

2019 Gaos Lectures: On Mexican Philosophy  
**Lecture 1: Mexico and the History of Philosophy**  
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### **Introduction**

In some sense, these talks are a report on 20 years of intermittent thinking about philosophy in Mexico. I come to you with nothing like a final verdict, but as an enthusiast who has benefitted enormously from thinking about the history of philosophy in Mexico. Over the past decade or so, a considerable amount of my own philosophical writing and teaching has been influenced by reflections on that history. These lectures are partly about the figures and ideas that have been important in my own philosophical thinking, but that have been mostly invisible to the wider profession.

One of the reasons why I read and teach Mexican philosophy is that, at least in the United States, it seems to really matter to my students in a way that it simply doesn't for many of the other courses I teach. The issues that figure in my Mexican philosophy course aren't esoteric or only abstractly related to them. They seem to think these things are important, and that they matter for their own lives. Some of what I hope to do in these lectures is to communicate what's exciting and alive to them about these issues, and why I think they are right to be excited by these ideas. So, these lectures are an effort to invite you, and in general, our Anglophone colleagues, to appreciate and engage with what I think are some philosophically rich and interesting ideas within the history of Mexican philosophy.

Here's the general thesis of these lectures: for those of us working in either the Anglophone philosophical world or in the broader analytic philosophical world, we have reason to make the history of Mexican philosophy a part of what we read, teach, and treat as part of our philosophical milieu. By "we are better off," I don't mean in some tepid and general "the more we know, the better off we are" sense. (Although I endorse this view, too.) The argument is that right here and right now, in this historical moment, the history of Mexican philosophy has particularly good tools for changing how we think about philosophy, for improving many of our existing philosophical projects, and for making our philosophy classrooms more interesting and dynamic environments.

(Apart from the direct benefits of helping us do good philosophy, I'm inclined to include as benefits the values of recovery of neglected philosophical work, the contribution of this work for serious counter-canonical examples, and the possibility of developing a philosophy of culture that integrates with the philosophy of action and political philosophy, but at this stage nothing turns on these further possibilities.)

There is some urgency to do this project now. Within the Anglophone academy, there have been prior waves of work on Latin American and Mexican philosophy, but the uptake has been limited, and the institutionalization of that work has been fragile. For most of the past two

decades, I have been pessimistic about whether philosophy from Latin America had any hope of uptake in Anglophone philosophy and beyond (Vargas 2007). Now, though (at least in Anglophone philosophy), we are in a relatively rare and interesting moment where analytically-trained philosophers are more open than they have ever been to reading and teaching philosophical work that was not a part of their primary disciplinary formation. One way we change traditions, canons, and literatures is by showing people what is valuable about texts and ideas that might not have gotten their serious attention up until now. Of course, you can't do that if people aren't listening. For the moment, there is some willingness to listen.

Noting that Mexican philosophy has little or no visibility in the profession at large raises the question of why this is so. Wherever one looks—Mexico included—it is relatively rare that one finds serious engagement with the work of Mexican philosophers, living or historical, especially in the agenda-setting parts of the profession (cf. Ezcurdia 2004, Hurtado 2006, Pereda 2006, García-Ramírez 2011). There are plenty of structural explanations for this—e.g., the global politics of academe (Casanova 2004; Sánchez Prado 2018); the ongoing effects of colonialism (Mignolo 2009; Hurtado 2006; Pereda 2006); the way disciplines reproduce themselves (Lamont 2009; Posselt 2014: 95-115; 133-154; Vargas 2019); linguistic bias and stereotypes (Gracia 2000: 181-185), and so on.

There are also internal critiques that attempt to identify and explain distinctive pathologies that impeded the progress and visibility of philosophy in Mexico. As Eduardo García-Ramírez notes, “The hope of many of us is . . . that an important source of this invisibility is caused by a set of bad, yet traditional academic habits. If we can identify them, the hope goes, we might get rid of them, and with that, decrease our invisibility” (García-Ramírez 2011: 12). This sense of pathology is widespread, I gather. José Gaos is said to have bemoaned that, “among Mexican philosophers, though, there was a kind of cannibalism. They devoured each other, or in the worst case, their works fell into a conspiracy of silence, as though nobody had written anything” (Villegas 1992: 39).<sup>1</sup>

Although these are interesting and difficult issues, I won't try to say anything about them here. Rather than identifying what's wrong with Mexican philosophy, my focus is on what has been right, interesting, promising, or useful about it. My interests in these lectures is largely historical, both because of expedience and the limits of my expertise, but also because there is a rich history to draw from.

This will not be a survey of Mexican philosophy. I am incapable of telling that kind of story, and that's not my interest here. My goal is something more modest. I aspire to make a case for the value of the history of Mexican philosophy by focusing on specific episodes or moments where I have found the philosophical issues particularly interesting, rich, or insightful. As a

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<sup>1</sup> “en los filósofos mexicanos había una especie de canibalismo, se devoraban entre ellos o, en el peor de los casos, sus obras caían en una conspiración de silencio, como si nadie hubiera escrito nada” (Villegas 1992: 39).

consequence, mine is not a story about all the great names, the main movements, or the various positions adopted within that history. Instead, my focus is on a handful of ideas, issues, and arguments from that history that strike me as promising for those of us philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I hope to make the unfamiliar familiar, and the familiar less familiar. For those of you who have limited or no familiarity with the history of Mexican philosophy, my ambition is to give you a sense about what you are missing, what you can get out of engaging with it, and why we need to teach it and grow the community of scholars who can guide us through it. For those of you who have standing interests in the history of philosophy in Mexico, I offer some new and hopefully useful re-interpretations of familiar texts and ideas.

### **Roadmap**

Today's lecture is mostly about clearing the ground for this project. I lay out some presumptions, articulate the problem space and some puzzles, and address some objections about the project. In the rest of these lectures my focus will be on first-order, substantive philosophical problems that have arisen in the context of Mexican philosophy, and especially, what we 21<sup>st</sup> century philosophers might get from thinking about these issues.

The issues I am addressing today, however, are mostly metaphilosophical. I say this with some trepidation, because metaphilosophy has been something of a plague on the history of philosophy in Latin America. Many of us complain about it as we do it, admonishing others to stop talking about it, and exhorting everyone to focus on doing good first-order, substantive philosophical work (Vargas 2007: 54-56)

In what follows, I'll say a bit about the idea of Mexican philosophy as I conceive of it, some challenges to it, and the difficult issue of demarcating its beginning—including the question of whether we should think of Nahuatl thought as philosophy, and what the stakes might be in asking and answering that question. The second lecture (on Weds) will focus on some underappreciated features of the Las Casas/Sepúlveda debate, and the third lecture (Friday) will focus on some themes in the work of Sor Juana.

First, though, I want to say something about the elephant in the room, as we say in the U.S.—that is, the obvious problem of me being the one talking about these particular things in this particular venue.

### **Positionality**

I am a U.S.-born philosopher who has spent most of his career writing about free will and moral responsibility. Today, I'm lecturing on Mexican philosophy to Mexican philosophers in Mexico City, a place where many philosophers aren't inclined to think the history of Mexican philosophy is especially interesting or valuable.

I recognize the incongruity. The incongruity is not all mine, though. These lectures are named for José Gaos, a Spanish phenomenologist and personalist who trained several generations of

Mexican philosophers within a broadly Continental intellectual tradition, and who wrote widely about philosophy in Mexico. Most of the Gaos lectures, up until now, have been on topics squarely in the mainstream of Anglophone analytic philosophy. There is incongruity all around.

This sort of complexity, the overlap of influences and diverse intellectual histories, as well as the complicated social and intellectual dilemmas that come with these things, is one of the things I love about Mexican philosophy. As someone whose principal intellectual formation was firmly inside conventionally analytic institutions in the U.S., the philosophical scene in Mexico has never failed to induce in me a two-stage reaction: first, the thought that its history and present always constitutes an alternative to the way philosophy can and has unfolded, and second, the thought that there is no *prima facie* reason to privilege the story of philosophy's history as it has been told where I happened to receive my education. The luminous figures of my education are the familiar ones to me, and perhaps to many of you. But there are other histories and other figures. Once we recognize this, we are faced with the intriguing questions about which histories and which figures we should focus on. The history of Mexican philosophy is one place to start (Cf. Pereda 2019).

The incongruity of these lectures is not limited to the topic. You may have noticed they are in English. While English provides a *lingua franca*, so to speak, for analytically-trained philosophers, it also raises barriers to full participation in this part of the discipline. Even so, English-language philosophical work provides access to a wider audience than Spanish language work, and that is true even for work on Mexican philosophy. However, the truth is as Carlos Pereda once pointed out to me, my Spanish sounds really bad.

Still, one might worry that there is something unhappy about this. In giving these talks in English, I am benefitting from the linguistic privilege of English, and perhaps, the unearned presumptive epistemic authority for those of us who group up as native English-speakers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Moreover, in talking about this work in this language, I am re-enacting the history of appropriating the cultural and material resources of Mexico.

I take these concerns seriously, but I am unconvinced that they are fatal to the project. First, philosophical resources don't work like natural resources. My talking about Mexican philosophy does not, by itself, strip others of the ability to speak about these things. My hope is that the project will turn more, not less, attention to Spanish language work in Mexican philosophy, helping to grow the possibilities that that work is taken up more widely.

Second, although facts about language of dissemination and one's place in the global network of philosophy plausibly do affect philosophical uptake, my aspiration is to expand the conversation, and to do so in a way that does not drown out the voices of those who have been working on these issues. Inevitably, this will be an imperfect process, but I acknowledge that the practical and symbolic import of these issues is complex (Cf. Ezcurdia 2003: 201; Rodriguez-Pereyra 2013; Pérez 2014; Siegel 2014).

Third, it is not clear what the alternative is. It is overdue for me to discharge my debt to this body of work, and to convey my delight in it, even though there are the inevitable blind spots in my own reading and scholarship. Moreover, I am inclined to think that the intellectual inheritance of Mexican philosophy can and should belong to philosophers everywhere. We don't hold that Greek philosophy is solely for the Greeks—it is part of our inheritance because we, and our teachers, and their teachers—have made it so (Cf. Appiah 2019). We would not have been better off leaving Greek philosophy to only the Greeks. So, in this case, an imperfect effort towards making this body of work belong to everyone seems worth the inevitable infelicity of my doing it.

### **What is Mexican philosophy?**

By “Mexican philosophy” I mean something any philosophy produced in Mexico, or any philosophy produced by Mexicans, as well as any philosophy that is in some non-trivial sense concerned with Mexico. This is an intentionally expansive conception. Is it also an unprincipled, monstrous disjunction? Maybe. But we shouldn't be afraid of this monster. It picks out a collection of philosophers, ideas, and debates that share some important connection with Mexico and whose comparative invisibility (at least relative to the philosophical circles I run in) is partly a function of that connection.

In framing my subject matter in this way, I do not mean to imply that there is a unified philosophical tradition here (whatever that means), or that there is a shared set of commitments or sensibility that is had by Mexican philosophers. Mexican philosophy, in my sense, is too diverse, too varied in its sources and its histories, and too extended in its duration to readily sustain those kinds of claims.

This capacious way of framing my subject matter is opposed to various narrower conceptions of Mexican philosophy. For example, one version of Mexican philosophy took as its central task the analysis of Mexicanness, or *mexicanidad* (Uranga 1952; Portilla 1966; see also the essays in Sánchez and Sanchez 2017).

Although this version of a nationalist ontology was distinctive in a number of ways, in the context of wider Latin American philosophical movements, it was of a piece with broader impulses in the region (Pereda 2011; Hurtado 2011). At least since the era of Independence movements, there had been plenty of efforts by Latin American thinkers to characterize the ostensibly distinctive nature Latin America, the essence of our best construal of nations and peoples, the social and political order best suited to them, and the applicability or not of European thought and social practices to those peoples and social arrangements. Later philosophical movements have continued to sound these themes, holding that an *authentic* (Salazar Bondy 1969) or *liberatory* (Dussel 1977; Schutte 1993; Silva 2015) philosophy is required to overcome the effects of colonization and its successor arrangements in the contemporary world.

These are all interesting projects, but narrower conceptions of Mexican philosophy are unappealing in the present context because of what they exclude. For example, to narrow our

scope to liberatory work will exclude vast swaths of philosophy that is concerned only to accurately describe the world. (Unless we expand the category to encompass all philosophy—but then that would make it vacuous, at least as distinctive approach to philosophy.) To exclude work that is putatively inauthentic or unresponsive to some local reality presumes consensus about what authenticity is and how it is to be assessed. In the face of neglect, we do better to be more inclusive rather than less. Too much philosophy from Mexico has been rendered invisible simply because of its regional and linguistic origins. When the method, content, or philosophical orientation of a work leads us to reject it by fiat, it seems more an effort to impose a particular conception of local academic politics than an act of open-ended pursuit of wisdom, truth, or human flourishing.

(This suggests a test for unreasonable exclusion for academic fields: when someone offers a narrow definition for a field, ask what it excludes, and whether the excluded work has any reasonable claim to the term, and if so whether that work has substantial possibility of being studied outside of a field defined with that term.)

Even if we are content to employ a category that is a monstrous disjunct, it would not be unreasonable to ask which Mexico we are talking about. Post-revolutionary Mexico? Independent Mexico? Colonial Mexico? Pre-colonial Mexico? Again, I see no benefit to narrowness in vision or ambition.

The Mexico of these lectures is the maybe mythical Maximal Mexico—a place with vague and shifting boundaries that stretches back to before the arrival of the Spanish and that extends up to the present day. Is there a principled way to characterize that thing—something that existed before nation states, and that didn't have a name for a long time? Or is that to simply take on board the nation-state mythology of post-Revolutionary Mexico? These are questions worth asking, but I will not try to answer them here. Instead, I will only note that Maximal Mexico is plausibly the most common conception of Mexico inside and outside academe, and that's good enough for now.

With a project and an object in hand, we can begin at the beginning. But where's that? A natural candidate place to start is the 1550-1551 Valladolid debate between Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda. The protagonists and the nominal location of the debate suggests that this is a Spanish story, but there is much to recommend it as a foundational moment in the story of Mexican philosophy, and indeed, for philosophy in Latin America. The Valladolid debate was a dispute about the wars of conquest in the Americas, the status of the indigenous peoples, and the basis and limits of efforts to transform the moral convictions of a community. Beyond the fact of its subject matter, the debate was fundamentally *American*—in its continental sense—in that Las Casas endeavored to advocate on behalf of the indigenous communities and their interests, a community he knew well from his considerable time living in New Spain. It is a kind of genesis point for an American philosophical resistance to Eurocentrism and colonialism.

I'll have more to say about that debate in the next lecture, but can we find any Mexican philosophy before that? Does starting with Las Casas already give away too much, giving pride of place to a Eurocentric conception of philosophy, or to some tacit presumption that *of course* the native peoples of what is now Mexico could not have done philosophy?

That's the question to which we now turn.

## Philosophy in Black and Red Ink

### Nahuatl philosophy?

Did the Nahuatl-speaking people of central Mexico—a group that includes what is now more commonly called the Aztecs, but were known to the Spanish as the Mexica—produce philosophy? The answer depends on what philosophy is, and how similar or dissimilar Nahuatl thought is to the things that we recognize as philosophy.

In taking up this question, we face an immediate difficulty. Despite sporadic outbreaks of disciplinary enthusiasm for establishing what philosophy is or is not, the ambition to define philosophy is a mostly fruitless one. As a descriptive project, capturing the full span of things that have been called philosophy across millennia, the project seems hopeless on the face of it. The history is too complicated, and it isn't clear how we should adjudicate its apparent departures from any privileged definition of philosophy. Moreover, most debates about how to define philosophy are, at bottom, thoroughly prescriptive efforts, attempts to convince others that this is how we ought to do philosophy now.

I'm not much inclined to think there is benefit to scrupulous definitions of disciplinary borders, nor in efforts to patrol those borders (Cf. Vargas 2007). I'd rather scholars felt free to make use of forms, evidence, and styles of argument that they find useful, whatever the results are. There are, of course, institutional reasons to decide what department one is housed in. There are practical considerations that affect who we are beholden to, and the communities we hope to be in conversations with. None of these things are reasons to exclude lines of inquiry that may go outside of existing disciplinary conventions, conventions that are oftentimes products of the accidents of history and local expedience.

Beyond the expedience of having some principled starting point for the present project, why take up this question of whether Nahuatl thought is philosophy? What is at stake in asking and answering this question?

One reason for being interested in Nahuatl thought is that it is the relatively rare case of a surviving body of thinking that was produced by a class of educated elites among an urbanized people that was developed entirely independently of thought on other continents. It is a kind of Galapagos island of the mind, a window into intensely cultivated conceptual categories, forms

of knowledge, and social practices generated under conditions entirely disconnected from the European-derived intellectual traditions in which most of us were educated, and originating in a history mostly disconnected from the empires and linkages that shape our disciplinary canon. If it is philosophy, then it is “philosophy without Europe” as James Maffie (2020) puts it. That is, it is a variety of philosophy that might teach us something about what is universal, contingent, or possible that does not reflect the history, cultural legacy, or political and economic relationships that may have shaped Western philosophical thought. In short, Nahuatl philosophy might teach us something about philosophy as such.

The stakes in asking and answering the question are more complicated. The indigenous peoples of the Americas suffered terribly under colonization, and they have suffered from centuries of abuse, denigration, and neglect even after colonization formally ended. To some, justice may seem to require that we recognize the contributions of indigenous people and that in dubbing some indigenous thought ‘philosophy’ we thereby contribute to the recognition of the full rationality and cultural achievements of indigenous peoples.

However, a desire for justice, recognition, and acknowledgement of a people’s contributions does not entail that those people have indeed made those contributions. I would love for Mexico to be recognized for its having won a World Cup title. This doesn’t mean that it ever produced one. Whatever the utility of identifying something as Nahuatl philosophy, it doesn’t follow that it exists. Justice might require that we carefully consider our biases or verdicts, but it can’t require that, for any substantive or demanding conception of philosophy, that we just *know* that the Nahuatl-speaking peoples produced it.

We could, of course, change how we think about philosophy, or go in for a conception under which all peoples everywhere have trivially produced it. I’m not entirely unsympathetic to this thought, as I have already remarked. It would be foolish, though, to not acknowledge that the discipline of philosophy as it is presently constituted, tends to operate with a more restrictive conception of these things. Indeed, a more exacting conception of philosophy is undoubtedly why a number of distinguished figures (including Samuel Ramos (1943: 16) for example), have simply rejected the idea that Nahuatl-speaking peoples did philosophy.

In what follows, I’m going to make the case that there is sufficient reason to regard some Nahuatl thought as really, truly philosophy in some relatively narrow, straightforwardly recognizable sense of philosophy that is continuous with the history of philosophy as we tend to think of it here and now. After some preliminaries, I’ll take on a board a conception of philosophy that allows us to make distinctions between philosophy and religious thought, between philosophy and “wisdom traditions” and that captures at least a lot of what is recognizably philosophy in the intellectual tradition of which contemporary Anglophone philosophers tend to understand themselves. Not only will I argue that Nahuatl thought satisfies this standard, I’m going to go on to argue that Nahuatl philosophy is rich enough to sustain competing interpretations, for contemporary philosophers to find it worth discussing, and for us to have constructive engagements with it.

That said, I do think skeptics of Nahuatl philosophy could be right about something: it is an open question how much payoff there is in our study of Nahuatl thought. I am modestly optimistic. Even if I am wrong to be optimistic, I am confident that the unexamined discipline is not worth studying. Reflecting on Nahuatl thought, and reflecting on why we are or are not inclined to regard Nahuatl thought as philosophy tells us something about ourselves, our conception of philosophy, and the role it can play—and that is worth at least some of our time.

### **Standards**

Pursuing this project requires giving some characterization of philosophy. I'll get to that in a moment, but if we're going to give the idea a fair hearing, some general observations are in order, about both Nahuatl thought and what we think of as the Western philosophical canon.

First, there is a body of recorded thought—codices, ethnographic writing, and so on—that relates details of the everyday life, ethical concerns, cosmological vision, and religious practices of Nahuatl-speaking peoples right before, during, and soon after the fall of the Triple Alliance, more widely known as the Aztec empire. Although mediated by Spanish commentators and their indigenous collaborators, sometimes decades after the fall, that body of work is fairly extensive. The question at hand is whether any of the extant examples of Nahuatl material is philosophy in some recognizable, disciplinarily serious sense.

Second, the situation for Nahuatl thought is better than it is for many pre-Socratic and Hellenistic philosophers. In those cases, interpretation of those fragments oftentimes proceeds on the basis of much more fragmentary information than we have in the case of Nahuatl works. In at least the Anglophone academy, there may be more scholarship on the Empedoclean injunction to keep one's hands from beans than there is on the entirety of putative Nahuatl philosophy.

However, in asking whether Nahuatl thought was philosophy we face an immediate challenge: we have to look past both its form and the very fact of its disconnection from the European intellectual tradition. Supposed cases of Nahuatl philosophy are remote from the treatises and journal articles that make up the discipline of philosophy as we currently recognize. That it was also conceived of independently of an intellectual tradition rooted in the Greeks is a reason for us to be suspicious of whether it is indeed philosophy.

Consider this passage from *Cantares Mexicanos*, a text that proponents of Nahuatl philosophy tend to appeal to in making their case.

I weep, I feel forlorn  
I remember that we must leave flowers and  
songs.  
Let us enjoy ourselves now, let us sing now!  
For we go, we disappear.

Remove trouble from your hearts, oh my  
friends.  
As I know, so do others:  
Only once do we live.  
Let us in peace and pleasure spend our  
lives; come, let us enjoy ourselves!  
Let not those who live in anger join us  
The earth is so vast.  
Oh! that one could live forever!  
Oh! that one never had to die!  
(*Cantares Mexicanos*; transl. from  
L-P 1963, pp. 131)

Lloro, me siento desolado  
recuerdo que hemos de dejar las bellas flores y  
cantos.  
¡Deleitémonos entonces, cantemos ahora!  
pues que totalmente nos vamos y nos perdemos.

No se aflijan vuestros corazones, amigos míos;  
como yo lo sé, también ellos lo saben,  
una sola vez se va nuestra vida.  
Así en paz y en placer pasemos la vida,  
¡venid y gocemos!  
Que no lo hagan los que viven airados,  
la tierra es muy ancha  
¡Ojalá siempre se viviera,  
ojalá nunca tuviera uno que morir!  
(quoted from LP 1956 225)

You may or may not be moved by this bit of poetry. On the face of it, though, this is nothing like Kant on the antinomies of reason, like Russell on denoting, or like Haslanger on ideology. Even so, it doesn't follow that we can just reject this as not philosophy. Consider the following passage:

And if one truly full of years should fret  
and wail at death, poor soul, more than is right,  
what has he earned but sterner reprobation:  
"Away with your tears, you fool, and stop your wailing.  
You've had all life could offer; now you're tired.  
You've wanted what isn't; scorned what is; hence life  
has slipped through your fingers, shapeless and unlovely,  
and now you're amazed that death stands near, before  
well-filled and sated, you might depart this world.  
Now banish all thoughts unsuited to your years  
and in good spirit yield you must."

That's from Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* 952-962 (transl. Copley p. 78). Lucretius' text is one of our most important sources of Epicurean views, and the tradition readily recognizes Lucretius' work as philosophical. Of course, *On the Nature of Things* does not follow our current disciplinary conventions. It is in the form of a poem, and it reflects a bizarre-to-us combination of aims. Among its contents are religious/mythical reflection, proto-scientific theorizing, metaphysical speculation, and ethical recommendations. For all that, though, we don't discount it as a piece of philosophy.

Indeed, Lucretius' work is a helpful reminder of just how diverse the range of things are that have been considered philosophy. Internal to the European philosophical tradition, we have regarded a wide range of forms as vehicles for philosophy. Beyond poetry, we've counted dialogues (Plato); aphorism (Nietzsche); essays (Montaigne); meditations (Descartes);

fragmentary notebooks (Wittgenstein), lectures notes (Hegel), transcribed talks, and so on. This is not an accident: in the intellectual tradition we have inherited, the *form* of the work matters less than the *content* or the *spirit* of the work (Cf. Gracia 2001).

If all of that is right, we cannot reject Nahuatl thought as unphilosophical simply in virtue of its poetic form. Our judgment has to turn on something like the contents, orientation or attitude of that thought, or perhaps in its provenance. In turn, this pushes back to the vexed question of establishing what is or isn't philosophical, what the nature of philosophy is, and on what basis we assess these things.

The question of what is philosophy is, of course, partly normative—it is a question about what we should think of as philosophy, of what kinds of things we treat as falling within the scope of what is worth our thinking about, of what we regard as deserving of institutional recognition and accommodation, and of attentional and social regard. To call something philosophy in this context is not merely to label something, or even to bestow an honorific on past intellectual achievement. It is partly a way of saying that this is *ours*, that this is the kind of thing we recognize as in our conversations, as things that are worth knowing, as texts and ideas that have some prima facie claim on our thinking about the things that philosophers think about, have thought about, or could think about.

So, (1) why think Nahuatl thought satisfies this kind of normative aspiration, and (2) why make it ours?

### **Philosophy in black and red ink**

A natural place to begin any account of Nahuatl philosophy is with the genuinely groundbreaking work of Miguel León-Portilla. In *La filosofía Nahuatl* (1956) and subsequent texts, León-Portilla makes a sustained and subtle case for applying the term 'philosophy' to ancient Nahuatl thought. As Walter Mignolo rightly observed, "If we think back toward León-Portilla's book [*La filosofía Nahuatl*], we may see that it opened up a can of worms that unfortunately went unnoticed in Latin American philosophical circles" (1999: 39). Although León-Portilla was a tireless advocate for recognizing the value of Nahuatl thought, the English-language title of his book soft-pedalled the issue. In the U.S., it was released as *Aztec Thought and Culture*, rather than emphasizing León-Portilla's bold claim that Nahuatl-speaking people did philosophy (Cf. Maffie 2014: 4-8). This shift in framing was too bad, as it contributed to the neglect of León-Portilla's case for Nahuatl thought as philosophy.

León-Portilla's view was that Nahuatl thought constituted a "special form" of philosophy that is worth studying on its own terms (LP 1966: 5). León-Portilla didn't deny that a good deal of what we have recorded of Nahuatl is plausibly understood as religious, or as expressing a religious-mythical *Weltanschauung* or world-view (LP 1963:xxi). He held that Nahuatl thinkers lacked "a clear perception of the differences between the formal objectives of philosophy and other varieties of religious and scientific knowledge or artistic intuition," (LP 1963: xxi-xxii). He also acknowledged that Nahuatl thinkers "did not elaborate great logical or rationalistic systems, in the way that certain philosophers of the West have," and that instead, what they left us are

“testimonies of their inquietudes and doubts” (LP 1966: 55). Even so, he maintained that Nahuatl thought was indeed philosophy.

The basis of his claim was that there was also work that merits the label of philosophy—at least a “special form” of philosophy (LP 1966: 5)—, and that that work satisfies any reasonable standard for counting something as philosophy, is as follows:

1. There is evidence of a special class of person—the *tlamatinime*—who played a role analogous to philosophers in Ancient Greece; ATC 1963: 22; LFN 1956: 86)
2. The work of some of these figures displays a kind of skepticism about traditionally received views and an effort to produce new, reasoned, critical, and original thought about truth, morality, and the fundamental nature of the world (LP 1966: 9);
3. That in analogous cases (China, India) we readily extend the label of philosophy to such work (LP 1966: 10); and
4. That work can still sustain ongoing and current reflection, providing “occasions of thought” for new reflections (LP 1966: 11); in this, Nahuatl philosophy is “capable of becoming something new when rethought by the modern man of Occidental roots” (LP 1966: 55), a feature had by the great or canonical works in the European intellectual tradition

Léon-Portilla notes that he was not alone in recognizing the existence of Nahuatl philosophy, and that there is a tradition of ethnographic and scholarly reflection that has recognized at least some classical Nahuatl works as philosophical works. For example, the 16<sup>th</sup> century ethnographer and Franciscan priest Bernadino de Sahagún’s reports of Nahuatl-speaking peoples’ practices made note of the *tlamatinime* as a class of “wise men or philosophers” and their characteristics as moralists, teachers, and exemplar-sages. They were not simply the religious or priestly classes, but “those who know something” (LP 1966: 4), possessors of “the black and red ink” that marked the illuminated manuscripts or codices, and teachers who enlighten without obscuring, as “a stout torch that does not smoke” (LP 1963: 10).

We might grant that there was a class of teacher-sages identified as “those who know something,” but it is another matter to think of them as philosophers. In taking up this question, though, we do well to be more self-aware than the tradition has oftentimes been. In particular, philosophers working in the decolonial tradition and in non-Western thought more generally, have observed that non-European thought is oftentimes subject to a tacit double-bind by philosophers trained in the European tradition. That is, sometimes, the non-European work is sufficiently similar to Western philosophy that it ceases to be notable, perhaps appearing as derivative or as shadows of more familiar and authoritative works of Western philosophy. Other times, though, it is clearly different or exotic. When that happens, its credentials as philosophy are always in doubt (Bernasconi 1997: 188; Mignolo 1999: 37-8; Maffie 2014: 4-8).

One way to respond is to own the difference. Maffie (2020) argues that Nahuatl philosophy should be understood as an *alternative* to Western philosophy, in that it focuses not on the pursuit of truth, but on “way-seeking,” articulating a vision of how to act. To the extent to

which it is a difference, it seems to me more a matter of emphasis than deep disagreement. Concerns about how to act have a long and important history in Western philosophy (e.g., Socrates, Montaigne, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Singer). It is not obvious that this can't be compatible with "truth-seeking." Moreover, I am skeptical of the utility and accuracy of sweeping characterization of what are plausibly diverse bodies of thought.

However, even if Maffie is right, it still strikes me as worth considering whether Nahuatl philosophy might hope to find a home in academic philosophy of the sort one finds in 21<sup>st</sup> century universities. The answer to that question, it seems to me, turns on its fit with the conception that contemporary philosophers have about the history of philosophy.

I think these figures are right in noting that work not already institutionalized as philosophy in our universities tends to face a double-bind or dilemma of the sort they identify. However, I'm inclined to think that we can effortfully attempt to push back against the double-bind in a variety of ways that do not require us to surrender the interestingness of the category of philosophy. For example, we can ask whether (given some conception of philosophy, or some construal of the philosophical tradition), we ought to regard some non-Western thought as philosophy, and if so, whether we find it fruitful to reflect on that philosophy, important to incorporate it in our teaching and thinking, and so on. We might find that things that appear different or exotic can—to our surprise—satisfy our standards for philosophy. Just because our tradition has been disinclined or even hostile to the recognition of philosophy elsewhere, doesn't mean that we've been fair about applying our own norms. It also doesn't preclude us from doing better than our philosophical parents.

What, then, is our current disciplinary conception of philosophy? I doubt there is one, and any proposal will necessarily be vague and contested. However, I take it that most of us would be prepared to maintain that philosophy is oftentimes characterized by (1) a defeasible but initially skeptical attitude towards received wisdom, and (2) that an important part of philosophical work is the articulation of considerations for adopting and rejecting views. (If you like, we can also stipulate (3): it must concern the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.) This is a capacious conception, but not without some virtues. I believe it captures most contemporary philosophy and a lot of its history. It also captures something about what makes philosophy different from religion, and it is consistent with thinking that a lot of philosophy may end up being continuous with inquiries in other domains.

Do we need a further stipulation, one that requires that skepticism and reasons-giving have some historical connection back to the Greeks? If we treat a historical connection to the Greeks as an essential feature of philosophy, then philosophy—like smallpox—was alien to the Americas prior to European colonization.

That's a view. Upon reflection, though, it doesn't seem especially appealing. Imagine a group of people otherwise doing exactly what we were doing, in exactly the same way we were doing it. It would be strange to pound the table, to exclude them for our conferences and journals, because their work lacked the historical connection to the Greeks or the European tradition. As

Léon-Portilla notes, we are prepared to acknowledge that people around the world can have local versions of art, architecture, music, and so on. So, it seems like little more than naked prejudice (perhaps, once again, a denial of indigenous rationality) to rule out the possibility of philosophy in places and times that were unaffected by the Greeks (1966: 10). And, of course, it is unclear why we *ought* to limit our conception of philosophy in this way. Instead, we should “refuse to cede philosophical inquiry to the West,” as James Maffie has put it (2014: 7).

To be sure, the cultural categories with which Western ethnography begins have particular histories in Europe; the same is true within disciplinary conceptions of those things that arise in the disciplinary framework as it has developed within European-influenced university systems. What León-Portilla rightly recognizes is that these are not static things, and local understandings of knowledge practices are oftentimes expanded and reconceptualized by their practitioners when we encounter things that are close enough for our interests and practices.

Even if philosophy, as we conceive of it, began with a particular knowledge practice of the Greeks this historical fact is, by itself, of little interest when asking whether we should extend the category PHILOSOPHY to cover cases of people not influenced by the Greeks. What seems more promising is to simply lean on the core picture of philosophy as a skeptical attitude and an effort at reasons-giving. It is capacious, to be sure, but not out of step with how most of think about what we are teaching when we teach the *Apology*, the *Meditations*, or *After Virtue*.

So, is there reason to think that Nahuatl work can satisfy this standard? When in doubt, start with the classics. Consider the following passages from Nezahualcoyotl:

Maybe one really lives rooted in the earth?  
Not forever on earth; only for a while here.  
Although jade, it breaks,  
Although gold, it shatters,  
Although a quetzal feather, it shreds.  
Not forever on earth; only a little while  
here.

¿Acaso de verdad se vive con raíz en la tierra?  
No para siempre en la tierra: sólo un poco aquí.  
Aunque sea jade se quiebra  
aunque sea oro se rompe,  
aunque sea plumaje de quetzal se desgarrar  
No para siempre en la tierra: sólo un poco aquí

. . . Everything that flourishes in your mat or  
chair,  
the nobility on the battlefield,  
upon which your lordship and command  
depend,  
your flowers of war—  
are merely dried flowers.

. . . Todo lo que florece en tu estera y en tu silla,  
la nobleza en el campo de la guerra,  
con la que se enlaza el señorío y el mando  
tus flores de guerra . . .  
sólo son secas flores

(my translation, following LP 1963: 46)

(LP EHFM 1963: 46; from the manuscript  
*Cantares Mexicanos*)

As poetry, this is absolutely compelling. That’s not the issue, though. We want to know whether the work manifests the dual features at stake in the operative notion of philosophy, i.e., defeasible skepticism towards received views, and an effort toward reasons-giving about recognizable philosophical subjects, such as truth, goodness, or beauty.

Nezahualcoyotl's poem satisfies that standard. It expresses a skeptical attitude about the value of social status and the markers of prestige, justified by an observation about the transitory nature of human life. There is also a kind of argument that the markers of status and prestige are impermanent human projections, devoid of a substance beyond our estimation of it (they are "merely dried flowers"). Plausibly, this is an effort to help its audience see the world in a way different than they are inclined to, to remind the audience of the transitory arrangement of things, and in particular, the projected nature of so much of what we value. Indeed, one might think the poem itself is an invitation to think about how far that thought goes, inasmuch as the performance of the poem is itself transitory, and the values it expresses are potentially projections, too.

Perhaps you are unmoved by the particulars of my reading of the text. That's fine; philosophers argue about interpretation of texts all the time. My argument requires only that it is reasonable to hold that this work contains the kind of attitude and subject matter which I have attributed to philosophy, and that this standard reflects a fairly widespread disciplinary conception of philosophy and its history. I submit that it does.

To be sure, if we insist on a more demanding conception of philosophy, then this work might not make the cut. But then we'd have to know what that alternative conception is, why it doesn't rule out lots of other things we readily recognize as philosophy, and why we should think it captures both how the profession tends to think about what makes things philosophy.

Consider two more examples of canonical texts that are sometimes cited as examples of Nahuatl philosophy:

Do we speak the truth here, oh Giver of  
Life?  
We merely dream, we only rise from a  
dream.  
All is like a dream . . .  
No one speaks here of truth . . . .  
(LP 1963a: 7)

¿Acaso hablamos algo verdadero aquí,  
dador de la vida?  
Sólo soñamos, sólo nos levantamos del  
sueño.  
Sólo es como un sueño . . .  
Nadie habla aquí de verdad . . .  
(LP 1956: 66; f/ ms *Cantares  
Mexicanos*)

Does man possess any truth?  
If not, our song is no longer true.  
Is anything stable and lasting?  
What reaches its aim?  
(LP 1963a: 7)

¿Acaso son verdad los hombres?  
Por tanto ya no es verdad nuestro canto.  
¿Qué está por ventura en pie?  
¿Qué es lo que viene a salir bien?  
(LP 1956: 67; f/ ms *Cantares  
Mexicanos*)

For those of us who are inheritors of the European intellectual tradition, both bits of text may suggest parallels with dream skepticism of the sort that figured in Descartes. This is how León-Portilla reads these passages. Again, though, one might contest the reading. One drawback of

philosophy in the form of poetry is that the form's allusive character tends to invite multiple readings, and this can frustrate our impulse to identify a clear reading. Again, though, interpretive problems are not what is really at stake. We know philosophy can be pursued in poetic form, and we recognize some instances of poetry as instances of philosophy. So, the issue is whether plausible readings of the text have a claim on being philosophy in some disciplinarily recognizable sense.

One difficulty that we face with Nahuatl thought is our reluctance to do the work. We don't tend to have the accretions of centuries of careful, learned scholarship that disentangle the interpretive options for us, and makes manifest the contributions and puzzles in these works. That does not mean we have no scholarship, though. The field has undergone a recent renaissance of sorts. In particular, a monumental treatise on Nahuatl metaphysics by James Maffie (2014) argues that these passages aren't expressions of Cartesian-style dream skepticism, or expressions of something like Platonic dualism about the unreality of the apparent world. Instead, on his account, the dream-like nature of the world is a manifestation of the underlying reality. Crucially, this underlying reality—*teotl*—is a *process* and not a substance. Change is baked into its nature, so to speak. That's what explains the transitory nature of the world we experience, and that's what explains the dream-like nature of reality: any arrangement of categories is, at best, a temporary arrangement of *teotl* that will, inevitably come to be transformed (Maffie 2014: 21-77).

Maffie offers a rich and nuanced picture of how to understand the metaphysics one sees in a wide range of source material. He makes his case abductively, with a careful reading of the historical texts, other indigenous texts, and historical and occurrent practices of indigenous communities in Mexico (for methodological details, see Maffie 2014: 8-12). The upshot of his work is a fundamentally different picture of the metaphysics in Nahuatl thought than the one León-Portilla offers us. I won't try to adjudicate that debate, and we don't need to settle the issue. I highlight it, though, to call attention to one reason we are reluctant to recognize this work as philosophy: it isn't familiar, and we have only begun to do the scholarship and teaching that makes it easy for us to recognize the philosophy that is there.

For present purposes it is enough that, though the poetic form of various Nahuatl works makes interpretation contestable and difficult, there are a range of straightforwardly philosophical readings that the text sustains. Not all Nahuatl poetry is philosophy, but poetry was a vehicle in which Nahuatl philosophy was produced. Skepticism about the particulars of any one reading of these texts is compatible with concluding that at least some Nahuatl thought is Nahuatl philosophy.

### **Yes, but . . .**

At the outset, I claimed that I was going to argue that at least some Nahuatl thought is really, truly philosophy in some straightforwardly recognizable and non-trivial sense of philosophy. The case is not without its caveats, but those caveats are at least as instructive about us as they are about Nahuatl philosophy.

For example, we will not find Nahuatl works that are akin to the forms of writing that have dominated the academic discipline of philosophy over the past century. Nahuatl philosophy isn't dense with explicit arguments, and it doesn't obviously build intricate theories that advertise themselves as such. The closest parallels to European philosophy are to (generally pre-modern) forms of philosophical work that are not now typically regarded as serious forms of contemporary philosophical expression. This is, presumably, why León-Portilla is careful to emphasize that Nahuatl philosophy is a *form* of philosophy.

Is this fatal? In the European tradition, those now-wayward forms of philosophical expression—poetry, dialogues, expression of divine inspiration and guidance—are allowed because the work is already treated as canonical, already within the scope of things we recognize as philosophical. For non-Western philosophy, the double-bind of uninteresting familiarity or remote exoticism can only be overcome by making the work canonical, the kind of thing we think ought to be studied. In turn, that can only happen if we do study it, if we teach it, and if we engage with that work. Otherwise, our classes, our writing, and our thinking will simply reproduce the unstable commitments that we've inherited from our teachers.

We should join with a number of recent commentators who think that we should move past the question of whether Nahuatl philosophy exists, and instead, we should focus on what is valuable about it as philosophy (Santana 2008; Maffie 2020).

Here's where I think skeptics of Nahuatl philosophy may yet have reason to object: it is an unsettled matter how much payoff there is in our study of Nahuatl thought. Upon thorough inspection, we might find that the work gives out, and that the interpretive intricacies leave us with no further tools or interest than we had before we took seriously Nahuatl philosophy as philosophy. The double-bind still lurks: maybe Nahuatl philosophy is philosophy, but it is unremarkable, uninteresting, or even just philosophy that is poorly done.

I am inclined to think the skeptic about the value of Nahuatl philosophy is on the wrong side of the bet. First, as we have seen, Nahuatl philosophical work is sufficiently robust to support interestingly different interpretations about its philosophical content. Second, the fact that a growing number of philosophers have found it useful to reflect on and teach this work (e.g., Santana 2008; Ahumada Torres 2009; Maffie 2014; Purcell 2017), even in the face of limited scholarship about it, suggests that even cursory attention to it yields fruits. Third, asking whether something is philosophy might simply be the wrong question for any of us to ask, *qua* philosophers. It may be that the question we should be asking is simply this: "does this work help us think better about the things we are trying to understand?" If it does, we should read it and teach it and show how it helps our thinking, and in so doing, do philosophy as best we can, here and now.

I cannot pretend to have shown that, considered as a whole, Nahuatl philosophy is immune to worries about its depths and ability to sustain extensive scholarship or appropriation to contemporary contexts. At least some contemporary philosophers will not find Nahuatl thought especially rich. Whatever else is true of it, it requires more of us if we are to extract insight from

a framework of ideas more conceptually remote from our canonical figures. It may be worth remembering, though, that for some, trips to the Galapagos are significant primarily as costs. For others, though, it is an extraordinary opportunity.

### **Further notes and commentary on themes from the introduction**

The present characterization of Mexican philosophy has some affinities with Jorge Gracia's construal of *ethnic philosophy*, according to which an ethnic philosophy picks out philosophy tied to an ethnic group (for details, see the discussions in Jaksic 2015). For Gracia's purposes, the underlying reality that unifies Hispanic, Latin American, and/or Latinx philosophy is that these groups are structured by a kind of relationship to the historical events of 1492, but where all other conditions for membership in the group are (in principle) fungible but subject to a family resemblance constraint. In my case, I am agnostic about whether there is an underlying historical reality that anchors Mexican philosophy. For my purposes, it is enough that there is a cluster of work I find valuable, that shares some connection to a social and national category, and where the social currency of that category (plausibly connected to a way we currently understand and carve up that history) explains its relative invisibility in the parts of the philosophical world where I reside.

Even so, my focus on Mexico raises some reasonable further questions about the scope of this project. Why stop with Mexico? Why not write about Latin America as a whole? Or, for that matter, why not focus on underrecognized philosophy in general?

Apart from the fact of my wide-ranging incompetence at these more ambitious projects, one mostly principled explanation for restricting my focus to Mexico is that this is the level of granularity where I think I can make a contribution. I take it that many of the more important claims I want to make—in particular, about the value and payoffs of Mexican philosophy—require some work to make plausible. Weak arguments on behalf of marginalized work threaten to do more damage to that work than more careful arguments would. Plus, Mexico happens to have an especially rich body of philosophical work, so it makes a natural focal point for the kind of project I wish to pursue. Others are better positioned to focus on other countries, regions, or even broader conceptions of this project, and I hope that they do so.

Focusing on a category shaped by a national (and in some contexts, a transnational ethnic) identity, can raise a variety of fears about essentializing the nature of the category or its members, perhaps exoticizing it. In the case of Mexico/U.S. contexts, stereotypes that invite unhappiness of different sorts are plentiful. Within Mexico, there is a recurring concern about the problem of the “Mexican curious”—or the impulse for external observers to fixate on an image of Mexican things as a colorful folkloric curiosities to be inspected or collected, but whose full humanity and complexity is hidden by something like a category of decorative artisanal curiosity (Cf. Portilla 2017:182-183). The best way to combat this, it seems to me, is to make explicit the diversity, complexity, and disagreements that are masked by these impulses.

### **Further notes and commentary on Philosophy in Red and Black Ink**

I'm inclined to a pretty permissive conception of philosophy, and as I suggest at the end of this chapter, I am not unsympathetic to the thought that it is simply a mistake to think that features of a text alone can establish whether some work is philosophy or not. On one view of the sort I have in mind, the only thing we are asking when we ask if something is philosophy is whether we are wrong (relative to whatever interpretive framework is proper to us, here and now, given our practices and interests) to read the text in ways we regard as philosophical. Put that way, whether something is philosophy is a feature more about us than the considered text. On this sort of view, it doesn't matter whether in reading the text in philosophical ways we are doing as the originator of the work intended, and it does not matter whether there is a fact of the matter about whether the work expresses these attitudes and subject matters in some way antecedent to our interpretive practices. I'm open to this sort of view, and I think Nahuatl thought can sustain our interests in philosophical reading of those works. So, even by this more radical

conception of what makes a text philosophical, I think there is Nahuatl philosophy (more evidence: the secondary literature on Nahuatl philosophy!). That said, the argument in the main text does not depend on this more radical picture of what makes a text a work of philosophy.

This broadly “interpretivist” reading of philosophy is consistent with an interesting thread of León-Portilla’s discussion that is rarely discussed. He maintains *all* interpretations of Nahuatl texts involve a certain amount of invention or construction, and that the project of reconstructing Nahuatl philosophy is always an effort to transform these texts “into occasions of thought” (1966: 11) or “pretexts of thinking” (1966: 55; Cf. Sánchez 2016: 5-13 on “violent” readings). What the work of historical and contemporary interpreters of Nahuatl philosophy shows is that these texts can and do support interesting and rich philosophical readings, comparable to the kinds of readings we give of a variety of texts in the Western philosophical tradition.

If we do count Nahuatl thought as philosophy, why not baptize any thought, by any group, as philosophy? Why look to the work of elites as philosophy? On a more expansive alternative, any worldview, any relatively expansive bit of folk wisdom, and any tacit metaphysics and ethical commitments of a people might count as philosophy.

Again, I’m not opposed. Nothing I say here is intended to count against the possibility that there are interesting things we might learn or discover from undertaking investigations of these more expansive notions of philosophy. It might be that for certain kinds of abstract conceptual innovation, for reflection on whether the moral and physical world is as it appears, and for explicit reasoning about why, it is not unreasonable to look at the intellectual production of elites precisely because they are the people most likely to have the time, the social infrastructure, and the material opportunity to develop, articulate, and record those thoughts. But if one finds it interesting or valuable to look elsewhere, I have no objection to such a project. Moreover, I take it that it is an open question whether we profitably expand our concept of philosophy to encompass that work, too. In this chapter, though, my goal has been to be responsive to the contemporary disciplinary conception of philosophy and its history, and the sorts of commitment that are readily recognizable within it, and that seems to favor a narrower conception of philosophy.

Interestingly, León-Portilla thinks it helps his case that we already recognize the existence of classical Chinese and Indian philosophy, because they are sufficiently analogous to the sorts of things we have characterized as philosophy in the West (1963a: 10). So, lack of a historical connection with the Greeks, or the Western tradition, or prior European thought, is no barrier to recognizing Nahuatl thought as Nahuatl philosophy.

I am somewhat more skeptical than León-Portilla is about the willingness of 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglophone philosophers to extend recognition that there was philosophy in ancient Asian and ancient India. Even today, the study of these things remains very marginal in at least Anglophone philosophy. It is hard to know whether the various institutional changes tied to the field reflect better or worse prospects for the field, or simply a re-arrangement of the liminal state of the fields with respect to philosophy. Of course, the stakes here are normative, but one might be unconvinced that current practice already signals a recognition of philosophy detached from a Western/European/Greek-derived history.

In that spirit, I should note that I use the term “Western” with some reservations. It is a relatively recent term (its origins are in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) that tends to create the illusion of a continuous, unified sense of integrity in culture or people dating back at least to the Greeks. For discussion, see Appiah (2018: 200-207).

According to some accounts, an important feature of the rise of philosophy among the Greeks, and of what it means for something to be philosophy, involves alphabetic literacy. Although Walter Mignolo is broadly sympathetic to León-Portilla's position, he thinks León-Portilla overlooks this feature of the putatively Western concept of philosophy and its difference from other forms of knowledge (Mignolo 1999: 36).

I don't disagree that technological mediation of our thought can put us into importantly transformative relationships to ourselves, our pasts, and our communities. (For an especially vivid illustration of this, see Ted Chiang's short story "The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling" (2019: 185-230). And, the absence of alphabetic writing may indeed count against our willingness to extend PHILOSOPHY to non-alphabetic work. However, it is unclear to me that this is operative in current disciplinary resistance to thinking of Nahuatl thought as philosophy. As the main text suggests, I am inclined to think the poetic form, the unfamiliar metaphors, and the lack of intellectual influence from what is paradigmatically philosophy (to us) is what does the explanatory work. And anyway, for worries about alphabetic literacy to matter, you'd have to ignore the fact that what candidates we do have for Nahuatl philosophy were often in fact in alphabetic form, transmitted via Spanish and indigenous accounts mostly in the era immediately following the defeat of the Triple Alliance (León-Portilla 2006). León-Portilla explicitly emphasizes that what records we have are not just oral, ideographic or pictographic representations, but also partly phonetic manuscripts, and written Spanish and Nahuatl texts (LP 1966: 11-15).

In this vein, it may also be worth noting that León-Portilla was (to my mind, unduly) concerned to assert the suitability of the language itself for doing philosophy. It is why he insisted that Nahuatl is a "marvel of 'linguistic engineering'" (1963: 4); and it is why he insists on noting that "Nahuatl, like Greek or German, is replete with long compound forms juxtaposing various roots, prefixes, suffixes, and infixes" (LP 1963: 4).

For a different (but also affirmative) approach to the question of whether the Aztecs did philosophy, see Santana (2008). On his approach, philosophy should be understood on a family resemblance model, and what we find is that Aztec thought satisfies enough of the varied properties of philosophy to count as a member of the family. I take it that this picture is more demanding than the institutional conception I'm inclined to, but less demanding than the account I give in the text. My hope is that the modestly more demanding conception of philosophy I employ in the text will move some who might not be inclined to accept Santana's model.

A final concern is worth noting. One might worry that focusing on whether the ancient Nahuatl-speaking peoples did philosophy is a kind of distraction of the sort that 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican nationalism was particularly good at: it combines a fixation on an ancient Aztec past with a systematic disregard for the diverse peoples that made up that indigeneity in the past and present.

Maybe that's right, but a politics that recognizes the full diversity and complexity of indigenous peoples in Mexico and throughout the Americas seems compatible with any answer we give about whether some or all of those people historically did philosophy in a sense that accords with current disciplinary conceptions of philosophy. If one is interested in this latter question, starting with the urbanized populations of the pre-Conquest Americas is not unreasonable. Of course, one might wish to contest current disciplinary conceptions of philosophy, expanding it to include a much wider thing than most philosophers in the academy would be inclined to accept. That may have its virtues, but nothing I have said here is intended to take a stand on that issue.

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