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CALLS FOR SUBMISSIONS

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provide the kind of space in which younger scholars can be nurtured. Our committee’s work in mentoring and sustaining future Hispanic/Latino scholars and professors is undoubtedly indispensable. But no less important is the work the committee does in educating other colleagues in the profession about the work that Latino, Latin American, and Hispanic philosophers have contributed to our discipline. Additionally, I hope that over the next few years, the committee will work actively in fund-raising to endow permanently the prize that the APA presently funds to encourage, acknowledge, and honor work on Latino and Latin American philosophy. I have also made it one of my goals to pursue different venues to encourage greater and more substantive cooperation with colleagues in Latin America and Spain. But perhaps the most important thing that I want to say as your incoming chair is that I look forward to hearing from you about what kinds of topics, themes, figures, problems, and so on, you think our committee should be paying attention to. I also look forward to any suggestions about how the work of the committee can be improved and made to have a greater impact within and outside the APA.

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ARTICLES

Did the Aztecs Do Philosophy?
Alejandro Santana
University of Portland

Introduction
In Aztec Thought and Culture, Miguel León-Portilla argues that the Aztecs, or Nahua, addressed traditional problems in philosophy.1 In this paper, I will present and evaluate León-Portilla’s argument for his view. This is important for two main reasons. First, it will help determine how we approach the philosophical study of the Nahua people and their thought. León-Portilla presents the most sustained argument for the idea that the Nahua did philosophy. If his argument is adequate, then we may engage the Nahua as partners in philosophical inquiry. However, if his argument is inadequate, then we must either correct its mistakes or find other reasons to support his conclusion. But if his conclusion is simply false, then we would be mistaken to engage the Nahua as philosophical thinkers, as we do the ancient Greeks. Although it would still be true that the Nahua had a philosophy, which they certainly did, determining that philosophy would be primarily an interpretive historical and anthropological matter.2 We wouldn’t have to engage them as philosophical thinkers, but only as informants in our own philosophical quest to interpret, understand, and evaluate their thought.

Second, León-Portilla’s argument provides an interesting case for revealing common meta-philosophical presuppositions about the boundary between philosophy and non-philosophy or whether such a boundary exists. To give his argument, León-Portilla presents a sample of song-poems that seem to address traditional problems in philosophy. If considered philosophy, these texts would challenge some common pre-conceptions on what philosophy is and what separates it from non-philosophy.3 This challenge is similar to that which confronts us when viewing odd pieces of abstract or pop art. Consider, for example, Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain,4 or suppose that I, a non-artist, arbitrarily scribble lines on paper. Some of us might be puzzled about how to interpret such work as genuine, and it might compel us to ask what legitimate grounds, if any, determine whether or not these works are such instances. In the same way, the Nahua song-poems might leave us puzzled about how to interpret them as genuine philosophy, and it might compel us to ask what legitimate grounds, if any, determine whether or not the Nahua texts are such instances. To be sure, this problem confronts Western thinkers who see philosophy as requiring some form of linguistic analysis, conceptual clarification, or systematic argumentation. Yet it equally confronts philosophers who would have no qualms about regarding the Nahua texts as genuine philosophy. However this challenge is met, one is nonetheless confronted with the problem of determining what legitimate grounds, if any, distinguish philosophy from non-philosophy.

Ultimately, then, I am addressing León-Portilla’s argument in order to address the question of whether the Nahua explicitly did philosophy, which thereby leads to the question of what distinguishes philosophy from non-philosophy. In this paper, I will argue that León-Portilla’s argument is inadequate, but despite the problems with his argument, it is still plausible to think the Nahua did philosophy. More specifically, I will argue the Nahua texts bear significant similarities to characteristics that we philosophers commonly associate with genuine philosophizing.

To address the question of what distinguishes philosophy from non-philosophy, I will suggest that philosophy is best understood as a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” concept. On this construal, there is no one thing that is common to all instances of philosophy; instead, we see, as Wittgenstein says, “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (PI, 65). Given this, there is no sharp boundary between philosophy and non-philosophy; instead, there are closer and further similarities to characteristics that philosophers commonly associate with genuine philosophizing. Seen from the prism of this “family resemblance” view, it might have at first seemed that the Nahua texts exhibited characteristics that only slightly resembled those that we associate with philosophy; but upon closer examination the texts bear a much stronger resemblance that places them well within the domain of philosophy.

In what follows, I will first present León-Portilla’s argument, including all of the texts that he cites. Second, I will pose my main objections to his argument. Third, I will give my argument that the Nahua did philosophy and address the issue on what distinguishes philosophy from non-philosophy.

I. León-Portilla’s Argument
To begin with, León-Portilla asks, “Did the Nahua concern themselves with the traditional problems of philosophy? Did they experience, in addition to a religious-mythical Weltanschauung, that human restlessness resulting from doubt
and a sense of awe which gives rise to rational inquiry into the origin, essence, and destiny of man and the world." To answer this question, he first offers a definition of philosophy. Although León-Portilla acknowledges that his definition might not be universally accepted, he takes it to be at least a non-controversial definition:

To establish a universally acceptable definition of philosophy would be a formidable task. Genuine philosophy arises from the explicit perception that problems are innately involved in the essence of things. A sense of wonder and mistrust of solutions derived from tradition or custom are requisite to the formulation of rational questions about the origin, the true nature, and the destiny of man in the universe. The philosopher must experience the need to explain to himself why things happen as they do. He directs himself to the meaning and true value of things, seeking the truth about life and life after death, even speculating about the possibility of knowing anything at all of that afterlife where myths and beliefs find their final answers.  

With this definition, León-Portilla then gives an affirmative answer to his main question. As evidence for his answer, he cites the following Nahuatl poetry from the Colección de Cantares Mexicanos.

**Text 1:**
What does your mind seek?
Where is your heart?
If you give your heart to each and every thing,
you lead it nowhere: you destroy your heart.
Can anything be found on earth?

**Text 2:**
Where are we going?
We came only to be born.
Our home is beyond:
In the realm of the defleshed ones.
I suffer:
Happiness, good fortune never comes my way.
Have I come here to struggle in vain?
This is not the place to accomplish things.
Certainly nothing grows green here:
Misfortune opens its blossoms.

**Text 3:**
Do flowers go to the region of the dead?
In the beyond, are we dead or do we still live?
Where is the source of light, since that which gives life hides itself?

**Text 4:**
Truly do we live on earth?
Not forever on earth; only a little while here.
Although it be jade, it will be broken.
Although it be gold, it is crushed,
Although it be quetzal feather, it is torn asunder.
Not forever on earth; only a little while here.

**Text 5:**
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...

**Text 6:**
Does man possess any truth?
If not, our song is no longer true.
Is anything stable and lasting?
What reaches its aim?

According to León-Portilla, these texts provide evidence that the Nahuas indeed took the appropriate philosophical attitude expressed in his definition of philosophy: they attempted to formulate abstract philosophical questions about humanity and the world; they came to appreciate the difficulty of providing answers to these fundamental questions; and since their traditional beliefs offered answers to these questions, they questioned their traditional beliefs. Text 1 shows the author to question whether one could find satisfaction on earth. The poet also supposes that one could not give one’s heart to everything, for doing so would eventually lead nowhere. Given this, the author seeks something real and of lasting value. Text 2 shows the author to address the meaning of human life and the struggle it involves; text 3 questions what happens after death. Since Nahuatl religion and mythology offered answers to these questions, León-Portilla takes these texts to be evidence that their authors were unsatisfied with the answers their traditional beliefs provided. “They doubted; they admitted that much had not been adequately explained. They longed to see with greater clarity the real outcome of our lives, and, through this, to learn what importance there might be in this struggle.”

Texts 4-6 show awareness of the difficulty of establishing objective truths in a world in constant flux. The author(s) of these texts question(s) the possibility of ever establishing truth in a world that seems more like an ephemeral dream than an experience of a durable and stable reality. The texts reveal an attempt to discover foundations or “true basic principles” with which to interpret life and the ever-changing world.

León-Portilla therefore concludes, “The Nahuatl enunciation of such questions is sufficient evidence that they were not satisfied by myths or religious doctrines. Their writings evince a vigorous mental development, and interest in the value, stability, or evanescence of things, and a rational vision of man himself as a problem.”

**II. Objections to León-Portilla’s Argument**

Regarding León-Portilla’s argument, one could raise objections about the authenticity and historicity of the texts that are cited. One might also object that the term “philosophy” cannot be appropriately applied to what the Nahuas did. León-Portilla has offered responses to these objections, but discussing them is beyond the scope of this paper. For this paper, I would like to focus on problems with his definition of philosophy. We have seen that León-Portilla offers what he takes to be a non-controversial definition and then argues that the Nahuatl texts fit his definition.

The problem with the argument is two-fold. To begin with, León-Portilla’s definition is far from non-controversial because many would find it unacceptably imprecise and broad. One might concede that his definition identifies several qualities that are associated with philosophy, but nonetheless object that it ignores many important qualities that philosophy involves. For example, philosophy involves the systematic attempt to answer fundamental questions by giving reasons for those answers; it also involves addressing objections, clarifying concepts, making distinctions, among other things. One could also object that León-Portilla’s definition is so broadly formulated that it would include poetry, theology, various forms of fictional literature, and perhaps visual art. The problem is not that philosophy cannot somehow overlap into these areas; instead, it is that the definition is so broad that it ex hypothesi includes the Nahuatl texts.
This raises another problem because León-Portilla offers no argument for his definition. This consequently reveals León-Portilla’s argument to be deeply question-begging, for it leads one to ask why one should accept this definition of philosophy. Thus, León-Portilla’s argument does not establish that we can regard the Nahuatl texts as genuine philosophy; instead, his argument seems problematic from the very start.

Now, we might agree that these song-poems are “philosophical” or “philosophically inclined” insofar as they pose philosophical questions and sometimes give speculative answers. But we might also think it more appropriate to say that the Nahuas did something only slightly resembling philosophy, for the texts leave out much of what philosophy involves.

This might seem to be a bit of philosophical hairsplitting but, as I mentioned above, this issue is important because it determines how we approach the Nahuas and their thought: Should we approach them as philosophical amateurs who arbitrarily painted quasi-philosophical lines of thought, or should we approach them as having done something more intentional and philosophically sophisticated? It is also important because it poses an interesting test case for the plausibility of our own preconceptions about the boundary between philosophy and non-philosophy: What legitimate grounds, if any, determine whether these texts are philosophy, non-philosophy, or a borderline case?

III. My Argument that the Nahuas Did Philosophy

To address the former question, I submit that it is plausible to think the Nahuas did philosophy. Let me begin with characteristics that we philosophers often use to describe the subject matter, origins, aims, and methods of philosophy.17

Regarding subject matter, we might note that (1) philosophy addresses, but is not limited to, the various problems or questions that make up the generally recognized areas of philosophical investigation: metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc.18 Alternatively, we might note that philosophy is primarily concerned with (2) living a worthwhile, meaningful life or living in the right way.19

Regarding origins, we might say that philosophy begins with (3) wonder, (4) reflection, or (5) the clash between traditional beliefs and the need for justification.20

Regarding aims, we might mention that philosophy seeks (6) wisdom, (7) knowledge, (8) a clear, comprehensive, and plausible worldview, (9) the elimination of doubt, confusion, or nonsense, (10) intellectual liberation and autonomy.21

Regarding methods, we might note that philosophy proceeds by (11) formulating and answering fundamental questions, (12) critically examining and evaluating fundamental assumptions, (13) giving justification, (14) raising and addressing objections, (15) analysis, (16) clarifying concepts, or (17) synthesizing ideas.22

Given that philosophers use these characteristics to describe genuine philosophical thinking, then I submit that the Nahuatl texts can be plausibly seen as philosophy. In my view, a straight-forward reading of the Nahuatl texts shows that they have many of the characteristics listed above.23 They certainly (1) address what we generally recognize to be philosophical issues (i.e., value, the meaning of life, life after death, knowledge, and truth). All of the texts (2) show a concern with living a worthwhile or meaningful life, and text 1 shows a concern for living in the right way. Insofar as they address these issues, they also exhibit a sense of (3) wonder and (4) reflection about them. Since these questions are raised despite the fact that Nahuatl traditional beliefs provided answers to them, there seems to be (5) a clash between traditional beliefs and the need for some kind of justification. Since the author(s) of text 5 and 6 sought fixed truths about the world, the author(s) sought some kind of (7) knowledge, at least (8) a comprehensive and plausible worldview, or at the very least (9) the elimination of doubt, confusion, or nonsense.24 Given this, one could argue that the author(s) sought to obtain a degree of (10) intellectual liberation and autonomy from their traditional beliefs. All of the texts (11) formulate and attempt to answer fundamental questions. Given the nature of their questions, they (12) attempt to critically examine and evaluate fundamental assumptions. Thus, the Nahuatl texts seem to have many of the characteristics that we generally associate with philosophical thought in terms of subject matter, origins, aims, and some philosophical method.

Granted, the texts do not show much in the way of (13) giving justification, (14) raising and addressing objections, (15) analysis, (16) concept clarification, or (17) synthesis of ideas. Aside from their use of poetic verse to express their philosophical thought, it is hard to determine what other methods the Nahuas might have used. But this observation should not lead us to exclude the Nahuatl texts from philosophy. Many of the Pre-Socratics are lacking in one or more of these characteristics as well, but we still include them in the philosophical canon. Given this, then, consistency requires that we treat the Nahuatl texts similarly. And we have seen that the Nahuatl texts bear a substantial resemblance to a number of other characteristics that we associate with genuine philosophizing. If so, then consistency requires that we include them in the domain of philosophy on these grounds. We therefore have reason to regard these texts as philosophy and their authors as having done philosophy.

I should note that the catalogue I have presented is largely drawn from philosophers who are firmly within the Western philosophical tradition. But I should also emphasize that I do not intend to suggest that Western philosophers have or should have a privileged place in determining what is or is not philosophy. Instead, I intend to provide a sampling of views expressed by a variety of philosophers who view philosophy from a variety of perspectives. To this end, I have included feminist, Native American, and Latin American perspectives in the catalogue. I have also included perspectives of philosophers who have pluralistic views on the nature of philosophy. So, I have worked to make the catalogue substantial and reflect a diversity of views on philosophy, but I recognize that it can be improved by being made more comprehensive and exhaustive. For example, the catalogue could include critical post-modernist perspectives. It could also include South and East Asian perspectives, as well as African American, African, and Middle Eastern perspectives. With this, I recognize that the generality with which I draw my conclusion is limited by the standard I used to draw it, but I think it is safe to say that many philosophers would not take issue with the characteristics that I have provided above, although they might take issue with the fact that various other perspectives have not been included.

Yet others might take issue with my inclusion of feminist, Native American, and Latin American perspectives, as well as my suggestion that the other world perspectives should also be included. To some, one or more of these areas of thought do not do philosophy either. It is beyond the scope of this essay to address this issue,25 but it is important to note that this, once again, raises the issue of what should or should not be included in philosophy. Ultimately, it raises the latter question about what grounds, if any, distinguish philosophy from non-philosophy, a question to which I will now turn.

Now, by giving my argument, I do not intend to argue that the Nahuat texts can now be construed as on the philosophy side of a distinct boundary outside of which is non-philosophy.
Indeed, I should make clear my denial of a sharp distinction between philosophy and non-philosophy. I say this in response to what seems to be a common inclination to think in terms of sharp boundaries when considering whether a text is or is not philosophy. For example, we might say that philosophy is essentially a reflective activity grounded in wonder and thereby include the Nahuatl texts into the domain of philosophy; or we might say that philosophy is essentially concerned with giving justification and thereby exclude the Nahuatl texts. Indeed, one is especially prone to think this way when attempting to exclude a particular text from the domain of philosophy or a group of people from the domain of philosophical thinkers. If so, one might be inclined to think of philosophy as having an “essence” definable by one or more of the characteristics above or by some other hitherto unmentioned set of characteristics.

Nevertheless, I suggest that we resist this way of thinking. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully argue this point, except to say the following. To think in this way implies that the “essence” of philosophy is definable in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, for it assumes that a specific set of characteristics is all that is required to determine whether a particular text is philosophy.

But I think that it is unlikely that philosophy can be adequately defined in this way. As we have seen, philosophy can be described along several main categories: its subject matter, origins, aims, and methods. Within each category, we can mention a number of characteristics. But again neither these categories nor characteristics should be construed as exhaustive, for there is much more that can be said for each. For example, regarding main categories, we might include the practical consequences of philosophy, that is, we might say that philosophy is a pleasurable intellectual exercise done for its own sake or that it helps us navigate through life more effectively and efficiently. Regarding characteristics, we might say that philosophy aims at a theory of life or that it examines the actions of people within context of the concrete situations in which they live or that it examines the ideas of people understood within the context of their lived experience. We might also say that philosophy aims at some kind of knowledge of the world so that we can understand the social circumstances in which we live and thereby change them for the better. Additionally, we might say that philosophy involves imagination, curiosity, openness, vision, and passion. Thus, we can go on indefinitely about the dynamic and expansive nature of philosophy, and, if so, it seems unlikely that we can adequately define it by a static and finite concept.

We might attempt to address this problem by constructing a very comprehensive and detailed definition, one that does well to characterize various important features of philosophy. Such a definition might be helpful and even illuminating, but it is unlikely to be adequate, for it would also have to state necessary and sufficient conditions for each of the main concepts used to characterize philosophy. That is, we would also have to state necessary and sufficient conditions for, say, “wonder” or “reflection,” which surely would have to be somehow included in any comprehensive definition of philosophy. This is because if necessary and sufficient conditions are required to define philosophy, then I don’t see why we should not require the same for the concepts used in that definition. If this were not required for these concepts, then it would seem arbitrary to require such conditions for philosophy. Therefore, consistency would require that the essentialist demand necessary and sufficient conditions for concepts like “wonder” and “reflection,” but it seems unlikely that we can adequately define these concepts, for they seem as difficult to define as “imagination” and “creativity.” Thus, it is unlikely that we can adequately give necessary and sufficient conditions for philosophy, for it seems that we could indefinitely describe the nature of philosophy and, moreover, indefinitely describe the concepts used in that definition. If we attempted such a definition, then we could at best understand it to be a characterization of philosophy and one that does not fully capture all that philosophy is or could be.

Given this, I also suggest that it is more likely that philosophy is a concept without a distinct boundary, if we construe it as having a boundary at all; the challenge now is to understand philosophy in this way while also understanding it as distinguishable from non-philosophy. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully address this challenge, except to say the following.

I think it would be helpful to view philosophy in a way similar to Wittgenstein’s “family resemblance” view of language. According to Wittgenstein, there are no necessary and sufficient conditions that make language what it is, and, therefore, no one set of properties that constitute the “essence” of language. To explain this, he draws an analogy to the various kinds of games we play: board games, card games, ball games, and so on. Wittgenstein then asks us to “look and see” that there is no one thing that all games have in common; instead, we see that games bear various similarities and dissimilarities to one another (PI, 66). Some games have winners; others do not; some games involve accumulating points; others do not, and so on.

For Wittgenstein, instead of seeing one thing that all games have in common, what we see is a “complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail” (PI, 66). It is therefore best to see games as bearing a “family resemblance” to each other: games share a variety of resemblances in a variety of ways with no one thing common to them all (PI, 67). For Wittgenstein, this suggests that natural language is a concept with blurred edges and no definite boundary (PI, 71). Just like the games we play, language is a set of inter-related “language-games” with no one thing that all “language-games” have in common (PI, 69-71). There is also no sharp boundary between language and non-language. As Wittgenstein says, “you could draw a boundary, but you can’t give the boundary,” because no such boundary exists (PI, 68). Nevertheless, the concept of language still has meaning and use despite the fact that we can’t state necessary and sufficient conditions for it. And just as there may be no end to the various games we can play, there is no end to the various kinds of language-games we can construct.

To my knowledge, Wittgenstein nowhere extends this view to philosophy, but it seems that doing so would be an acceptable application of his view. If we make this application, then we obtain a view of philosophy that is more plausible than viewing it in the essentialist way described above and one that nonetheless enables us to view philosophy as distinguishable from non-philosophy. On a family resemblance view of philosophy, there is no one property or set of properties that makes philosophy what it is, and, therefore, no one thing that separates philosophy from non-philosophy. Instead, what we see is a family of various ways of doing philosophy that bear similarities to each other in various ways, with no one thing common to them all. And there is no sharp boundary between philosophy and non-philosophy; if we speak of a boundary at all, then it is fuzzy, permeable, and perhaps shifts over time.

Of course, we could draw a boundary between philosophy and non-philosophy, but we can’t give the boundary. Nevertheless, our concept of philosophy still has meaning and use despite the fact that we cannot state its necessary and
sufficient conditions, for we are still able to distinguish clear cases of philosophy (e.g., Plato’s *Republic*) from clear cases of non-philosophy (e.g., the *National Enquirer*). Although there might be cases that fall into the blurry area between philosophy and non-philosophy, they would not pose a problem for this view, for it accepts that there are closer or further similarities to a family of characteristics that we recognize as philosophy. Thus, there might be cases where a text bears a slight resemblance to some characteristics we associate with philosophy without it being clear as to how or to what degree this resemblance occurs. Seen from the prism of this “family resemblance” view, it might have at first seemed that the Nahuatl texts exhibited characteristics that only slightly resembled those that we associate with philosophy, but upon closer examination the texts bear a much stronger resemblance that places them well within the domain of philosophy.

It is important to note that my argument for the claim that the Nahuas did philosophy does not depend on accepting this “family resemblance” view, for one could give the consistency argument I gave above without holding this view. Nevertheless, I think it can provide a plausible theoretical basis for my argument, and one that is helpful in advancing a better understanding of philosophy and its distinction from non-philosophy.

**Conclusion**

At any rate, I hope this discussion shows that, despite the inadequacy of León-Portilla’s argument, it is still plausible to think that the Nahuas did philosophy: the Nahuatl texts exhibit many characteristics that we philosophers use to describe genuine philosophical thinking, and, on those grounds, consistency requires that we consider them as philosophy and their writers as having done philosophy. At least, I hope to have shown that it is far from obvious that we should exclude them from the domain of genuine philosophizing. It is unlikely that philosophy is the kind of thing that has a distinct boundary because it is unlikely that one set of characteristics can serve as criteria for inclusion into its domain. Thus, it is more likely that philosophy has no distinct boundary. I have offered a family resemblance view to explain how we could understand philosophy in this way and yet distinguish it from non-philosophy, but much more work is needed to fully justify this view. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that we should philosophically examine the Nahuatl texts and likewise engage their authors, rather than exclude them because they don’t fit neatly into some rigid conception of what philosophy is.

**Endnotes**

1. Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahua Mind* [Aztec Thought and Culture] (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 3-24. Who were the Aztecs? The name “Aztecs” refers to a native group who called themselves the “Mexico.” This group migrated from its origins probably in northwestern Mexico to what is now the Valley of Mexico. The Mexico established their capital, Tenochtitlan, on a marshy island off the western shore of Lake Tetzococo. From it, they built an empire that stretched from what is now the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. The Mexico, however, were not the only native group in the Valley of Mexico. There were many others: Tetzcocans, Acocluans, Axllacates, Cholulans, Chalcans, to name a few. These groups shared a common language, Nahuatl, which is a member of the Uto-Aztecan linguistic family and related to the Ute, Hopi, and Comanche languages. They also shared strong cultural influences from the earlier Toltec and Teotihuacan civilizations (Richard F. Townsend, *The Aztecs* [London: Thames & Hudson, 2000], 44-53). This larger group is called the Nahau, and it is this broader population—with the Mexico as its most dominant group—that is the focus of my study. So instead of using the name “Aztecs,” I will use “Nahuas.”

2. Thus, I am not asking here whether or not the Nahauas had a philosophy: that question has already been answered affirmatively by ample textual evidence from which we can piece together an interpretation of their philosophy. Instead, I am asking whether or not that Nahauas explicitly did philosophy, as, say, the Pre-Socratics explicitly did philosophy. This is an important question, for it is certainly possible that the Nahauas could have a philosophy without doing it in this explicit way.

3. One obvious pre-conception has to do with the relationship between poetry and philosophy. In the *Ion* and *Republic*, Plato argues that the poets say many fine things, but these sayings are more the product of a kind of inspiration, not knowledge (*Ion* 534b – c, 536c – d). Poetry is an irritable skill, and poets often have little, if any, understanding of what they say (*R.* X 602b). Wisdom and understanding, however, is the aim and task of philosophers and philosophy (*R.* V 475b, VI 511c – d). Poets are therefore not philosophers and poetry is not philosophy.

4. Duchamp’s *Fountain* is a common urinal displayed as a work of art.

5. León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, xxiii.

6. Ibid., 3-4.

7. Ibid., 4-7 for texts 1-6. For all these texts, León-Portilla notes the following: “Colección de Canatares Mexicanos [Cantares Mexicanos] (ed. by Antonio Peñaíel), vol. 2, v. The original manuscript of this work is found in the National Library of Mexico.”

8. This text seems to express an insight similar (but not identical) to the one Aristotle expresses in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1094a20 – 23): “…we do not choose everything because of something else—for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile.” Here, Aristotle argues that there must be a highest good that is the ultimate end for all our desires; without this ultimate end, desire is empty and futile. The similarity between text 1 and Aristotle’s view has to do with the nature of desire rather than the nature of the good. Both seem to agree that desire without an ultimate end is empty and futile. There are differences, however: text 1 seems to question whether there is an ultimate end to desire and whether such an end could be discovered; Aristotle thinks there must be such an end, and that it can be discovered. Indeed, Aristotle later settles on an answer: the ultimate end of human desire is happiness (*NE* 1097b22 – 24).

9. León-Portilla notes: “The term Xinoayan, ‘the abode of the defleshed ones,’ was one of the Nahua expressions for the hereafter” (*Aztec Thought and Culture*, 6).

10. According the word “truth,” León-Portilla states:

> The word “truth” in Nahuatl, *neilioti*, is derived from the same radical as “root,” *itl-neliotl*, from which, in turn, comes *nelt-niuld*, “base” or “foundation.” The stem syllable *ne* has the original connotation of solid firmness or deeply rooted. With this etymology “truth,” for the Nahua, was to be identified with well-grounded stability. (*Aztec Thought and Culture*, 8)


12. Ibid., 8.

13. Ibid., 8-9.

14. More specifically, one might question the extent to which the texts were corrupted by the Indian informants from whom these texts were secured. As León-Portilla notes,
Regarding the second objection, León-Portilla argues that the concept of philosophy. In this way, investigators can make the term “philosophy” can be applied to Nahuatl thought comprehensible to themselves yet maintain an awareness of the real epistemological limitations of their investigation.

17. A few important remarks about this catalogue are in order. First, this catalogue was compiled from a sampling of views expressed by a variety of philosophers. This sampling is intended to list fairly common ways in which philosophers describe their discipline. It is not intended to be a definition, nor is it intended to present these characteristics as “essential” properties of philosophy. Second, this sampling of descriptors is intended to be substantial, but it is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. For example, a more comprehensive and exhaustive list would include critical post-modernist perspectives. It would also include South and East Asian perspectives, as well as African American, African, and Middle Eastern perspectives. Moreover, it would include the views of those who argue that genuine philosophy must be a priori, necessary, or non-scientific. Third, the main categories, including their various characteristics, need not be construed as mutually exclusive or all-compatible. Fourth, all of these characteristics should be understood to have very broad meanings, so that they generally describe the similarities of what philosophers say about philosophy, but leave out the specific meanings that each philosopher had in mind. For example, Aristotle, Russell, and Burkhardt all think that philosophy aims at knowledge (7), but there are differences in the conception of knowledge that each has in mind.

15. Walter Mignolo notes some of the ways in which this objection has been raised (Walter Mignolo, “Philosophy and the Colonial Difference,” in Latin American Philosophy: Currents, Issues, Debates, edited by Eduardo Mendieta [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003], 80). According to Mignolo, some regarded the application of the term “philosophy” to the Nahua texts as “imprudent.” The Nahua may not have done anything resembling philosophical discourse; instead, they simply may have been doing something entirely different. This need not be construed as a “lack” but simply a difference. Just as the Nahua may have “lacked” philosophy, they may have been doing something that the Europeans “lacked.”

16. Regarding the first set of objections, León-Portilla argues that we can be confident that we have translated at least part of the Mesoamerican ‘Ancient word’ (“Translated!” 313-38). To begin with, the ancient Mesoamericans had an oral tradition that was formally taught but was used in conjunction with written codices so that the oral teachings enable the student to “follow” the pictorial representations in the codices. The native Mesoamericans thus used books, and they had a deep appreciation for them, which is exemplified by texts expressing reverence for wise men, “to whom the books belong.” Moreover, there are texts that read as though the writer is taking dictation from someone who is “reading” a codex. For example, the text of the Legend of the Suns strongly suggests that the speaker is referring to a codex, for the speaker says things like, “Here is …” and “of this, his appearance is here.” Lastly, there exist several copies of the same transcribed indigenous text, copies that were independently collected and could be demonstrated to have its source in an indigenous codex. Regarding the second objection, León-Portilla argues that the term “philosophy” can be applied to Nahuatl thought provided that we properly understand its application (Miguel León-Portilla, “Pre-Hispanic Thought,” in Major Trends in Mexican Philosophy, by Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México: Consejo Técnico de Humanidades [Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1966], 6-11). According to León-Portilla, when investigators of Nahua culture apply the term “philosophy” to Nahua thought, they are in no way describing Nahua thought in itself, for they cannot escape the conceptual machinery that they bring to the investigation. Instead, they apply this term to their own historical invention of Nahau thought, which results from the process of working to understand Nahua thought in its own proper context and then determining whether the concept of philosophy applies. When doing this, investigators might extend the original connotation of the term “philosophy” and thereby widen its applicability; however, they apply the term only when features in their reconstruction of Nahua thought are found to be analogous to those which are found in the concept of philosophy. In this way, investigators can make

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(12) Sober, Core Questions, 4; Grimshaw, Philosophy and Feminist Thinking, 30, 32-33.

(13) Solomon, Big Questions, 6; BonJour and Baker, Philosophical Problems, 8-9.

(14) Ibid., 9-11.


(16) Black, "Linguistic Method," 66-67; Dewey, Reconstruction, 26; BonJour and Baker, Philosophical Problems, 2; Solomon, Big Questions, 6; Sober, Core Questions, 4-5.

(17) Solomon, Big Questions, 6, "gathering together different ideas into a single, unified vision."

23. Here, one could raise problems with the accuracy of León-Portilla’s translations, but for the purpose of this paper, I will leave these problems to the translators.

24. One might ask here: Did the Nahuaus aim for wisdom (5)? Texts 1-6 do not provide evidence for this, but elsewhere León-Portilla argues that there were indeed Nahuaal wise men, or llamatini. According to León-Portilla, llamatini is best translated as “he who knows things” or “he who knows something” (Aztec Thought and Culture, 11). To give his argument, León-Portilla cites another text that gives an elaborate description of the nahuaal wise man. This description, which is too long to quote here, defines the wise man as “a light, a torch...the path, the true way for others.” The wise man possesses “...the handed-down wisdom; he teaches it; he follows the path of truth.” He is a “[t]eacher of truth, he never ceases to admonish.” We are told that “[e]veryone is comforted by him, corrected, and taught. Thanks to him people humanize their will and receive a strict education” (León-Portilla, Aztec Thought and Culture, 10). Thus, despite the fact that texts 1-6 do not show that the Nahuaus aimed at wisdom, there is other evidence that the Nahuaus aimed at wisdom, in history of philosophy. (23)


27. Blackburn, Think, 6-7; Sellars, Science, 1-2.


33. Gracia gives perhaps the most comprehensive definition of philosophy that I have yet come across. He does so in three points.

The first is that the aim of philosophy is to develop a view of the world, or any of its parts, which seeks to be accurate, consistent, comprehensive, and supported by sound evidence. As such, philosophy can be distinguished from other disciplines of learning in two ways: (1) It is more general insofar as all other disciplines of learning are concerned with restricted areas of knowledge involving specific methodologies, particular objects or kinds of objects, or both; and (2) It involves areas of investigation that are uniquely philosophical such as ethics, logic, and metaphysics. The second point is that philosophy concerns the solution of philosophical problems, that is, of problems that surface precisely when one tries to achieve the aim just stated, either because of conceptual inconsistencies, empirical evidence, or inadequacies of other sorts. Finally, philosophy is not merely a descriptive enterprise; it also involves interpretation and evaluation. To proceed philosophically, then, is to proceed so as to achieve the aims of the discipline; and to proceed nonphilosophically is precisely to proceed in ways that divert oneself from those aims. (“History of Philosophy,” 23)

34. This view has been used to help clarify other thorny issues in Latin American thought. For example, Gracia has used it to help clarify our understanding of Hispanic/Latino identity (Jorge J. E. Gracia, Hispanic/Latino Identity: A Philosophical Perspective [Great Britain: Blackwell, 2000], 44-69).

35. I would like to thank James Maffie, Caery Evangelist, Rod Jenkins, and Jim Baillie for their helpful comments during the construction of this paper. I would also like to thank Grant Silva, Norman Swazo, Michael Koch, and José Mendoza for their helpful comments when I presented the paper at the spring 2007 meeting of the Society of Iberian and Latin American Thought.

References


The Legacy of Humboldt, Krause, and Nietzsche in Latin America: Three Brief Accounts

Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert
DePaul University

The following three essays evolved from a special session on “German Philosophy in the Americas” that was part of the Central Division Meeting of The American Philosophical Association that was held in Chicago in 2008. The idea behind the session was to attract attention to Latin American philosophy by highlighting the interesting ways in which the German and Latin American philosophical traditions have influenced each other. Despite the fact that three distinct German thinkers from three distinct periods were discussed during the panel session, each with unique intellectual projects, there is a common strand that connects the influence that the work of Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859), K.C.F. Krause (1781-1832), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) had in Latin America. The work of each of these thinkers found a warm reception in Latin America in part because central to each thinker’s work was a concern for freedom and social reform.

Alexander von Humboldt’s legacy in America is presented by way of an investigation of his famous American Voyage (1799-1804) or travels to the equinocial regions of the earth. During this voyage, Humboldt not only collected important plant, animal, and mineral samples for further study, he also made careful observation of the cultures that he encountered in Spanish America, preparing political essays that reflected an open, appreciative attitude for the people and culture of America. Humboldt was one of the first Europeans to express independence from Spain.