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Weaving the World: On James Maffie's *Aztec Philosophy*

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Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion

James Maffie

University of Colorado Press, Boulder

512 pp.

Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion is an ambitious synthesis of Aztec thought written by a self-described analytic philosopher (3) who also has affinities with process thought. I am going to begin by saying why this book is timely and important. I will conclude with some caveats though these are really suggestions for how the conversation about this book may unfold in the future. First off, the author seems to recognize, rightly, that in a globalized context we need to expand our sense of philosophy and its boundaries. This is because we are increasingly concerned with cultures which do not ‘have’ philosophy in the narrow, technical sense of the term but nonetheless have rich wisdom traditions that deserve consideration. In Canada, where the reviewer resides, this would include the traditions and practices of indigenous peoples who are increasingly subjects *in* academic discussions rather than objects *of* it.

Forms of Philosophy

Let me put the problem this way. In the academy we tend to study philosophers by means of texts. The assumed norm is that philosophy is an activity of thinking that understands and formally presents itself as such. The assumed medium of this presentation is the formal lecture and the published text. Also, the activity of philosophizing is assumed to proceed by means of formal eristics by which ‘theses’ or ‘positions’ are proved or disproved, attacked or defended. Thus, there is no ‘philosophy’ outside what we in the western academy have come to call philosophy. Of course, on its face this seems to preclude a serious engagement with things like literature or visual art outside the limits of the formal study of aesthetics. Worse it makes the globalization and effective decolonization of philosophy exponentially more difficult. This is because philosophy can take multiple forms.

As mentioned, philosophy can take the form of a formal discipline cognizant of itself as such and productive of oral argument, text and commentary. Modern academic philosophy is such an endeavor as were the Platonic schools of antiquity. Philosophy in this sense also existed in India and China. Alternatively, ontological or ethical claims can be encoded in cultures. The Navaho, for instance, certainly have an ontology. This is encoded in the Navaho language, in ritual, mythic narrative and social practice. The ‘text’ here is the living text of a community and culture. Navaho philosophy has not been produced evidentially or eristically or academically but is directly lived. It is wisdom embodied in a *way* or form of life. It is known connaturally by those who live it. Finally, one may have philosophy in the form of oral teaching. Jesus and Socrates seem to have ‘philosophized’ in this sense until the fateful decision was made to write about them!

Aztec Philosophy

It is Maffie's contention that the Aztecs had philosophy in the second and third of these senses (4-5). By this he means there were oral teachers who considered and discussed the world philosophically. This consideration was grounded in a sacred cosmology that expressed itself ritually, poetically and in the form of graphic art and architecture. This means that our access to Aztec philosophy is not typically mediated through texts and arguments but through the work of archeologists, anthropologists and historians. Historical data from the era of the Spanish conquest is correlated with information from contemporary Nahua speakers. This is certainly an unusual way for a philosopher to proceed and I can't help but be impressed with Maffie's diligence and scope even though I cannot, myself, mediate disputes in this area. *Aztec Philosophy* is not only impressive as philosophy but as a synthesis of historical and anthropological data.

Maffie has a very definite take on the Aztecs, one which he distinguishes from the conclusions of many previous scholars (see for instance 50-54). He holds that they conceived of the world monistically and processively rather than dualistically. Underlying the multiplicity of things, the gods included, lay a single principle, *Teotl*. *Teotl* is the becomingness of things and that which becomes (21-22, 62-63). It is the unity in every difference and the difference in any unity. It is stasis and motion. *Teotl*, as such, escapes determinate predication. All is *Teotl*. *Teotl* is always already itself and its other. Reality is the processive becoming of *Teotl* which its also its being for the two are one. *Teotl* unfolds itself in an act profoundly linked to weaving and this weaving is nature. Indeed, its being is in act and its nature apprehended operationally (26). Maffie conceives this pan-theistically (79-80). *Teotl* is nature and all things in nature are *Teotl* in one or other mode of its manifestation. There is no above or below, no this or that, here or there that is not the processive self-explication of *Teotl*. It is the singer, the singing and the song being sung, the weaver, the weaving and the thing woven. It is without explicit, conscious aim or purpose and hence non-teleological (22-23).

Teotl is not figured as 'conscious' or 'personal' though it is hard to see how it determinately *excludes* those things: *Teotl* surely generates conscious or personal phenomena too which must be modes of its manifestation (though the Aztecs may not have emphasized this). The world and all in it is the self-weaving of *Teotl*. Within this monistic framework Aztec thinking weaves a complex web of symbolic associations and correspondences. These express a symbolic and relational ontology founded on 'inamic partners' or determinate but fused opposites such as male, female or right and left.(137-38). In this 'weaving' (the image is very apt) the various Gods cluster in patterns and can, considered from various angles, swap attributes and identities. Indeed, we may associate the elusiveness of *Teotl* with the creative self-transformation of the Shaman (42).

Thus, ambiguity and polysemy reign throughout the self-weaving of *Teotl*: "In the final analysis, *teotl* is simultaneously the weaver of reality, the weaving of reality and woven reality itself" (513). This brings us close the various triadic or Trinitarian formulations we find in much Western metaphysics and religion. *Teotl* does not, like the Christian Trinity, subsist in a

trinity of ‘persons’ (though the Aztecs COULD have, like the Greek Fathers and later Augustine, formulated the notion of a relational ontology using the concept of *inamic* partners). However, its procession is three-fold or triadic. It subsists in Threeness that is one in the sense that there are three moments in its unified unfolding (if you like, subject, action and object). In this sense it seems closer to the (later) Christian conception than the triadic intelligible hierarchy of, say, Plotinus, which is more rigorously more hierarchic in conception (though that hierarchy deploys itself in three terms; one, intellect and soul). Still, if one were in the mood for comparisons one might discern a kind of processive ‘hierarchy’ (using that word guardedly) in the structure of Aztec ontology. This would hark back to the esoteric Platonism of the first academy for, just as the Aztecs speak of the Quetzalcoatl/Ometeotl pair as ‘unified twoness’ so did Plato speak of a one/dyad in the *Philebus* (where he appropriates the limit/un-limit pair of the Pythagoreans) and elsewhere.

One might figure *Teotl* as the one or unity who processes into a dyadic principle of otherness and differentiation (Ometeotl or the trickster- he who upsets or overturns the same by the different) which in turn shapes a triad of ordered, determinate motions (*olin*, *malinalli*, *nepantla*). *Olin* is the bouncing oscillating of things, *malinalli* the twisting, spiralling, binding motion and *nepantla*, the weaving and centering of order out of difference and opposition. We may attribute to the Aztecs, then, a concept of dynamic equilibrium in which a constantly shifting, dynamic universe finds even within instability and eccentric motion a stable center. A stable center found, in fact, *through* instability and eccentric motion.

Philosophy in Motion

One core principle of this ‘weaving’ is what I might call ‘homologous motion’ (197). Different motions instantiate in different phenomena in surprising ways which links them metaphysically and ritually. Thus, an oscillating motion, labeled ‘*olin* motion’, links the path of the sun with the bouncing ball in the ritual game and the human heart (see chapter 4 for an extended description). Other ages of the world than our present fifth ones involve other forms of motion. One notable contrast is that symbolized by the Gods Quetzalcoatl and Ometeotl or the ‘god of duality’ (169). Aztec philosophy does not distinguish order from disorder except in a second order sense. By this I mean there is an overall ordering and centering of things that INCLUDES disorder as a moment in its unfolding. Disorder, death and disease are a moment in the renewal of life. All ends that it may begin again. This is why *Teotl* manifests both a Quetzalcoatl AND his trickster counterpart Ometeotl. This, though, does not appear to be entirely the hopeful doctrine it seems. The Aztecs seem to have conceived the ordering of the ‘fifth age’ to be subject to radical contingency or, the use the phrase of Qoheleth, vanity. This fed a steady stream of human sacrifices intended to transfer life energy (*tonalli*) from human hearts to the sun (with which they were homologously linked).

A contemporary reader might be inclined to stop and moralize here but this temptation should probably be resisted. It is hard to see, in strict pantheistic terms, how the sacrifice of a victim could be figured as the ‘destruction’ of a person rather than an alteration in an external mode of presentation. At any rate the circulation and reciprocity of sacrificial energy

(embodied in *tonalli*) seems as core a concept for the Aztecs as Kant's second categorical imperative is for us and one point where their concepts will not readily gel with ours. Indeed, the monism of the Aztecs seems as fully rigorous as that, say, of Parmenides. Other western philosophers have sought to allow finite things to stand out more fully from the first principle (however conceived) though we will get into the differences and similarities of Aztec and western metaphysics directly below. Qualifying this monism somewhat is the view that Teotl can be *more or less manifested* in a state of affairs which may thereby be well or not well ordered or centered (102-103).

Maffie has introduced us to a world view of tightly woven symbolic and semantic complexity, one that meshes with certain of our perceptions but which, in other ways, stubbornly refuses to reduce itself to our categories. This, ideally, is what ANY cross-cultural exercise in philosophy ought to do which is mediate between the apparently familiar and the irreducibly strange. So impressive are his labors that it may seem almost churlish to voice a hesitation. My one objection to his procedure is a tendency to render the Aztecs a bit TOO strange. By this I mean that Maffie constructs a series of binary contrasts between 'Classical metaphysics' and Aztec philosophy. He also constructs a series of binary contrasts between Aztec and Christian religion. These contrasts run contrary to my own reading of these sources though I admit I am coming at them from a very different point of departure than Maffie.¹ For instance, the Maffie attempts to distinguish the processive becoming of *Teotl* from the 'static' metaphysics of the Greeks who, we are told, thought being a noun, a static identity not a verb (26, 148, 165). This is not, to my understanding, a fair assessment of Greek metaphysics or its Latin epigones.

Take Aquinas for instance. His name for God is '*esse*'. This is literally the infinitive of the verb to be. It is NOT a noun and Aquinas does not conceive it as such. Nor does Aristotle or Plato or any Neo-Platonist (Aquinas' identification of God with *esse* comes ultimately from Porphyry the successor of Plotinus). God is not 'static' nor is the *nous* or the Good of Aristotelianism and Platonism static. The One of Plotinus, say, 'ones' as the supreme unified and unifying energy. In a more difficult to specify sense it also 'others': it is productive of the dyadic difference it unifies. Whether named God, *nous*, the good or the One the first principle is the most supremely active of all actualities. But its action, being perfect, rests eternally in itself. Finite substance too, is *esse* in the creaturely mode *esse* being the first ACT that makes for substance. This is only a 'static' concept in appearance and in the metaphysical tradition Aquinas' view is far from anomalous.

To see this more clearly, it is helpful to look at thinkers like Proclus for whom the One is both pure power and pure energy BUT a surplus or excess of energy that overflows the boundaries of time (to the extent that these are conceived as determinations or limitations).

¹ Here I should say something about positionality. Maffie is coming from a background formed by analytic philosophy and process thought. I, as the reader has probably sensed, am not. I long ago abandoned (for better or worse) analytic philosophy for Neo-Platonism and German idealism. The upshot of this is that I read a Plato radically different from the one Maffie's presents. The same is true of Aristotle and Christian sources which for me are not simple avatars of dualism, say. The plus side of this is that I have no problem acclimating to speculative concepts like *Teotl* or other concepts broached in *Aztec Philosophy*.

There is, of course, a difference here but it is not quite the one Maffie has stated. *Teotl* is iterative and serial in its activity rather like post-modern notions of ‘difference’ (114). It is endlessly self-productive horizontally. God or the One is not like this but that is not because he or it is a static conceptual object of detached intellection. This contrast seems to me inadequate. Horizontal openness vs. circular return is a key contrast between the Platonic tradition and the modern process thought of a figure like Bergson say.

The motion of God reverts on itself so one can speak a kind of motionless motion or self reverting activity that is not spread out in futurity but remains in a kind of concentration. This means its relation to the world can be figured vertically rather than horizontally though this is only an image for the One is not ‘above’ anything in a spatial sense. Indeed, Plotinus and Proclus hold that it is precisely by remaining in itself in this way that the first principle is productive. The core of this view was available to a medieval thinker like Aquinas by the curious quirk that Proclus’ *Elements of Theology* circulated under an Arab precis as the *Book of Causes* and was attributed to Aristotle. Maffie, if he is curious, can find an account of this history in R.T. Wallis’ lucid and accessible introductory work *Neo-Platonism*. My suspicion is that if he is enthused by Aztec philosophy he will not find these earlier traditions as alien as they might appear at first blush.

Thus, the actual contrast between Aztec and Greek metaphysics is NOT between the static and processive but between the iterative and self-reverting. Here we might to return to Plato himself and forget what we are too often told about ‘Platonism’ and its ‘static conceptualism’. In the *Sophist* Plato found that movement, action and passion belong to the forms which thereby become living nodes of activity and intellectual energy not ciphers for mere abstract nouns. As he notes (247e) they possess *dynamis* or indwelling power. Maffie himself has told us that power is a key concept in Aztec thought and that “... what something is follows from *what* it does and *how* it does it” (26). Further, what is ‘static’ about the form of the beautiful in the *Symposium*? It generates in *eros* and not only is it active but its activity is love. Endlessly self-generating love and indeed it has a mediumistic complexity not unlike the elusive self-production of *Teotl*. (see Wills 2011) Further, in the *Republic* and elsewhere Plato clearly DOES NOT adopt ‘a philosophy of being’ as the author asserts on page 55.

In *Republic* VII he explicitly places the good *above* being (*hyperousia*) just as Plotinus does later. This move is actually crucial for certain scholars who seek in the Platonic tradition a philosophy and theology less nakedly onto-theological. Finally, the author refers so often to the supposed opposition of spirit and matter, divinity and nature in Christianity (115 etc.) that one really wishes he would interrogate the Russian Orthodox tradition about the matter (to mention just one example of a Christianity that does NOT make so stark a distinction). By Christianity Maffie again and again means CALVINISM though this misconception seems nearly universal in the sources he cites. (see 155, for instance, where Maffie virtually identifies Christianity with Manicheism). Clearly, the fields of religious studies and anthropology need to overcome their negative obsession with historic Protestantism to conceive these issues more clearly and accurately.

On the Aims Aztec Thought

The reason I bring all of this history up, though, is that I conceive a much different aim for the discussion of Aztec thought than the author seems to. Aztec thought does not interest me for its assumed contrast to some western metaphysic I think is defective or oppressive. In fact, my attitude is the exact opposite. Like other so called 'indigenous' thought forms Aztec thought is not simply 'other'. Clearly, it has affinities to pre-Socratic notions such as the doctrine of the identity of opposites found in Heraclitus (and his modern disciple Hegel!). It has affinities to the paradoxical discourse of so called 'negative theology' as well as to pantheism or idealism. These notions recur at many points in western thought and this would be evident if we STOPPED privileging so called the 'scientific', 'technical' or 'empirically oriented' philosophies typical of the English and Scottish enlightenment.

The animistic and symbolic ontology of the Aztecs is very much a part of OUR tradition if by that we mean Renaissance Platonism, Hermeticism and other 'occluded' schools of thought. If we categorically reject *these* as 'real philosophy' then we have no grounds for accepting Aztec thought as 'real philosophy' either. If on the contrary we DO accept that thinkers like Ficino, Pico, Paracelsus, Bruno, More or Fludd (to say nothing of Plotinus, Iamblichus or Proclus) are part of the charmed circle of 'real philosophy' not only can Aztec thinking become part of our thinking but so can the thinking of a great many global cultures. This is because of the real affinity between these traditions and the animistic thought forms of the Aztecs (191), animistic thought forms which are still found today in many parts of the globe. Correspondence and homology as the basis for systems ritual medicine and magic are familiar to students of renaissance thought as well and for such students (indebted to the work of Frances Yates) Aztec symbolism and practice will seem far less strange or 'other'. If Maffie wishes to take on Aztec thought as part of our discourse then it seems to me that the proper path to this is the genuine retrieval of OUR OWN lost or suppressed traditions which are more 'Aztec' than perhaps he realizes.

Perhaps this is a step too far for the academic guild: the traditions I mention are, after all, among the dark, primitive, metaphysical dragons slain by early 20th century thought. Maffie claims he is an analytic philosopher and that he is bringing that perspective to Aztec thought (3). I find it telling, however, that there is little evidence of this of this allegiance in his actual procedure. As far as I can tell he speaks insightfully of Aztec thought without ever really having to translate it into 'analytic' categories. He wastes very little time turning Aztec symbolism and metaphysics and its terminology into modern 'analytic' equivalents. His book is all the better for it.

Maffie conducts a perfectly coherent discussions of global philosophy without ever having to bring it before the bar of Anglo-American thought for judgement. The conversation can proceed without clarification or approval from what is, after all, only a regional hegemon. A regional hegemon, moreover, which has far less affinity to what the Aztecs held than the kinds of thinking it historically supplanted such Platonism or idealism (how, one wonders, might the notion of *Teotl* compare to, say, Schelling's philosophy of nature?). If this is true of global thought it is true of historical thought as well. Diachronically, Aztec philosophy can

meet Renaissance Platonism, Aristotelianism or Pre-Socratic metaphysics. Synchronically, it can meet modern process thought, idealism or even post-structuralism on a plane of equality without the assumed mediation of ‘professional’ analytic philosophy. This means that Anglo-American philosophy is a *partner* in a potential conversation and not a *tribunal* or court of appeal. The narrowness of contemporary philosophy not only occludes the richness of global thought but philosophy’s *own history in the west*. A narrow professionalization has dismissed not only comprehensive wisdom traditions such as those found in India or China but their closest counterparts in Europe.

A New Encounter with a Different Philosophy

At any rate we have the beginning here, if not the end, of a new encounter with a radically different kind of philosophy. This is potentially an exciting encounter particularly in places which face the issue of decolonization. Of course, this potentially exciting encounter can only really occur if we are genuinely open to our own intellectual history. It can only occur in a context where we DON’T succumb to the temptation to ‘translate’ indigenous or other global philosophies into something that sounds familiar to Anglo-American philosophers. I suggest, however, that if we get a more accurate read of things like Neo-Platonism, Renaissance thought or idealism a much broader conversation becomes possible: one in which Aztec claims make their own kind of sense without any special apology being made for their being ‘foreign’ or ‘other’ and without ever having to pass the bar of what sounds like ‘real philosophy’ to a highly specialized professional caste of English speaking thinkers. This would be a conversation in which startling differences would exist side by side with striking analogies and convergences. It would also be a conversation which would open more possibilities than just a rapprochement with certain strains of current academic philosophy. In fact, carried through to its conclusion it might blow the doors of philosophy wide open. I think this is just what is exciting about Maffie’s project though he may conceive his own aims more modestly.

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