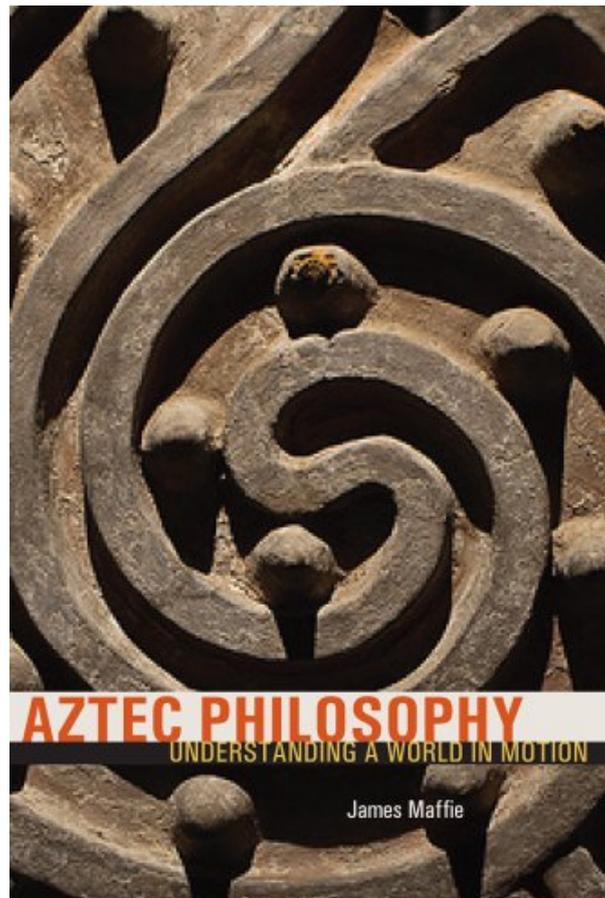
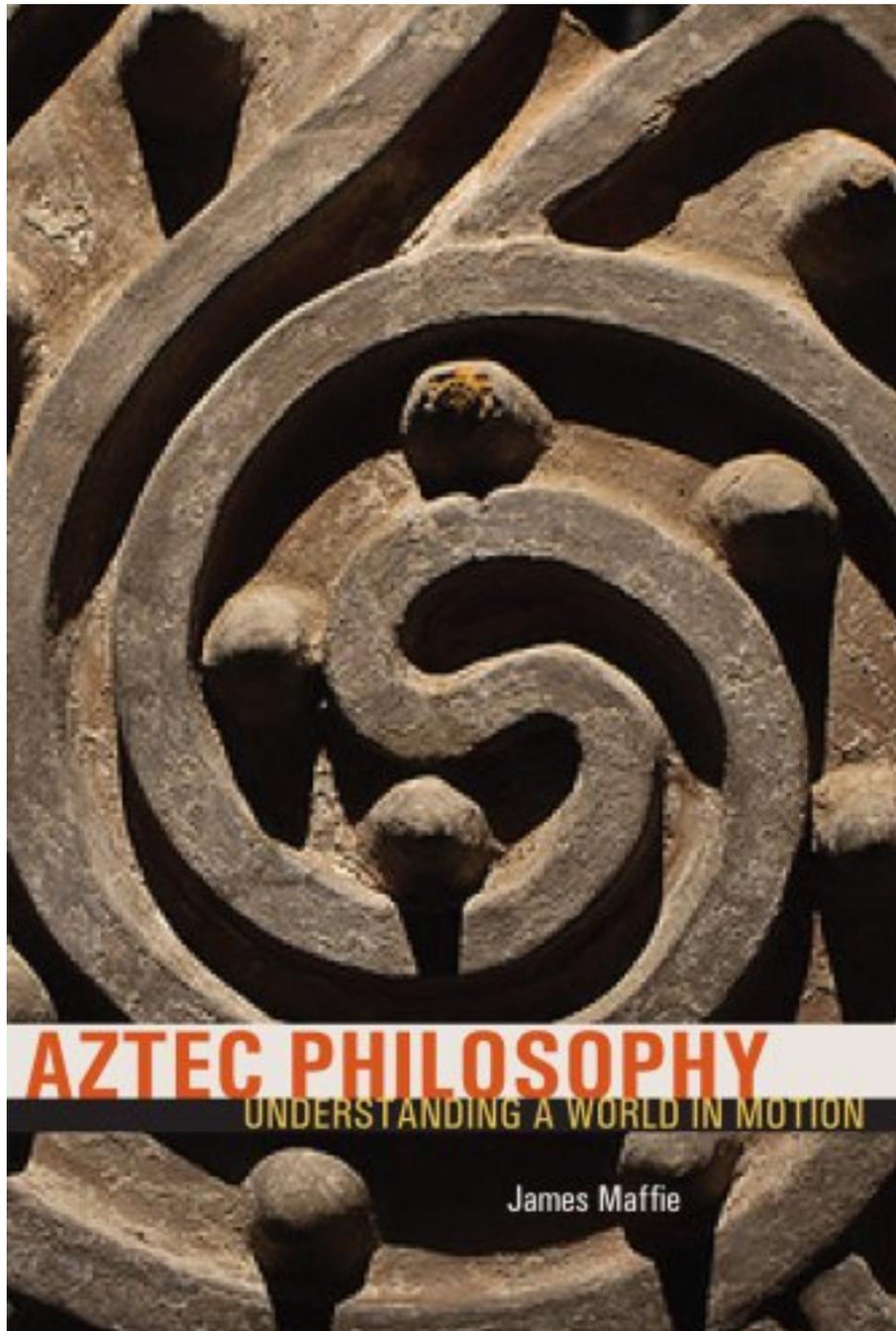


# AZTEC PHILOSOPHY: UNDERSTANDING A WORLD IN MOTION BY JAMES MAFFIE



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In Aztec Philosophy, James Maffie shows the Aztecs advanced a highly sophisticated and internally coherent systematic philosophy worthy of consideration alongside other philosophies from around the world. Bringing together the fields of comparative world philosophy and Mesoamerican studies, Maffie excavates the distinctly philosophical aspects of Aztec thought.

Aztec Philosophy focuses on the ways Aztec metaphysics—the Aztecs' understanding of the nature, structure and constitution of reality—underpinned Aztec thinking about wisdom, ethics, politics, and aesthetics, and served as a backdrop for Aztec religious practices as well as everyday activities such as weaving, farming, and warfare. Aztec metaphysicians conceived reality and cosmos as a grand, ongoing process of weaving—theirs was a world in motion. Drawing upon linguistic, ethnohistorical, archaeological, historical, and contemporary ethnographic evidence, Maffie argues that Aztec metaphysics maintained a processive, transformational, and non-hierarchical view of reality, time, and existence along with a pantheistic theology.

Aztec Philosophy will be of great interest to Mesoamericanists, philosophers, religionists, folklorists, and Latin Americanists as well as students of indigenous philosophy, religion, and art of the Americas.

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#### Most helpful customer reviews

16 of 18 people found the following review helpful.

The most important book on "Aztec" philosophy. Period.

By Nican Tlaca

The bar has been raised by James Maffie's 512-page tour of "Aztec" (i.e. Nahua/Mexica) philosophy. This book is a clear and enlightening look into one of the world's most profound – and profoundly misunderstood – systems of thought. A philosopher trained in the Western canon, Maffie deliberately uses Western philosophical methods to approach and explain the complex philosophy of the Mexica (a.k.a. the Aztecs) in

terms that we can understand. What Linda Schele did for Maya epigraphy, James Maffie now does for Aztec philosophy.

The result is a work that clears away the New Age fantasies and Christian-colonial distortions of modern culture, revealing an Indigenous perspective that explained reality in terms of motion-processes (“ceaseless becomings and transformations”). This contrasts with Western philosophy’s focus on fixed states.

Whereas Western philosophy rests upon the foundation of Plato’s unchanging Forms as the ultimate reality, Mexica-Aztec philosophy embraced ambiguity, transformation, and the “objectively sacred” reality of everyday life (as opposed to the “degenerate” everyday world of Plato and Christianity).

One of the book’s major achievements is in its examination and explanation of the concept of “teotl”, a Mexica-Aztec metaphysical idea that explained the ultimate nature of reality. Using a variety of historical sources, Maffie demonstrates how teotl represents the “sacred energy” that literally constitutes the “Time-Place” of reality and ceaselessly transforms the universe (and all things within it).

--Note #1: When Maffie speaks of teotl as “energy”, he means it in the same way that physicists do: a physical, empirically-based force (as opposed to the imaginary “energy” of New Age pseudoscience).

--Note #2: When Maffie speaks of teotl as “sacred”, he states it is “Objectively Sacred”: its physical power is essential to our everyday life, undeniable, and an endless source of awe and terror.

There are no actual “Aztec gods” then. Instead, there are what Maffie describes as naming conventions for objective processes and process-clusters. Maffie argues that the Mexica-Aztecs were not polytheistic, but pantheistic and that their philosophy was animistic (viewing the universe as alive with objectively-sacred power). This false idea of “Aztec gods” is a distortion invented by early Spanish missionaries who misinterpreted the Mexica-Aztec world through the lens of the Greco-Roman pantheon of gods. This notion of European-style “gods” is in reality a kaleidoscope view of a single Teotl-reality, as perceived through the limitations of human understanding. What Europeans took to be “Aztec gods” were really just another form of philosophical notation, incomprehensible to the Western mind (this incomprehension continues to this very day).

Teotl, then, is the the creative/destructive energy-in-motion (hence, the sub-title of the book) which at once comprises the universe, as well as transforms it through distinct patterns. Teotl’s dynamic power manifests through what Maffie calls “agonistic inamics”, or the endless complement-tensions between primordial dualities (e.g. Life and Death, Male and Female, Order and Chaos, etc.) Maffie compares this to the Chinese concept of Qi, the Zen concept of Tao, and the Polynesian idea of “Mana”.

The metaphysical patterns of this dualistic-dynamism (teotl) are classified by Maffie in a threefold “taxonomy” (the second major achievement of this book): Olin (bouncing/pulsing movement); Malinalli (“twisting energy”); and Nepantla (“weaving-the-universe”). These three metaphysical patterns “define the dynamics of reality and of the Aztec cosmos”, according to Maffie. They are represented across Mexica-Aztec culture as ordering principles of teotl (and thus, reality). Maffie does an excellent job of relating these patterns to Mexica-Aztec astronomy and what he calls the “Sun-Earth-Ordering” of the universe (his explanation of the so-called “Aztec Calendar” is fascinating).

Specifically, Olin describes the oscillations of solar time-movement, and Malinalli describes the “twistings” of physical energy transferences between major Life/Death cycles and “layers” of the universe.

The third pattern, Nepantla (“weaving”), literally creates the “Time-Place” fabric of the universe. The

Nepantla as weaving-the-universe metaphor was so important that it literally elevated the value of cloth, cloaks, and sacred bundles across “Mesoamerica”. This Nepantla-weaving process cannot be understated in its importance and forms a major theme throughout Maffie's book. “The cosmos is a grand weaving-in-progress”, and “Teotl is the weaver”. This profoundly determined everything to the Mexica-Aztec philosophical mind.

In summary, the author shows the Mexica-Aztecs to be orderly thinkers of a world-class caliber who described the universe as processes-in-motion (in contrast to the Western tendency of focusing on fixed and ideal states). Whereas Western philosophy considers the unchanging to be “real”, Mexica-Aztec philosophy sees reality as something that is never really fixed, but always in motion, always becoming. Maffie peels away the Eurocentric distortions of the Spanish conquistadors (and New Age pseudoscience of modern culture) to reveal a rational, orderly philosophy that challenges our modern worldview to its core.

This book builds and improves upon previous works by Miguel Leon-Portilla, Barbara and Dennis Tedlock, Roberta and Peter Markman, and – in my opinion – “Native American Studies” scholar Jack D. Forbes. Students of Comparative World Philosophy will find this to be a must-have addition to their collections. The author has made a significant contribution to the field with this work, sure to affect the future of “Mesoamerican Studies (if not Andean Studies as well). As one scholarly review put it, “This book is a game-changer.”

I challenge you to find a more logical and better-researched book on this subject.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

"A Landmark Contribution"

By Julie Greene

Here's an excellent, thorough review of Jim Maffie's Aztec Philosophy by philosopher Robert Sanchez, published in the journal Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: "In this comprehensive study, James Maffie offers much more than an introduction to Aztec philosophy. For the reader unfamiliar with the Náhuatl-speaking people of the Central Valley of Mexico, whose capital Tenochtitlan was conquered by Hernán Cortés in 1521, Aztec Philosophy offers a close examination of Nahua life, thought, and culture; for the anthropologist and Mesoamericanist, it offers a philosophical lens through which to examine and evaluate standard interpretations of Aztec life and society; for the student of philosophy, it reconstructs a systematic and coherent worldview and provides enough material to pursue graduate level research; and for any reader, it is a model of how to bring multiple disciplines to bear on a topic that is beyond the scope of any one discipline." And the review concludes: "...Maffie has done us all a great service. His book is not only a landmark contribution to comparative philosophy, which cuts across multiple disciplines and multiple philosophies -- there are more than 1800 footnotes, a massive number for a philosophy text -- but I suspect that it is also a landmark contribution to philosophy, insofar as it provides us with a necessary resource to start questioning whether there is a difference between philosophy and comparative philosophy."

[http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/53017-aztec-philosophy-understanding-a-world-in-motion/?utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/53017-aztec-philosophy-understanding-a-world-in-motion/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter)

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Five Stars

By John Enyeart

Maffie's creative use of sources and brilliant insights have forever changed how we will understand the Aztecs.

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