
“WE EAT OF THE EARTH
THEN THE EARTH EATS US¹”:
THE CONCEPT OF NATURE IN
PRE-HISPANIC NAHUA THOUGHT

JAMES MAFFIE

ABSTRACT. Conquest-Era Nahua thought founded its concept of nature upon a monistic metaphysics that maintained that there exists only one thing: a dynamic, vital, vivifying, and perpetually self-generating and self-regenerating sacred energy or force. Nature is generated by this force, from this force, as one aspect, facet, or moment of its eternal self-regeneration. Nature is accordingly processive and alive with sacred energy. All things in nature are organically interdependent upon one another, and all are bound by relationships of mutual reciprocity. Human beings are thoroughly natural creatures, and hence wholly implicated within these interdependencies and relationships of mutual reciprocity. In short, humans are in the world as well as of the world.

KEY WORDS. Nature, Nahua cosmivision, pantheism, monism, interdependence, sacred energy, self-generation reciprocity.

Pre-Hispanic Nahua philosophy of nature has its roots in over two thousand years of Mesoamerican lived experience. It represents a way of understanding and interacting with nature that differs profoundly from the way presently governing contemporary Western societies. This essay aims to explicate the pre-Hispanic Nahua conception of nature. Section I discusses the Nahuas’ understanding of nature and its relationship with their metaphysics; section II, the nature of human beings; section III, the relationship between humans and nature, and section IV concludes with a brief comparison of post-Galilean Western and pre-Hispanic Nahua conceptions of nature.

I. NATURE AS *TEOTL* AND *TEOTL* AS NATURE

North American Sioux scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., writes, “the most common feature of [indigenous] awareness of the world [is] the feeling or

Department of Philosophy, Colorado State University, USA. / maffiej@lamar.ColoState.edu

belief that the universe is energized by a pervading power²." The indigenous peoples of North America call this power *wakan orenda* or *manitou*, while those of Polynesia call it *mana*. Regardless of what they call it:

...[indigenous] peoples recognize the existence of a power in the universe that affects and influences them...They felt power but did not measure it...the presence of energy and power is the starting point of their analyses and understanding of the world. It is their cornerstone for further exploration³.

Deloria, Jr. likens this power to a force field that not only permeates all of nature but also constitutes nature. Since this power is considered to be sacred, so is nature.

Pre-Hispanic Nahua philosophy bears out Deloria's claim. Its starting point is the monistic ontological thesis that there exists a single, vital, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating-and-self-regenerating sacred energy, power, or force. The Nahuas called this sacred energy "*teotl*". Elizabeth Boone writes, "The real meaning of [*teotl*] is spirit—a concentration of power as a sacred...force⁴". In a similar vein, Jorge Klor de Alva asserts, "*Teotl*...implies something more than the idea of the divine manifested in the form of a god or gods...it signifies the sacred in more general terms⁵". The multiplicity of gods in official, state sanctioned Aztec religion, for example, does not gainsay this basic metaphysical claim, for this multiplicity was merely the sacred, merely *teotl*, "separated, as it were by the prism of human sight, into its many attributes⁶".

Teotl created as well as continually recreates, permeates, and shapes nature. That which humans commonly regard as nature—*e.g.*, sun, earth, rivers, humans, trees, animals, etc.—is generated *by teotl*, *from teotl*, as one aspect, facet, or moment of its eternal process of self-generation-and-regeneration. *Teotl's* self-generation-and-regeneration is identical with its generation-and-regeneration of nature. Both processes are products of *teotl's* possessing what humans commonly understand as active and passive as well as male and female attributes. As the single, all-encompassing life force of nature, *teotl* vivifies and vitalizes nature and all of its contents. Hence nature is alive. As one contemporary Nahua expresses it, "the earth is alive⁷".

What's more, Nahua ontology is processive. Process, movement, change and transmutation are essential attributes of *teotl*. *Teotl* is accordingly better understood as ever-flowing and ever-changing energy-in-motion rather than as a static entity, being, or thing. Since nature is constituted by *teotl*, it, too, is properly understood as ever-flowing and ever-changing energy-in-motion. Nature, too, is essentially process, movement, change, and transmutation. In short, nature is a living process—not a static and lifeless thing or object.

Yet *teotl* is more than the unified totality of nature, and nature is more than simply constituted of *teotl*. Nature is identical to *teotl* and *teotl* is identical to nature. They are one and the same sacred energy. *Teotl* is therefore both immanent within and transcendent of nature in the following respect. It is immanent in the sense that it penetrates deeply into every detail of nature and exists within the myriad of created things; yet it is transcendent in the sense that it is not exhausted by any single, existing thing in nature.

Teotl's process, movement, and transmutation present themselves primarily as the ceaseless, cyclical oscillation of paired, complementary forces. Although essentially dynamic and devoid of any permanent order, nature is nevertheless characterized by an immanent equilibrium and rhythm: one provided and constituted by *teotl*. *Teotl* presents itself in multiple aspects, preeminent among which is duality. This duality takes the form of the endless opposition of mutually arising, mutually interdependent, and mutually complementary polar forces that divide, alternately dominate, and explain the diversity, movement, and momentary arrangement of nature. These include being and not-being, order and disorder, life and death, light and darkness, hot and dry, masculine and feminine, and active and passive. Life and death, for example, are mutually arising, mutually interdependent, and mutually complementary sides of the same process. Life forces arise from death forces, death forces from life forces. The artists of Tlatilco and Oaxaca, for example, artistically presented this duality by fashioning a split faced mask, one half with flesh and alive, the other half, fleshless, skull-like, and dead⁹. The masks are intentionally ambiguous. Skulls simultaneously symbolize death and life, since life springs from the bones of the dead. Flesh simultaneously symbolizes life and death, since death arises from the flesh of the living.

Since *teotl* and nature are essentially processive, they are properly understood neither as being nor not-being but as becoming. They are also properly understood as neither ordered (law-governed) nor disordered (anarchic) but as unordered. Being and not-being, like order and disorder, are simply two dialectically interrelated polar forces or facets of *teotl*, and as such, not strictly speaking predicable of *teotl* and nature itself. Indeed, at this point applies to all the aforementioned dualities. Life/death, active/passive, male/female, etc., are not strictly speaking predicable of *teotl* and nature. These dichotomies are the product of common sense thinking and are illusory. According to Nahua thinking, *teotl* represents a *tertium quid* that transcends these dichotomies by being simultaneously neither-male-nor-female-yet-both-male-and-female, simultaneously neither-active-nor-passive-yet-both-active-and-passive, and so forth¹⁰.

The Nahuas' conception of nature is also pantheistic¹¹. They believed that: (a) everything that exists constitutes an all-inclusive and interrelated

unity; (b) this unity is sacred; (c) everything that exists is substantively identical and hence one with the sacred; (d) the sacred is *teotl*. Hence there is only one thing, *teotl*, and all other forms or aspects of reality and existence are identical with *teotl*; (e) *teotl* is not a minded being possessing the characteristics of a 'person' (in the Western sense of having intentional states or the capacity to make decisions). I thus agree with Eva Hunt when she writes:

Prehispanic religion...was truly pantheistic... Mesoamerican cultures were neither polytheistic nor monotheistic. In their view...reality, nature and experience were nothing but multiple manifestations of a single unity of being...The [sacred] was *both* the one and the many...Since the divine reality was multiple, fluid, encompassing of the whole, its aspects were changing images, dynamic, never frozen, but constantly recreated, redefined¹².

Alan Sandstrom's ethnography of contemporary Nahuas in Veracruz, Mexico, also supports this interpretation:

...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...everything is connected at a deeper level, part of the same basic substratum of being...The universe is a deified, seamless totality¹³.

Teotl's untiring process of generating-and-regenerating nature is also one of untiring self-transmutation-and-self-retransmutation. Nature is *teotl's* self-transmutation—not its creation *ex nihilo*. The Nahuas conceived this process of self-transmutation in two, closely interrelated ways. First, they conceived it artistically. *Teotl* is a sacred artist who endlessly fashions and refashions itself *into* and *as* nature. A contemporary Nahua song-poem reads:

I sing to life, to man
and to nature, the Mother Earth;
because life is flower and it is song,
it is in the end: flower and song¹⁴.

Nature, in other words, is *teotl's in xochitl, in cuicatl* or "flower and song". The Nahuas used the expression "*in xochitl, in cuicatl*" to refer specifically to the composing and performing of song-poems and to refer generally to creative, artistic, and metaphorical activity (such as singing poetry and painting-writing). As *teotl's* "flower and song", nature is *teotl's* grand, on-going artistic-cum-metaphorical *self-presentation*.

The Nahuas also conceived *teotl's* process of self-transmutation in shamanic terms. Nature is *teotl's nahual* or "disguise". The Nahuatl word

“*nahual*” derives from “*nahualli*” which signifies a form-changing shaman. The continuous becoming of nature and its myriad aspects are *teotl*'s shamanic self-masking and self-disguising¹⁵.

Teotl artistically-cum-shamanically transmutes and masks itself in a variety of ways: (a) the apparent thingness of existents, *i.e.*, the appearance of static entities such as humans, mountains, animals, etc. This is illusory, since one and all are merely aspects of *teotl*'s sacred motion; (b) the apparent multiplicity of existents, *i.e.*, the appearance of distinct, independently existing entities such as individual humans, plants, mountains, etc. This is illusory since there is only one thing: *teotl*, and (c) the apparent distinctness, independence, and irreconcilable oppositionality of order and disorder, life and death, male and female, etc. This is illusory since one and all are interdependent, complementary facets of *teotl*.

In light of the foregoing, Nahua *tlamatinime* (“knowers of things”; *tlamatini* [singular]) commonly characterized earthly existents as painted images and symbols on *teotl*'s sacred canvas. The *tlamatini* Aquiauhztin characterized the earth as “the house of paintings¹⁶”. His contemporary, Xayacamach writes, “your home is here, in the midst of the paintings¹⁷.” Like the images on canvas painted by human artists, the images on *teotl*'s sacred canvas were fragile and evanescent. Nezahualcoyotl writes, “We live only in Your painting here, on the earth...we live only in Your book of paintings, here on the earth¹⁸.” Finally, Tochihuitzin Coyolchiuhqui writes: “We only rise from sleep, we come only to dream, it is untrue [*i.e.*, unrooted, inauthentic, concealing, undisclosed], it is untrue [*i.e.*, unrooted, inauthentic, concealing, undisclosed], that we come on earth to live¹⁹.”

Nahua *tlamatinime* conceived the dreamlike illusoriness of earthly existence in epistemological, not ontological terms. ‘illusion’ does not function as an ontological category for the Nahuas as it does, say, for Plato. In the *Republic*, Book VI, Plato employed the notion of illusion: to characterize an inferior or lower grade of reality or existence (*viz.*, semi-real realm of becoming); to distinguish this inferior grade of reality from a superior, higher one (*viz.*, the Forms), and to deny that earthly existence is fully real. In contrast, Nahua *tlamatinime* employed the concept of illusion to make the epistemological claim that the natural condition of humans is one of unknowing—not the metaphysical claim that *teotl*'s mask and all earthly existents are ontologically distinct and ontologically inferior to *teotl*, and so not fully real. Humans normally misperceive and misconceive *teotl*; that is, they normally perceive and conceive *teotl*'s mask. Indeed, the activity of human unknowing is one and the same as *teotl*'s activity of self-masking. The deceptive character of earthly existence, the mask of unknowing which beguiles us as human beings, is a function of our

human point of view—not an ontological dualism inherent in the make-up of things.

Pre-Hispanic Nahua ontological monism entails the metaphysical impossibility of humans perceiving *de re* anything other than *teotl*. After all, *teotl* is the only thing that exists to be perceived *de re*. This notwithstanding, humans normally misperceive and misunderstand what they see *de re*. How is this so? Humans normally perceive and conceive *teotl de dicto* or under a description, and hence do so in a manner that is untrue, unrooted, inauthentic, concealing, and non-disclosing. For example, humans perceive and conceive *teotl de dicto* and hence unknowingly *as* a thing, *as* an individual human, *as* hot, *as* maleness, *as* death, and so forth. When they perceive *teotl de dicto* they perceive *teotl's nahual* or self-disguise.

Nahua philosophy of nature distinguished between two further facets of nature (*teotl*): the visible (sensible) and invisible (insensible). The distinction was epistemological rather than metaphysical or moral since it was understood in terms of what humans are able to perceive or not with their unaided senses. It did not correlate with or map onto any significant metaphysical distinction, say, between two antithetical, mutually exclusive, or contradictory kinds of reality (or substance). Nor does it correlate with or map onto any meaningful moral dissociation, say, between moral (normative) and factual (descriptive) realms. Therefore it would be a mistake to understand this distinction in terms of such distinctions as spiritual vs. material, sacred vs. profane, natural vs. supernatural, or this-worldly vs. other-worldly as these are conceived by post-Galilean European thought. Sensible and insensible facets of reality form a seamless, single unity. They are facets of one and the same spatial-temporal nexus.

The foregoing suggests two further characteristics of *teotl*. Firstly, *teotl* is neither something nor nothing. It is a simple, undifferentiated, unordered, unstructured, and seamless processive totality. All structure, order, static thingness, etc., that humans attribute to *teotl* and to nature are simultaneously artefacts of human unknowing and artistic-shamanic presentations of *teotl*. This ontological indeterminacy appears well characterized (in Western philosophical terminology) as a radical, nominalist anti-realism, and a Kantian-like noumenon. Secondly, such dichotomies as god vs. non-god, natural vs. supernatural, sacred vs. profane, personal vs. impersonal, animate vs. inanimate, and alive vs. dead that are characteristic of post-Galilean European thinking simply do not apply to and so do not help us understand *teotl*.

II. HUMAN BEINGS

Human consciousness is merely another aspect of the eternal, vivifying, dynamic energy of *teotl*. The Nahuas believed the human body possesses

three animistic forces, one located in a different animistic center or organ ²⁰. *Tonalli* (from *tona*, "heat") is located in the head. It provides the body with character, vigor, and the energy needed for growth and development. Individuals acquire *tonalli* from the sun. A person's *tonalli* may leave her body, as in the case of dreams and shamanic journeys. Such journeys allow humans to perceive places far removed from their bodies. *Tonalli* is ritually introduced into an infant as one of her animistic entities. It is closely united to the person as her metaphysical-causal link with the universe and as the determining factor in her future. Everything belonging to a human by virtue of her relation to the cosmos receives the name of *tonalli*. *Teyolia* ("that which gives life to people") is located in the heart. It provides memory, vitality, inclination, emotion, knowledge, and wisdom. Unlike *tonalli*, a person's *teyolia* is not separable from him while alive. It is identified as that animistic force of an individual "that goes beyond after death" and enjoys a postmortem existence in the world of the dead. The Nahuas likened *teyolia* to "divine fire ²¹." Finally, *ihiyotl* ("breath, respiration") is located in the liver. It provides passion, cupidity, bravery, hatred, love, and happiness.

Every human is the living center and confluence of these three vital forces. The three direct both the physiological and psychological processes of humans, giving each individual their unique character and temperament. Moreover, all three must operate harmoniously with one another in order to produce a mentally and physically balanced as well as morally upright and genuine human being. Disturbance of any one affects the other two, creating imbalance and disorder in the person's body and mind. Only during life on earth are all three forces fully integrated within humans. After death, each goes its own way.

Their differences notwithstanding, all three forces are constituted by and facets of the dynamic, vivifying energy of *teotl*. In the final analysis, they are neither fully discrete nor separate. Human consciousness and experience are thus facets of *teotl*, and as such, neither ontologically inferior to the physical processes of the human body nor casually inert, derivative byproducts (e.g., epiphenomena) of physical processes. Head, heart, and liver are simply the temporary locations of these three forces while associated with the human body. Indeed, Nahua metaphysics holds that mind (spirit) and body (matter) are ultimately two aspects, facets, or moments of one and the same thing: *teotl*.

Lastly, none of these animating forces is possessed exclusively by humans. *Tonalli*, for example, is present in 'living' things such as animals and plants. *Teyolia* is present in both 'living' things such as humans, animals and plants as well as 'nonliving' things such as towns, mountains, lakes, and sky. The human heart, for example, is simply a piece of this force. Both 'living' and 'nonliving' things possess *teyolia* in virtue of their

ultimate oneness with *teotl*. Contemporary Nahuas continue to believe that everything in the universe, whether living or not, possesses a *yolotl* or “life force”:

by virtue of being part of the pantheistic universe. The *yolotl* is a piece of the universal deity that inheres in everything. Thus even objects partake of an animate universe and they can be said to be alive in this sense²².

Both humans and non-humans as well as living and non-living things partake of and share in the vital energy and movement of *teotl*. In short, the Nahuas’ concept of nature is appropriately characterized as animistic. All of nature—rocks, mountains, water, earth, etc.—are enspirited, animated, and hence alive, and consequently there is no sharp, qualitative distinction between animate and inanimate, human and non-human, and thus humans and the rest of nature²³.

III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE

The monism of Nahua metaphysics entails that all of nature—including human beings—is not only constituted by but also substantively one with *teotl*. As fully natural entities, humans are *in* the world (nature), *of* the world (nature), and one *with* the world (nature). The perception that human beings are distinct from nature is an illusion. What’s more, humans do not merely live amidst the paired, complementary polar forces of nature (discussed above); these cosmic forces literally permeate, constitute, and circulate *within* humans. Humans are continuously affected, both physically and psychologically, by the forces of nature, and as a consequence their individual and collective well-being is interdependent with the well-being of nature. In order to attain some measure of such during their short, evanescent lives here on the surface of the earth, humans must live in balance and harmony with the forces of nature.

The Nahuas conceived the relationship between humans and nature in terms of accommodation, interdependence, co-participation, respect, and reciprocity. They regarded nature as something to which human beings must conform and accommodate their lives. Humans live upon the surface of the earth, and the surface of the earth is a dangerously slippery place²⁴. Humans lose their balance all too easily while walking upon this surface and as a consequence, suffer disorder, disharmony, discomfort, and dis-ease. And in order to attain some measure of well-being while walking upon the unsteady surface of the earth, humans must therefore learn how to maintain their balance. Doing so requires that they accommodate all their activities—mental and physical as well as individual, social, and environmental—to the ways of nature. It does not involve, however, accommodating nature to human ends²⁵. Nahua thought thus

opposes the modern European, anthropocentric notion that nature is a mere means or instrument to human ends (whatever they may be), and that as such, nature should be complied to those ends through control, domination, exploitation, and manipulation.

The Nahuas's conceived accommodation in active rather than passive terms. Humans accommodate themselves to nature not by quietistically acquiescing to nature but by causally contributing to and co-participating alongside nature in the future course and character of nature. Human actions causally promote balance and purity or imbalance and impurity in nature. Nature not only causally affects human beings; humans causally affect nature. Since the balance, harmony, and purity of humankind is interdependent with the balance, harmony, and purity of nature, humans must actively promote the latter on pain of slipping into ill-being. Borrowing from Johannes Wilbert, I suggest the Nahuas saw their relationship with nature as one of "compelling mutuality" and "interdependence"²⁶. The nature of humans' relationship with nature was simply a function of the interrelatedness and ultimate oneness of all things.

Nahua thought accordingly maintained that *tlamatiliztli* (knowledge, wisdom) consists of four ultimately indistinguishable aspects. First, it consists of the practical ability to conduct one's affairs in such a way as to attain some measure of balance, harmony, and purity—and hence some measure of well-being—in one's personal, domestic, social, and natural environments. Secondly, it consists in living in such a way as to creatively participate in, reinforce, adapt, and extend into the future the way of life inherited from one's predecessors. Thirdly, *tlamatiliztli* consists in participating in the regeneration-cum-renewal of the universe. Finally, it consists of the practical 'know how' involved in performing ritual activities which: genuinely present *teotl*; authentically embody *teotl*; preserve existing balance and purity; create new balance and purity, and participate alongside *teotl* in the regeneration of the universe. *Tlamatiliztli* involves knowing how to perform these ritual activities as well as where and when to perform them, hence the essential importance of knowing both the sacred-ritual calendar and sacred-ritual landscape²⁷.

Tlamatiliztli also possesses an ineliminable moral dimension since it involves treating nature in a morally responsible manner. Humans are the creations of nature (*teotl*) and so owe nature filial-like moral consideration and respect. Since they regarded nature as a sacred, animating force, the Nahuas approached nature as a "Thou" rather than as a lifeless "It"²⁸. That is, they treated nature as living individuality, as life confronting life. Humans' conduct toward *teotl* was accordingly morally regulated by such notions as reciprocity, respect, and humility. Treating a nature as a means to one's own ends or as something to be dominated and exploited is thus not only foolish but also immoral since it promotes imbalance, dishar-

mony, and dis-ease in both humans and nature. Contemporary Nahuas, for example, believe the most important human attribute is *tlatlepanitaliztli* or "respect", by which they mean "a sense of propriety, or recognition of humans' place in relation to the rest of the world ²⁹." Humans express *tlatlepanitaliztli* through ritual activities such as making offerings to the earth, water, hills, and crops. Failing to show respect for the earth and its gifts, *e.g.*, through arrogant and aggressive behavior towards nature, has dire consequences for all creation, and is strongly condemned.

Pre-Hispanic Nahua empirical inquiry such as astronomy and medicine adopted the selfsame attitude towards nature ³⁰. While empirical inquiry did seek successful prediction, it did not seek successful prediction with the aim of controlling or manipulating nature (as is commonly argued to be so with Western-style science). Nahua astronomy, for example, embraced the threefold aim of: (1) compliance or conformity, *i.e.*, shaping one's actions, thoughts, and behavior so as to be in harmony and balance with the movements of *teotl*; (2) alligning oneself with pre-existing patterns and forces of the cosmos so as to promote human and cosmic balance, and (3) actively co-participating in the patterns and forces of the universe with the goal renewing the cosmos. Seasonal and calendarical festivals (such as the New Fire Ceremony) did not consist of humans trying to bend the cosmos to their will but rather humans trying to cooperate with the universe in order to renew the universe (and human-kind along with it).

The Nahuas not only believed humans are able to influence the future character of the cosmos; they also believed that humans are morally responsible for doing so. Because humans owe their existence to the sacred (*teotl*), they are born indebted to the sacred and bear a moral-cum-religious obligation to participate in the renewal of the universe. Humans are born with "original debt" which they repay by performing ritual activities (*e.g.*, in *xochitl*, in *cuicatl* or "flower and song", autosacrifice, and sacrificing of plants, animals, and humans) that create new balance, preserve existing balance, or forestall the creation of new imbalance.

Timothy Knab argues that pre-Hispanic Nahuas understood the relationship between human beings and nature in terms of the metaphor of plants, which is "typified" by the statement "Man is a plant ³²." The lives of humans and plants are the same. Both originate from the earth, grow from seeds, require and take nourishment from the earth, mature, flower, produce fruit, wither, die, and return to nourish the earth. As a contemporary Nahua song from the Sierra Norte of Puebla puts it:

We live HERE on the earth [stamping on the mud floor]
 we are all fruits of the earth
 the earth sustains us
 we grow here, on the earth and flower

and when we die we wither in the earth
 we are ALL FRUITS of the earth [stamping on the mud floor]...
 We eat of the earth
 then the earth eats us³³.

Like plants, humans are organically interwoven into the living organism of nature, and they need to know how to move in balance and harmony with that organism order to survive and flourish. Like plants, humans need to live in balance with the various paired, polar cosmic forces that characterize the movement of nature: light and dark; hot and cold; wet and dry, etc. Like plants, humans must know where and when to sow their seeds, harvest, etc.—*i.e.*, when and where to perform rituals activities that help them remain in harmony with nature and maintain their balance upon the slippery earth.

IV. CONCLUSION

Pre-Hispanic Nahua beliefs about and attitudes towards nature differ dramatically from post-Galilean European and European-diaspora beliefs and attitudes. Indeed, the two differ so dramatically that it is safe to say that nature means, radically different things for each one. By way of conclusion, I briefly examine why this is the case.

Broadly speaking, post-Galilean European philosophy vacillates between two patterns of thought: a fully modernist, positivist pattern, and a partially modernist, non-positivist pattern. The partially modernist, non-positivist pattern is characterized by an overarching dualism that divides reality metaphysically, morally, and epistemologically into natural and supernatural—or if secularized, natural and non-natural—realms. Natural and supernatural (non-natural) realms are antithetical, contradictory and mutually exclusive. The natural realm—*i.e.*, what gets called “nature”—is profane, lifeless, non-teleological, governed by laws of efficient causation, physical, atomistic, secular, factual, and devoid of meaning, purpose and value (*e.g.*, moral, aesthetic, etc.). The natural realm is extended in space and in time. Nature is considered the proper epistemological province of descriptive, empirical, scientific ways of knowing. The supernatural (non-natural) realm, on the other hand, is sacred, teleological, animated, enspirited, or spiritual, and the locus of intention, purpose, meaning, normativity and value. It is extended in time but not space. The supernatural (non-natural) realm is considered the proper epistemological province of non-empirical, *a priori* ways of knowing such as reason, intuition, divination, or revelation. The nature of human beings mirrors the foregoing duality, humans are composed of two, fundamentally antithetical kinds of substances: spirit (supernatural, sacred) and matter (natural, profane). Because of this, humans are commonly said to be *in* the world (nature) but not *of* world (nature). Finally, since nature is lifeless,

profane, devoid of value, etc., the human treatment of nature is not governed by morality.

The fully modernist, positivist pattern denies the existence of a supernatural (sacred, non-natural) realm. As a result, the denizens of this realm such as meaning, purpose, intention, normativity, and value are either denied existence or reconceived in terms of human subjectivity. For example, positivism either denies the existence of moral value (*e.g.*, embracing moral nihilism) or reconceives moral value in fully descriptive terms such as human choice, feeling, utility, etc. Nature consists of entities, properties, facts, or relations that are profane, non-teleological, lifeless, governed by laws of efficient causation, physical, and atomistic. Nature is the proper epistemological province of empirical, scientific ways of knowing. Upon being naturalistically reconceived, the erstwhile denizens of the supernatural (non-natural) realm become susceptible to scientific analysis. All of nature exists in space and time. As one among other natural entities, human beings are fully integrated within nature, fully exhausted by their natural make-up, and conceived along the lines of the rest of nature. If, for example, nature is conceived as a machine, computing device, or accidental constellation of indivisible particles, then so are humans. In short, as nature goes, so do humans. Finally, since nature is lifeless, devoid of value, etc., the human treatment of nature is not governed by morality.

Pre-Hispanic Nahua philosophy paints a radically different picture of nature and of human beings. This picture is monistic and processive. Nature consists of a single, dynamic, vivifying, sacred energy or force. While nature is divisible into visible and invisible aspects, this division is epistemological, not metaphysical or moral. Moreover, it does not map onto such distinctions as sacred vs. profane, spiritual vs. material, natural vs. supernatural, or this-worldly vs. other-worldly as these are defined by post-Galilean. European thought. Nature is animated, enspirited, and charged with sacred energy. Everything in nature is mutually interrelated as parts of an all-encompassing, organic whole. Everything participates in the grand, overarching, endless cycle of life/death, order/disorder, etc. As facets of this single, universal energy, human beings are in the world and of the world—as are body, emotion, sensation, thought, meaning, and value. Value and meaning are objective, metaphysical facts woven into the fabric of nature. There is no epistemological or metaphysical distinction between fact and value, descriptive and normative, or mind and body. Finally, human treatment of nature is governed by strict moral regulations.

NOTES

- 1 From a song sung by the contemporary Nahuas of San Miguel in the Sierra de Puebla, from Timothy Knab, "Words great and small: Sierra Nahuatl narrative discourse in everyday life," unpublished manuscript, quoted in Johanna Broda, "Templo mayor as ritual space," in *The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan: Center and Periphery in the Aztec World*, Johanna Broda, Davd Carrasco, and Eduardo Moctezuma (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p.107. I am indebted to James Boyd, Willard Gingerich, Grant Lee, and Helmut Wautischer for invaluable input.
- 2 Quoted in Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner, and Sam Scinta (eds), *Spirit and Reason: The Vine Deloria, Jr., Reader* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1999), p.356; see also pp.40-60. See also: Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1994); Leroy N. Meyer and Tony Ramirez, "Wakinyan Hotan: The Inscrutability of Lakota/Dakota Metaphysics," in S. O'Meara and D.A. West (eds), *From Our Eyes: Learning from Indigenous People* (Toronto: Garamound Press, 1966), pp.89-105.
- 3 *Ibid.* David Hall characterizes *qi* in classical Chinese metaphysics in a strikingly similar terms (David Hall, "Just how provincial is Western Philosophy?, 'Truth' in comparative context," *Social Epistemology* 15 (4) (2001): 285-298).
- 4 Elizabeth Hill Boone, *The Aztec World* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1994), p.105. Boone likens *teotl* to the Polynesian notion of *mana*. See also: Arild Hvittfeldt, *Teotl and Ixiplatl: Some Central Conceptions in Ancient Mexican Religion*, Niels Haisland trans. (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1958); Peter T. Markman and Roberta H. Markman, *Masks of the Spirit: Image and Metaphor in Mesoamerica* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); H.B. Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico", in *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol.10, G. Ekholm and I. Bernal (eds.) (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), pp.395-446; Richard F. Townsend, *State and Cosmos in the Art of Tenochtitlan*, Studies in Pre-Columbian Art and Architecture, no. 20 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1979); and Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972).
- 5 Jorge Klor de Alva, "Christianity and the Aztecs," *San Jose Studies* 5 (1979): 7.
- 6 Irene Nicholson, *Firefly in the Night: A Study of Ancient Mexican Poetry & Symbolism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p.63f. See also: Alfonso Caso, *The Aztecs: People of the Sun*, Lowell Dunham (trans.) (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958); Eva Hunt, *The Transformation of the Hummingbird: Cultural Roots of a Zinacatecan Mythical Poem* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977); and Nicholson (1971).
- 7 Quoted in Alan R. Sandstrom, *Corn Is Our Blood: Culture and Ethnic Identity in a Contemporary Aztec Indian Village* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p.239.
- 8 5. See: Caso (1958); Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989); Gary Gossen, "Mesoamerican ideas as foundation for regional synthesis", in *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community: Essays in Mesoamerican Ideas*, Gary Gossen (ed) (Albany: Institute for Mesamerican Studies, 1986), pp.1-8; Alfredo Lopez Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, vol. I and II, Thelma Ortiz de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano (trans.) (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988); Miguel Leon-Portilla, *La filosofía nahuatl: Estudiada en sus fuentes*

- (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1993); Dennis Tedlock, (trans. & ed.), *Popul Vuh: A Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).
- 9 For duality in Mesoamerican art, see: Esther Pasztory, *Aztec Art* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1983); Jacques Soustelle, *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, Patrick O'Brien (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961).
- 10 For further discussion, see James Maffie, "Why care about Nezahualcoyotl?: Veritism and Nahua Philosophy," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 32 (2002):73-93.
- 11 Pace Leon-Portilla (1993). I adapt this definition of pantheism from Michael P. Levine, *Pantheism: A Non-theistic Concept of Deity* (London: Routledge, 1994). Levine (pp.96,102) argues that pantheists are committed to the metaphysical immanence of the sacred but are not necessarily committed to epistemological immanence of the sacred in the sense that the sacred is knowable either easily or even in principle. He cites Spinoza as a pantheist who rejects the epistemological immanence of the sacred. Leon-Portilla (1993) apparently believes that metaphysical immanence entails epistemological immanence, and concludes that Nahua metaphysics cannot be pantheistic since the sacred is epistemologically transcendent. I find Leon-Portilla's argument unsound since it rests upon a mistaken premise.
- 12 Hunt (1977: 55f. brackets mine).
- 13 Sandstrom (1991: 138).
- 14 Quoted in Sandstrom (1991: 229).
- 15 See: Peter T. Furst, "Shamanistic survivals in Mesoamerican religion," *Actas del XLI Congreso Internacional de Americanistas*, vol. III (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1976), 149-157; Willard Gingerich, "'Chipahuacanemliztli, The Purified Life,' in the Discourses of Book VI, Florentine Codex", in *Smoke and Mist: Mesoamerican Studies in Memory of Thelma D. Sullivan*, Part II, J. Kathryn Josserand and Karen Dakin (eds) (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 1988), pp. 517-44; Nicholson (1971); Bernard R. Ortiz de Montellano, *Aztec Medicine, Health and Nutrition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990).
- 16 *Cantares mexicanos* fol.10 r., translation by Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), p.282.
- 17 *Cantares mexicanos* fol.11 v., translation by Leon-Portilla (1992:228)
- 18 *Romances de los señores de Nueva España*, fol. 35 r., translation by Leon-Portilla (1992:83).
- 19 *Cantares mexicanos* fol. 10 r., translation by Leon-Portilla (1992:221), bracketed translation mine.
- 20 The following is indebted to: David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmvision and Ceremonial Centers* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); Jill Leslie McKeever Furst, *The Natural History of the Soul in Ancient Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Lopez Austin (1988); Leon-Portilla (1993); and Sandstrom (1991).
- 21 Carrasco (1990:69).
- 22 Sandstrom (1991:258).
- 23 I borrow this definition of animism from Levine (1994:114). Levine cogently argues that animism and pantheism are not incompatible. If Levine is correct, then there is plenty conceptual space for the Nahua's view of nature to be

- animistic *and* pantheistic. Sandstrom's remarks (1991:258) suggests that same.
- 24 See Burkhart (1989).
- 25 This attitude survives today among contemporary Nahuas. According to Sandstrom (1991:67,341), contemporary Nahuas seek through ritual and other means to enter into balance and harmony with nature, not control or dominate it.
- 26 Johannes Wilbert, "Eschatology in a participatory universe: Destines of the soul among the Warao Indians of Venezuela", in *Death and the Afterlife in Pre-Columbian America*, Elizabeth Benson (ed.) (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1975), pp.163-189.
- 27 See Broda (1987); Carrasco and Sessions (1998), and Philip P. Arnold, *Eating Landscape: Aztec and European Occupation of Tlalocan* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1998).
- 28 Although a "Thou", *teotl* is not an intentional agent in the modern Western sense. I borrow this terminology from Henri Frankfurt and H.A. Frankfurt, "Myth and reality." In *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Henri Frankfurt, H.A. Frankfurt, John Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), pp.3-30.
- 29 Sandstrom (1991:255).
- 30 See Anthony Aveni, *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Johanna Broda, "Astronomy, *cosmovision*, and ideology in Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica", in Anthony F. Aveni and Gary Urton (eds), *Ethnoastronomy and Archeoastronomy in the American Tropics* (New York: Annals of New York Academy of Science, vol. 385, 1982), pp.81-110; and Ortiz de Montellano (1990).
- 31 See: Arnold (1998); Broda (1982,1987); Burkhart (1989); Jorge Klor de Alva, "Aztec spirituality and Nahuatized Christianity", in *South and Meso-American Spirituality*, Gary Gossen (ed) (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1993), pp.173-197; Leon-Portilla (1993); Leon-Portilla, "Those made worthy by sacrifice", in Gossen (ed) *op.cit.*, pp.41-64; and David Carrasco with Scott Sessions, *Daily Life of the Aztecs* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).
- 32 Timothy J. Knab, "Metaphors, concepts, and coherence in Aztec", in Gary Gossen (ed) (1986), p.46. For a related yet slightly different perspective, see Kay A. Read, *Time and Sacrifice in the Aztec Cosmos* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
- 33 See note num. 1.
- 34 The following draws from: Hans Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World*, Robert M. Wallace trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987); E.A. Burtt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science* (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1952); John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1948); Joseph Rouse, "Philosophy of science and the persistent narratives of modernity", *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 22 (1991):141-162; and Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980).