

# Pre-Columbian Philosophies

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The indigenous peoples of what is now called “Latin America” enjoy long and rich traditions of philosophical inquiry dating back centuries before being characterized by their European “discoverers” as “primitives” incapable of or unmotivated to think philosophically. Pre-Columbian societies contained individuals who reflected critically and systematically upon the nature of reality, human existence, knowledge, right conduct, and goodness; individuals who puzzled over questions like “How should humans act?,” “What can humans know?,” and “What can humans hope for?” This chapter focuses upon the philosophies of Andean and Aztec societies, the two most prominent indigenous philosophies flourishing during the period of contact (i.e., of mutual encounter, interaction, exchange, and conflict between Europeans and indigenous peoples) in the sixteenth century.

Our understanding of Andean and Aztec philosophies is limited by the fact that we lack pre-contact primary sources written in their respective indigenous languages. Reconstructing pre-Columbian philosophies therefore involves triangulating from a variety of alternative sources. First, we have the ethnohistories of early indigenous, *mestizo*, and Spanish chroniclers. For Andean philosophy, these include the writings of Spaniards such as Pedro Cieza de León (1967), Juan de Betanzos (1996), and Bernabé Cobo (1990), and of indigenous Andeans such as Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (1936) and Juan de Santa Cruz Pachacuti Yamqui Salcamaygua (1873). For Aztec philosophy, these include the writings of Spanish missionaries such as Bernardino de Sahagún (1953–82), Diego Durán (1971, 1994), and Alonso de Molina (2001). Second, we have Andean *quipus* or knotted-strings that were used for recording information, and Aztec pictorial histories, ritual calendars, maps, and tribute records. Third, in both cases we have archaeological evidence such as architecture, statues, pottery, jewelry, tools, and human remains. Finally, we have contemporary ethnographies of relevant surviving indigenous peoples, e.g.: Classen (1993), Isbell (1978), Seibold (1992), and Urton (1981) in the case of Andean philosophy; Sandstrom (1991) and Knab (2004), in the case of Aztec.

## Contact-Period Indigenous Andean Philosophy

Inca philosophers inherited a vibrant tradition of philosophical reflection from a long line of predecessors in the Andean region. The Inca empire (ca. 1400–1532) – called

*tahuantinsuyu* (“the four parts together or unified”) in Quechua, the lingua franca of the Incas – was merely the last and best known in a series of pre-Columbian Andean cultures including Chavín and Paracas (900–200 BCE), Nazca and Moche (ca. 200 BCE–550 CE), Huari and Tiahuanaco (ca. 550–1000) and Chimú (ca. 1000–1400). There was no single, pan-Andean philosophy shared by all Andean peoples prior to the conquest, and therefore we must distinguish Inca from non-Inca Andean philosophies. “Non-Inca philosophy” refers broadly to the many provincial philosophical views of local *ayllus* – a Quechua word for a social unit bound together by kinship, lineage, ritual, territorial, political, and economic ties – and ethnic groups in the Andean region. “Inca philosophy” refers specifically to the philosophical views espoused by Inca *amautas* (singular, *amauta*), i.e., “sages,” “poet-philosophers,” “priests,” or “thinkers.” Inca philosophy drew upon a wealth of non-Inca Andean philosophical themes while at the same adapting these to Inca imperial purposes and circumstances.

Their many specific differences notwithstanding, Inca and non-Inca philosophies nevertheless shared in common several fundamental metaphysical themes regarding the nature of reality, human beings, and the interrelationships between human and nonhuman realms. These, in turn, set the stage for a shared vision of wisdom and ethics. I attribute these to Andean philosophy broadly construed and explore them below.

First, Andean philosophy claims that the cosmos along with all its contents is vivified or animated by a single life force (Cobo, 1990; Pachacuti Yamqui Salcamaygua, 1873). In colonial-era documents, this life force is sometimes called *camaqueñ* or *camac*, other times, *upani* and *amaya*. Human beings, plants, mountains, water, wind, light, mummified human remains, textiles, and stone structures are infused with this force. It appears to be coextensive with existence as such. It is dynamic, flowing, and constantly circulating throughout the regions and inhabitants of the cosmos. Water, light, rainbows, and the human life–death cycle serve as conduits for its circulation and recycling.

This force also assumes the guise of interdependent, mutually arising, complementary dual forces: e.g., night/day, sun/moon, celestial/terrestrial, above/below, cultivated/uncultivated, insider/outsider, and life/death. Life and death, for example, are cyclically interrelated as well as mutually arising and mutually interdependent. The desiccated remains of the dead serve as seeds for new life. Andean dualities oppose one another but never exclude or contradict one another. Andeans conceived rainbows as double-headed serpents that physically embodied this complementary dualism. They regarded double-faced textiles, woven so as to display a single design on both sides but with colors reversed, as visually expressing the concept of a single reality assuming two guises or forms. Dualism also plays an important role in Quechua mathematics’ understanding of odd and even numbers as well as pairs of numbers. These dual forces are also gendered. Day, sun, celestial, above, and cultivated are male; night, moon, below, and uncultivated are female. Domestic, social, political, and economic relations are rooted in this metaphysics and accordingly conceived in dualistic, gendered terms. Invaders are male; original inhabitants, female. Tilling the soil is male; sowing seeds, female.

Andean dualities contribute jointly to a single, orderly whole. Indeed, the cosmos consists of the continuing alternation of these dualities. This process is governed by *ayni*, i.e., by relationships of reciprocity and mutual exchange. When dualities reciprocate equally and as a result coexist in equilibrium, the cosmos enjoys a *pacha* – i.e., “world/time/space/state-of-being,” “age,” or “sun” – of relative existential and

spatio-temporal order and stability. The equilibrium of the present pacha makes possible human existence. Pachacuti Yamqui Salcamaygua (1873) writes of a diagram kept in the Coricancha, the principal temple in Cuzco, the capital city of the Inca empire. He claims that the diagram graphically expressed the foregoing conception of the cosmos as organized by gendered, mutually reciprocating, polar dualities. His hand-drawn reproduction of the original depicts a series of paired, complementary polarities, including sky and earth, sun and moon, summer and winter, and man and woman. The various elements of the diagram are brought together by a cross of stars and a large oval representing the Inca's creator deity, *Viracocha*, or perhaps the Milky Way.

Reciprocity between dualities eventually breaks down, however, and disequilibrium ensues. Each cosmic age undergoes cataclysmic disintegration and *pachacuti*, i.e., a "turning around, alternating or overturning" (*cuti*) of "world/time/space/state-of-being" (pacha). This is a time of disorder, instability, and transition; a time betwixt and between ages. And yet a new cosmic age begins as an inevitable consequence of this "turning around." Each ending cyclically unfolds into a new beginning. According to Guaman Poma de Ayala (1936), the cosmos had undergone four such ages prior to the Incas, who lived during the fifth. The fifth had "turned around" upon the Spanish invasion, initiating the current, sixth age.

The Andean cosmos is "open" in the sense that it allows the causal participation of human beings in its continuing equilibrium. Through their actions humans affect – positively or negatively – the balance of the cosmos. What humans do makes a difference to the equilibrium and hence continuing existence of the current cosmic age. Moreover, human participation is absolutely necessary. Human life occurs within and is defined by an intricate and fragile matrix of reciprocity relations (*ayni*) with other elements of the cosmos (e.g., water and earth). These relations bring with them a host of obligations to reciprocate. Humans contribute positively to cosmic equilibrium when they perform the requisite, obligation-fulfilling reciprocal actions. They disrupt cosmic equilibrium by failing to perform these actions. The continuing equilibrium of the cosmos depends upon humans' fulfilling their reciprocity obligations. In sum, human reciprocal activity is an *integral* part of as well as *integrating* force in the cosmos.

The foregoing metaphysical picture sets the stage for what we might call an "ethics of reciprocity." Human beings are *in* the world and *of* the world. As such, they are obliged to perform reciprocating actions that maintain the equilibrium and continuing existence of the cosmos and humankind. They are obliged to organize all aspects of their lives according to the norm of reciprocity. Such obligations are simultaneously moral, prudential, and religious. Wisdom consists of knowing how, when, and where to act so as to maintain reciprocity between humans and cosmos. The wise person knows how to guide humans through the dualities, cycles, and reciprocal relationships defining human existence so that humans may enjoy relatively stable, harmonious, and thriving lives. Such know-how requires constant revising based upon the interpretation of a variety of phenomena, including eclipses, droughts, crop successes or failures, dreams, visions, and the condition of slaughtered camelid lungs and entrails.

Finally, humans have at their disposal two calendars: daytime and nighttime. These are embodied in the unfolding of various cosmic cycles. As such, the two calendars function as practical action-guides or maps for human activity directed at maintaining

reciprocity, equilibrium, and the continuing existence of the current cosmic age (Cobo, 1990; Guaman Poma de Ayala, 1936; Pachacuti Yamqui Salcamaygua, 1873).

## Contact-Era Aztec or Nahua Philosophy

Mesoamerica is standardly defined as a broad, historical cultural tradition consisting of a dynamic, complex intermixing of various local and regional indigenous cultures. Geographically, Mesoamerica covers the southern two-thirds of Mexico, all of Guatemala, El Salvador, Belize, and the western portions of Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica. The origins of Mesoamerica are standardly associated with Olmec culture (ca. 1150–300 BCE), which was followed by (to name only a few) the cultures of Monte Albán (ca. 250 BCE–700 CE), Teotihuacán (ca. 150 BCE–750 CE), the Classic Maya (ca. 250–900 CE), the Toltecs (ca. 900–1200), Chichén Itzá (ca. 900–1200) (often referred to as Post-Classic Maya), and the Aztecs (ca. 1350–1521). Each was ethnically, linguistically, politically, culturally, and/or regionally distinct. Earlier cultures influenced later ones, as successive generations of descendants from earlier cultures interacted through migration and trade with the members of later ones. Contemporaneous cultures influenced one another through trade and migration. The members (in the case of the Aztecs) or descendants (in the case of the rest) of these cultures all faced invasion and military defeat by the Spanish beginning in the sixteenth century. So, for example, even though Classic and Post-Classic Maya cultures had by this time long since ceased flourishing, Spanish invaders nevertheless encountered Mayan language speakers following beliefs and practices derived from their ancestral cultures.

The Aztecs were one among many Nahuatl-speaking peoples who migrated in successive waves from outside of Mesoamerica (in what is now northwestern Mexico–southwestern United States) to the central highlands of Mexico during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Nahuatl is member of the Uto-Aztecan linguistic family along with Hopi, Ute, and Huichol. Contact-era Nahuatl-speakers included (among others) the Mexica (dubbed “Aztecs” by European and North American scholars), Texcocans, Tlacopans, Tlaxcaltecs, and Chalcans. In light of their common language and culture, scholars refer to Nahuatl-speakers as “Nahua” and to their culture as “Nahua culture.” This chapter follows this practice. Nahua culture flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries prior to 1521, the official date of the fall of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital city (Carrasco, 2001).

Contact-era Nahua philosophy draws jointly from its Uto-Aztecan cultural roots *and* from its adopted Mesoamerican cultural inheritance. It views the earth as an extremely perilous place for human beings (Sahagún, 1953–82). Humans lose their balance easily while walking upon the earth and as a consequence suffer pain, hunger, thirst, sorrow, disease, and madness. Nahua *tlamatinime* (*tlamatini*, singular), i.e., “knowers of things,” “poet-philosophers,” or “sages,” conceived the *raison d’être* of philosophy as providing practicable answers to what they saw as the central question of human existence: “How can humans walk in balance and so flourish upon the earth?” This existential situation-cum-question defines the *problematic* framing Nahua philosophy. Nahua philosophers conceived ethically, epistemologically, and aesthetically good (*cualli*) conduct, attitudes, objects, and states of affairs in terms of humans

maintaining their balance and flourishing upon the earth (Burkhart, 1989; Durán, 1971, 1994; León-Portilla, 1963; López Austin, 1988, 1997; Maffie, 2007; Sahagún, 1953–82).

This problematic is rooted in Nahua metaphysics. The starting point of Nahua metaphysics is the claim that there exists a *single*, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power or force. The Nahua referred to this power as “*teotl*.” *Teotl* is always active, actualized, and actualizing energy-in-motion. The cosmos and all its constituents are constituted by, as well as ultimately identical with, the sacred force of *teotl*. *Teotl* permeates, configures, and vivifies the entire cosmos and its contents (Durán, 1971, 1994; Sahagún, 1953–82).

Process, motion, transformation, destruction, and creation define *teotl*, hence reality per se, and hence the cosmos and all its contents. *Teotl* is properly understood as *neither* being *nor* non-being but as *becoming*. *Teotl* neither *is* nor *is not*; *teotl becomes*. As a consequence, reality per se and hence the cosmos and its inhabitants are unstable, evanescent, and transitory. Reality is devoid of static states of being, order, and permanent structure. *Teotl* creates (and re-creates) the cosmos – along with all its inhabitants – out of itself. They are *teotl*’s immanent self-presentation – not its creation ex nihilo. They neither exist apart from nor outside of *teotl* (Maffie, 2007; Sahagún, 1953–82).

Nahua metaphysics may be viewed as a form of pantheism. Everything is bound together by an all-inclusive and interrelated sacred unity: *teotl*. Everything does not merely exist inside *teotl*, and *teotl* does not merely exist inside everything (as panentheism claims). Rather, everything is identical with *teotl*. Although vivifying, *teotl* is nonpersonal, non-agentive, and non-intentional. It is not a deity possessing power in the manner of a ruler or king.

Nahua metaphysics is further shaped by several additional intuitions. First, that which is real is that which becomes, changes, and transmutes – contra most Western metaphysics which claims that that which is real is that which is immutable, stable, and static. Reality is characterized by Becoming – not by Being or “is-ness” as such. To exist is to become, move, transform, and change. Second, that which is real is that which makes things happen. Being real consists of the power to create, destroy, transform, act upon, or affect change in things. To be is to be (causally) effective. Nahua metaphysics is committed to the mutual equivalence of existence, power, energy, motion, becoming, causing, and transforming (both of self and others). Third, reality is irreducibly ambiguous – contra most Western philosophers’ claims that reality (as opposed to appearances) is unambiguous. Fourth, nature follows function: what something is follows from what it *does*. In sum, according to Nahua metaphysics processes rather than perduring objects or substances are ontologically fundamental. Activity, motion, flux, time, change, and transformation are the principal notions for understanding things.

Nahua philosophy also conceives *teotl* in terms of the autochthonous Nahua notion of *nepantla*. *Nepantla* plays a central role in Nahua metaphysics’ descriptive account of the nature of reality and of the human condition, and a central role in Nahua value theory’s (i.e., ethics, epistemology, and aesthetics) conceptions of good conduct, good cognizing, good art, and the good life for human beings.

Durán (1994) glosses “*nepantla*” as “betwixt and between” (*en medios*), “neither one nor the other,” and “neither fish nor fowl” (*neutros*). Molina (2001) glosses “*nepantla*” as an adverb, meaning “in the middle of something” (*en el medio, o en medio, o por medio*).



Nepantla primarily modifies activities, processes, doings, and becomings. It tells us how, when, or where an agent(s) or thing(s) acts, behaves, or does something; or how, when, or where a process occurs. Nepantla-processes take place “in the middle of,” “betwixt and between,” or “in the balance between” two or more things. They place people or things in *nepantlatli*, i.e., in the middle of, or betwixt and between, two endpoints. Nepantla-processes are also middling in the sense of actively middling their *relata*. Nepantla also conveys a sense of abundant reciprocity or mutuality; one that derives from being “middled.” Nepantla-processes occupy, use, and apply the middle as well as create a middled product. They are “nepantla-middling” or “nepantla-balancing.” The Nahuas regarded weaving, sexual commingling, the joining, shaking, or mixing together of things, and reciprocal greeting, pardoning, and befriending as nepantla-middling and -balancing processes (Burkhart, 1989; López Austin, 1997; Maffie, 2007; Molina, 2001; Sahagún, 1953–82).

Nepantla-processes are simultaneously destructive *and* creative and hence essentially transformative. Consider weaving. On the one hand, weaving creates something new – a fabric that is neither warp nor weft yet at the same time both warp and weft held in reciprocal tension with one another. On the other hand, weaving destroys the prior identities of individual warp and weft fibers. The transformation from fibers to fabric is simultaneously creative and destructive. The creation of something new is predicated upon and emerges from the destruction of something prior.

Nepantla-processes suspend things within a dynamic, unstable, and destabilizing *ontological zone* between conventional categories: a zone in which things become ill-defined, ambiguous, and anomalous; a zone in which things disappear into the interstices between conventional categories; and finally, a zone from which emerges a novel *tertium quid*. Things previously categorized as “fish” and “fowl” are subjected to a transformative process that destroys their erstwhile independent, well-defined status as “fish” vs. “fowl” while also creating a *tertium quid* that is neither fish nor fowl. “Fish” and “fowl” are destroyed in the course becoming something that is neither fish nor fowl yet simultaneously both fish and fowl: something ill-defined, unsettled, and unstable; something that “cuts across” the conventional categories of fish and fowl. Nepantla-processes place their participants within an ambiguous ontological zone that transcends “either/or” and “this” vs. “that.” The Nahuas regarded the crossroads (*onepanco*) as a paradigmatic example of nepantla. The crossroads is the “center” or “middle” of two intersecting roads. This intersecting creates a new space, one betwixt and between two roads; a marginal, anomalous, unstable, and ill-defined place; a place that is ultimately “no place” at all. The crossroads is ontologically ambiguous: it is neither this road nor that road yet simultaneously both roads at once. In sum, nepantla-processes place people and things within a “borderland,” i.e., a dynamic zone of mutual interaction, reciprocal influence, unstable and diffuse identity, and transformation (Maffie, 2007).

Nahuas metaphysics conceives *teotl* as a nepantla-process. *Teotl* oscillates middlingly betwixt and between being and non-being. *Teotl* is at bottom ontologically ambiguous since it is neither being nor non-being yet simultaneously both being and non-being. That is, it is becoming. Similarly, *teotl* is neither ordered (determined or governed top-down by laws or principles) nor disordered (chaotic) but rather *unordered*. It captures an ontological *tertium quid*: unorderliness. Since they are identical with *teotl*, reality, cosmos, and human existence are likewise defined in terms of nepantla,

i.e., by transformative dialectical reciprocity and abundant mutuality. It follows that they, too, are dynamic, processive, constantly changing, irreducibly ambiguous, and inescapably caught betwixt and between order and disorder, and being and non-being.

Although essentially processive and devoid of Being as well as permanent order, structure, and substances, *teotl*'s ceaseless becoming and self-presenting are nevertheless characterized by an overarching pattern or rhythm. This rhythm is expressed simultaneously in two, ultimately equivalent ways: as the agonistic, dialectical reciprocity of complementary dualities, and as the two calendars. According to the former, *teotl* presents itself as the ceaseless, cyclical alternation or tug-of-war between coexisting, mutually interdependent and arising, complementary dualities or polarities. These include being/not-being, order/disorder, life/death, light/darkness, male/female, and drought/humidity. Life and death, for example, are mutually arising and interdependent, complementary aspects of one and the same cyclical process. Life contains the seed of death; death, the seed of life. Without death, there is no life; without life, there is no death (Durán, 1994; Sahagún, 1953–82). The dialectic of life and death is also one of abundant mutuality and reciprocity. The same applies to order and disorder, male and female, light and darkness, etc. Although each moment in a cycle consists of the dominance of one or the other paired opposite, in the long run the cycle manifests an overarching dynamic balance. Short-term imbalances are woven into long-term balance. What produces and explains this overarching balance and rhythm of complementary dualities? *Teotl* as *nepantla*-process.

The cyclical alternation and momentary dominance of each of these complementary opposites produces the diversity of the cosmos across time and place as well as the momentary arrangement of the cosmos at any given moment. The genesis of the cosmos falls into five successive ages or “suns,” each representing the temporary dominance of a different aspect of *teotl*. The present era, the “Age of the Fifth Sun,” is the one in which human beings live. Like its four predecessors, however, the Fifth Sun will eventually succumb to catastrophic imbalance, the earth will be destroyed by earthquakes, and humankind will vanish (Durán, 1971, 1994; Sahagún, 1953–82).

Nahua dualism differs profoundly from the Zoroastrian- and Manichean-style dualisms that characterize so much of Western thinking. These standardly claim that order, goodness, life, or light, on the one hand, and disorder, evil, death, or darkness, on the other, are mutually contradictory, incompatible, and exclusive. They view history as consisting of the either/or struggle of these contradictories. At the end of history, one or the other of these contradictories will or ought to defeat and eliminate the other. Nahua dualism claims that order and disorder, life and death, etc., alternate endlessly and interdependently without resolution. It rejects as foolish the ideas that life is inherently good and that death is inherently evil as well as the idea that life will or ought to triumph over death. It rejects as equally foolish the quest for eternal life. Lastly, and especially noteworthy, “good” and “evil” do not show up on the Nahuas’ list of complementary dualities. Reality and hence human existence are not defined in terms of a conflict between good and evil.

The overarching rhythm of *teotl*'s *nepantla*-balancing also presents itself as the spiraling cycle of time-place captured by the two calendars – the *tonalpohualli* or 260-day count, and the *xiuhmolpilli* or 360+5-day count – that characterize the Age of the Fifth Sun. Calendrical counts frame human existence. A person's birth date according to the

tonalpohualli determines her *tonalli*: a general cosmic force that suffuses the earth's surface and determines a person's innate character predispositions. Each day carries its own tonalli, and each tonalli carries its own causal influence upon the earth. The Nahua used the tonalpohualli to ascertain the specific tonalli reigning on any particular day (Durán, 1971, 1994; Sahagún, 1953–82).

In the final analysis, teotl is essentially an undifferentiated, unordered, unstable, and seamless processive totality. As a nepantla-process, teotl falls betwixt and between being/non-being, order/disorder, life/death, etc. It is simultaneously neither alive nor dead yet both alive and dead, neither orderly nor disorderly yet both orderly and disorderly, etc. Teotl cuts across conventional categories and is therefore ambiguous and ill-defined relative to such categories. It is neither this nor that, yet both; neither something nor nothing, yet both. Moreover, given that time-place (as defined, mapped, and counted by the two calendars) is yet another self-presentation of teotl, teotl is also ultimately untimed and unplaced. It is neither here nor there, yet both; neither now nor then, yet both.

Nahua philosophers understood teotl's self-presenting and self-transforming in two additional, closely interrelated ways. First, they conceived it as a shamanic process. The cosmos is teotl's *nahual* ("disguise" or "mask"). The Nahuatl word "nahual" derives from "*nahualli*" signifying a form-changing shaman. The becoming of the cosmos consists of teotl's shamanic self-masking or self-transforming. Second, they conceived it as an artistic process, one consisting of teotl's creating and re-creating itself *into* and *as* the cosmos. The cosmos is teotl's *in xochitl in cuicatl* or "flower and song." "Flower and song" refers specifically to the performing of song-poems. It also refers more broadly to transformative, artistic activity per se (e.g., goldsmithing, featherworking, and painting-writing). Nahua tlamatinime commonly characterized earthly existence as consisting of pictures painted-written by teotl on teotl's sacred *amoxtli* (a native papyrus-like paper). The tlamatini Aquiauhztin characterizes the earth as "the house of paintings" (trans. by León-Portilla, 1992, p. 282). Xayacamach writes, "Your home is here, in the midst of the paintings" (trans. by León-Portilla, 1992, p. 228). Like the images on amoxtli painted-written by human artists, teotl's images are fragile and evanescent. Nezahualcoyotl, sings:

With flowers You paint,  
O Giver of Life!  
With songs You give color,  
with songs you give life on the earth.  
Later you will destroy eagles and tigers:  
we live only in Your painting  
here, on the earth.  
With black ink you will blot out  
all that was friendship,  
brotherhood, nobility.  
You give shading  
to those who will live on the earth.  
We live only in Your book of paintings,  
here on the earth.

(trans. by León-Portilla, 1992, p. 83)



Because they regarded everything earthly as *teotl*'s disguise or mask, Nahua *tlama-tinime* claimed that everything earthly is dreamlike. *Tochiuhitzin Coyolchiuhqui* sings, "We only rise from sleep, we come only to dream, it is *ahnelli* [unrooted, inauthentic, untrue], it is *ahnelli* that we come on earth to live" (trans. by León-Portilla, 1992, p. 153, brackets mine) *Nezahualcoyotl* sings:

I, *Nezahualcoyotl*, ask this:  
 Is it *nelli* [well-rooted, authentic, true] one really lives on the earth?  
 Not forever on earth, only a little while here.  
 Though it be jade it falls apart,  
 though it be gold it wears away,  
 though it be quetzal plumage it is torn asunder.  
 Not forever on this earth, only a little while here.  
 (trans. by León-Portilla, 1992, p. 80, brackets mine)

Nahua philosophers conceived the dreamlike illusoriness of earthly existence in epistemological – not ontological – terms. They spoke of the dreamlikeness of earthly life in order to make the epistemological point that the ordinary, pre-reflective epistemic condition of humans is to be deceived by *teotl*'s disguise and hence to misunderstand *teotl* – not the Platonic-style metaphysical point that earthly existence is ontologically substandard and not fully real. Earthly existence provides the occasion for human misperception, misjudgment, and misunderstanding. The dreamlikeness of earthly existence is a function of our human perspective – not an ontological dualism of appearances and reality inherent in the make-up of reality.

The human existential condition is no exception to the above metaphysical picture. Human existence is defined by *nepantla*, i.e., by the ceaseless alternating of life and death, order and disorder, being and non-being, male and female, etc. Succinctly put, human beings are *in nepantla* as well as *of nepantla*. Human life occurs on *tlalticpac*, the earth's surface. The word "*tlalticpac*" literally means "on the point or summit of the earth," suggesting a narrow, jagged place surrounded on all sides by unrelenting dangers (Burkhart, 1989). The Nahuatl proverb recorded by Sahagún, "*Tlaalahui, tlapetzcahui in tlalticpac*," "It is slippery, it is slick on the earth," was said of a person who had lived an upright life but then lost her balance and fell into wrongdoing, as if slipping in slick mud (Sahagún, 1953–82, vol. 6, p. 228, trans. by Burkhart, 1989, p. v). Humans lose their balance all too easily on the slippery earth, and as a consequence suffer pain, sorrow, hunger, thirst, death, and mental and physical disease as well as domestic, social, political, and environmental strife and discord. With this in mind, the *huehuetlatolli* ("words of the elders," "words of the ancients") recorded by Sahagún include the following speech from a mother to her daughter:

On earth we live, we travel along a mountain peak. Over here there is an abyss, over there is another abyss. If thou goest over here, or if thou goest over there, thou wilt fall in. Only in the middle doth one go, or doth one live. (Sahagún, 1953–82, vol. 6, p. 101)

Human life takes place *in nepantla*, i.e., in the middling, oscillating tension betwixt and between life and death, being and non-being, male and female, etc. That is, human

existence takes place “in the crossroads.” As a result, human existence is inescapably unstable, ambiguous, fragile, treacherous, evanescent, and perilous.

Human existence is *of nepantla* in the sense that the very activity of living consists of nepantla-balancing the forces of order and disorder, life and death, male and female, etc. Living is a nepantla-process involving constant change, transition, becoming, and transformation (Durán, 1971, 1994; Maffie, 2007; Sahagún, 1953–82).

In light of these circumstances, Nahua philosophers asked, “How can humans maintain their balance, minimize misfortune, and live flourishing lives upon the slippery earth?” (Sahagún, 1953–82, vol. 6). They conceived the *raison d’être* of philosophical inquiry to be the providing of practicable answers to this question. They accordingly defined wise behavior, attitudes, and states of affairs in terms of promoting balance, minimizing misfortune, and maximizing flourishing upon the earth.

Nahua philosophers turned to their metaphysics for guidance concerning how humans ought to behave wisely, knowledgeably, and appropriately. Given its centrality in Nahua metaphysics, they turned to *teotl* as nepantla-process. They regarded *teotl* as nepantla-process as the ideal normative model *for* human behavior since they regarded *teotl* as nepantla-process as the ideal model *of* nepantla behavior. They accordingly enjoined people to live their lives in a *teotl*-like, nepantla-balancing way, and based their prescriptive claims regarding how human beings *ought* to conduct their lives upon *teotl*’s example. Nepantla thus figures prominently in Nahua normative conceptions of the good life for human beings, good conduct, good cognition, and good art. Nepantla plays a central role in Nahua ethical, epistemological, and aesthetic prescriptions concerning how humans ought to behave, think, feel, judge, speak, and eat; work, farm, and trade; treat their nonhuman surroundings; and play music, paint-write, and weave. Nahua *tlamatime* thus apparently reasoned that since reality and the human existential condition are inescapably middling, humans must therefore behave middlingly. In short, in a cosmos defined *by* nepantla, one must live a life *of* nepantla.

The inescapably painful and unstable nature of human existence did not, however, prompt Nahua philosophers to reject earthly life in favor of some transcendent, other-worldly life. There simply is no such life to be had for humans. The earth’s surface is the only time-place where the three vital forces comprising human beings – *tonalli* (“inner heat,” “vitality,” “potency,” and “innate personality”) concentrated in the head, *teyolia* (“that which gives life to someone,” “that which moves someone”) concentrated in the heart, and *ihiyotl* (“breath,” “wind,” “respiration”) concentrated in the liver – are fully integrated, and hence the only time-place where humans enjoy the potential for well-being (López Austin, 1988; Molina, 2001; Sahagún, 1953–82). The Nahua thus resolved to live as best they could here on *tlalticpac*.

Nahua wisdom is accordingly this-worldly. It deems as intrinsically valuable (i.e., worth pursuing, doing, or having for its own sake) living a flourishing, genuinely human life on earth. After likening the human condition to walking down a narrow, jagged path along a mountain peak, the mother quoted above advises her daughter, “*zan tlanepantla in uiloa, in nemoa*,” “only through the middle can one go, or live.” The mother invokes *tlaneptantla*, “in (or through) the middle.” A Nahua adage recorded by Sahagún states, “*Tlacoqualli in monequi*,” “the middle good is necessary” (Sahagún, 1953–82, vol. 6, p. 231, trans. by Burkhart, 1989, p. 134). Those striving to walk in balance upon the earth must pursue a nepantla or middling way of life. One’s life must be a

skillfully executed *nepantla*-process. One must avoid doing too much and too little of any activity: e.g., eating, working, sleeping, or bathing. When one slips and eats too much, for example, one must restore balance by eating too little. In this manner, one weaves the unavoidable, short-term imbalances of daily existence into a life of long-term balance.

Nahua wisdom aimed at teaching humans how, like skilled mountain climbers, to maintain their balance upon the narrow, jagged summit of the earth. Alternatively, it aimed at teaching humans how, like accomplished weavers, to weave together the various forces and tensions in the cosmos and in their lives into a well-balanced fabric. In order to live wisely, live artfully, and thus live a flourishing, genuinely human life in a cosmos characterized by *nepantla*, one's living must actualize *nepantla*-balancing. One's living must be a well-crafted *nepantla*-process. And from what better teacher to learn how to do this than from *teotl* itself? When ultimate reality is characterized by constant change, motion, and becoming, one needs to learn how to change, move, and become in balance. One cannot find stability in transcendent Being. One cannot find balance by clinging to a "rock of ages," for even rocks and ages come and go. Living wisely consists of embracing and mastering *nepantla* – not trying to avoid, minimize or escape *nepantla*.

Nahua philosophy conceived *tlamatiliztli* ("wisdom" or "knowledge") pragmatically in terms of human balancing and flourishing (Sahagún, 1953–82). *Tlamatiliztli* is active, creative, practical, concrete, situational, and performative – not passive, abstract, theoretical, representational, or contemplative. It consists of knowing *how* to act mid-dlingly, *how* to maintain one's balance, and *how* to flourish as one walks upon the jagged path of life. Wisdom does not consist of knowing *that* certain facts are the case, or of apprehending abstract principles, laws, or conceptual truths. Nahua epistemology does not embrace semantic goals such as truth for truth's sake, correct description, or accurate representation. The aim of cognition is walking in balance upon the slippery earth, and epistemologically good (*cualli*) cognition is that which promotes this aim.

Flourishing upon the earth requires not only that humans know how to accommodate themselves to the various spiraling cycles constituting the Age of the Fifth Sun, but also that they know how to contribute to the overall balance of these cycles and in so doing contribute to the continuation of the Age of the Fifth Sun. How human beings act makes a difference to the balance and continuing existence of the present cosmic age. Human activity is both an integral as well as integrating element of the Fifth Sun. Human existence is implicated within a complex web of reciprocity relationships between humans and cosmos, and these entail a host of corresponding reciprocity obligations. Humans contribute to the equilibrium of the Fifth Sun when they successfully perform these obligation-fulfilling actions. They disrupt equilibrium when they fail to do so. The continuing equilibrium and existence of the Fifth Sun thus depends upon human beings' fulfilling their obligations (Durán, 1971, 1994; Sahagún, 1953–82).

*Neltiliztli* ("truth") is an indispensable feature of wisdom and knowledge. Nahua philosophy conceives truth in terms of authenticity, genuineness, and well-rootedness *in* and non-referential disclosing of *teotl* – *not* in terms of correspondence, aboutness, or representation (contra most Western philosophy). It characterizes persons, actions, and things equally and without equivocation in terms of truth (and falsity). That which is well rooted in *teotl* – be it a person, song-poem, ritual action, painted-written text,

or sculpture – is true, genuine, well balanced, and non-referentially disclosing and unconcealing of teotl; that which is unrooted is false, non-genuine, inauthentic, imbalanced, and concealing of teotl.

Humans cognize knowingly if and only if their cognizing is well rooted (*nelli*) in teotl, and their cognizing is well rooted in teotl if and only if teotl burgeons and flowers within their heart. This, in turn, occurs if and only if humans possess a *yolteotl* or “teotlized heart” (León-Portilla, 1963, p. 143; Sahagún, 1953–82, vol. 3, p. 69), i.e., a heart that attains nepantla-balancing. A teotlized heart moves middlingly, well balancedly, and thus in harmony with the oscillating moving of teotl. Such a heart is charged with teotl’s sacred energy and enjoys sacred presence. The person possessing a “teotlized heart” is said to have “teotl in his heart” and to be “wise in the things of teotl.” Teotl discloses itself *to* and *through* a well-rooted, well-balanced heart. As the generative presentation of teotl, human knowing constitutes one of the ways that teotl genuinely discloses itself on earth. Humans cognize unknowingly (dully, foolishly, or confusedly), by contrast, when their cognizing is poorly rooted if not unrooted (*ahnelli*) in teotl. Such cognizing is false, inauthentic, non-genuine and non-disclosing. Teotl fails to burgeon and flower within such a heart (Sahagún, 1953–82, vols. 3, 6, 10). Unknowing, not-good (*ahmo cualli*) cognizing constitutes a form of cognitive dementia, disease, and imbalance. It is one of the ways that teotl masks itself on earth.

Nahua tlamatime drew three consequences from the fact that teotl is ultimately unordered, unstable, betwixt-and-between, and neither-this-nor-that. First, knowing teotl requires a non-binary – i.e., non-either/or – mode of experience. Humans experience teotl knowingly via a mystical-style union of their hearts and teotl. Teotl burgeons and flowers within their hearts. This enables humans to bypass conventional binary categories and in so doing experience teotl without distortion by such categories. When this occurs, one’s thinking is no longer befogged by the “breath on the mirror” (as the Maya text, the *Popol Vuh* [Tedlock, 1985, p. 167], puts it) constituted by perceiving and conceiving teotl through conventional binary categories. Second, expressing one’s understanding of teotl requires a non-binary mode of expression, viz. “flower and song” (León-Portilla, 1963, p. 75). Artistic activity generally, but especially singing poetry – rather than advancing of discursive arguments – is the truest, most authentic way of expressing one’s understanding of teotl. Philosophers are perforce poet-singers and artists who unconceal teotl through metaphorical speech and artistic image. Finally, because teotl is unordered, betwixt-and-between, etc., human beings are unable to fully comprehend teotl.

Nahua philosophers conceived language primarily as a practical instrument for guiding behavior and making things happen in the world – not as an instrument for representing facts or reporting propositional truths. The spoken word is causally efficacious, and when used wisely, affects change in the course of human *and* non-human events with an eye toward human and cosmic balance.

Nahua ethics evaluates the goodness of human conduct, attitudes, and states of affairs from the standpoint of creating, maintaining, and restoring balance and flourishing. It characterizes ethically good (*cualli*) conduct as “*in quallotl in yecyotl*,” i.e., “fitting for” and “assimilable by” humans. Ethically good conduct balances people and helps them become more authentically human. Not-good (*ahmo cualli*) conduct throws people out of balance, causing them to impoverish their lives and to become defective

“lump[s] of flesh with two eyes” (Sahagún, 1953–82, vol. 10, p. 3). To the degree humans live balanced lives, they perfect their humanness and flourish; to the degree they do not, they destroy their humanness and suffer miserable beastly lives (Burkhart, 1989; López Austin, 1988; Sahagún, 1953–82, vols. 6, 10).

The Nahuas used “flower and song” to refer broadly to artistic activity and its products. They did not, however, have a modern concept of art in the sense of “art for art’s sake.” The Nahuas had no notion of a distinctly aesthetic – as opposed to moral or epistemological – point of view from which to judge the goodness of human artistry. They defined aesthetic goodness in terms of human flourishing. Aesthetically good (cualli) “flower and song” improves both its creator and audience metaphysically, morally, and epistemologically, and is an essential ingredient of a flourishing life. Aesthetics is thus shot through with moral and epistemological purpose. That which is aesthetically good – be it a song-poem, woven fabric, or person – is morally and epistemologically good (and vice versa). It is well rooted, well balanced, true, genuine, and non-referentially unconcealing of teotl. That which is aesthetically not-good (ahmo cualli) is unrooted, undisclosing, inauthentic, and false.

## Conclusion

Pre-Columbian Aztec and Andean philosophies conceived of ways of *being-human-in-the-world* that stress the fact that humans are both in the world and of the world as well as the need for humans to live in balance with the world. In this respect they differ from those conceptions of being-human-in-the-world advanced by leading secular and religious Western philosophies. The latter typically view humans as in the world but not of the world, and regard nature as something to be exploited for human self-aggrandizement. However, as Western philosophies prove increasingly unsustainable in the face of catastrophic environmental collapse, thinking people of the West would do well to critically reexamine their philosophical preconceptions as well as engage in dialogue with pre-Columbian philosophies. After all, as once noted (Hickman and Alexander, 1998, p. 21), for John Dewey Western European philosophy is only a “provincial episode.”

*Related chapters:* 2 The Rights of the American Indians; 3 Colonial Thought; 16 Language and Colonization; 24 Latin American Philosophy.

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