

Why Care about Nezahualcoyotl? Veritism and Nahua Philosophy

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Sixteenth-century Nahua philosophy understands *neltiliztli* (truth) and *tlamitilizli* (wisdom, knowledge) nonsemantically in terms of a complex notion consisting of well-rootedness, *alethia*, authenticity, adeptness, moral righteousness, beauty, and balancedness. In so doing, it offers compelling a posteriori grounds for denying what Alvin Goldman calls *veritism*. Veritism defends the universality of correspondence (semantic) truth as well as the universal centrality of correspondence (semantic) truth to epistemology.

Western philosophers since Plato have widely embraced semantic conceptions of truth as well as placed them at the heart of knowledge. The most prominent, recent defense of this view may be found in the work of Alvin Goldman. Goldman dubs this view *veritism*. In keeping with his naturalistic approach to epistemology, Goldman advances veritism as an a posteriori thesis about human epistemic practices. In what follows, I assess the a posteriori plausibility of veritism against the philosophical contributions of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of Mexico at the time of the Conquest (1521).

My discussion focuses on the Nahuatl word standardly translated as “truth”: *neltiliztli*. I argue that translating *neltiliztli* poses the following dilemma for veritism. Either (1) we translate *neltiliztli* as truth and so attribute a concept of truth to the Nahuas, or (2) we do not translate *neltiliztli* as truth and deny a concept of truth to the Nahua. If (1), then veritism is false. Why? The Nahua did not understand truth semantically in terms of correspondence; they understood truth in terms of well-rootedness-cum-*alethia*. Truth as well-rootedness-cum-*alethia*

Received 15 October 2001

This article has benefited from input by Gordon Brotherston, R. Joe Campbell, Willard Gingerich, Julie Greene, Francis Karttunen, William E. Morris, Paul Roth, Ben-Ami Scharfstein, and Alison Wylie.

Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Vol. 32 No. 1, March 2002 71-91
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enjoys a better fit with central components of Nahua philosophy including its metaphysics, philosophy of language, epistemology, and underlying problematic. If (2), then veritism is also false. If the Nahua did not have a concept of truth, then they did not have a semantic concept of truth. In either case, veritism is false.

VERITISM

In his recent work, Goldman defends what he calls “veritism.”¹ Veritism consists of the following set of theses:

1. “Truth is a vital concern for humankind across culture and history” (1999, 33). Goldman writes,

“All men desire to know.” So said Aristotle and he was right. . . . Information seeking is a pervasive activity of human life. . . . What we seek in all such cases is true or accurate information. . . . Question-seeking is a universal feature of human communication. . . . The primary purpose of asking a question is to learn . . . the true answer. (1999, 3)
2. “The unifying aim [of genuinely epistemic practices] is the pursuit of true belief . . . or knowledge” (1999, 30). Epistemology evaluates belief in terms of the “*genuinely* epistemic” (emphasis mine) aim of truth—not utility, power, consensus, and so forth (1999, 5).
3. Epistemic notions such as evidence, justification, and knowledge are properly conceived in terms of truth (1999, 5).
4. A “single concept of truth seems to be cross-culturally present” (1999, 33), namely, correspondence or descriptive success: “An item X (a proposition, a sentence, a belief, etc.) is true if and only if X is descriptively successful, that is, X purports to describe reality and its content fits reality” (1999, 59). Veritism conceives truth semantically, that is, in terms of a relationship between sentence (or proposition) and reality. “The basic correspondence idea is this: ‘what *makes* sentences or propositions true are real-world truth makers’ ” (1999, 68). “Truth requires ‘truth makers’, i.e. worldly entities of some sort that *make* propositions or other truth-bearers true” (1999, 61). The content of true sentences successfully “matches,” “fits,” and “depicts” the world, manifesting “mind-to-world” or “utterance-to-world” fit (1999, 59).
5. Knowledge is a species of true belief (1999, 5).
6. Hence (from 1-5), humans uniformly seek knowledge where knowledge is defined as a species of correspondence true belief. Epistemic notions such as knowledge are properly conceived in terms of correspondence truth.

Several features of veritism bear mentioning. First, it is a contingent thesis about our “epistemic folkways” (Goldman 1992, 155), that is, about what humans *do* as a matter of fact, seek, value, and so forth. Second, veritism is a “scientific” (Goldman 1992, 156) thesis about actually existing human evidential practices, goals, norms, and concepts supported (or not) by a posteriori evidence supplied by cognitive psychology, linguistics, and anthropology.² Third, veritism is a descriptive thesis about what humans *do* in fact do, not a normative thesis about what they *ought* to do. Finally, veritism is an *emic* (from the agent’s point of view) thesis about what humans consciously seek, want, believe, and so forth, not an *etic* (from the observer’s point of view) or “deep” thesis about what they *really* seek, want, and so forth without necessarily being aware of doing so.

Although Goldman’s naturalistic defense of veritism is uncommon, veritism itself represents an enduring view embraced by 20th-century Anglophone epistemologists from Alston and Chisholm to Russell and Stroud. This notwithstanding, it has not been embraced universally by Western philosophers. Hobbes, Hume, Nietzsche, James, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Quine, Rorty, Foucault, and Goodman (to name a few) reject the relevance to epistemology—if not very intelligibility—of semantic conceptions of truth (such as correspondence) and advance in their place nonveritistic epistemologies based on nonsemantic conceptions of truth. However, veritists may respond that such views fail to gainsay veritism because they represent normative or reforming proposals that do not reflect our ordinary, human epistemic folkways. But are ordinary, human epistemic folkways really veritistic? What about the epistemic folkways of non-Western peoples? Are they veritistic? In what follows, I test veritism against a single case study: the epistemic folkways of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of the High Central Plateau Mexico at the time of the Conquest.

TRUTH AND THE NAHUA

The Nahua included (among others) the Mexicans (dubbed “Aztecs” by the Spaniards), Acolhuans, Texcocans, Chalchans, Tlacopans, and Tlaxcaltecs. Due to their common language and culture, Mesoamerican scholars refer to these people as the Nahua and their culture as Nahua culture. Nahuatl is a Uto-Aztecan tongue

related to North American languages such as Ute and Hopi. It remains the most widely spoken indigenous language in Mexico today. Nahua culture flourished in the 15th and 16th centuries prior to 1521 (C.E.), the official date of the Conquest. Nezahualcoyotl, of this article's title, was one of many Nahua *tlamatinime* ("knowers of things," "sages," "philosophers").³

The First Horn of the Dilemma

Prominent Nahua scholars such as John Bierhorst, R. Joe Campbell, Francis Karttunen, Willard Gingerich, and Miguel Leon-Portilla standardly translate the Nahuatl word *neltiliztli* (and its cognates) as *truth* (and its cognates).⁴ In doing so, they attribute a concept of truth to the Nahua. At first blush, then, Conquest-era Nahua philosophy confirms a key component of veritism: the cross-cultural presence of correspondence truth.

However, a closer examination reveals that the Nahua understood truth in terms other than correspondence. Leon-Portilla writes,

The word "truth" in Nahuatl, *neltiliztli*, is derived from the same radical as "root," *tla-nel-huatl*, from which in turn comes *nelhuayotl*, "base" or "foundation." The stem syllable *nel* has the original connotation of solid firmness or deeply rooted. With this etymology "truth," for the Nahuas, was to be identified [in its abstract form] with [the quality of] well-grounded stability [well-foundedness, or rootedness].⁵

Leon-Portilla thus believes the Nahua possessed a concept of truth but conceived truth (*neltiliztli*) in terms of well-grounded stability, well-foundedness, and well-rootedness (henceforth "well-rootedness" for short). They did *not* do so in terms of correspondence, fit, or successful description. The Nahua held that a person cognizes truly if and only if she cognizes well-rootedly. If Leon-Portilla is correct, Nahua thought gainsays Goldman's claim that correspondence truth is "cross-culturally present." Indeed, if Leon-Portilla is correct, the Nahua appear to have understood *neltiliztli* (truth) nonsemantically, that is, in terms other than correspondence, reference, representation, and aboutness.

Willard Gingerich (1987, 102f.) defends Leon-Portilla's translation of *neltiliztli* and his etymological reconstruction of *neltiliztli* in terms of well-rootedness. Gingerich cites as additional confirmation Friar Mijangos's 17th-century translation of the Nahuatl sentence, *nitlanelhuayoto'cac uel ynellhuayo'can ona'cic*, as "I discovered the truth

of something." According to Gingerich, the original Nahuatl sentence borrows the imagery of "a tree whose roots have been dug up and revealed" and says literally, "I sought out the root of the matter; I reached completely down to the place where the roots were." Gingerich also observes that truth occurs in the early post-Conquest sources more often in its adverbial form, *nelli*, meaning "truly" or "with truth" (which I believe reflects the Nahuatl's processual approach to reality). Gingerich's analysis suggests the following: cognizing truly "reaches completely down to the place where the roots" are; cognizing falsely does not.

What's more, Gingerich cogently argues that well-rootedness does not exhaust the nature of *neltiliztli*. The Nahuatl's understanding of *neltiliztli* also contained an ineliminable Heideggerian (pre-Socratic?) component, namely, "non-referential *alethia*—[that is,] 'disclosure,' " (1987, 104), "unconcealedness" (1987, 102), "self-deconcealing" (1987, 105), and "unhiddenness" (1987, 105). Hence, that which is *neltiliztli* is not only well rooted but also nonreferentially unconcealing and disclosing. In short, the Nahuatl understood *neltiliztli* (truth) nonsemantically, that is, in terms other than correspondence, reference, representation, and aboutness.

By arguing that the Nahuatl understood *neltiliztli* in terms other than correspondence, received Nahuatl scholarship gainsays an essential tenet of veritism: the cross-cultural presence of correspondence truth. In so doing, it gainsays the cross-cultural relevance of correspondence truth to epistemology and knowledge. But why put stock in received Nahuatl scholarship, especially when a philosophical thesis as important as veritism is at stake? In what follows, I argue that translating *neltiliztli* as well-rootedness-cum-*alethia* (following Gingerich) is better supported by a host of contextually based considerations than is translating *neltiliztli* as correspondence truth. Truth as well-rootedness-cum-*alethia* is overwhelmingly more consonant with Nahuatl metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and problematic defining philosophical inquiry.

NAHUA METAPHYSICS

At the heart of Nahuatl metaphysics beats the monistic claim that there exists a single, vital, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-conceiving as well as self-regenerating and self-reconceiving sacred energy or force: what the Nahuatl called *teotl*. That which

human beings commonly understand as the universe—for example, sun, earth, humans, animals, trees—is generated *by teotl*, *from teotl*, as one aspect, facet, or moment of its eternal process of self-generation-and-regeneration. *Teotl's* self-generation and regeneration is identical with its generation and regeneration of the universe. *Teotl* created as well as continually recreates, permeates, encompasses, and shapes the cosmos. *Teotl* is the single, all-encompassing life force of the cosmos. It is not merely the unified totality of things; *teotl* is literally everything and everything is literally *teotl*.

Process, movement, and becoming as well as transmutation and change are essential properties of *teotl*. *Teotl* is thus better understood as ever-flowing and ever-changing energy in motion than as a static entity. Since the universe and its contents are ultimately identical to *teotl*, they, too, are simply ever-flowing and ever-changing energy in motion. What's more, *teotl's* endless process, motion, and becoming manifests itself as the ceaseless, cyclical oscillation of polar (or paired) opposites. Although essentially dynamic and devoid of any lasting order, the created universe is nevertheless characterized by an immanent equilibrium and rhythm: one provided and constituted by *teotl*. *Teotl* presents itself in multiple aspects, preeminent among which is duality. This duality takes the form of the endless opposition of mutually arising, interdependent, and complementary polarities that divide, alternately dominate, and explain the diversity, movement, and momentary structure of the universe. These include being and not being, order and disorder, life and death, male and female, and active and passive. Life and death, for example, are mutually arising, interdependent, and complementary sides of the same process. Life arises from death and death from life. The artists of Tlatilco and Oaxaca artistically presented this duality by fashioning double-faced masks, one half flesh (alive), one half skull (dead). The created universe consists of the endless, cyclical tug-of-war between these polarities—all of which are manifold manifestations of *teotl*. As a result, it is unstable, transitory, and devoid of any lasting being, order, or structure.

Because *teotl* is essentially movement, process, and change, it is better understood neither as being nor not-being but as becoming. Being and not-being are, after all, simply two dialectically interrelated polarities and facets of *teotl* and, as such, strictly speaking not applicable to *teotl*. Similarly, *teotl* is better understood as neither order nor disorder but as unorder. Last, *teotl* is both immanent and transcendent. It is immanent because it penetrates deeply into every detail of

universe and exists wholly within the myriad of created existing things. Yet it is transcendent because it is not exhausted by any single created thing.

Teotl's unceasing process of generating and regenerating the universe is also one of unceasing self-transformation and retransformation. The universe is *teotl's* self-transmutation—not its creation *ex nihilo*. The Nahua conceived this process in artistic and shamanic terms. They conceived *teotl* as a sacred artist-shaman who eternally transforms and retransforms itself *into* and *as* the universe. As a process of shamanic self-transmutation, the universe is *teotl's nahual*, that is, “disguise” or “mask.” The universe and its myriad contents are thus *teotl's* artistic self-disguise, its shamanic self-masking, and as such, presentations of the dynamic, life force of *teotl* itself.

Teotl transmutes and masks itself in a variety of ways: (1) the apparent thingness of existents, that is, the appearance of static entities such as humans, mountains, animals, and so forth. This is illusory since one and all are merely aspects of *teotl's* sacred motion; (2) the apparent multiplicity of things, that is, the appearance of distinct, independently existing entities such as individual humans, plants, mountains, and so forth. This is illusory since there is only one thing: *teotl*; and (3) the apparent distinctness, independence, and irreconcilable oppositionality of order and disorder, life and death, male and female, and so forth. This is illusory since one and all are facets of *teotl*. As an epistemological consequence of *teotl's* process of self-masking self-presentation, when humans ordinarily gaze on the world, they misperceive *teotl* as an individual human, as male, and so on.

In light of the foregoing, Nahua *tlatatinime* (“knowers of things”; *tlatatini* [singular]) commonly characterized earthly existents as painted images and symbols on *teotl's* sacred canvas. The *tlatatini* Aquiauhztzin characterized the earth as “the house of paintings.”⁶ His contemporary, Xayacamach, writes, “your home is here, in the midst of the paintings.”⁷ Like the images on canvas painted by human artists, the images on *teotl's* sacred canvas were fragile and evanescent. Nezahualcoyotl writes, “We live only in Your painting here, on the earth . . . we live only in Your book of paintings, here on the earth.”⁸ Finally, Tochiuhztzin Coyolchiuhqui writes, “We only rise from sleep, we come only to dream, it is *ahnelli* (untrue, unrooted-undisclosing), it is *ahnelli* (untrue, unrooted-undisclosing), that we come on earth to live.”⁹

Nahua *tlatatinime* conceived the dreamlike illusoriness of earthly existence in epistemological rather than ontological terms. That is,

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

Since their metaphysics maintains there is only one thing, namely, *teotl*, the Nahua held that it is metaphysically impossible for humans to perceive *de re* anything other than *teotl*. After all, *teotl* is the only thing that exists to be perceived *de re*. Humans' metaphysically mandated *de re* perception of *teotl* does not, however, prevent them from normally misperceiving and misunderstanding what they see *de re*. How can this be? Because humans normally perceive and conceive *teotl de dicto*, that is, as an individual human, as maleness, as death, and so forth. They perceive *teotl de dicto* and they perceive *teotl*'s *nahual* or disguise.

Nahua epistemology claims the only way for humans to experience *teotl* knowingly is to experience *teotl* sans description. Humans know *teotl* by means of a mystical-style union between their hearts and *teotl* that enables them to know *teotl* directly and immediately (i.e., without recourse to or mediation by language, concepts, or categories). Humans know *teotl* through *teotl*. Although metaphysically immanent with human hearts, *teotl* is nevertheless epistemologically transcendent. Humans are not guaranteed knowledge of the sacred despite its immanence within their hearts.

A fundamental metaphysical difference thus distinguishes the problematics of Nahua epistemology and Cartesian-style epistemology. The latter conceives the subject and object dualistically and conceives the relationship between subject and object as one mediated by a "veil of perception." The subject's access to the object is indirect,

being mediated, for example, by appearances or representations of the object. The Nahua's epistemological problematic, in contrast, conceives the subject and object monistically and conceives the relationship between subject and object in terms of a mask. And masks in Mesoamerican epistemology have different properties than veils!

In their study of masks in Mesoamerican shamanism (in which 16th-century Nahua epistemology was deeply rooted and to which it remained closely related), Markman and Markman (1989) argue that masks "simultaneously conceal and reveal the innermost spiritual force of life itself." For example, the life/death mask mentioned above simultaneously conceals and reveals the simultaneously neither-alive-nor-dead-yet-both-alive-and-dead figure. The mask does not represent or point to something deeper, something hiding behind itself, for the simultaneously neither-alive-nor-dead-yet-both-alive-and-dead figure rests right on the surface of the figure. The simultaneously neither-alive-nor-dead-yet-both-alive-and-dead figure does not lurk behind the mask, nor is our access to it obstructed by a veil or representation. It is fully present *de re* yet hidden *de dicto* by our unknowing, that is, by our normal habit of misperceiving reality as either dead or alive—as opposed to neither alive nor dead yet both alive and dead.

How does the foregoing bear on the question concerning the comparative fitness of translating *neltiliztli* (truth) as correspondence as opposed to rootedness-cum-*alethia*? First, since *teotl* is an undifferentiated, unordered, and seamless processive totality, there does not seem to be the requisite kinds of "worldly things" to serve as "truth-makers" (Goldman 1999, 59) for our utterances, that is, discrete facts, states of affairs, structure, order, laws, or joints. There does not appear to be anything metaphysically speaking to make our sentences true or false, anything for our sentences to correspond to or not, or anything for our sentences to represent or not. Indeed, all structure, order, and so forth are simultaneously fictions of human unknowing and artistic-shamanic presentations of *teotl*. The ontological indeterminacy of Nahua metaphysics appears to be an extreme, nominalist antirealism, and *teotl* a Kantian-like noumenon. However, semantic conceptions of truth such as correspondence truth fit very poorly with such metaphysics. In contrast, characterizing true cognition as that which is well rooted in *teotl* and through which *teotl* discloses itself fits much better.

Second, Nahua metaphysics' monism claims that reality is a single, unified totality: *teotl*. However, semantic conceptions of truth (such as

correspondence) conceive truth in dyadic terms and therefore fit poorly with—if not outright contradict—this monism. As commonly understood, correspondence truth, for example, conceives truth as a relational property between two things: some *X* that is made true and some *Y* that makes *X* true, where *X* is not identical with *Y*. As a property of sentences (or propositions), correspondence truth commits one to a metaphysical dualism consisting of at least two kinds of things: sentences (or propositions) and truth-making reality (e.g., facts, states of affairs). As a property of representations (or their content), semantic truth commits one to a dualism consisting of representations and what they purport to represent. Semantic conceptions of truth enjoy a better fit with epistemological problematics presupposing dualist metaphysics that distinguish appearances from reality and that seek to know whether appearances correspond to (correctly represent) reality. But none of these characterize the Nahua's metaphysics or epistemological problematic.

Third, according to Nahua metaphysics, *teotl* is simply not the *kind* of thing *about* which one speaks (or thinks) using literal language and therefore not the *kind* of thing about which one speaks truly *or* falsely in terms of correspondence. *Teotl* is ineffable. Correspondence truth is a property of sentences (propositions), which are, in turn, tied to language and concepts. Yet language and concepts are not literally applicable to *teotl*. Therefore, if we consider correspondence (semantic) truth to be a property of illocutionary speech acts that are composed of language and concepts and that, by predication and reference, attempt to represent, assert, or describe, then correspondence (semantic) truth does not apply to sentences (or thoughts) about reality (*teotl*). In short, what we have here appears to be what Gilbert Ryle calls a "category-mistake."¹⁰

Of course, whether talk of correspondence (semantic) truth commits a category mistake depends on one's metaphysics. And my contention here is simply that correspondence truth (and semantic truth generally) fits ill with Nahua metaphysics, while characterizing utterances and cognition as well rooted in *teotl* and as that through which *teotl* discloses itself fits well with Nahua metaphysics. In a recent article, Goldman, however, dismisses the introduction of alternative metaphysics into discussions of truth as "playing the metaphysics card."¹¹ Yet it is difficult to see why doing so is illegitimate since correspondence truth (and semantic conceptions generally) are metaphysically loaded. As we've seen, they require a dualist metaphysics that is incompatible with the monism of Nahua metaphysics. How better,

then, to determine whether the Nahua conceived truth semantically than to assess its coherence with their metaphysics? In the same article, Goldman also contends the incompatibility of alternative metaphysics with correspondence truth is irrelevant if those metaphysics are as a matter of incorrect. But this misses the point. At the emic level, the factual incorrectness of an alternative metaphysics is irrelevant while its presence gainsays the cross-cultural pursuit of correspondence truth and so gainsays theses 1 and 4 above.

Fourth, Nahua writing offers no succor for semantic truth since Nahua writing consists primarily of pictographs, that is, painted, symbolic pictures. Nahua pictographs are not logo-syllabic and do not consist of assertive sentences composed of alphabetically transcribed, spoken Nahuatl words.¹² They functioned as nonassertive, nondescriptive, nonrepresentational scripts, cues, or directives for artistic performances such as storytelling, singing, dancing, and playing music—much as notated scripts function for the performances of ballets and operas. As Searle characterizes them, directives display “world-to-word” direction; they try to get the listener (or reader-singer-performer in our case) to do something.¹³ As such, they do not display “word-to-world” direction and are not assessable “on the dimension of assessment which includes *true* and *false*” (Searle 1979, 12). Yet the Nahua did characterize writing in terms of *neltiliztli*, and therefore we need to find a sense in which Nahua writing may be assessed as such. We may do so in terms of its being well rooted in and disclosing *teotl*. As directives, Nahua writing functions as a vital component of the “becoming and happening of truth” (as Heidegger puts it).¹⁴

Fifth, in light of the metaphysics of *teotl*, Nahua epistemology denies humans are able to know *teotl* linguistically or discursively. Human language, concepts, and categories (along with their attendant divisions and distinctions) are fictions that contribute to our *de dicto* misperception, misapprehension, and unknowing of *teotl*. Humans only know *teotl* without mediation by language and concepts, doing so directly by means of ritually induced, mystical-style acquaintance with and union between their hearts and *teotl*. The heart’s knowing *teotl* is unmediated by concepts, language (literal and poetic), and artistic imagery. Such hearts are said to be “*teotlized*” and to “hav[e] *teotl* [with]in them.”¹⁵ The Nahua characterized this process in the following way. The movement of one’s heart becomes well rooted in *teotl* as a consequence of ritual activities such as autosacrifice and performing song-poems. On becoming well rooted,

one's heart resonates in harmony with and eventually melds with the movement of *teotl* itself. At this point, one's heart experiences-feels-intuits the undifferentiated oneness and motion of reality. *Teotl* burgeons through one's heart, presenting itself both *to and through* one's heart. Knowing *teotl* thus consists of the self-presenting and self-disclosing of *teotl* by *teotl*. Translating *neltiliztli* as correspondence truth fits poorly, whereas translating it as well-rootedness-cum-*alethia* fits well, with these features of Nahua epistemology.

Sixth, Nahua metaphysics characterizes persons, objects, and utterances *equally* in terms of *neltiliztli*. One and all are said (without equivocation) to be true or untrue. Translating *neltiliztli* as correspondence-truth falters seriously here since correspondence (and semantic) truth is standardly understood as applying primarily and literally only to sentences, propositions, or utterances. Indeed, a semantic conception of truth such as correspondence makes little, if any, sense applied to persons and objects. Truth-as-well-rootedness-cum-*alethia*, however, does. Nahua metaphysics conceived created things in terms of a continuum ranging from those that are well rooted in *teotl* and that authentically present and embody *teotl* as well as disclose and unconceal *teotl*, at one end, to those that are poorly rooted in *teotl* and that neither authentically embody and present *teotl* nor disclose and unconceal *teotl*, at the other end. The former, which included fine jade, quetzal plumes, *teotlized* human hearts, and well-crafted song-poems, enjoyed sacred presence. Given *teotl*'s processual nature, persons, objects, and utterances are constantly becoming more or less *neltiliztli*; constantly shifting their position along the continuum of rootedness. The well rooted, true utterance, person, and object eventually become unrooted and untrue; the unrooted, untrue utterance eventually become rooted and true. In the latter case, we observe the "becoming or happening of truth."

Finally, in light of the metaphysical nature of *teotl*, the inapplicability of ordinary language and concepts to *teotl*, and the nonlinguistic nature of knowing *teotl*, Nahua *tlamatinime* turned to what they called *in xochitl*, *in cuicatl* ("flower and song")—that is, art, poetry, music, symbolism, and metaphor—to *present* (rather than *represent*) *teotl*. 'Flower and song' refers in some contexts to the composing, interpreting, and performing of song-poems (accompanied by flutes, drums, incense, and costumery) specifically and in other contexts to creative, artistic activity generally. Performing song-poems is the highest form of human artistry since in doing so humans most closely imitate *teotl*'s own sacred artistry. What's more, performing song-poems best pre-

pare the human heart for knowing *teotl* as well as best expresses that knowing.

The multiple functions of 'flower and song' included the following: genuinely presenting *teotl*, authentically embodying *teotl*, preserving existing cosmic equilibrium and purity, creating new cosmic equilibrium and purity, and participating alongside *teotl* in the recreation and regeneration of the universe. Its functions did not include depicting, describing, or representing *teotl*. When engaged in artistic creativity, Nahua sage-artists both imitated and participated in the creative artistry of *teotl*. In so doing, they participated in the recreation-regeneration of the universe itself. Human beings are able to participate in the unfolding of the universe through the performance of 'flower and song' (along with other ritual activities). While poetry, song, dance, and so forth are poorly characterized in terms of semantic truth, they are well characterized in terms of truth-as-well-rootedness-cum-*alethia*. Well-crafted song-poems and dancing are well rooted in *teotl* and thus instances of the becoming and happening of truth in the sense of authentically disclosing and unconcealing *teotl*.

The Nahua viewed human speech as a force-possessing, performative activity with concrete causal effects on the world. This was especially true of 'flower and song' in the sense of sung poetry. However, the character of 'flower and song' is not captured by current speech act theory. Searle (1979) analyzes speech acts in terms of their "direction of fit" between words and world, that is, whether they try to get words to match the world (words-to-world direction) or world to match words (world-to-words direction). But 'flower and song' neither tries to get the world to match the content of its words nor get the content of its words to match the world. It is neither an assertive, directive, expressive, commissive, nor declaration.

Very briefly, 'flower and song' is not an assertive since it does not purport to describe, represent, or report the world. It is not an expressive since its illocutionary point is not expressing the feelings of its singer-composer. Expressives include apologies, welcomings, and condolences. 'Flower and song' is none of these. 'Flower and song' is not a commissive since its illocutionary point is not to commit the speaker to some future course of action. It does not try to get the world to match its words, as do commissives. Commissives include vows, promises, and pledges. 'Flower and song' is none of these. Moreover, there is no obvious hearer to whom 'flower and song' is directed in the relevant sense. 'Flower and song' is not a directive since it does not try to get the world to match words. Unlike directives, its illocutionary

point is not the speaker's trying to get the hearer to do something. Directives include asking, begging, praying, entreating, and commanding. 'Flower and song' is none of these. And, once again, there is no obvious hearer to which 'flower and song' is directed. Finally, 'flower and song' is not a declaration since it displays neither world-to-world nor world-to-word direction of fit. Examples of declarations include a person's marrying two people by saying, "I now pronounce you husband and wife," or God's illuminating the world by declaring, "Let there be light!" 'Flower and song' is not one of these.

What went wrong? For starters, Searle (1979) analyzes speech acts in terms of direction of fit between words and world and explicates direction in such terms as "fit," "matching," and "correspondence." But the latter are deeply problematic since they easily lend themselves to thinking about truth in semantic terms and so easily lend themselves to thinking that the speaker seeks the content of her speech act to fit the world (or vice versa). But this is not so with 'flower and song.' While the Nahuas may have wanted their song-poems to display some kind of fit with the world, they understood such fit in terms of consonance, that is, in the way a songbird's melody harmoniously fits with the symphony of sounds of the forest. Indeed, the Nahuas saw the heart's performing song-poems as the human equivalent of songbirds' singing. The Nahuas wanted their speech performances qua processes in the world to fit harmoniously with and thereby add to the overall metaphysical rhythm and equilibrium of *teotl*. And this occurred only if their performances were well rooted and disclosing.

More decisively, qua speech act 'flower and song' contributes to the store of harmony and beauty in the universe *not* by declaring, "Let there be harmony and beauty!" (in the manner of Searle's God example) but by *being* beautiful and harmonious. The performance of song-poems brings about greater harmony and beauty in the world *not* by their singer-composers' intending that the content of their words "match" the world or the world "match" the content of their words but by their singer-composers' artfully crafting the words, melody, and rhythm so that their performance embodies, exemplifies, and presents harmony and beauty. 'Flower and song' therefore need not—and overwhelmingly does not—use the words *harmony* and *beauty* in the way the declarative, "Let there be harmony and beauty!" must use them. Well-crafted song-poems simply *are* harmonious, beautiful processes in the world alongside the singing of songbirds, the blooming of flowers, and so forth. 'Flower and song' represents a

becoming or happening of truth in the Heideggerian sense—a sense left unexplored by Searle (and Austin).

THE DEFINING PROBLEMATIC OF NAHUA PHILOSOPHY

Translating *neltiliztli* as well-rootedness-cum-*alethia* is more consonant with the problematic defining the aim of philosophy according to the Nahua. The Nahua saw life on earth as one filled with pain, sorrow, and suffering. The earth's surface was an extremely treacherous place. Its name, *tlalticpac*, means literally "on the point or summit of the earth," suggesting a narrow, jagged, point-like place surrounded by constant dangers.¹⁶ The Nahuatl proverb, *Tlaalahui, tlapetzcahui in tlalticpac* ("It is slippery, it is slick on the earth") was said of a person who had lived a morally upright life but then lost her balance and fell into moral wrongdoing, as if slipping in slick mud.¹⁷ Humans lose their balance easily on *tlalticpac* and as a result repeatedly suffer ill fortune and ill being.

With this conception of the human situation in mind, Nahua *tlamatinime* turned to philosophy for a concrete solution to what they saw as the most pressing problem facing humankind: how can humans keep their balance on the slippery surface of the earth? They answered: humans must conduct every aspect of their lives wisely. What is the best path for humans to follow? They answered: the middle path since it avoids the imbalance and ill-being incurred by following extremes. Nahua sages accordingly conceived wisdom (*tlamatiliztli*) in practical, not theoretical, terms. Wisdom consisted of how one comported oneself while walking on the slippery surface of earth. And how do humans become wise? They must become rooted (*neltiliztli*), that is, they must root their mental and physical dispositions, actions, and hence lives deeply and steadfastly in *teotl*. And so, Nahua sages defined *tlamatiliztli* in terms of *neltiliztli*.

The Nahua saw *tlamatiliztli* as consisting of two inseparable aspects. First, it consisted of the artisan-like, practical ability to conduct one's affairs in such a way as to attain some measure of equilibrium and purity in one's personal, domestic, social, and cosmic environment, and thus some measure of well-being in an otherwise evanescent life filled with sorrow, pain, and suffering, here on an impermanent, doomed earth. Second, it consisted of the artisan-like, practical ability to conduct one's life in such a way as to creatively par-

ticipate in, reinforce, and extend into the future the way of life inherited from one's predecessors. In short, the Nahuas conceived *tlamatiliztli* nonpropositionally as 'knowledge how' rather than propositionally as 'knowledge that.' And knowledge how is poorly characterized in terms of semantic truth.

The wise, well-rooted person is stable, well founded, and solid. Like a skilled mountaineer, she is able to keep her balance and avoid slipping while walking on the narrow, jagged summit of the earth. She has mastered the art of living well, that is, the art of fashioning her "face and heart" (*in ixtli in yollotl*) into a pure and precious work of art that embodies equilibrium and purity (Leon-Portilla 1963, 113ff.). She possesses "a wise face and a strong, humanized heart," that is, one characterized by sound judgment and apt sentiment (Leon-Portilla 1963, 113ff.). Her psychological, emotional, cognitive, and physical behavior promotes equilibrium and purity and averts disequilibrium and impurity. The Nahuas likened the person of "wise face and good heart" to well-formed, unblemished jade and well-crafted song-poems—that is, earthly objects that authentically present, embody, and disclose *teotl*'s equilibrium and purity. The possessor of a wise face and a strong, humanized heart is well rooted in *teotl* and thus genuine. Because well rooted in *teotl*, she authentically presents, discloses, and embodies *teotl* through her life. In sum, because well rooted (*neltiliztli*) in *teotl*, wise thinking and feeling offer humans stability, equilibrium, and the practical ability to make one's way and walk in balance on the slippery earth.

Truth, well-rootedness, walking in balance, possessing a wise face and strong, humanized heart, *alethia*, authenticity, and genuineness possess ineliminable moral and aesthetic dimensions. Genuine, well-rooted humans are morally upright, straight, pure, and virtuous. They are careful, temperate, composed, adept, steadfast, and trustworthy. Their lives are works of beauty like fine jade and quetzal plumes. In contrast, false, ungentle, unrooted humans are morally vicious, impure, and crooked. They are careless, inept, mendacious, duplicitous, untrustworthy, and slippery. Their lives are miscreations of twisted imbalance and insanity.

Consequently, I suggest that the Nahua conceived *neltiliztli* (truth) even more broadly than we have been considering heretofore. In addition to a metaphysical-cum-epistemological notion, they also regarded well-rootedness-cum-*alethia* as a practical, moral, and aesthetic notion: one characterizing the quality of a person's entire life process. Correspondence-talk is simply not at home here.

NAHUA EPISTEMOLOGY

Nahua *tlamatinime* conceived *tlamatiliztli* (wisdom, knowledge) in terms of *neltiliztli* (truth). Here, too, understanding *neltiliztli* (truth) in terms of well-rootedness-cum-*alethia* enjoys a better fit. Nahua epistemology maintains that human beings cognize knowingly (wisely) if and only if they cognize truly or well-rootedly and that they cognize truly or well-rootedly if and only if their cognizing is well rooted in *teotl*. Nahua *tlamatinime* understood rootedness, in turn, in terms of burgeoning. Cognizing truly and hence knowingly is the flower of an organic-like process consisting of *teotl*'s burgeoning and blossoming within a person's heart. As the generative expression of *teotl*, human knowing is one of the ways by which *teotl* genuinely and authentically presents itself here on earth. *Teotl* burgeons within a person's heart, unfolding, disclosing, and unconcealing itself like a blossoming flower. Unknowing, in contrast, is unrooted in *teotl*. *Teotl* fails to burgeon and hence unfold and unconceal itself within one's heart.

In conclusion, if we elect to translate *neltiliztli* as truth and in so doing attribute a concept of truth to the Nahuas, I submit that the Nahua understood truth (*neltiliztli*) in terms of well-rootedness-cum-*alethia* (as well as moral rectitude, genuineness, authenticity, and beauty) and that Nahua philosophy is therefore not veritistic.

THE SECOND HORN OF THE DILEMMA

The second horn of the dilemma concerning *neltiliztli* questions at the very outset the move to translate *neltiliztli* as the English word *truth* and thereby attribute a concept of truth to the Nahua. Briefly put: why translate *neltiliztli* as the English word *truth* in the first place? Why think the Nahua even had a concept of truth? The evidence favoring our translating *neltiliztli* as the English word *truth over and above* "well-rootedness-cum-*alethia*" is less than conclusive, as is, therefore, the evidence favoring the hypothesis that the Nahuas had a distinct concept of truth over and above the concept of well-rootedness-cum-*alethia*. Why, then, introduce the notion of truth into our discussion of Nahua philosophy?

Are there any reasons that favor resisting this introduction? Translating *neltiliztli* as well-rootedness-cum-*alethia simpliciter* is much clearer and more straightforward. The concept of *neltiliztli* appears to be nonsemantic, whereas our own concept of truth as correspondence

is semantic. Unlike truth as correspondence, *neltiliztli* is not concerned with representing, aboutness, matching, fitting, describing, or depicting. The concept of *neltiliztli* is not logically equivalent to our own concept of truth understood as correspondence. Indeed, *neltiliztli* seems quite alien from our concept of truth. Thus, I submit that truth-talk simply muddies the waters. Translating *neltiliztli* as truth contributes more to our misunderstanding than it does to our understanding of Nahua thought. The less confusing course would seem to be to translate *neltiliztli* as well-rootedness-cum-*alethia* and drop completely all talk about truth. I also worry that translating *neltiliztli* as truth and in so doing attributing a concept of truth to pre-Hispanic Nahua amounts to a projection of Western philosophical notions on pre-Hispanic Nahua thought. This worry is supported by the fact that Western-style semantic truth fits so poorly with the larger body of Nahua thought.

Surely, the fact that *neltiliztli* has been translated as truth since the Conquest is inconclusive. Translation is, after all, an exceedingly complex, normative, and interpretive endeavor, and in their search for a Spanish equivalent possessing the same role as well as degree of significance, centrality, and ultimacy that *neltiliztli* carries in Nahua thought, I worry that the early European Dominican translators-interpreters (along with their native Nahuatl-speaking assistants) rejected *raiz* ("rootedness") in favor of *verdad* ("truth"). Correspondence truth is historically one of the most central concepts of Western religion, philosophy, and epistemology, and it is both natural and intuitive for those schooled in this tradition to believe that truth must be central to all other religious and philosophical traditions as well. Indeed, a non-truth-centered epistemology may well be nigh inconceivable to such people. With this presupposition in tow, early translators-interpreters set out to find a Nahuatl concept with which to match the Western concept of truth. They found rootedness and accordingly translated it as truth. The fact that most of the early Dominican translators-interpreters were apparently motivated by what we now call "a principle of charity"—that is, a desire to portray indigenous Mesoamericans as similar as possible to Europeans so as to convince secular colonial authorities that they deserved the moral treatment and consideration accorded to human beings—lends additional credence to this hypothesis.

In conclusion, I submit that we have ample grounds for resisting translating *neltiliztli* as truth in favor of well-rootedness-cum-*alethia*. The Nahua thus lacked a concept of truth. And if they lacked a concept of truth, veritism cannot be universally true.

CONCLUSION

Sixteenth-century Nahua philosophy offers us compelling, a posteriori grounds for denying veritism since it represents an exception to both the universality of correspondence (semantic) truth and the universal centrality of correspondence (semantic) truth to epistemology. The Nahua conceived truth and knowing nonsemantically in terms of a complex notion consisting of well-rootedness, *alethia*, moral righteousness, beauty, keeping one's balance, making one's way, and authenticity. Indeed, I submit that Nahua epistemology and veritistic epistemology are fundamentally incommensurable and thus represent two genuinely alternative epistemologies. Nahua philosophy also dramatically exposes the localness and ethnocentrism of many of our own philosophical views. In so doing, it illustrates the pitfalls involved in generalizing from our domestic philosophical folkways to those of others.

It is difficult for veritists to dismiss Nahua philosophy's exception to veritism since its nonveritism is organically interwoven with its metaphysics, philosophy of language, epistemology, and defining philosophical problematic. One cannot meaningfully discuss the Nahua's notion of truth without also discussing their notions of reality, language, knowledge, and the aim motivating philosophical inquiry. Veritism's semantic conceptions of truth and knowledge make little if any sense in conjunction with the extreme monism, processualism, and antirealism of Nahua metaphysics; the pragmatic-cum-moral-cum-aesthetic character of Nahua truth and knowing; and the participatory-performative character of the Nahua spoken word.

Therefore, while Aristotle may be correct when asserting that all humans desire to know, he and his followers overlook the fact that not all humans desire to *know what* the truth is. Many such as the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of Mexico at the time of the Conquest desire to *know how* to walk truly on the slippery surface of the earth.

NOTES

1. See Goldman (1992, 1999).
2. See Goldman (1992, 156; 1999, 32). In both works, Goldman seeks to naturalize normative and meta-level epistemic inquiry. Goldman (1999) appeals to anthropological studies cited in an earlier work of mine in which I defended the universal truth of veritism; see James Maffie, "Towards an Anthropology of Epistemology," *Philosophical Forum* 26 (3): 218-41 (1995). I now reject the universal truth of veritism for the reasons offered below.
3. For discussion of Nahuatl, Nahua history and culture, and our sources for studying Conquest-era Nahua culture, see Robert M. Carmack, Janine Gasco, and Gary H. Gosen, eds., *The Legacy of Mesoamerica: History and Culture of a Native American Civilization* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996).
4. *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs*, translated with introduction and commentary by John Bierhorst (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985); R. Joe Campbell, personal correspondence; Willard Gingerich, "Heidegger and the Aztecs: The Poetics of Knowing in Pre-Hispanic Nahuatl Poetry," in *Recovering the Third World: Essays on Native American Literature*, edited by B. Swann and A. Krupat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987): 85-112; Francis Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983); Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind*, translated by Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).
5. Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, 8. I have translated and added within brackets portions of the original text omitted by Davis.
6. *Cantares Mexicanos*, fol.10 r., translation by Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 282.
7. *Cantares Mexicanos*, fol.11 v., translation by Leon-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets*, 228.
8. *Romances de los senores de Nueva Espana*, fol.35 r., translation by Leon-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets*, 83.
9. *Cantares Mexicanos*, fol.10r., translation by Leon-Portilla, *Fifteen Poets*, 221.
10. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1949).
11. Alvin Goldman, "Replies to Reviews of Knowledge in a Social World," *Social Epistemology* 14, no. 4 (2000): 320.
12. See Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, eds., *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerican and the Andes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).
13. John Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 13ff.
14. Quoted in Gingerich, "Heidegger and the Aztecs," 106.
15. See Alfredo Lopez Austin, *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, translated by Thelma Ortiz de Montellano and Bernard Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), vol. I, pp. 258ff., and vol. II, pp. 245, 298; Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*.
16. Translation by Michael Launey, quoted in Louise Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 58.
17. Fray Bernardino de Sahagun, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, edited and translated by Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles Dibble (Santa Fe:

School of American Research and University of Utah, 1953-82), vol. 6, p. 228, translation by Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*.

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