

**James Maffie: *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, Boulder:  
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James Maffie's book is a comprehensive study of Aztec metaphysics. It attempts to outline the Aztec world-view in a way that integrates the best archeological, anthropological, ethnological, historical, literary, and artistic scholarship in Nahua and Mesoamerican studies. It intends to serve as a foundational text aimed at starting a philosophical dialogue about Aztec (or more broadly speaking, Nahua) philosophy. It fits squarely in the area of history of philosophy but is equally valuable to comparative philosophy and offers interesting insights relevant to contemporary metaphysics and epistemology.

Overall, Maffie is eminently successful in these aims. His careful and in-depth study is obviously a significant contribution to Nahua studies, but it is a game-changer for future scholars in philosophy insofar as it can serve as a foundational text to examine, debate, and develop. Maffie's book also makes a significant contribution to Latin American philosophy, for it provides a badly-needed philosophical study of an indigenous world-view that could be more broadly applied in this area. Most importantly, it marks a beginning in which an indigenous Mesoamerican way of thinking is brought to the table of academic philosophy to share insights, offer critiques, and thereby take its rightful place among the major philosophies of the world.

This book would be useful to scholars in the various sub-disciplines of Mesoamerican studies, as it offers a coherent monistic interpretation of Nahua thought, one that systematizes and more fully elaborates the philosophical underpinnings of existing scholarship, and one that breaks with long-standing and widely-held dualistic interpretations. This book would also be useful to scholars in philosophy who are interested in entering and developing the philosophical study of Nahua thought. Not only does it serve as a crash-course in Nahua thought, but also its copious citations (over 1800), extensive bibliography (34 pages), and well-constructed index makes it an excellent resource for the best scholarship in the field of Nahua studies. Lastly, it is appropriate for use in graduate seminars and in upper-division undergraduate courses. For undergraduate courses, I would recommend chapters 1-3, 7, or 8. Chapters 1-3 can be taught as a unit; chapters 7 or 8 could be taught independently, provided that students are given sufficient background from chapters 1 – 3.

Unfortunately, I have the space for only a brief summary, but I hope the following will give an impression of the scope and depth of Maffie's work. Maffie begins with what he takes to be the heart of Aztec metaphysics: the ontological claim that there exists one and only one thing, *teotl*, which he defines as a "continually dynamic, vivifying, self-

generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy” (Maffie 2014, 21-22). This claim commits the Aztecs to other metaphysical claims including the idea that this one thing is made of a single kind of stuff (constitutional monism), and that this stuff is a processive, interrelated unity (process philosophy and process holism). The Aztecs also took *teotl* to be metaphysically immanent in several senses: it is a sacred, homogenous power that is identical to the cosmos and generates the cosmos out of itself. It is not supernatural or transcendent; it does not divide into ontologically distinct kinds of stuff, realities, degrees of being, or hierarchies. *Teotl* is simply the active, dynamic, animating, and generative power that expresses or manifests itself as the cosmos and everything in it.

In chapter two, Maffie continues drawing implications of his analysis by arguing that the Aztecs also embraced a form of pantheism, which can be summarized as follows. First, the cosmos is a single, sacred, all-inclusive, and interconnected unity that is constituted by *teotl* and ontologically identical with it (Maffie 2014, 79-80). Second, this unity was not created *ex nihilo*; rather it always existed and emerges from *teotl*'s self-unfolding, which genealogically unifies it (Maffie 2014, 79-80). Third, this unity is ordered and arranged by the process of how *teotl* manifests or unfolds itself (Maffie 2014, 80). And fourth, this unity is “the self-presentation – not self-representation – of *teotl*,” but this unity is not anthropomorphic or teleological in any way whatsoever (Maffie 2014, 80).

With this in place, Maffie argues that the various gods of the Aztec pantheon should be understood as clusters or concentrations of sacred energies and processes, but since *teotl* is a homogeneous and dynamic whole, these clusters are ultimately different ways in which humans carve up reality, which helps explain the vast and dizzying panoply of Aztec gods with overlapping qualities and traits. Maffie also argues that Aztec pantheism helps explain their sense of the sacred, which ultimately consists in a reverence for power in all its creative, destructive, and transformative manifestations. Because *teotl* is the sacred power identical to the cosmos, everything in the cosmos is sacred. This helps explain why the Aztecs could treat virtually anything as sacred. This leads Maffie to conclude that the Aztecs rejected any ontological distinction between the sacred and profane: for the Aztecs, the profane amounted to stuff out of place or improperly placed, but it did not amount to something inherently bad or unsacred.

Chapter three is an examination of how *teotl* more specifically functions, which is most fundamentally explained by what Maffie calls “agonistic inamic unity,” that is, “the continual and continuous cyclical struggle (agon) of paired opposites, polarities, or dualities” (Maffie 2014, 137). These dual aspects include life~death, day~night, fire~water, male~female, creation~destruction, being~non-being, and order~disorder.[1] Conspicuously absent from this list is good and bad, for according to Maffie, *teotl* is thoroughly amoral (Maffie 2014, 155).

Nevertheless, these paired opposites are engaged in a constant and ceaseless interrelationship that is competitive and antagonistic yet interdependent and complimentary. According to Maffie, these paired opposites are "... dual aspects or facets of teotl ...," and their ceaseless cyclical struggle for dominance both constitutes and explains the origin, diversity, and ordering of the cosmos (Maffie 2014, 138). Neither of the inamic partners is temporally or conceptually prior to the other; neither is morally superior to the other; and neither constitutes a distinct metaphysical essence. (Maffie 2014, 137). Additionally, inamic pairs are neither contradictories nor contraries insofar as they are not mutually exclusive. This for Maffie entails the "eliminable ambiguity of all things" according to which reality is irreducibly ambiguous: all things are both male and female, hot and cold, and so on; nothing is exclusively male, exclusively hot, and so on (Maffie 2014, 157).

This irreducible ambiguity, however, does not imply that teotl does not exhibit itself in regular, recognizable patterns or shapes, and chapters 4-6 respectively outline what Maffie takes to be the main ones: ollin, malinalli, and nepantla. It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss each in detail, but suffice it to say that each is a pattern or shape of how teotl's energy moves, changes, and becomes in both its physical and qualitative manifestations. Maffie calls this "motion-change" (Maffie 2014, 185-186). Ollin motion-change is exhibited in pulsating, expanding and shrinking, bouncing in various directions (up/down, back/forth, up and over, down and under), oscillating, undulating, and centering. It was observed in various physical manifestations including pulsating hearts, the expanding and contracting of pregnancy and respiration, the various movements of a bouncing rubber ball in the Mesoamerican ball game, earthquakes, the oscillations of the sun across the horizon between solstices, and indeed is seen as the biorhythm of the fifth sun, which the Aztecs called 4-Ollin Tonatiuh. Malinalli motion-change is characterized by twisting, spinning, gyrating, revolving, as well as by things that have been rounded or made circular. It was observed in wild grass (from which the word comes) and various fibers that have been put in order to make ropes, brooms, or thread. Malinalli was also observed in spindles, curls of hair, ropes, whirlwinds, helixes, axles, wheels, the twisting of fire drill, and the veins which nourish the body with blood. Nepantla motion-change is characterized by middling, mixing, shaking, being in-between or betwixt, comingling, or joining-together. It was observed in the act of marriage, the positions and motions of sexual union, the back-and-forth movements of warfare, the thrusting and parrying of hand-to-hand combat, weaving, woven products, and most importantly, the motions of back-strap weaving performed when making cloth.

For Maffie, nepantla motion-change is ultimately the most fundamental and primordial of the three forms of motion change; nepantla intermingles ollin and malinalli in its weaving of the fabric of the cosmos. This leads him to another central thesis of the book: weaving – and more specifically, back strap weaving – is the "root metaphor" and key to understanding Aztec metaphysics (Maffie 2014, 14-15, 509). Given that nepantla is simply a shape or pattern of teotl's motion-change, then weaving is the key to understanding the *modus operandi* of teotl, which ultimately manifests itself as a grand

weaver of the cosmos and everything in it (Maffie 2014, 14-15). But since *teotl* simply is the cosmos, then *teotl* is simultaneously “the weaver, the weaving, and the woven” (Maffie 2014, 14).

Chapter seven is devoted to articulating the Aztec conception of time, which is how *teotl* unfolds as “time-place” (Maffie 2014, 422). To do this, Maffie first articulates how best to understand Aztec time-place, including how to situate the main cycles of Aztec time-keeping (the 260-day *tonalpohualli*, the 360-day *xiuhpohualli*, the 52-year *xiuhmolpilli*, and the cycle of the nine lords of the night) into this framework. Second, he situates this temporal framework within Aztec cosmogony, more specifically, into the Aztec view that the world was created and destroyed on four previous occasions or cosmic ages, with the Aztecs inhabiting the fifth cosmic age and living under the fifth created sun, 4-Ollin Tonatihu. I do not have the space to do justice to Maffie’s impressively detailed analyses of each but suffice it to say that the various cycles of Aztec time-place, as well as each creation and destruction of the world, are all patterns of how *teotl* unfolds as the fabric of the cosmos. Maffie further argues that *teotl* and therefore time-place has always existed, which implies that the Aztecs had an acosmognic metaphysics: there was no beginning to the universe; no *ex nihilo* creation; and each successive creation and destruction of the world is a manifestation of *teotl*’s inamic oscillations between creation~destruction, being~non-being.

In chapter eight, Maffie attempts to tie all of the foregoing together, which I can only briefly sketch here. Ollin motion-change characterizes the biorhythm of the fifth sun and thereby the fifth cosmic age. This sun undulates back and forth across the horizon between solstices and moves over and under the flat surface of the earth, which the Aztecs called *tlalticpac*. Malinalli motion-change unites agonistic inamic partners in constant tension by twisting them together as well as transmitting energy through the various layers or, more accurately, folds in the cosmos. Ollin and malinalli are united by *nepantla*, which weaves them together into the fabric of the cosmos.

The key to understanding how, Maffie contends, is via the root metaphor of weaving – more specifically, back strap weaving. Malinalli motion-change is represented as the vertical warp strands of a back strap loom, with its twisted threads of agonistic inamic partners. Ollin motion-change is represented as the horizontal weft thread which is moved back and forth via a shuttle stick between the warp threads. *Nepantla* motion-change is the process by which malinalli and ollin are middled or comingled and thereby woven together. Since Ollin motion-change also characterizes the biorhythm of the fifth sun, the motion of ollin as a weft thread also represents the sun as it travels over and under *tlalticpac*, which thereby helps explain how the various cycles of Aztec time-place can be incorporated into this framework. Vertical and horizontal space is also incorporated: the unwoven upper part of the back strap loom represents the upper part of vertical space; the woven middle part of the loom represents the layer of earthly space; and the unwoven lower part of the loom represents the underworld. Additionally, the right side of the woven middle part of the loom represents the east, while the left side represents the west. This summary doesn’t do justice to the richness and depth of

Maffie's analysis, and many more details remain to be worked out (as Maffie readily acknowledges), but one is ultimately left with at least broad, comprehensive outlook of how *teotl* as *nepantla* motion-change weaves itself into the spatio-temporal fabric of the cosmos.

Obviously, there is much that can be said about many of the details in each chapter, but I would like here to point out two problematic areas, which should be read more to point out topics for future research, rather than reveal weaknesses. One broad problem has to do with the evidence that Maffie cites for the details of his view of *teotl*. Maffie's evidence largely consists of supporting scholarship, one strand of which includes scholarship on the Aztecs.[2] The primary intention of this evidence is to support the idea that this scholarship is in general agreement with Maffie's overall view, and it indeed helps to support the general idea that *teotl* is some kind of sacred, impersonal, and animating force. But I'm not sure that this evidence supports the more specific claims that Maffie imbeds in his view of *teotl*, namely, the specific claims of process philosophy, holism, process holism, and the various senses of metaphysical immanence.

Later, Maffie takes up López Austin's dualistic view of Aztec metaphysics, presenting arguments intended to do the initial work of arguing for ontological and constitutional monism (Maffie 2014, 50-54). But the primary function of these arguments is largely negative: they are intended to establish that López Austin's evidence does not entail the dualistic outlook. The positive function of these arguments is largely *suggestive* insofar as Maffie offers monistic interpretations of the same evidence that López Austin cites. So if we take Maffie's arguments against López Austin at face value, they largely establish an interpretive impasse, which is considerable considering how well-established the dualistic outlook is. My worry about this, however, is that they do not yet establish monism as the better interpretation, nor do they establish the other details that Maffie imbeds in his view of *teotl*.

Maffie emphasizes that much more argumentation is needed and that the rest of the book is an attempt to do this (Maffie 2014, 54). But it seems to me that the requisite arguments are never given, for Maffie largely presupposes his view of *teotl* later in the text; that is, he uses it to provide the heuristic backdrop or foundation for his views on agonistic inamic unity, *ollin*, *malinalli*, and so on. So overall, it appears that Maffie has not adequately argued for the more specific claims imbedded in his view of *teotl*.[3]

Another problematic area has to do with the overall outlook that Maffie attempts to sketch. I think Maffie offers a compelling argument for the idea that *nepantla* weaving is the root metaphor for Aztec metaphysics. However, it seems that Maffie attempts to go beyond metaphor by treating weaving as an analogy, which is evident in his attempt to find one-to-one relationships between the various aspects of back strap weaving and the various elements of Aztec metaphysics. But if we go this far, it seems that there are troubling disanalogies that undermine the metaphorical picture that Maffie is trying to sketch. For example, *ollin* motion-change is represented in the weft thread that is

moved via a shuttle stick, which also represents the sun moving east to west, over and under the surface of the earth. But in actual back strap weaving, the shuttle stick moves not only right to left, but also left to right, which would mean that the sun moves not only east to west, but also west to east. Certainly no analogy is perfect, but it seems to me that there are many such disanalogies, enough to make me wonder how far this metaphor should be taken and whether Maffie has overburdened it with details that are not supported by the argument he has given.[4]

Overall, however, I can't help expressing my deep sense of gratitude to Maffie for writing this book. His work demonstrates a breadth and depth that is truly impressive, and it is done with the rigor that one would expect from a top scholar in any area in the history of philosophy. And he offers highly plausible views regarding, teotl, pantheism, agonistic inamic unity, and nepantla-based weaving as the root metaphor for the Aztec understanding of the cosmos. Perhaps most importantly, Maffie undeniably puts Nahua philosophy on the philosophical map and does so in a way that unambiguously opens up a new and attractive area in academic philosophy, and for that, he has done us all a tremendous service.

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## Notes

[1] Maffie uses a tilde (~) to express agonistic inamic relationships.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all of the following quotes can be found at Maffie 2014, 31-33. For example, Maffie cites Arild Hvidtfeldt who argues that teotl is best translated as "sacred, sacral, or ritual" and who argues that teotl should be understood as a "manalike power," which refers to an "inherent and pervasive 'power or influence' diffused throughout the cosmos, 'present in the atmosphere of life.'" He also cites Richard Townsend, who argues that teotl should be understood as expressing a "sacred quality" and as "a numinous, impersonal force diffused throughout the cosmos." Similar views are expressed by Jorge Klor de Alva, Elizabeth Boone, Kay Read, and David Carrasco. Louise Burkhart claims, "Despite the many aspects of Nahua thought, its theology was monist. A single divine principle – teotl – was responsible for the nature of the cosmos, negative aspects of it as well as beneficial ones. It was a polytheist monism: that is, the divine principle manifested itself in multiple forms, some ambivalent, some expressing opposite principles in their different manifestations" (Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 36-37). She later says that a more accurate description of teotl would be Klor de Alva's *teoyoism*, which he claims "...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."

[3] Now, in saying this, I recognize several methodological claims that Maffie makes. To begin with, I agree with Maffie's use of Quine's view that "Theory and data are united epistemologically within one and the same overall web of belief," and that we make decisions between rival theories relative to other values such as empirical adequacy, explanatory power, logical consistency, and so on (Maffie 2014, 9). I also agree that any empirical theory, which Maffie takes this to be, is entailed by the data supporting it. Moreover, I agree that the interpretation of all information is "theory laden since theory cuts all the way down." (Maffie 2014, 10) And lastly, I agree that there is "no direct empirical evidence for our interpretive claims about Aztec metaphysics" and that the best we can do is to offer "indirect evidence for deciding between better or worse interpretations" using the best available textual, pictorial, archeological, and ethnological evidence (Maffie 2014, 11). My point, however, is that even while granting all of this and indeed granting the overall plausibility of Maffie's view, there still needs to be a set of arguments that tie the details of this interpretation to the available evidence, and does so in a way that argues how this interpretation is better than its rivals. That is, I'm worried that although Maffie's view of *teotl* has the theoretical virtues of simplicity and explanatory power, the details need more empirical evidence to support the inference that the overall view is indeed the best explanation of the available evidence.

[4] Also, in actual back strap weaving the warp threads are divided in half with every other thread pulled up and alternately every other thread pushed down. These halves are kept separated by a batten so as to create space for the shuttle stick to move through. But if the sun is represented by the shuttle stick, then it seems the sun is always traveling *between* warp threads, not over and under them as the sun appears to when it travels over and under the earth. The shuttle stick also pulls a thread to make a weft thread, which in the metaphysical picture is presumably twisted and ordered by *malinalli* motion-change; however, *malinalli* motion-change is supposed to be represented in the vertical warp threads. And it remains unclear whether each passing day is represented by the shuttle stick passing over one warp thread, over and under two warp threads, or passing between all of them.