



# James Maffie. "Aztec Philosophy: Understanding A World in Motion."

Lee Clarke

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**James Maffie.** *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding A World In Motion.* University Press of Colorado 2015. 608 pp. \$34.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781607324614).

‘Did the Aztecs even have philosophy?’ said my interested friend when I told him that I had purchased the book by James Maffie about the subject of Aztec Philosophy. As someone who aims to specialize in cross-cultural philosophy, like Maffie does, someone who is heavily interested in Indigenous cultures and who also has Latin American family, I was extremely intrigued when I saw this book and resolved to buy it. Like many people, despite my interest in them, I did not know much about Aztec philosophy at all. I did not doubt that they could have done philosophy, I knew that they had an extremely rich and complex culture and civilization, I also knew that Indigenous philosophy was gaining more recognition, but like many other Non-Western forms of philosophy, Aztec philosophy is not taught much, sometimes is not even recognized within Western scholarship. Maffie’s book shows how wrong we are to continue to exclude entire systems of thought and this review will hopefully show readers why as well.

In his introduction, Maffie speaks about the prevailing idea that philosophy can only be exclusively Western and says that this idea “plays a vital role in the West’s conception of itself” (6) against the Non-Western ‘other.’ He continues to make the case here, as throughout the whole work, that the Aztecs, and other Non-Western civilizations not only had philosophy, but that it was (and is) as sophisticated and as intellectually rich as anything in our Western tradition. This is an issue on which I agree with him wholeheartedly, Non-Western philosophical traditions continue to be marginalized and forgotten in Western philosophy departments, Maffie’s book is his attempt to right that wrong. He mentions that this particular book focuses specifically on Aztec Metaphysics and that other follow up works will focus on other areas of Aztec thought.

The book consists of eight detailed chapters, and to avoid a very long review and taking the experience away from readers of discovering the work for themselves, I’ll restrict myself to summaries of each one before talking about the strengths of what Maffie does throughout multiple chapters. Unfortunately, there is a lot I will have to miss out of my chapter summaries, again due to spatial constraints, still, I hope that my descriptions are enough to ignite an interest and do justice to the work and its author.

The first chapter is about the basics of Aztec metaphysical thought, at the heart of which is the concept of ‘teotl.’ Teotl, says Maffie is a ‘continually dynamic, vivifying, self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force or energy’ (21-22). For the Aztecs, teotl was the only thing in existence, identical with reality itself, everything that exists was made from teotl, came from teotl and was part of teotl. Aztec philosophy then, expounded ontological monism (the claim that there exists only one thing) and says that this thing is made from just one kind of stuff which is called constitutional monism. Teotl is not, though, the Aztec equivalent of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God, a supreme being with thoughts, emotions, goals and an idea of morality; it does not stand outside of creation, but exists along with reality. What it is, is ‘an ever moving, ever-circulating, energy in motion, in short, a process which is ever flowing, changing and becoming, self-transforming and self-unfolding’ (23) to paraphrase Maffie’s words. It also does not have a goal that it strives towards

completing; it simply becomes as that is its nature. Everything that exists, humans, trees, animals, the sun, moon, stars and everything else, are merely concentrations of this sacred energy.

The Aztec understanding of *teotl* results in a philosophical worldview that is in many ways the complete opposite of the Western one. For Plato, and Western philosophy since, what is real is what is permanent whereas what is unreal is that which changes and does not stay the same. Plato's theory of forms, his idea that everything in the physical world is a mere impermanent reflection of an eternal and perfect archetype of the same thing that exists in an otherworldly realm apart from the physical world, is a perfect example of the prevailing Western view.

Maffie writes that according to the Aztecs, the complete opposite is true, that which is real, is what is impermanent, that which constantly changes, and is in constant flux. 'Reality, he says, is defined by becoming—not by being or is-ness... It squarely identifies the real with the constant flux of things' (25). Aztec metaphysics is also what Western philosophy would call non-hierarchical. 'It denies the existence of a principled ontological distinction between "higher" and "lower" realms, realities, degrees of being and or kinds of stuff' (30) The Aztecs also did not distinguish between such notions as sacred and profane, for the Aztecs, the sacred was present everywhere. They also saw *teotl* as a large unified macroprocess that expressed itself in many microprocesses that were interrelated with each other and interwoven.

The second chapter builds on the first by arguing that *teotl* was pantheistic. Maffie also makes a very interesting argument about Aztec religion and the way that they viewed their gods. It is true, he says, that the Aztecs emphasized certain 'facets, aspects or qualities' of *teotl* for certain purposes such as ritual or artistic ones. He goes on to say that the different deities that the Aztecs worshipped, unlike the Greco-Roman pantheon, were different clusters of those qualities of *teotl* that overlapped with each other. They indeed had different 'personalities,' but that these, along with the deities themselves, were not independently extant in their own right but were simply 'put together' by humans, psychologically imposed onto the concentrations of *teotl*. Each 'personality' was defined by what it did, not by what it was. All the deities were still aspects of *teotl* themselves and did not exist outside of it or before it. (86-87) Aztec views on the notions of order and disorder, and also how some things were thought to disclose *teotl* more than other things, are also discussed in this chapter. Maffie also explains why the Aztec view of 'the divine' was pantheistic rather than polytheistic or panentheistic, because *teotl* does not permeate the universe but in a sense exists outside and above it too, as panentheism asserts. As stated before, *teotl* co-exists completely with the universe and the universe itself is formed out of *teotl*.

Chapter 3 goes on to discuss the concept that Maffie calls 'Agonistic Inamic Unity.' This is 'the continual and continuous cyclical struggle (agon) of paired opposites, polarities or dualities' (137). *Teotl*'s continual process of self-becoming is characterized by this never-ending struggle between them. These dualities include such ideas as life and death, day and night, male and female, and more. 'Inamic partners' says Maffie 'are not only interrelated and interdependent with one another, they are also mutually defining' (149). They are competitive and working against each other all the time, each trying to overcome the other, though not to eliminate the other entirely. In these struggles, one aspect of the pair does sometimes come to temporarily dominate the other, before that

aspect in turn is dominated by its opposite; this explains the diversity and movement in the cosmos at large for the Aztecs. Day changes into night, for example, because the day forms part of an inamic pair with night, its opposite, and they continually temporarily beat each other, with day turning into night and vice-versa. These dualities are not distinct essences, separate from *teotl*, they are fundamentally as Maffie writes ‘facets of *teotl*’ (138).

Aztec metaphysics, says Maffie, claims that this struggle between partners is characterized by three different patterns of movement: *olin*, which is an up and down, up and over or down and under movement, *malinallia* spinning and twisting movement, and lastly *nepantla* which unifies them by weaving them together and ‘middling them’ (172). Chapters 4-6 are about these three movement-processes. *Nepantla* is the most important of them and constitutes the movement and change of the whole cosmos and therefore *teotl* itself, which moves and changes in the weaving manner of *Nepantla*. Chapter 7 looks at Aztec views of time and place, which Maffie calls ‘time-place’ and says that is it how *teotl* itself moves and as such is also characterized by *Nepantla* motion-change. He contrasts these views with Western ones. Substantialism, which Maffie says is the predominantly Western view, says that time and space are independent entities inside which things exist and take place. Relationism says that space and time are not independent of objects and events, but are dependent on and interrelated with them, and do not exist above these interrelationships. Maffie writes that ‘Aztec metaphysics conceives time-place in relationist rather than substantialist terms’ (455).

Chapter 8 looks back at the insights of the previous chapters, summarizes the three types of motion change and focuses on the overall Aztec idea of ‘weaving’ the cosmos that is referenced throughout the book, looking again at the *nepantla* process involved in this, comparing it with the physical activity of weaving and how this relates to the cosmos metaphysically for the Aztecs. Maffie concludes the book by using *nepantla* to introduce a brief discussion about Aztec ethics and how they integrated the concept of *nepantla* into their view of life, a discussion that he will hopefully continue into the next book.

Throughout all the chapters, Maffie looks at the topics from a variety of angles and the sheer variety of sources that he employs are impressive. He starts many chapters by examining the Nahuatl language terms on an etymological basis, looking at the merits and drawbacks of different translations. He’ll demonstrate how the concept, such as *Olin* motion-change for example, was depicted and understood by the Aztecs themselves with reference to Aztec art and the drawings in the codices made by the Spanish. His textual sources also cover a wide basis. The writings of Spanish friars and writers from the time are made use of, as are the writings of other modern scholars whose views Maffie compares with his own. He acknowledges that these other scholars may take issue with some of his ideas about Aztec philosophy and answers them in dedicated sections of some of the early chapters which not only make them more interesting, but also have the added effect of showing the reader some of the wider debates within this area and some of the different viewpoints that are adhered to.

Other sources, including anthropological texts from people who have lived with modern Indigenous peoples from Mexico, including modern Nahuatl-speakers, and around Latin America,

are presented to show how a certain concept in Nahuatl has changed over the centuries, and how it compares with the ideas of other Indigenous peoples around the Americas, such as the Maya. Where appropriate, comparisons with the philosophical views of other cultures are contrasted with that of the Aztecs. In the earlier chapters about Teotl, for instance, Indigenous philosophers from North American cultures, such as the Sioux, are quoted about their own cultures' metaphysics. He says that showing these similarities 'enable us to see that this kind of metaphysical picture is not inconceivable or even uncommon' (36). Teotl is compared with East Asian philosophical concepts from China, such as the 'Dao' and Confucian ideas, as well as the concept of Brahmin from Indian Hindu Advaita Vedanta philosophy and Zen Buddhism in the form of the thought of Japanese philosopher, Dogen.

The variety of sources is a major strength of Maffie's work. They ensure that it can be enjoyed by people who specialize, and have interests in, areas outside of philosophy such as linguistics, art history, anthropology, history, religion, and more. The potential for this wider reach is increased by Maffie's clear writing style and his repetitions of the central points of a chapter, which serve as a constant reminder about what the chapter is about, these repetitions make understanding the ideas, which can sometimes be complex, much easier. The comparison of the Aztecs' ideas with those of other cultures makes the work truly cross-cultural in scope, shows that distant peoples sometimes have similar ideas, creating the possibility of dialogue, and has the potential to introduce readers to other areas of Non-Western thought that are also underrepresented, along with Aztec and Indigenous philosophies.

One of the most enjoyable things about the book is what you learn about Aztec culture along the way. In learning about their philosophy and metaphysics, you also learn about the Aztec society, how they saw the world, and how they lived their daily lives. In chapters 4 and 8, we learn about Aztec views on the five ages of the earth. Chapter 5 has a section about how the simple act of sweeping, for us normally a boring chore, was a participation in the metaphysical life of the cosmos for the Aztecs. There are many more gems like this throughout the book that really give you a feel for what life was like for the Aztecs pre-conquest and as a result, the book sometimes feels like reading a novel or story as much as an academic text.

What the book also allows us to do is to see the Aztecs from their own point of view. This is shown very well by the discussions of human sacrifice, which is referenced throughout the book, notably in chapter 5. Human sacrifice is one of the most well-known parts of Aztec society and is sometimes used, even in the modern era, as an example of the 'brutality' of their culture. Whilst you may still not agree with human sacrifice by the end of the book, Maffie does help us to see the reasons behind it from the Aztec perspective. Far from being violence for the sake of it, for the Aztecs, human sacrifice was an act of gratitude to their gods for their own act of sacrifice to create the world, as well as being seen as vital to maintaining the continued existence of the Fifth Sun era and the human world at large. Whilst the idea of it will of course remain repugnant to many, we should do our best to judge the Aztecs on the basis of their own culture and beliefs, and remember that in countless other ways, they were just the same as us. It is also worth reminding people that Europeans similarly executed people in horrific ways, with similar wishes to please their own God by ridding the world of people deemed to hold heretical beliefs, at the same time as the Aztecs were sacrificing people to

please theirs.

To conclude, *Aztec Philosophy* is an excellent piece of scholarship that answers with a determined ‘yes’ my friend’s question of whether or not the Aztecs had philosophy. Far from being ‘primitive,’ ‘irrational,’ and ‘brutal’ as they are often depicted, the book demonstrates that the Aztecs had a sophisticated, rich, and complex philosophical metaphysics that is equal to anything from the Western tradition. In an increasingly interconnected world, the continued exclusion of whole systems of thought is growing increasingly untenable. At present, more non-Western forms of philosophy are starting to be recognized by Western scholarship. Whilst there still remains work to do to achieve this goal, Maffie’s work makes a brilliant case in favour of giving the Aztecs an equal place at the philosophical table. I look forward to his follow-up work.

A large part of the Aztec culture was focused on the idea of continuous renewal. Maffie’s book has given Aztec philosophy and culture a renewal of which both he and the Aztecs can be justly proud.

**Lee Clarke**, Nottingham Trent University