

Interview of James Maffie by Bryce Huebner. *Daily Nous*, May 20, 2014.

<http://dailynous.com/2014/05/20/pip-1-huebner-interviews-maffie/>

During the last weekend of April, I was in Chapel Hill, NC for a workshop on pipeline problems in philosophy. While I was there, I was fortunate to have an opportunity to sit down and talk with James Maffie about his new book, [Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a world in motion](#) (University of Colorado Press, 2014). The book provides an overview of the sophisticated metaphysical views recorded by Nahuatl-speaking people at the time of the Spanish Conquest. To my mind, many of the views that Maffie discusses have a familiar ring to them (given my Spinozistic predilections), though it's also clear that there's much in Aztec philosophy that will be novel to those of us who have only been exposed to the problems and systems bequeathed to us by European Philosophers.

Jim was the first person to introduce me to naturalistic methods in philosophy. He really helped me to see what a rich and interesting tapestry philosophy could become by thinking about things scientifically. This book points in a slightly different direction. But I think it has great potential to help philosophers to think about the history of philosophy in new and creative ways. I really hope it gets a lot of uptake in philosophy—it really should!

BH: *Jim, let me start by saying thank you very much for agreeing to do this interview for Daily Nous. Let's start with the obvious question: How did you get interested in Nahuatl, or Aztec philosophy, given that there is little existing work in the area?*

JM: Thanks, Bryce, for giving me this opportunity to discuss my understanding of the philosophy of the 16th century Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the High Central Plateau of Mexico.

Yes, how did I move from a University of Michigan PhD studying “real” philosophy to studying the philosophy of the Mexica (Aztecs)? Heady with epistemology's late 20th century naturalistic turn, I sought to make epistemology continuous with the sciences. Unlike most my peers, however, I sought doing so by linking it with anthropology rather than linguistics and psychology (later, cognitive science). The latter's focus, it seemed to me, perpetuated modern Anglo-European philosophy's obsession with the individual. One's choice of partner disciplines is underdetermined, of course, I leaned towards anthropology. And this made sense. If naturalized epistemologists were going to proclaim that all humans at all times and places pursue truth or truth-defined knowledge, for example, then it struck me that we ought to confirm a posteriori such factual claims. But no one seemed inclined to do so. I saw such proclamations as little more than armchair, domestic cognitive anthropology. They needed to be tested, and anthropology seemed to offer the opportunity to do so. So I started reading lots of ethnography.

My reading eventually brought me to Miguel León-Portilla's groundbreaking *Aztec Thought and Culture* (1963), a translation of his earlier and more faithfully titled, *La filosofía náhuatl* (1956). León-Portilla argued that the Mexica engaged in philosophical inquiry commensurate with that of the Pre-Socratics. Pursuing this further, I discovered Alfredo López Austin's *The Human Body and*

Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas (1988). However, rather than treat Mexica philosophy as a case study to test the claims of North American naturalized epistemology, and rather than study Mexica philosophy as an instance of mere *ethnophilosophy* (an approach that colonizes, controls, and categorizes non-Anglo-European philosophies as entertaining, exotic “museum of man” curiosities in the same way the Anglo-European academy uses of the prefix “ethno-“ to marginalize non-Anglo-European botany, astronomy, art, and music), I threw myself wholly into Mexica philosophy. I ceased doing naturalized epistemology. *Mexicatlamatinime* (“knowers of things,” “sages, “philosophers”) advanced a systematic and sophisticated philosophy worthy of consideration for its own sake. I studied Nahuatl (the language of the Mexica and their descendants today) with native speakers in Mexico. (After all, one wouldn’t think of studying Plato without knowing classical Greek, or Hegel without knowing German. So why think one can study Mexica philosophy without knowing Nahuatl?) In brief, after reading León-Portilla, I never returned to Anglo-American philosophy.

BH: *One thing that you suggested in an earlier conversation was that your aim is to understand Mexica or Aztec philosophy, rather than to explain it, and then explain it away. How do you think your approach differs from the standard, orthodox, and imperialist perspective on nonwestern philosophy?*

JM: The hegemonic perspective you mention hopes first to deny the existence of non-western philosophies. Whatever non-westerners do, it is certainly *not* philosophy. It is religion, mythology, storytelling, poetry, or “dancing” (as Levinas once so generously declared). However, if philosophy turns out to be present, the perspective’s second move is to characterize the philosophy as unconscious or implicit. The folks in question “have a philosophy” but no one there actually “does philosophy.” There are no philosophers. The folks in question are mere philosophical sleepwalkers. At the same time the perspective tries to explain scientifically the philosophy in terms set out by structuralism, functionalism, cognitive psychology, sociobiology, cultural materialism, or ecological determinism. In so doing it seeks to subsume non-western philosophies within an overarching, western scientific understanding of the world that omits western philosophy from such explanation and that leaves western philosophy intact since such explanations privilege western epistemological, moral, and metaphysical assumptions and categories.

If the foregoing strategies lose their cogency (as they now seem to be doing), the hegemonic perspective places non-western philosophies in the colonizing category of ethnophilosophy. Non-western thinkers are begrudgingly recognized as philosophers and their work begrudgingly recognized as (inchoate) philosophy, but neither are worthy of serious or equal consideration. Ethnophilosophy contrasts with philosophy *simpliciter*, “real” philosophy, “serious” philosophy, i.e. western philosophy. Philosophy proper dominates the teaching curriculum, while non-western philosophies are ghettoized, being taught under courses with titles such as “world philosophy” or “multicultural philosophy.” There they serve as entertaining sidelines to the main curriculum.

BH: *It's really striking to me just how powerful the urge to police the boundaries of philosophy are in the Western Tradition, and I do want to return to that point in a minute. But before I do, could I ask you to briefly summarize the core claims of Mexica or Aztec metaphysics, as you understand them? My guess is that very few of the people who read this interview will be familiar with the kind of project that you're interested in. And I think that a quick rundown of the main themes will really open people's eyes to what a cool project this is!*

JM: Mexica metaphysics embraces an ontological and constitutional monism. At the heart of Mexica 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 Mexica referred to this power as "*teotl*." Reality, cosmos, and all existing things consist of *teotl* and are ultimately identical with *teotl*. Mexica metaphysics is also non-hierarchical, i.e. it denies any principled metaphysical distinction between transcendent and immanent, higher and lower, or supernatural and natural realities, degrees of being, or kinds of stuff.

Mexica philosophy also embraces what Western philosophers call a *process metaphysics*. Process, becoming, change, and transformation define *teotl*. Processes rather than perduring objects, entities, or substances are ontologically fundamental. 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. Mexica philosophers also embraced pantheism. Everything that exists constitutes a single, all-inclusive and interrelated sacred unity. This single all-encompassing unity is substantively constituted by *teotl* and ontologically identical with *teotl*. The unity is genealogically unified by *teotl* since it unfolds out of *teotl*. *Teotl* does not create the cosmos *ex nihilo*; rather, the cosmos emerges from *teotl*. *Teotl* is therefore 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*.

Teotl's ceaseless self-transforming is characterized by what I call *agonistic inamic unity*. *Inamichuan* (pl; *inamic*, singl) consist of matched pairs such as male/female, life/death, dry/wet, being/non-being, and order/disorder. *Inamic* pairs are mutually arising, interdependent, and complementary as well as mutually competitive. They are neither contraries nor contradictories. The transformation and becoming of reality consist of the non-teleological struggle (agon) between *inamic* pairs as well as the alternating momentary dominance of each *inamic* over its partner. All things — sun, mountains, humans, trees, animals, and corn — are constituted by the agonistic unity of *inamichuan* and as a consequence are constitutionally unstable and irreducibly ambiguous. Indeed, reality *per se* is irreducibly ambiguous. These *inamichuan* are nothing more than *dual aspects of teotl*.

Teotl and *inamic* forces circulate throughout the cosmos in three principal ways: *olin*, *malinalli*, and *nepantla*. These explain the dynamics of reality. They constitute three different patterns of

change, becoming, and creative-destructive/destructive-creative transformation. They also constitute three different ways of ordering power or energy for circulation and transmission. Olin refers to the four-staged, oscillating, and centering transformation involved in moving within and across life-death cycles. Olin-transformation is exhibited by bouncing balls, pulsating hearts, respiring chests, earthquakes, pregnant women's abdomens expanding and contracting, spindle rods expanding and contracting with spun thread, and the daily-nocturnal movement of the sun. It is the biorhythm of the cosmic Era in which we presently live as well as the biorhythm of all existing things in this Era.

Malinalli refers to the transformation involved in the transmission of energy between: olin-defined life-death cycles (e.g. from sun to corn to humans to sun, etc.); non-hierarchically defined vertical layers of the cosmos (above, below and upon the earth's surface); and different conditions of the same stuff (e.g. disorderly raw cotton fiber into well-ordered spun thread). Malinalli-transformation is typified by spinning, twisting, gyrating, and double helical spiraling. It is the energy-conveying bloodstream and foodstream of the current Era.

Nepantla refers to the middling, back-and-forthing, mutually reciprocating transformation that results in the creation of a *tertium quid*. It is typified by weaving, commingling rivers, reaching mutual agreement, and sexual commingling. For example, the nepantla-defined motion of weaving interlaces warp and weft threads to create a *tertium quid*: woven fabric. (Nepantla is a wholly autochthonous notion that is not to be confused with liminality as understood by Victor Turner, Mary Douglas, Gloria Anzaldua, Walter Mignolo, and others.) Nepantla-transformation is metaphysically speaking the most fundamental of the three. It cosmogonically precedes and subsumes olin and malinalli. Nepantla-transformation defines and explains teotl's continual self-generation, self-regeneration, and self-transformation. Reality is nothing more than the nepantla-defined self-transformation of teotl.

Mexica metaphysics conceives time and space as a single seamless unity: what I call *time-place*. Time-place is a pattern in the modus operandi of teotl's continual self-becoming and self-regenerating. It is a matter of *how* teotl moves. It is relational, not substantive. Mexica metaphysics conceives teotl as a grand cosmic weaver who by means of its own nepantla-transformation, generates and regenerates reality, the cosmos, the five Eras of the cosmos, and all existing things. *Teotl is the weaver, the weaving, and the woven product*. The cosmos per se is a grand weaving in progress. The present Era is a grand weaving in progress and teotl is its grand cosmic weaver. Mexica metaphysicians modeled the continuing generation and regeneration of the present Era upon backstrap weaving.

BH: Very interesting, and I bet that there's a lot of interesting work to do in thinking through the implications of this sort of dynamic *monism for critters like us*. *Could you say just a little bit more about the place of humans in this sort of metaphysical project?*

JM: Mexica tlamatinime looked to their metaphysics for guidance concerning how to conduct their lives and follow a path in a cosmos defined by nepantla. Given its defining role in Aztec metaphysics, they turned to teotl, or more precisely, *teotl-as-nepantla-process*. They regarded teotl-as-nepantla-process as the ideal normative model *for* human behavior because they regarded teotl-as-nepantla-process as the ideal descriptive model *of* nepantla-behavior. They did *not* however turn to teotl because they saw teotl as transcendent, supernatural, omniscient, or benevolent; or because they saw teotl as sacred and themselves as profane. They turned to teotl because human beings are *in* and *of* teotl. Mexica philosophers accordingly enjoined people to live their lives in a teotl-like, nepantla-middling manner, and based their prescriptions regarding how humans ought to conduct their lives upon teotl's example. Humans must weave together the various conflicting forces in their lives into a well-balanced fabric. The concept of nepantla thus figures prominently in Mexica prescriptions concerning how humans ought to walk, speak, eat, drink, think, feel, bathe, and sexually commingle. Nepantla defines the Mexica's understanding of what Western philosophers call ethics, epistemology, aesthetics, and social-political philosophy.

The Mexica saw humans as occupying a unique place in the universe. Humans are distinguished from other-than-humans (a term I borrow from Irving Hallowell by way of Thomas Norton-Smith) by their special moral responsibilities, not by an exclusive or higher moral status, or by special moral entitlements (e.g., to dominate and exploit other-than-humans). Humankind is born burdened with special responsibility, viz., to contribute to the continual processing of the present Era. Humans are born into—and live out their lives within—a web of interrelationships that imposes an ethical obligation to reciprocate. Indeed, Mexica ethics is best characterized as an ethics of reciprocity. One contributes to the ongoing processing of the current Era by contributing to its equilibrium. Acts of reciprocity promote balance: balance within human life, balance between humans and other-than-humans, and balance within the present Era as a whole.

Contemporary Nahuatl speakers in the state of Veracruz commonly proclaim during ceremonies, “We eat the earth, and the earth eats us.” This nicely encapsulates how they perceive their relationship with the cosmos. All things are alive with the vivifying energy of teotl, and as such, all things must eat in order to live. Eating involves the consumption of something dead, and so life requires death. Life and death are inamichuan and as such mutually interdependent, arising, and complementary. (The Christian notion of an eternal life where nothing ever dies, therefore, is simply ill-conceived.) Humans eat the fruit of earth, and reciprocity and balance demands that the earth eat humans upon internment. More generally, for conquest-era Mexica, the present Era requires nourishment and feeding just as humans, animals, and plants do. Humans are morally enjoined to feed the present Era on pain of its (and all its inhabitants') demise by starvation. And so humans are obliged to set forth food for consumption by the present Era. Such food included: *in xochtil in cuicatl* (“flower and song” or well-arranged sung words [poetry]); instrumental music; dancing; burning copal incense and rubber; foodstuffs of maize or amaranth; and finally, the ultimate power food, human blood. “The cosmos feeds us, and so we must feed the cosmos.”

BH: *Very Cool! It seems like there's a lot to explore in here, and I look forward to spending a lot more time thinking through the themes in your book, and to teaching this stuff the next time I do a grad seminar in metaphysics. But for now I want to close by asking you about the issue of boundary policing. There seems to be a growing recognition within academic philosophy about the pernicious effects of boundary policing (e.g., in the form of questions like "why is this philosophy"). I see your book as playing an important role in fostering a novel critique of boundary policing. Was that your primary aim in writing the book? Or was there something else you hoped readers would take away from your book?*

I honestly did not write the book with APA readers in mind, as I believed that it would garner little interest among them. Since beginning this project, I've engaged almost exclusively with Mesoamericanists and Nahuatlists (linguists, historians, historians of religions, archaeologists, art historians, and ethnographers), and I wrote the book with them in mind. In addition, several acquisition editors told me that I had to make a choice regarding the book's audience: philosophers or Mesoamericanists. It could not be both. So I choose Mesoamericanists and published with a press specializing in Mesoamerica studies.

As for gatekeeping, yes, as many have argued before, philosophy plays a vital role in the modern West's conception of itself and of the non-Western *other*. What is at stake here is nothing less 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, non-human, undisciplined, backward, feminine, and closer to nature. Philosophy is seen as representing the pinnacle of humanity's intellectual and rational achievement. For the European Enlightenment, philosophy represented the intellect's liberation from the fantasies of myth and shackles of religious dogma. Western culture's philosophy vs. non-philosophy binary serves as a social-historical tool used to celebrate and legitimize the West and its imperial hegemony while at the same time denigrating 'the Rest' and legitimizing its heteronomy.

What makes this intellectual and cultural self-posturing so transparent is the fact that Anglo-European philosophers cannot even agree among themselves upon a suitable definition of philosophy. All they seem able to agree upon is that non-Western thinkers cannot do it! Even self-styled, anti-philosophical establishment rebels such as Richard Rorty who maintain that philosophy has no essence nevertheless joined the chauvinistic chorus denying membership in Club Philosophy to non-Western thinkers.

Yet defining philosophy is, as we know, a *philosophical* problem. 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? 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 entertains as worthwhile questions "Are non-Western people philosophical?" and "What can we learn from non-

western philosophies?”, and why do they pose them? It is far from clear that these issues can be resolved in a non-ethnocentric and non-question-begging way.

Those traditionally excluded from Club Philosophy would appear to have at least two responses to this situation. They may seek admission into the club by arguing that what they do sufficiently resembles what bona fide club members do; or they may reject the philosophy vs. non-philosophy 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 vs. irrationality-savagery-femininity binary yet also refuse to cede philosophical inquiry to the West. I maintain the Mexica 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.” Their endeavors likewise satisfy William James’ definition of philosophy as “the unusually stubborn attempt to think clearly.” Indigenous North American philosophers Lee Hester Jr. and Douglas Rabb 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.” Granted, the Mexica’s philosophical journey took a different form and took them to a different set of answers. Yet this is irrelevant.

I submit Mexica and Anglo-European along with African, East and South Asian philosophies represent alternative philosophical orientations and trajectories rooted in alternative forms of life or ways of being human in the world. Mexica, East Asian, or African philosophy need not ape Anglo-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. As John Dewey once remarked, “Seen in the long perspective of the future, the whole of western European philosophy is a provincial episode.” If we agree, and I think we should, then we must acknowledge the fact that the philosophical orientation, aims, questions, style of reasoning, and concepts of European philosophy are provincial.

Finally, it is common for Anglo-European philosophers to ask, “How is the philosophy of the Mexica relevant to the dialogue of Anglo-European philosophers?” Although a legitimate question, they need also to ask themselves, “How is Anglo-European philosophy relevant to contemporary Nahuatl speakers, Maya Yucatec speakers, Quechua speakers, and other indigenous peoples of the world?” What do Aristotle, Hume, Rawls, and Quine have to offer them? Why think Anglo-European problems and proposed solutions are relevant to everyone?

BH: *Thanks, Jim. For my money, I hope that books like yours help western philosophers to see how much super cool stuff there is that has gone on, and is ongoing, outside of the traditions most of us happen to have been taught. I look forward to a lot more discussion with you on these issues, and to thinking a lot more about Mexica philosophy.*

JM: Thanks, Bryce.