"THE REGION OF THE FLEETING MOMENT": AN INTERPRETATION OF NAHUATL METAPHYSICS IN THE ERA OF THE CONQUEST

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Abstract
According to the metaphysical worldview of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the High Central Plateau of Mexico in the era of the Conquest, a single, dynamic, self-generating sacred energy or force created as well as continually generates, permeates, and governs the universe. The Nahuas called this force teotl. Teotl is essentially becoming, movement, and change. Teotl manifests itself cyclically and regularly in multiple aspects, preeminent among which is duality. This duality takes the form of the endless opposition of contrary yet mutually interdependent and complementary polarities that divide, alternately dominate, and explain the diversity, movement, and momentary structure of the universe. The ceaseless becoming of the universe is defined and constituted by the endless cyclical tug-of-war or dialectical oscillation of these polarities. The overall result of this dialectical oscillation is an overarching equilibrium or balance. Finally, all of creation is teotl's artistic and magical disguise or mask.

Key words: teotl, teoyoism, dialectical polar monism, pantheism.

Speculation concerning the nature, structure, and ultimate constituents of reality was not uncommon among the native peoples of Mesoamerica. This paper explores the metaphysics of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the High Central Plateau of Mexico at the time of the Conquest. At the heart of Nahuatl metaphysics stands the thesis that a single, dynamic, self-generating sacred energy, principle, or force -- what the Nahuas called teotl -- created as well as continually generates, permeates, and governs the universe. Teotl is essentially becoming, movement, and change. Following Klor de Alva (1979), I call this view, "teoyoism", from teotl. Teoyoism includes what I call the principle of dialectical polar monism. This principle maintains that the universe and its contents are substantively and formally identical with teotl. Because the universe is identical with teotl, the universe is essentially dynamic and devoid of any lasting created order or structure. This notwithstanding, the ceaseless becoming of the universe is characterized by an overarching equilibrium, rhythm, and regularity: one provided, constituted, and defined by teotl. The principle of dialectical polar monism also holds that teotl manifests
itself cyclically and regularly in multiple aspects, preeminent among which is duality. This duality takes the form of the endless opposition of contrary yet mutually interdependent and mutually complementary polarities that divide, alternately dominate, and explain the diversity, movement, and momentary structure of the universe. These polarities include: being and not-being, order and disorder, harmony and disharmony, light and darkness, life and death, man and woman, and active and passive. Life and death, for example, are simply two sides of the same reality. Life contains within itself the seed of death; death, the fertile, energizing seed of life. The potters of Tlatilco, for example, represented this duality artistically by fashioning a double face, one half alive, the other skull-like. Nahuatl philosophy accordingly neither conceived of death as inherently evil nor advocated its conquest.

The ceaseless becoming of the universe is defined and constituted by the endless cyclical tug of war or dialectical oscillation of the above polarities. The overall result of this dialectical oscillation is an overarching equilibrium. Like the Tao of Taoism, teotl is not only the force or energy but also the equilibrium, rhythm, and regularity immanent within the endless, dialectical oscillation of these polarities. Teotl is the warp and woof of the fabric of the universe. Like the Tao, it is both what the universe is and how the universe is.

Teotl created as well as continually generates and sustains the universe by a process Nahuatl metaphysics saw as quintessentially artistic. What's more, they saw all of creation as teotl's nahual, i.e. disguise or mask. "Nahual" derives from "nahualli", which signifies a form changing shaman, suggesting that this central idea of Teoyoism is rooted in native shamanism.

Teotl possesses the artistic, indeed shamanlike magical power to disguise itself from humans. Strictly speaking, teotl did not create the universe ab initio; rather, it magically transformed itself into the universe. The universe ultimately consists of teotl and the contents of the universe are simply part of teotl. The universe and everything in it are merely momentary, magical manifestations of teotl: a grand mask that covers as well as reveals the mysterious (i.e. epistemologically transcendent and ultimately unknowable) sacred force and life energy that is teotl. The physical being of living things, and all things are alive according to the Nahuas, is a mask placed over teotl and its essence; a mask that the Nahua sage is able to penetrate in the process of coming to know (albeit imperfectly) teotl.

The universe's endless dialectical oscillation of mutually interdependent and complementary polarities masks the overarching equilibrium provided by the principle of dialectical polar monism. Yet at the same time it also expresses teotl's "true face": i.e. the principle of dialectical polar monism. Nahuatl metaphysics conceived the universe as symbolic, i.e. as pointing in a way understood by the sage to the overarching equilibrium of teotl and to the principle of dialectical polar monism. Those who understood the symbols of teotl's mask could 'read' their meaning; the 'false' face becoming the 'true' face. The created universe contains the signature of the sacred, which the sage is able to decipher.

Teotl artistically disguises itself from humans in a variety of ways. Firstly, teotl's mask consists of the apparent thingness of existence -- i.e. the appearance of static entities such as
humans, trees, insects, etc. All this is illusory, since Teoyoism maintains that reality -- i.e. teotl -- is dynamic and processual. Contrary to appearances, humans, trees, etc. are processes rather than entities. Secondly, teotl's disguise consists of the apparent multiplicity of existents -- i.e. the appearance of distinct, independently existing entities such as particular humans, trees, etc. This, too, is illusory, since there is only one thing: teotl. Humans, trees, etc. are not only interrelated, they are ultimately one with one another because ultimately one with teotl. They are merely episodes in teotl's process of self-disguising. Lastly, teotl's disguise consists of the apparent distinctness, independence, mutual exclusiveness, and irreconcilable oppositionality of life and death, male and female, etc. This, too, is illusory, since one and all are manifestations of teotl. As a consequence of teotl's self-masking, when humans ordinarily gaze upon the world, what they see is teotl as a human, as a tree, as death, etc. -- i.e. teotl behind a mask -- rather than teotl itself. Coming to understand teotl enables humans to penetrate this mask and in doing so disclose and apprehend the single, sacred presence of teotl itself.

Consequently, far from conceiving a certain and stable universe, far from believing that the universe had always existed or had been created once and for all, the Nahuatl metaphysics situated humankind in a fragile, evanescent universe subject to a cyclical state of flux, each cycle of which crashed to an end in a dramatic upheaval. It saw the history of the universe as falling into five successive ages or "suns," each representing the temporary dominance of a different polar aspect of teotl. The present age, the "Age of the Fifth Sun," was the final one and that in which the Nahuas believed they lived. Like its predecessors, it too was destined to cataclysmic destruction, at which point humankind would vanish forever, the sun would die, and chaos would reign.

In view of the temporary as well as masklike, symbolic nature of the created universe, Teoyoism commonly characterized earthly existents as painted images and symbols on teotl's sacred canvas. Aquiauhtzin, for example, characterizes the earth as "the house of paintings." His contemporary, Xayacamach, writes, "your home is here, in the midst of the paintings." Teoyoism accordingly maintained that earthly things were as ephemeral and evanescent as painted images on a canvas.

Nezahualcoyotl writes:
"I comprehend the secret, the hidden: O my lords! Thus we are, we are mortal, men through and through, we all will have to go away, we all will have to die on earth. Like a painting, we will be erased. Like a flower, we will dry up here on earth. Like plumed vestments of the precious bird, that precious bird with the agile neck, we will come to an end... Think on this, o lords, eagles and ocelots, though you be of jade, though you be of gold, you will also go there, to the place of the fleshless. We will have to disappear, no one can remain."

In another song-poem, Nezahualcoyotl writes:
"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.\footnote{x\textsuperscript{i}}

Furthermore, because it conceived everything earthly as an aspect of teotl's artistic self-disguise, Teoyoism characterized everything earthly as dreamlike.

Tochihuitzin Coyolchihqui writes: "We only rise from sleep, we come only to dream, it is not true [rooted], it is not true [rooted], that we come on earth to live."\footnote{x\textsuperscript{ii}}

Another song-poem reads:

"The Giver of Life deceives! Only dreams do you follow, You our friends! As truly as our hearts believe, As truly they are deceived."\footnote{x\textsuperscript{iii}}

However, Teoyoism conceived the illusoriness of earthly existence in epistemological rather than ontological terms. That is, illusion functioned not as an ontological category as it does, say, for Plato, who, in the Republic, employed the idea of illusion to characterize an inferior grade of reality and to deny that earthly existence is fully real. Rather, illusion functioned as an epistemological category (as it did, say, for Dogen and Samkara\footnote{x\textsuperscript{iv}}), which Teoyoism used to make the epistemological claim that the natural condition of humans is to misunderstand teotl. Humans misinterpret teotl's multifold dual polarities (e.g. life/death, male/female, etc.) as contradictory dualities and as distinct, self-sufficient existents. They misattribute distinct, independent existence to the multiplicity of individual things picked out by these categories, e.g., individual humans, trees, etc. As a result, when they look upon the world humans do not see teotl but rather see teotl under a deceptive description or set of categories. They see, for example, teotl as maleness or as death, as this or that individual human being or plant -- not teotl itself. In short: humans typically see only teotl's disguise or mask.

Consequently, when Teoyoism characterizes earthly existence as illusory and dreamlike, it does so not because earthly existence suffers from an inferior ontological status, but because it provides the occasion for human misunderstanding. Similarly, when Teoyoism claims that all earthly things are ephemeral and evanescent, it does so not because earthly things lack genuine reality but because as part of teotl's disguise earthly things are subject to the endless oscillation of dialectical polar monism.

I submit the foregoing suggests Nahua metaphysics holds that the illusory and non-illusory enjoy equal ontological status. In short, they are both equally real. The illusory is simply teotl's disguise, and as such, an aspect of teotl and hence real. I also submit the foregoing suggests that Nahuatl metaphysics, like Taoist and Confucianist but unlike the bulk of Western, South Asian, and post-Han East Asian metaphysics, neither equates reality with being, immutability, and permanence, nor equates unreality with becoming, mutability, and impermanence. Because teotl is real and essentially becoming, Nahuatl metaphysics equates reality with becoming. Hence everything earthly, its impermanence and evanescence notwithstanding, is fully real\footnote{x\textsuperscript{v}}.

Teoyoism also characterized teotl in pantheistic terms. That is, it claims: (1) everything that exists constitutes an all-inclusive and interrelated unity; (2) this unity is sacred; (3) everything that exists is substantively identical (i.e. one) with the sacred; (4) the sacred is teotl; (5) teotl is
single; (6) teotl is the unifying and ordering force or energy of everything that exists; (7) teotl is not a minded being possessing the characteristics of a "person" (such as having intentional states). Teotl is not only the unified totality of things, teotl is everything and everything is teotl. Because substantively identical with all things in the universe, teotl is metaphysically immanent within all things (although this does not preclude its being epistemologically transcendent)\textsuperscript{xvi}.

Finally, many of the preceding claims are expressed mythologically in popular sixteenth-century Aztec religion\textsuperscript{xvii}. For example, teotl manifests itself as the supreme god Ometeotl (literally, "Two God", also called "in Tonan, in Tota, Huehuetotl", "our Mother, our Father, the Old God") and a host of lesser gods as well as the stars, fire, and water\textsuperscript{xviii}. Ometeotl is the god of duality, a male-female unity who resides in Omeyocann, "The place of duality", which, in turn, occupies the highest levels of the heavens. S/he fathered/mothered the universe and everything in it, including her/himself. As "Lord and Lady of our flesh and sustenance", Ometeotl provides the universal, cosmic energy from which all things derive their original as well as continued existence and sustenance; s/he provides and maintains the oscillating rhythm of the universe; and s/he gives all things their particular natures. In virtue of these attributes s/he is called the "one through whom all live" (Caso 1958:8), and the one "who is the very being of all things, preserving them and sustaining them"\textsuperscript{xix}. Because metaphysically immanent, Ometeotl is called "Tloque Nahuaque", the "one who is near to everything and to whom everything is near"\textsuperscript{xx}. Because epistemologically transcendent, Ometeotl is called "Yohualli-ehecatl", the one who is "invisible (like the night) and intangible (like the wind)"\textsuperscript{xxi}.

References


Notes

i "Earth is the region of the fleeting moment" (Cantares mexicanos fol.11 v., translated by Leon-Portilla (1992:221) from a song-poem attributed to Ayocuan Cuetzpaltzin (second half of the fifteen century-early sixteenth century) who hailed from the region of Chalco. This paper has benefitted from conversations with James Boyd, Alex Greene, Julie Greene, Jane Kneller, Grant Lee, Michael Losonsky, Ted Morris, Paul Roth and Ronald Williams. Special thanks go to Willard Gingerich for sharing his expertise with me. The errors that remain are my own.

ii The natives of the High Central Plateau of what is now Mexico spoke the Nahuatl language, an Uto-Aztecan tongue related to languages of the native inhabitants of western and southwestern United States. The Nahuatl-speaking peoples of pre-Hispanic Mexico included, among others, the Mexicas (Aztecs), Acocluans, Texcocans, Tlacopans, Culhuans, Chalcans, Tepanecs, and Tlaxcaltecs. These groups shared a common cultural heritage bequeathed to them by the Toltecs. Due to their common inheritance and language, scholars typically refer to them as the Nahuas, and to their culture, as Nahuatl culture. By some accounts, Nahuatl culture flourished from the ninth century to 1521, the time of the Conquest (the date standardly assigned to Cortez's conquest of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan). Sources for studying pre-Hispanic Nahuatl philosophy include: pre-contact and early post-contact native pictorial manuscripts or
"codices" (e.g. the Codex Barbonicus and Codex Mendoza); reports by the Conquerors; and ethnography-style chronicles composed by the first missionary friars entering Mexico after the Conquest. Friars Sahagun, Olmos, Motolinia, Duran, and Mendieta sought knowledge of Nahua- | | culture and questioned the survivors of the Conquest about their culture. Friar Sahagun assembled hundreds of folios containing enormous amounts of information which serve as the basis for his Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva Espana and Florentine Codex. The Cantares mexicanos and Romances de los senores de Nueva Espana consist of transcriptions of native song-poems compiled by natives under Spanish supervision during the last part of the sixteenth century. Recent ethnographies of contemporary Nahuatl-speaking peoples in Mexico also prove useful (e.g. Sandstrom (1991) and Hunt (1977)). For discussion of sources, see Bierhorst (1985), Clendinnen (1990), Leon-Portilla (1963, 1992), and Smith (1998).

iii For related discussion see Markman and Markman (1989).

iv As Davies (1990) and Ortiz de Montellano (1990) observe, dialectical polar monism parallels Taoism's notion of Yin and Yang. Both philosophies claim that it is mistaken: to view polarities such as life/death, male/female, etc. as mutually exclusive, mutually warring, logically contradictory dualities; and to cultivate one polarity (e.g. life) at the expense of the other (e.g. death). See Ames (1989) and Hall (1989a,1989b) for further discussion of Taoism. What I call the principle of dialectical polar monism resembles what Young and Ames (1977) calls "the principle of antithetical rotation" when characterizing the Tao. Burkhart (1989), Davies (1990) and Lopez Austin (1996) argue that what I call "dialectical polar monism" differs from eschatological dualisms (such as Zoroastrianism) which maintain that good triumphs over evil at the end of history.


vi Markman & Markman (1989) contains useful discussion of shamanism and the role of masks in Mesoamerican thought.

vii For supporting discussion see Markman and Markman (1989), Lopez Austin (1990), and Clendinnen (1991).

viii Cantares mexicanos fol.10 r., translation by Leon-Portilla (1992:282). Aquiauhtzin (ca.1430-ca.1500) hailed from the hamlet of Ayapanco in the region of Chalco-Amaquemecan. The expression "house of paintings" refers both to the building in which the painted codices were stored and to earthly existence.

ix Cantares mexicanos fol.11 v., translation by Leon-Portilla (1992:228). Xayacamach (second half of the fifteenth century) hailed from and governed the town, Tizatlan, in Tlaxcala.

x Romances de los senores de nueva espana, fol. 35r-36r, translation by Leon-Portilla (1992:80-81). Nezahualcoyotl (1402-1472) was the ruler of the city-state of Tezcoco.


Translation by Wiget (1980:9).

For discussion of Samkara, see Deutsche (1969); for the Zen Buddhism of Dogen, Kazulis (1980).

See Hansen (1985) for relevant discussion of South Asian, East Asian, and Western philosophies. My interpretation of Nahuatl metaphysics contradicts the received view among scholars (e.g. see Leon-Portilla (1963), Gingerich (1987), Bierhorst (1985), Clendinnen (1990), and Burkhart (1989)) which claims that Nahuatl metaphysics equates permanence, immutability, and stability with reality, and impermanence, mutability, and instability with unreality.

I borrow the above characterization of pantheism from Levine (1994). Sandstrom (1991) claims contemporary Nahuatl-speaking people living in northern Veracruz, Mexico, continue to uphold the cosmology of their pre-Hispanic ancestors, which he characterizes as "pantheistic". He writes: "For the Nahua... everybody and everything is an aspect of a grand, single, overriding unity. Separate beings and objects do not exist -- that is an illusion peculiar to human beings. In daily life we divide up our environment into discrete units so that we can talk about it and manipulate it for our benefit. But it is an error to assume that the diversity we create in our lives is the way reality is actually structured. For the Nahua, everything is connected at a deeper level, part of the same basic substratum of being... The universe is a deified, seamless totality" (Sandstrom 1991:138). Hunt (1987) and Sandstrom & Sandstrom (1986) make similar claims. This pantheistic interpretation is further supported by the fact that sixteenth-century Teoyoism it is still very close to its shamanic roots and the fact that native Mesoamerican shamanism is pantheistic. See Markman and Markman (1991), Florescano (1994) and Ortiz de Montellano(1990) for suppoing discussion. For an opposing view, see Leon-Portilla (1963).

Leon-Portilla (1963:92). Caso (1958) and Leon-Portilla (1963) suggest the uneducated classes tended to embrace the polytheistic aspects of the view, priests and tlamatinime ("knowers of things") or sages, its monistic aspect. Hunt (1977:55f.) characterizes pre-Hispanic metaphysics and its relationship to popular religious mythology follows: "In their view... reality, nature, and experience were nothing but multiple manifestations of a single unity of being. God was both the one and the many. Thus the deities were but his multiple personifications, his partial unfoldings into perceptible experience. The partition of this experience into discrete units such as god A or god B is an artifice of iconography and analysis, not part of the core conception of the divinity since divine reality was multiple, fluid, encompassing the whole, its aspects were changing images, dynamic, never frozen, but constantly recreated, redefined. This fluidity was a culturally defined mystery of the nature of divinity itself. Therefore, it was expressed in the dynamic, ever-changing aspects of the multiple "deities" that embodied it. For didactic, artistic, and ritual purposes, however, these fluid images were carved in stone, painted on frescoes, described in prayer. It is here, at this reduced level of visualized, that the transient images of a sacralized universe became "god" with names attached to them, with anthropomorphic attributes, and so on."

The existence of Ometeotl is defended by Caso (1958), Leon- Portilla (1963), and Lopez Austin (1988).


Angel Garibay, quoted in Leon-Portilla (1963:93).

Leon-Portilla (1963:92,179).