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Discourses of the Elders: The Aztec Huehuetlatolli: A First English Translation

Translated by Sebastian Purcell

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Sebastian Purcell's translation of the *The Aztec Huehuetlatolli* is a timely addition to the philosophical canon. Before any comment on the text's actual content and its pedagogical value, it is essential to highlight its existence as invaluable. It is trivial to state, but it must always be reinforced, that the text emerges from a tradition that has a longstanding history of marginalization. That corpus was at best investigated as a cultural or artistic expression but largely ignored as a source for ideas at the same footing as classical Western philosophical texts. To this extent praise must be given to Purcell not only for the initiative to facilitate and enable the translation, but also for advancing a broader philosophical conversation by drawing parallels between classic philosophy and the way analogous themes appear in the discourses. This is done in a manner that does not subjugate the discourses to a traditional conceptualization of the terms, trying to reduce the complexity of the Aztec worldview to fit western standards, but the two corpuses are put on an equal footing. The parallels are drawn exclusively where they are possible and where it is not possible, Purcell highlights this difference, hence allowing for plural approaches to coexist without one conditioning the other.

Regarding the content, the texts are a collection of discourses on how one is expected to behave in Aztec society. It collects a series of teachings passed across generations. Each section is characterized by the nature of the dynamic between the orator and its audience. These range from differences in gender, power status, age and even number. For example, some are about the relationship between a father and his child, and others are between the leader and its collective. To this extent, the discourses serve as normative guidelines covering a wide scope of a person's life. It covers both the different functions one might have in society and the different periods of one's life.

The first challenge highlighted by Purcell, central to our review, is the question of translation. In his introductory text, Purcell reflects on whether these teachings constitute an ethical or moral tractate. This reflection is fundamental because we find it to be the underlying question of how to approach a corpus that is not modeled or framed in the categories "Western" philosophical texts commonly are. In such a context, the question of translation refers to something beyond the simple exercise of pairing words in a foreign language to the words in the target language; rather, it refers to the capacity of bridging between words and worlds. The perception that there is a degree of dissonance between the two worlds is both a challenge, but also

its utmost value since the importance in such engagement emerges precisely from it being unreachable.

From a pedagogical lens, this is an important text for teaching philosophy: it offers a window into a mode of education, transmission, and memory. Furthermore, it offers an opportune frame to approach the question of translation itself, given this question pervades the text. The main challenge the book provides for teaching philosophy is the fact that it is not set for pedagogical purposes. Purcell does not offer guidance on how to approach the text or how to use it in a teaching environment. This is both a limitation, since it demands work from the educator, but also an advantage since the teacher is presented with a wide range of possibilities that are not set by the way the text is framed. To this extent, the text can be employed for several purposes. We will highlight some in the following.

The presence of Christian motifs, and marks of the colonial encounter, remind us of the wider context: this text probably emerged from an attempt to catechise native populations, from a logic of understanding with a goal of domination or subjugation (li–lii). The shadow of this encounter permeates the translation, which is ultimately a translation of a translation, hinting at the messiness involved in crossing epistemic borders, and the hollowness of seeing this text as a rendering of a “pure” or “original” culture. While we cannot comment authoritatively on the translation as we are not familiar with Nahuatl, this is partly irrelevant, given that it is the inevitable impurity of the text, product of its context, that is arguably one of its key values. Turning to this source is not a return to a preserved worldview, but a confrontation with the complexity of interaction. We are invited towards humility, or as a mother instructs her daughter in the text, “One’s word is not something that can be bought” (28).

The importance of the text as a tool for critical reflection on colonialism and exploitation comes from its challenge to a notion of a noble savage who exists beyond the contact with colonization. Such a reading does not dismiss the violence and oppression in this dynamic, but it invites an alternative reflection on its undoing, and a reimagination of the landscape of philosophy.

The discourses teach of an expanded view of wisdom, found in books, in colour, in earth. There are several sections where Purcell highlights the confluence between the teachings of the discourses and tenets of classic philosophy. For example, even though the term virtue might not have a direct translation, Purcell highlights that it plays the same role in the Aztec ethics as it does in classic philosophy. Purcell highlights how in both cases virtue is constructed as a non-consequentialist normativity. In both cases, it concerns not a specific action or motive but the general character of the agent.

To this extent, the common ground charted by Purcell also invites a reflection about the terminology used in classical philosophy. The notion of virtue has its etymological roots in virility and hence it has been historically associated with conceptions of masculinity and heroism. The discourses

therefore allow for an introspection into that construction and perhaps the possibility of charting another configuration. Purcell suggests that unlike the notion of virtue that is developed in ancient philosophy where traits like courage and justice might be conflicting, in the discourses those attributes serve as complementary or are even combined into a larger account of virtuous action (x–xi). In the discourses, a virtuous posture is not one that navigates between conflicting possibilities of virtue but rather one that conciliates between different elements of virtue. This contrast between the two perspectives is a crucial perspective developed by the translator and could be the object of analysis in pedagogical environments. Such a practice of contrast can allow educators to generate encounters or re-encounters of philosophies, with the view of contesting, rethinking and perhaps even expanding key concepts within them. Take the notion of will or selfhood. Purcell highlights that the reflective mode that contemplates selfhood does not function in the same way. He refers to the notion of *nehuiyqn*, a mode of referring to oneself (147). This construction is a mode of selfhood that does not entail a will. Therefore it is not a form of self-determination that entails a mode of self-governing. For example, Purcell highlights that self-formation is an act of habituation, not a form of self-creation as if to “pull oneself by one’s bootstraps,” or to “optimise and improve one’s self.” The Nahua account of the individual is one that becomes used to being oneself. Within Nahua cosmological grammar, the notion of will appears to be not individual but collective; agency is always a shared agency. The individual does not act alone (xxii).

This could be developed into an interesting classroom reflection on what it is to be someone. The assumption of individuality, integrality and continuity can be interesting to question. This can be particularly relevant when teaching a heterogeneous cohort of schoolchildren. For example, a reflection on what makes someone into something could be an interesting teaching activity since it is bound to wield hugely different responses. Inviting students to think through the Discourses’ invocations of reverence for other beings when discussing issues of government, can invite towards more imaginative conversations on what a more ecological politics may look like today. Many of the text’s core themes—age, childhood, elderhood, teaching and transitions—speak very directly to often unspoken assumptions within educational settings. The use of *difrasismos* and hybridisms throughout the text, while specific to a Mesoamerican context, can also provoke thought around analogous linguistic metaphors and hybridities in other linguistic contexts. *Difrasismos* are a way of expressing an idea by metaphorically employing two key terms to that notion: two separate words are paired together to form a single metaphoric unit. For example, the expression “the mat, the seat” stands for the notion of authority (xxix).

Highlighting the Aztec perspective in this context is important not just as a practice of transforming the canon as it was highlighted above but also as a demonstration of the plurality of possible philosophies, at every scale. As

much as one might try it is impossible to fully account for the multiplicity of philosophical worlds. The presentation of the Aztec discourses may seem like a small addition to what is a wider scope of possibilities, but it invariably demonstrates the possibility of another canon, whether for philosophy itself, for a collective, or for a person. The educational value of teaching that there are no univocal perspectives on key topics is already an immense pedagogical development. To teach that even though people thought in a certain way, it is possible to think differently, is in itself a valuable lesson. More importantly, this text invites us to think and teach not that specific modes of thought agree or disagree with another, as if they were in competition or as if the purpose of learning was epistemic victory, but to teach that modes of thought can merely coexist. That is, to teach that it is possible to coexist in difference.

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The Epistemology of Fake News

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Social media inundates college students these days with data, information, and opinions about all manner of things. Their so-called “smart” phones plug them into the world of appearances. Social media—Facebook, TikTok, X (formerly known as Twitter), YouTube—is the platform for today’s young person to interact with the world in ways that we Gen X folks might only have imagined as a scene in the 1960s television sci-fi series *Star Trek*. The proliferation of data, stories, and news on social media is akin to a tidal wave that just keeps coming and doesn’t ever let up. Such an environment is fit for the epistemologist whose concern for discerning knowledge is at the forefront of checking all that students face on social media.

But young people are not the only ones affected by social media; we have all been lured into its web of entertainment, deceit, conspiracy theories, as well as the genuine information that does exist out there. In short, media, be it social, television, radio, newspapers, internet, is a jungle. Epistemology is a guide that helps us navigate the jungle to avoid deep holes, sandpits, dangerous animals, and the Svengali.

Epistemology is one of the most important areas not only in the philosophy curriculum but also in the entire university curriculum. It teaches students first and foremost how to critique beliefs, their own and those of others. It sets a standard by which students can discriminate the genuine from the bogus and provides subtleties for gauging knowledge of difficult