throughout the entire cosmos. In the preceding I claimed the fundamental concepts for understanding reality are *dynamic* ones such as becoming, power, transformation, and emergence. I want now to add to this list *holistic* concepts such as interdependence, mutual arising, covariance, interconnectedness, interdependence, complementarity, and correlationalism.

How does this bear upon Aztec metaphysics? For starters, since reality is processive, it follows that Aztec metaphysics' holism is a processive holism. And since *teotl* is nonteleological and identical with reality *per se*, it follows that reality is a nonteleological processive whole: a "unified macroprocess consisting of a myriad of duly coordinated subordinate microprocesses."<sup>20</sup> The same also holds for the cosmos. These microprocesses are mutually arising, interconnected, interdependent, interpenetrating, and mutually correlated. They are intertwined one with one another like threads in a total fabric, where *teotl* is not only the total woven fabric but also the *wearer* of the fabric and the *wearing* of the fabric. Weaving is especially apropos since (as I argue in chapters 3 and 8) weaving functions as a root organizing metaphor of Aztec metaphysics. Alternatively, seeing as biological organisms function as another organizing metaphor in Aztec metaphysics, we may view these processes as mutually interdependent and interpenetrating like the processes composing an individual biological organism. It is in this vein that Kay Read claims Aztec metaphysics conceives

the cosmos as a "biologically historical" process.<sup>21</sup> In sum, Aztec metaphysics advances a nonteleological *ecological holism*.

If the foregoing is correct, it follows that *teotl* is metaphysically *immanent* in several significant senses.<sup>22</sup> First, *teotl* does not exist apart from or independently of the cosmos. *Teotl* is fully *copresent* and *coextensional* with the cosmos. Second, *teotl* is *not* correctly understood as *supernatural* or otherworldly. *Teotl* is identical with and hence fully coextensional with creation: hence no part of *teotl* exists apart from creation. *Teotl* does not exist outside of space and time. It is as concrete and immediate as the water we drink, air we breathe, and food we eat. *Teotl* is neither abstract nor transcendent.

Third, *teotl* is metaphysically homogeneous, consisting of just one kind of stuff: always actual, actualized, and actualizing energy-in-motion. The fact that *teotl* has various aspects does not gainsay its homogeneity. *Teotl* does not bifurcate into two essentially different kinds of stuff — "natural" and "supernatural" — and thus neither do reality and cosmos. Indeed, the very nature of *teotl* precludes the drawing of any qualitative metaphysical distinction between "natural" and "supernatural."<sup>23</sup> The natural versus supernatural dichotomy, so cherished by Western metaphysics and theology, simply does not apply. While Aztec *tamatinime* did claim that certain aspects of *teotl* are *imperceptible to* and so *hidden from* humans under ordinary perceptual conditions, and accordingly made an *epistemological* distinction between different aspects of *teotl*, this does not mean that Aztec *tamatinime* drew a principled metaphysical distinction between perceptible and imperceptible aspects of *teotl* or that they believed that the imperceptible aspects were "supernatural" because they consisted of a different kind of stuff.

Fourth, *teotl* is immanent in the sense that it generates and regenerates the cosmos out of itself. The history of the cosmos consists of the self-unfolding and self-becoming of *teotl*; of the continual unfolding and burgeoning of *teotl out of teotl*. *Teotl* is identical with creation since *teotl* is identical with itself. There do not therefore exist two metaphysically distinct things: *teotl* and its creation. There is only one thing: *teotl*.

Fifth, although *teotl* is sacred, it is not transcendent in the sense of being metaphysically divorced from a profane, immanent world. Aztec metaphysics does not embrace a dichotomy of sacred versus profane. Given that *teotl* is sacred, that everything is identical with *teotl*, and that *teotl* is homogeneous, it follows that *everything* is sacred. The Aztecs saw sacredness everywhere and in everything. Whereas Christianity's dualistic (and as we will see hierarchical) metaphysics effectively removes the sacred from the earthly and characterizes the earthly in terms of the absence of the sacred, the Aztecs' monistic (and as we

will see nonhierarchical) metaphysics makes the sacred present everywhere.<sup>24</sup> Aztec metaphysics lacks the conceptual resources for constructing a grand, metaphysical distinction between two essentially different kinds of stuff: sacred and profane. The sacred versus profane dichotomy, venerated by the metaphysical systems underlying many religions, simply does not obtain. This dichotomy is commonly underwritten by a Platonic-style, metaphysical dualism between two ontologically different kinds of stuff, one sacred, the other profane. But Aztec metaphysics rejects all manner of ontological dualisms. There is, however, one quite limited and insignificant sense in which teotl may be said to be transcendent. Teotl is neither exhausted by nor limited to any one existing thing at any given time or place: for example, any one given tree, human, or even cosmic era.

Consonant with the foregoing, Aztec philosophy embraces a *nonhierarchical* metaphysics.<sup>25</sup> That is, it denies the existence of a principled, ontological distinction between "higher" and "lower" realms, realities, degrees of being, or kinds of stuff. A hierarchical metaphysics, by contrast, upholds the existence of a principled hierarchy of "higher" and "lower" realities, degrees of being, and so on. Plato's Middle Period metaphysics serves as a paradigmatic instance of a hierarchical metaphysics, one that has exerted tremendous influence upon the metaphysics of Christianity and Western philosophy.<sup>26</sup> Hierarchical metaphysics are characterized by what Arthur Lovejoy calls a "great chain of being" and "great scale of being."<sup>27</sup> They standardly defend metaphysical dualism and the transcendence of the real and the sacred. Teotl's ontological monism and homogeneity, as well as its radical immanence preclude any such hierarchicalness. This helps us understand why, for example, "Christian transcendentalism was meaningless to the Nahuas," as Louise Burkhart claims.<sup>28</sup>

The assertion that Aztec metaphysics is nonhierarchical appears inconsistent with sources such as the *Historia de los mexicanos por sus pinturas* and *Historia de Mexico* that speak of the cosmos as being divided vertically into distinct layers: thirteen above and nine below the earthly layer (*tlahcipac*).<sup>29</sup> These layers are alternatively characterized as nine upper skies, four lower skies and the surface of the earth, and nine lower layers of the underworld. Claims regarding the hierarchical layering of the Aztec cosmos are also routinely based upon the depiction of cosmos with vertical layers (and accompanying commentary) on pages 1 and 2 of the *Codex Vaticanus 3738 A*.<sup>30</sup>

How do I respond to this? Chapter 8 argues the vertical layers of the cosmos are merely *folded* in the single, metaphysically homogeneous energy of teotl. This folding is analogous to the folding of a blanket or shirt that consists of one and the same kind of material (e.g., cotton). The fact that the Aztecs cosmologists

assigned different names to the folds does not mean they defended the metaphysical heterogeneity of the folds.

## 12. SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP

### SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP ON THE AZTECS

My understanding of teotl builds upon the foundational work of many scholars. First and foremost, Arild Hvidtfeldt observes that *teotl* is standardly translated as "god" (*dios*) and occurs commonly in compounds such as *teotalli*, "god's house, temple." Although "god's" is commonly used in translating such compounds, Hvidtfeldt argues that "sacred, sacral, or ritual" would be better: for example, *teopan* as "sacred place" rather than as "god's place"; "teoquemil" as "ritual garment" rather than as "god's garment"; and *teocalli* as "sacred house" rather than as "god's house."<sup>31</sup> Less commonly, teotl can also mean "sun" and occurs in such compounds as *teotlac*, "at sunset." In other compounds *teo-* entails "high potency, intensification, excellence."<sup>32</sup> In this respect, according to Hvidtfeldt, the notion resembles the Polynesian notion of *mana*. He concludes by suggesting that teotl be understood as a manlike power and that *teotl* be translated as "mana" (rather than as "god").<sup>33</sup>

Richard Townsend argues *teotl* signifies "a numinous, impersonal force diffused throughout the cosmos" and "expresses the notion of sacred quality."<sup>34</sup> Conceiving the cosmos in terms of teotl is an "essentially non-theistic manner of perceiving the universe as hallowed."<sup>35</sup> Like Hvidtfeldt, Townsend likens teotl to mana:

This force was preeminently manifested in the natural forces — earth, air, fire, and water — but was also found in persons of great distinction, or things, and places of unusual or mysterious configuration. *Teotl* expresses the notion of sacred quality, but with the idea that it could be physically manifested in some specific presence — a rainstorm, a mirage, a lake, or a majestic mountain. It was if the world was perceived as being magically charged, inherently alive in greater or lesser degrees with this vital force.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, everything in the cosmos — from stars, lakes, humans, plants, and insects to song-poems, works of art, and effigies made of amaranth dough — manifests some "aspect of the sacred." The early Spaniards' translations of *teotl* as "god," "deity," "saint," or "demon" are therefore misconceived.

In a later work, Townsend maintains teotl plays a central role in Aztec religious thought. Teotl was designated by the word-root *teo* and commonly written

with the *-tl* suffix as *teotl*.<sup>37</sup> Teotl is standardly associated with nature deities, sacred masks, and ritual objects (such as effigies of stone, wood, and amaranth dough). In this work Townsend denies *teotl* is adequately translated as "mana."<sup>38</sup> Mana — along with such notions as the numinous and the sacred — are far too narrow. He writes, "*teo* may be used to qualify almost anything mysterious, powerful, or beyond ordinary experience, such as animals of prey, a remote and awe-inspiring snowcapped mountain, a phenomenon of terrible power such as the sun or bolt of lightning."<sup>39</sup> What's more, *teo* was applied without equivocation to both benign and malign forces and objects. He concludes, "The diverse contexts of the word *teo* suggest that the Aztecs regarded the things of their world . . . as inherently charged to a greater or lesser degree with vital force or power."<sup>40</sup>

Since it serves as a reference point for many scholars' understanding of teotl, let's briefly examine the notion of mana. In his 1891 study, *The Melanesians*, R. H. Codrington writes, "*Mana* is power, *par excellence*, the genuine effectiveness of things which corroborates their practical actions without annihilating them. This is what causes a net to bring in a good catch, makes the house solid and keeps the canoe sailing smoothly: in the farms it is fertility, in medicine it is either health or death."<sup>41</sup> Mana is an inherent and pervasive "power or influence" diffused throughout the cosmos, "present in the atmosphere of life."<sup>42</sup>

However, we must resist thinking of teotl wholly in terms of mana as conceived by Codrington since the two concepts differ in several important respects. Most critically, Codrington characterizes mana as "a supernatural power or influence that 'works to effect everything which is . . . outside the common processes of nature."<sup>43</sup> However, teotl is neither supernatural nor operates "outside the common processes of nature." Teotl does not exist apart from the natural or the commonplace. It is one with both. The concept of teotl is also incompatible with a natural versus supernatural dualism. There exists just one thing, teotl, and it is identical with and exhaustive of everything — including what Western theology, metaphysics, and anthropology standardly call the "supernatural" and the "natural." The ordinary processes of everyday nature are simply the processing of teotl. In short, Codrington's conception of mana presupposes several dualisms which, although deeply entrenched in Western theologies and metaphysics, are not shared by Aztec metaphysics.

Jorge Klor de Alva, like Townsend and Hyldtfieldt, places teotl at the heart of Aztec religiosity and a fortiori Aztec metaphysics. He writes, "*Teotl* . . . implies something more than the idea of the divine manifested in the form of a god or gods; instead it signifies the sacred in more general terms." Klor de Alva proposes the term, *teoyoisim*, as a generic name "for the complex theological belief systems, the ritual practices, and mystical responses that constituted Nahua

religiosity before and after the conquest." He derives the neologism *teoyoisim* from *teoyotl*, the abstract form of *teotl*.<sup>44</sup>

Elizabeth Boone interprets teotl as "a concentration of power as a sacred and impersonal force" that charged the entire Aztec cosmos.<sup>45</sup> She writes, "Individual [Aztec] gods do not exist ontologically, endowed with visual appearances and physical attributes that they may or may not assume at any given time. Rather, sacred power, mana, or *teotl* (divinity)" exists.<sup>46</sup> The names of Aztec gods do not therefore function as proper names denoting supernatural beings but rather as "cultic terms denoting the persons and objects central to the ritual activities."<sup>47</sup> The various so-called deities are mere momentary ritual constructions. Louise Burkhart argues Aztec metaphysics is monistic. She writes, "A single divine principle — *teotl* — was responsible for the nature of the cosmos . . . It was a polytheistic monism: that is, the divine principle manifested itself in multiple forms, some ambivalent, some expressing opposite principles in their different manifestations. More accurate would be Klor de Alva's *teoyoisim*."<sup>48</sup> She proposes we translate *teotl* as "deity" or "sacred thing."<sup>49</sup>

Kay Read contends that although *teotl* translates literally as "powerful thing," we better understand its meaning if we add a sense of "animistic force or vitality."<sup>50</sup> Teotl is potent, vital, awesome, honored, and commonly beyond human ken. She writes, "The Nahua did not discuss teotl by itself, as we are doing. This was natural seeing as these powers could not be separated from physical objects. Nahua always includes powers in something else by using a prefix form that cannot stand alone (*teo-*). We are the ones focusing on these powers as a [metaphysical] category that can be [analytically] distinguished from the physical world."<sup>51</sup> Teotl permeates and vitalizes the entire cosmos including those things modern Westerners regard as inanimate such as sun, lakes, cities, and tortillas.<sup>52</sup> As David Carrasco remarks, "divine energy and force inhabit buildings as well as people, hills as well as temples, granaries as well as pyramids, costumes as well as animal skins and feathers, stones as well as bones."<sup>53</sup>

In sum, at the center of Aztec metaphysics stands the ontological thesis that there exists a single, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power: teotl. Thunderstorms, houses, grass, and centipedes are simply momentary orderings of this sacred power.

#### SUPPORTING SCHOLARSHIP ON OTHER MESOAMERICAN PEOPLES

The foregoing interpretation receives additional albeit indirect support from other indigenous Mesoamerican metaphysics. That other philosophies in the Mesoamerican cultural unit embrace similar views makes my interpretation less

novel and thus more plausible. If true, my interpretation attributes to the Aztecs a metaphysics not wholly unlike other indigenous Mesoamerican philosophies. According to Alan Sandstrom, contemporary Nahuatl-speakers in the Huastecan region of Eastern Mexico view the sacred as "a single, all-pervasive principle." They call this sacred unity *tototitl* ("our honored deity").<sup>54</sup> Despite its singularity, unity, and indivisibility, they nevertheless regard the sacred as multifaceted. The Nahuas' Otomí, Tepehua, Huastec, and Totonac neighbors likewise subscribe to such a notion.<sup>55</sup>

In his ethnography of contemporary Mixtec-speakers of the Mixteca Alta of Mexico, John Monaghan writes, "If the division between spirit and matter is axiomatic in Judeo-Christian thought, Nuyootecos begin in a different place, assuming that everything in existence is endowed with a life principle."<sup>56</sup> Nuyootecos call this single life principle *yñi*, which Monaghan glosses as "potency, vitality, fecundity."<sup>57</sup> They liken *yñi* to electricity.<sup>58</sup> *Yñi* possesses the properties of generative fecundity, transformative power, self-preservation, and vital heat.<sup>59</sup> Everything is vivified by this single, general, circulating, transforming, sacred force: wind, rain, earth, and sun as well as humans, communities, houses, birds, corn, and food. Nuyootecos also regard *yñi* as *ii* ("sacred"), suggesting something "dangerous, fragile, and easily disturbed."<sup>60</sup> In sum, at the core of Mixtec religious thought are notions of power, potency, vitality, force; transformative vitality and fertility; the animation of all things by a single sacred energy; and the circulation of this energy between things.

In his review of recent work on Mesoamerican religions, Monaghan claims Klor de Alva's concept of "teoyosim" more or less captures the beliefs, practices, and teachings of Mesoamerican religions.<sup>61</sup> The term *teotl* expresses "the proposition that reality is a unified whole, with a single divine principle responsible for the nature of the cosmos."<sup>62</sup> The divine is indistinct from the cosmos as well as immanent within the cosmos. What's more, this sacred principle appears to be indivisible, unitary, and fundamentally undifferentiated. Summarizing recent work on Mixtec, Zapotec, and Chatino religions at the time of the conquest, Arthur A. Joyce claims the three shared in common a fundamental belief in the existence of a vital force that animated time, the calendar, divine beings, people, plants, and animals as well as rivers, rain, light, mountains, wind, earthquakes, and clouds. The Mixtecs called this force *ini* or *yñi*, the Zapotecs, *péè*, and the Chatinos, *crizaa*. All three terms may be glossed as "wind," "heart," and "heart."<sup>63</sup> Belief in this single animating energy remains a vital component of the religious views of contemporary indigenous people throughout Oaxaca. According to Joyce Marcus, the Zapotec word *péè* refers to a single animating power found in humans, plants, hills, earthquakes, and the calendar.<sup>64</sup>

After observing that *teotl* is better understood as mana or sacred power than as a god, David Stuart asserts that "a very similar, if not identical, concept" is conveyed in Mayan languages by the word *k'uh* or *ch'uh*.<sup>65</sup> *K'uh* or *ch'uh* refers to "holy things generally – items that are charged, sometimes even fleetingly, with a sacred essence." He adds, "This overarching concept of a divine essence and its multifaceted expression through material objects appears to be a major foundation of Mesoamerican religious thought."<sup>66</sup> Stephen Houston and David Stuart analyze the Maya religious notion of *ku'* or *ch'u'* as follows: "*Ch'u'* is the foundation of the word *ch'ul'* which appears in Chol Mayan and Greater Tzeltalan languages with the meaning 'like vitality', but perhaps more literally 'holiness' . . . Widely translated as 'soul' or 'spirit' it more correctly refers to the vital force or power that inhabits the blood and energizes people and a variety of objects of ritual and everyday life."<sup>67</sup> This concept, they add, is "essentially identical" to other concepts of divinity found across Mesoamerica, including the central Mexican notion of *teotl* and the contemporary Mixtec notion of *yñi*.<sup>68</sup>

In a similar vein, Linda Schele and Ellen Miller write, "For the Maya, the world was a complex and awesome place, alive with sacred power. This power was part of the landscape, of the fabric of space and time, of things both living and inanimate, and of the forces of nature – storms, wind, mist, smoke, rain, earth, sky, and water."<sup>69</sup>

In sum, Mesoamerican metaphysical systems view the nature of reality in terms closely similar to those of Aztec metaphysics. My thesis that the Aztecs embraced the notion of *teotl* is well within the realm of Mesoamerican metaphysical thinking regarding the sacred.

#### SCHOLARSHIP ON INDIGENOUS NORTH AMERICAN AND EAST ASIAN METAPHYSICS

Native North American scholars attribute similar views regarding the singularity, uniformity, immanence, and vivifying potency of reality to indigenous North American philosophies. The late Standing Rock Sioux philosopher, Vine Deloria Jr., for example, argues that for indigenous peoples "the presence of energy and power is the starting point [and cornerstone] of their analyses and understanding of the world."<sup>70</sup> The "feeling or belief that the universe is energized by a pervading power" is basic and pervasive. It is not the abstract, theoretical conclusion of a process of scientific reasoning. Awareness of power is immediate and concrete.<sup>71</sup> The indigenous peoples of North America called this power *wakan orenda* or *manitu*. Deloria likens this power to "a force field" that permeates as well as constitutes everything (without distinction between

so-called matter and spirit). The cosmos is the operating of this vital power, and all existing things are products of its operating. Since this power is sacred, so is the entire cosmos. This power is neither "spiritual" nor "material" as these terms are customarily understood by Western secular and religious metaphysical thought. Indeed, indigenous metaphysics considers this a false distinction. Nature, too, then, is neither "material" nor "spiritual." Keith Basso writes, "The distinction made by Westerners between things 'natural' and 'supernatural' has no exact equivalent in the culture of the Western Apache." Powers, mythological figures, and ghosts exist on a par metaphysically with rain, sun, and wind. "The former are not conceptualized as belonging to an order of phenomena radically opposed to that which makes up the natural world."<sup>74</sup> In short, Western-style distinctions of sacred versus profane, spiritual versus material, and natural versus supernatural simply do not apply to indigenous North American metaphysics.<sup>75</sup> They are false distinctions.

Jicarilla Apache philosopher Viola Cordova argues indigenous North American metaphysics conceives the cosmos as a seamless dynamic field of energy or power that is called *asen* in Jicarilla Apache. Although standardly glossed as "great spirit" by anthropologists, she contends *asen* refers to something nonanthropomorphic and nonpersonal.<sup>76</sup> Usen has a tendency to "pool" and concentrate in varying degrees, creating "things" such as rocks and trees.<sup>75</sup> Cordova, Jace Weaver, Gregory Cajete, George Tinker, Willee Ermine, Deloria, and other Native scholars liken usen to other indigenous North American conceptions of a single, primordial, processive all-encompassing and ever-flowing creative life force including *natoji* (Blackfoot), *wakan tanka* (Sioux), *yocwa* (Cherokee), *orenda* (Iroquois), and *nilti'i* (Navajo).<sup>76</sup> According to Leroy Meyer and Tony Ramirez, Sioux metaphysics conceives all objects as "distinct manifestations" of *wakan tanka*.<sup>77</sup> Once again, we see that native North American philosophies reject as false the distinctions between sacred and profane, spirit and matter, mind and body, and natural and supernatural.

My purpose in introducing these views is to suggest that the Aztec notion of *teotl* is well within the realm of indigenous North American metaphysical thinking about the ultimate nature of reality. I do *not* claim exact correspondence, cross-cultural influence, or the existence of a shared pan-Indian way of thinking. I am *not* arguing that my interpretation of Aztec metaphysics is correct on the grounds that North American philosophies believed something similar. Rather, showing resonance between indigenous Mesoamerican (Aztec and others) and indigenous North American metaphysics enables us to see that this kind of metaphysical picture is *not* inconceivable or even uncommon, and that it is *not* a priori out of the question to attribute such a view to the Aztecs.

My purpose is also negative in the sense of clearing the ground. I believe such comparisons help gainsay scholars such as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Henri and H. A. Frankfort, and Benjamin Keen, who would argue that such a view exceeds the undeveloped cognitive abilities of "prephilosophical" and "mythopoetic" peoples who are too emotionally, practically, simple-, or concrete-minded to devise a metaphysical theory about something as "abstract" as *teotl*.<sup>78</sup> The Aztecs did not regard *teotl* as a bloodless, theoretical abstraction intellectually removed from the concrete, perceptible, and immediate. Rather, following Deloria Jr., I believe they sensed the immediate and concrete presence of power and life force both within and without. The idea of *teotl* as an "abstraction" is *our*s.

Before continuing, let's briefly examine several similar notions in classical East Asian metaphysics. First, consider classical Chinese metaphysics' notion of *qi*, traditionally translated as "breath-energy." Chad Hansen characterizes the concept of *qi* as the "basic-stuff concept" of Chinese metaphysics.<sup>79</sup> David Hall defines *qi* as a "vital, energizing field."<sup>80</sup> According to Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *qi* is the vivifying energy or life-force stuff constitutive of reality. Everything that exists – both animate and inanimate – is a "permutation" of *qi*. All things are momentary condensations or coagulations of *qi*. *Qi* possesses the power to assume different shapes or forms, two of which are mind and body. *Qi* also manifests itself in the generation, vigor, and decay of all things.<sup>81</sup> David Hall and Roger Ames characterize *qi* as the hylzoic, "continuous psychophysical sea of stuff that constitutes the ceaseless flow of existence."<sup>82</sup> *Qi* cuts across traditional Western dichotomies such as mind versus matter, mind versus body, spirit versus matter, and animate versus inanimate. *Qi* is consequently metaphysically ambiguous vis-à-vis these dichotomies. According to François Jullien, *qi* is "breath-energy" a primal, invisible, and generally diffuse flow of energy that tirelessly courses its way throughout the cosmos. Humans, rocks, and rain, for example, are nothing more than temporary concentrations or coagulations of *qi*. Their destruction, degeneration, and death represent the dissolving of these temporary concentrations.<sup>83</sup> Lastly, East Asian metaphysics commonly characterizes *qi* in terms of the active and passive dynamics of *yin* and *yang*.<sup>84</sup>

Second, Daoism speaks of *dao*, which Alan Watts characterizes as "an unconscious though nonetheless formative energy, like a magnetic field. Individual things are not so much entities as differentiations or forms in the unified field of the [d]ao."<sup>85</sup> Third, Japanese Shinto speaks of *musubi*, a creative and generative force that not only vivifies but also connects all of "Great Nature (*daishizen*)."<sup>86</sup> Humans, rivers, mountains, trees, and so forth are but aspects or manifestations of *musubi*.<sup>86</sup>



What's the point of discussing such East Asian concepts in the context of Aztec metaphysics? After all, they are obviously not equivalent to *teotl*, and I make no claims that they are. Nor for that matter do I defend cross-cultural influence or the existence of a cross-culturally shared, non-Western mode of thinking. There are, nevertheless, striking resemblances between these notions. All are central components of monistic metaphysical theories claiming that a single, vital, energy-like stuff comprises reality. Qi, dao, and *teotl* (as I argue in chapter 3) are also characterized in terms of dynamic dual polarities. In the case of dao and qi, these are yin and yang; in the case of *teotl*, they are inanic partners such as being and nonbeing, male and female, death and life, and so on. But what's the point of observing these similarities?

Such comparisons are useful heuristically. Listening to how Chinese philosophers characterized qi or dao offers us with new ways of thinking about *teotl*. I find it fruitful to think of *teotl* as a continuous "psychophysical sea" of vitalizing stuff that constitutes all things, or to think of the arrangement of the cosmos at any given time and place as well as the particular inhabitants of the cosmos at any given time and place (e.g., wind, earth, humans, butterflies, and corn) as nothing more than temporarily pooled, concentrated, or coagulated *teotl* energy-stuff. Furthermore, such comparisons offer us ways of thinking beyond such dichotomies as mind versus matter, spiritual versus physical, natural versus supernatural, and animate versus inanimate that are habitually entrenched in Western ways of thinking. Finally, such comparisons show that the idea that the cosmos is constituted and vivified by a single indivisible energy is neither unknown nor uncommon across world philosophies (and religions) — including those developed by cultures deemed "unsophisticated," "emotional," "irrational," "primitive," and "High Stone Age" by Western-trained scholars — and therefore show that it is not a priori implausible to ascribe such a view to Aztec tlamanime.

### 1.3. THE COSMOS AS TEOTL'S ARTISTIC-SHAMANIC SELF-TRANSFORMATION

Teotl's continual generating and regenerating of the cosmos is also a process of tireless self-transformation and retransformation. Aztec metaphysics commonly characterizes this transformation in two closely related, if not ultimately equivalent, ways: as a process of artistic creation and as a process of shamanic form-changing or shape-shifting. Teotl is the consummate cosmic artist-shaman. Let's examine each.

The Aztecs saw *teotl* as a creative and artistic process since *teotl* endlessly fashions and refashions itself *into* and *as* the cosmos. Artistic creation is

fundamentally transformative. The artist transforms disordered raw materials into well-ordered finished products: for example, raw cotton into woven fabric, words into song-poems, and mineral ore into jewelry. The artist also takes old objects and refashions them into new ones: for example, melting down old broken jewelry and refashioning it anew. Aztec metaphysics accordingly views the cosmos as *teotl's in xochitl in cuicatl* ("flower and song"). *In xochitl in cuicatl* refers broadly to creative activity such as composing-singing poetry, wearing, goldsmithing, and painting-writing. Conquest-era Nahuatl philosopher-poets commonly characterized the cosmos as an *amoxitli*, or sacred book of paintings, and earthly existents as figures painted-written therein. Nezahualcoyotl declares:

You paint with flowers, with songs, Life Giver. You color the ones who'll live on earth, you recite them in colors, and so you're hatching eagles, jaguars, in your painting place [*molacuilolohpani*] . . .  
Though we vessels are alive, we are mortal. All of us are to pass away, all of us are to die on earth . . .

Like paintings we're destroyed, like flowers we wither on earth.<sup>87</sup>

A song-poem León-Portilla attributes to Aquiauhztzin characterizes the cosmos as a *tlacuilocaltitl* ("house of paintings").<sup>88</sup> A song-poem attributed to Xayacamaxtla declares, "your home is here, in the midst of the paintings."<sup>89</sup> The contemporary Nahuatl poet, Natalio Hernández Hernández, expresses this idea as follows:

I sing to life, to man  
and to nature, the mother earth,  
because life is flower and it is song,  
it is in the end: flower and song.<sup>90</sup>

Aztec metaphysics also understands *teotl's* continuing generation and regeneration of the cosmos in terms of shamanic transformation or form-changing. The cosmos is *teotl's nahual (nahualli or nahuatl)* — that is, *teotl's* "guise," "transfiguration," "double," or "mask." The word *nahual* derives from *nahualli* meaning both a form-changing shaman and the being into which a shaman transforms.<sup>91</sup> The concept of a *nahual* has its roots in indigenous Mesoamerican notions of shamanic power and transformation. As a shaman possesses the power to transform him/herself into his *nahual* (say, a jaguar), so *teotl* possesses the power to transform itself into its *nahual*: the cosmos. The continual becoming of the cosmos along with its myriad characteristics and inhabitants are products of *teotl's* continuing shamanic self-shape-shifting and self-transforming. Teotl is

essentially transformative power and hence the quintessential transformer. As the ultimate shape shifter, Tzatzapipoca, "Lord of the Smoking Mirror," exemplified this shamanic power.<sup>92</sup>

Are teotl's transformations therefore deceptive? J. Richard Andrews and Ross Hassig reject Angel María Garibay K.'s proposal that *nahual* is rooted in an archaic verb meaning "to disassemble, to deceive" along with the idea that a nahual is by definition deceptive. *Nahualli* is a patientive noun that derives from *tlā-nahua*, meaning "to interpose something between self and public, skin and outer clothing, man and gods, the natural and supernatural, and so forth." A nahualli is simply "an entity that can be interposed."<sup>93</sup>

Andrews and Hassig's discussion suggests the need to be careful when thinking about masks and disguises. Raymond Fogelson writes about the traditions of Cherokee Booger masks and Iroquois (Seneca) False Faces as follows: "We do *not* understand the meaning of masks in these cultures if we treat their usage as analogous to our sense of masks as disguises, as distortions or caricatures that cover up a true reality hidden behind the mask." In these traditions masks represent "temporary incarnation[s] of cosmic reality."<sup>94</sup> The Seneca, argues Sam Gill, refer to their masks as *gagwā* which simply means "face."<sup>95</sup> "False Faces," the common name given to Seneca masks by outsiders, is therefore inaccurate and misleading. Seneca masks are living objects that "present and animate the real presence of the spirit."<sup>96</sup> They disclose and present a spirit, and are better thought of as *guises* than as *disguises*. The Seneca do not regard masks as coverings that are worn in order to hide, conceal, or deceive. The concept of being false or untrue plays no role. Similarly, in Hopi masking tradition the person who dons a mask is not regarded as someone impersonating a deity but as someone who loses his own personal identity in the process of becoming that deity.<sup>97</sup> In sum, we cannot simply assume that Aztec philosophy understands masks as necessarily deceptive or as ontologically distinct from the person donning the mask.

We customarily think about masks as by definition deceptive and as ontologically distinct from the person donning the mask. We customarily think of masks as deceptive because we see masks as concealing the identity of their wearers. One hides behind a mask; one covers one's face with a mask. Others are unable to recognize one's identity because one *interposes* the mask between one's face and them. This way of thinking about masks and masking presupposes a specific metaphysics, namely, one according to which mask and masker are two ontologically distinct things. It presupposes, in other words, an ontological dualism. The *epistemological* phenomenon of deception is grounded in this *dualistic ontology*. One is able to cover and hide one's face with a mask because mask and face are two distinct things.

This way of thinking about masks and masking, however, is not Aztec philosophy's way. In brief, since Aztec philosophy is ontologically monistic and it is a fortiori precluded from thinking about masks as something ontologically distinct from teotl, teotl cannot be said to mask itself in a way that presupposes that teotl and mask are two distinct things. Teotl and mask must in the final analysis be identical with one another. Consequently, the epistemological phenomenon of deception cannot be explained metaphysically by appealing to a dualistic ontology consisting of "false" mask versus "true" wearer.

Since Aztec philosophy sees teotl's generation and regeneration of the cosmos as a process of shamanic transformation, let's turn to shamanism for further insight. When transforming himself into, say, a jaguar, a shaman does not simply assume the guise or external form of a jaguar. The shaman literally *becomes* a jaguar Shaman and jaguar are one. And although the shaman's human identity is obscure and difficult to recognize while a jaguar, this is not the result of his concealing his identity within or behind the mask of the jaguar.

Teotl's relationship to the cosmos is analogous to the shaman's relationship to the jaguar. From this interpretation several important consequences follow for our thinking about teotl's relationship to the cosmos and its inhabitants. First, since a nahual is better understood as a guise that presents rather than as a disguise that misrepresents, to say that the cosmos and all its inhabitants are teotl's nahual is *not* to say that they are nothing but illusion (or illusory). Similarly, to say this is *not* to say that teotl *misrepresents* itself to human beings *in the guise of* the cosmos. Teotl does not hide behind the mask of the cosmos as a Halloween trick-or-treater hides behind her witch mask. Teotl is one and the same with the cosmos.

Second, it is a mistake to think of a nahual as something ontologically distinct from the shaman, who assumes it. Nahual and shaman are one. The shaman literally becomes a jaguar (his nahual). Teotl literally *becomes* the cosmos. To think otherwise is to commit Aztec metaphysics to an intolerable ontological dualism. Teotl and nahual (the cosmos) are numerically one and the same thing.

Third, just as it is a mistake to think the jaguar does not really exist because it is merely illusion (or illusory), so likewise it is a mistake to think that the cosmos does not really exist because it is merely illusion (or illusory). Both jaguar and cosmos are real, both exist.

Fourth, to claim that teotl is identical with its nahual (the cosmos) and to claim that nahuals are not deceptive is *not* to claim that humans recognize this identity, recognize the cosmos as teotl's nahual, or recognize teotl in the cosmos by means of ordinary sense perception. We may express this point more sharply using the Western philosophical distinction between perception *de re*