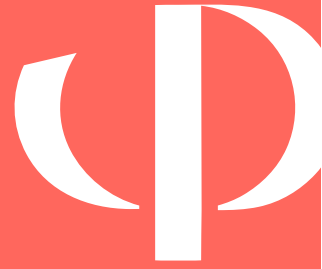


Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy



SPRING 2017

VOLUME 16 | NUMBER 2

FROM THE EDITOR

Carlos Alberto Sánchez

CALLS FOR SUBMISSIONS

DISCUSSION

José-Antonio Orosco

The Solace of Mexican Philosophy in the Age of Trump

Susana Nuccetelli

Repealing Obamacare: An Injustice to Hispanics

José Jorge Mendoza

Latinx and the Future of Whiteness in American Democracy

ESSAYS

L. Sebastian Purcell

Winner, Essay Prize in Latin American Thought: Eudaimonia and Neltiliztli: Aristotle and the Aztecs on the Good Life

Manuel Bolom Pale, edited and translated by Carlos Alberto Sánchez

Tsotsil Epistemology: An Intangible Inheritance

Mario Teodoro Ramírez, translated by Carlos Alberto Sánchez

Luis Villoro: Universal Mexican Philosopher

Django Runyan

In Search of the Philosophical Impulse: Zea and the Greeks

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS



APA NEWSLETTER ON

Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy

CARLOS ALBERTO SÁNCHEZ, EDITOR

VOLUME 16 | NUMBER 2 | SPRING 2017

FROM THE EDITOR

Carlos Alberto Sánchez
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

Although the present issue of the newsletter is not arranged around a singular theme—something we have done in the past—the issue is, nonetheless, a *special* issue. Included here is the winner of the 2016 APA's Essay Prize in Latin American Thought, L. Sebastian Purcell; two papers by contemporary Mexican philosophers, Mario Teodoro Ramírez and Manuel Bolom Pale, writing on Luis Villoro and Indigenous *Tsotsil* philosophy, respectively; and, more relevant to our current political situation, three discussion pieces by three established members of the Hispanic/Latinx philosophical community in the U.S., José-Antonio Orosco, Susana Nuccetelli, and José Jorge Mendoza.

We begin with our discussion pieces: in the first, José-Antonio Orosco reflects on what the election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency of the United States means for us. In the second, Susana Nuccetelli argues against the Trump administration's vow to repeal the Affordable Care Act (a.k.a., Obamacare). She writes that "no morally acceptable reason" can justify the repeal. In the final discussion piece, José Jorge Mendoza reflects on the future of Whiteness in American democracy in the context of the election of Donald Trump. He argues that, unlike the common opinion, and as the 2016 election showed, Whiteness will figure out a way to coopt certain sectors of the Latinx electorate so as to preserve its supremacy.

While the current political landscape might provoke its fair share of existential dread, especially amongst us Hispanics/Latinx, it's safe to say that we will continue with the important work of diversifying and enriching the philosophical curriculum for future generations. A case in point is Sebastian Purcell's prize-winning essay, which places Aztec philosophy in a very fruitful conversation with Aristotle. Sebastian Purcell considers the Aztec conception of the good life, *neltiliztli*. According to Purcell, "like Aristotelian *eudaimonia* or 'flourishing,' the Aztec understanding of *neltiliztli* functioned to justify concerns about action guidance, and so was conceptually prior to an account of the right. Unlike the Aristotelian conception, however, they did not hold that there was an internal relation between pleasure and the good life, understood as *neltiliztli*. The implications suggest that the Aztecs had a sort of virtue ethics, which has so far gone unrecognized in any study of Aztec philosophy."

Deepening our connection to the Mexican indigenous philosophical tradition, the essay by Manuel Bolom Pale, translated here for the first time, introduces the concept of *Tsotsil* epistemology. Bolom Pale, himself *Maya tsotsil* from the region of Chiapas, defines and explains certain terms in *Tsotsil* cultural life that seek to capture significant philosophical insights. These insights, in turn, are meant to structure *Tsotsil* cultural, religious, and political life while, simultaneously, serving as guides for the construction of *Tsotsil* subjectivity.

From Michoacán, Mario Teodoro Ramírez gives us an authoritative philosophical portrait of the great Mexican philosopher Luis Villoro. Ramírez, who oversees the Institute of Philosophical Investigations "Luis Villoro" at the Universidad Michoacána San Nicolás, accesses the vast archive at his disposal to provide an outline of Villoro's many and significant contributions to philosophy, ethics, and politics. This essay is also translated here for the first time.

In the final paper, Django Runyan reflects on Leopoldo Zea's connections to the Greeks, to the origins of philosophy itself. Runyan finds in Zea a deep appreciation of philosophy's roots and an almost obsessive impulse to return to those roots.

In all, the present issue of the newsletter aims both to connect us to the immediacy of our current social anxieties (in the Discussion section) and to remind us about the important work yet to be done in the history of our own philosophy. That is, it exemplifies those two impulses that characterize our calling as Latinx philosophers in the Americas: the impulse to advocate and be activists for causes that matter to our community, and the impulse for rigorous research into our own traditions.

CALLS FOR SUBMISSIONS

2017 ESSAY PRIZE IN LATIN AMERICAN THOUGHT

The APA Committee on Hispanics cordially invites submissions for the 2017 Essay Prize in Latin American Thought, which is awarded to the author of the best unpublished, English-language, philosophical essay in Latin American philosophy/thought. The purpose of this prize is to encourage fruitful work in this area. Eligible essays must contain original arguments and broach philosophical topics clearly related to the specific experiences of Hispanic Americans and Latinos. The winning essay will be published in this newsletter.

A cash prize accompanies the award along with the opportunity to present the prize-winning essay at an upcoming divisional meeting. Information regarding submissions can be found at http://www.apaonline.org/?latin_american. Please consider submitting your work and encourage colleagues or students to do the same. Feel free to pass this information along to anyone who may be interested. The submission deadline is June 5, 2017.

The committee is also soliciting papers or panel suggestions for next year's APA three divisional meetings. The deadline for APA Eastern meeting committee session requests is rapidly approaching, so please send any ideas to Grant Silva (grant.silva@marquette.edu), who will relay these suggestions to the rest of the committee.

FALL 2017 NEWSLETTER

The APA Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy is accepting contributions for the fall 2017 issue. Our readers are encouraged to submit original work on any topic related to Hispanic/Latino thought, broadly construed. We publish original, scholarly treatments, as well as reflections, book reviews, and interviews. Please prepare articles for anonymous review.

All submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Electronic submissions are preferred. All submissions should be limited to 5,000 words (twenty double-spaced pages) and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and *The Chicago Manual of Style* formatting. All articles submitted to the newsletter undergo anonymous review by members of the Committee on Hispanics.

BOOK REVIEWS

Book reviews in any area of Hispanic/Latino philosophy, broadly construed, are welcome. Submissions should be accompanied by a short biographical summary of the author. Book reviews may be short (500 words) or long (1,500 words). Electronic submissions are preferred.

DEADLINES

Deadline for spring issue is November 15. Authors should expect a decision by January 15. Deadline for the fall issue is April 15. Authors should expect a decision by June 15.

Please send all articles, book reviews, queries, comments, or suggestions electronically to the editor,

Carlos Alberto Sánchez, at carlos.sanchez@sjsu.edu, or by post: Department of Philosophy
San Jose State University
One Washington Sq.
San Jose, CA 95192-0096

FORMATTING GUIDELINES

The APA Newsletters adhere to *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use italics instead of underlining. Use an "em dash" (—) instead of a double hyphen (--). Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style: John Rawls,

A Theory of Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 90. See Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?" *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

DISCUSSION

The Solace of Mexican Philosophy in the Age of Trump

José-Antonio Orosco

OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

In *Mexico Profundo*, or *Deep Mexico*, Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla argued that the lives and experiences of ordinary Mexicans living in rural areas and poor urban neighborhoods in Mexican cities continue to be rooted in Mesoamerican civilizations. Their understandings of work, community obligation, health, time, and harmonious coexistence, he maintained, form a connection to indigenous folkways that go back to pre-Columbian societies. Most Mexicans may not recognize these habits, or themselves, as indigenous, especially since the Mexican state has gone to great lengths to "de-Indianize" Mexican national identity.¹ But the everyday experiences of many Mexican people are shaped by these much older cultures and practices lying deep underneath the modern ways of life.

I was thinking about Mexican thinkers such as Bonfil, as well as other Mexican philosophers, when I walked to the university the day after the Trump electoral victory. My first appointment that day was with a Chicana student who explained, in an emotionally tired voice, that she had been up all night with her parents who were trying to determine what sorts of work they might be able to find if they were deported back to Mexico. I saw some of my colleagues in the hallways and later learned that a few of them had broken down crying in front of their classes. A Muslim student, later in the day, told me he had been on the phone with friends all night, gauging their fear; one of them admitted to him that calls to suicide hotlines were overwhelming some centers in the area and they were having to put people on hold. After my class on Latin American philosophy in the afternoon, an African-American student came to my office and admitted he was deeply worried about what his younger sibling was going to do growing up in this environment. Throughout the whole day, my social media feeds filled up with friends expressing amazement, disgust, and the feeling that they did not understand their country anymore.

The work of José Vasconcelos helped me not to be shocked. In his 1925 work *The Cosmic Race*, he described what he considered to be the main cultural differences between North and Latin America—the profound U.S. and the profound Latin America, particularly Mexico. He argued if you wanted to understand the modern history of these two Americas, you have to go back and look at the differences in their modes of settler colonialism. These formative

experiences created deep grooves and patterns into the culture and political development of the two societies that continue to shape the habits and practices of modern life.

In North America, according to Vasconcelos, the white settlers envisioned the continent as a utopia for themselves, a place to venerate the accomplishments of English culture, and proceeded to exclude or exterminate nonwhite populations. In the North you found “the confessed or tacit intention of cleaning the earth of Indians, Mongolians [sic], or Blacks, for the greater glory and fortune of the Whites.”² This vision of white utopia propelled the extension of the United States all the way across the West. It also grounded legislation that excluded Asians from immigrating or from most civic life in places like California, propped up the Jim Crow segregation in the South, and the Juan Crow segregation in the Southwest that Vasconcelos directly experienced while he attended high school in Eagle Pass, Texas. He surmised: “The English kept on mixing only with the whites and annihilated the natives. Even today, they continue to annihilate them in a sordid and economic fight, more efficient yet than armed conquest.”³

Terrance MacMullan’s work, *Habits of Whiteness*, corroborates Vasconcelos’s view that North American white supremacy originates in the colonial experience of the United States.⁴ MacMullan points to the Bacon Rebellion of 1676 as the catalyst moment in which Europeans started to think of themselves as “white” with special privileges in civil society. When poor frontier farmers revolted against the landed plantation gentry, the latter responded by promulgating new laws that established a white identity and limited the liberties of those classified as non-white, namely, Native Americans and Africans. Thus, the richer plantation owners were able to reduce dissatisfaction with their regime by convincing the poorer farmers and white indentured servants that they all actually formed a natural community of interest around their racial identity and that African slaves and Native Americans were the real threats to their well-being.

For Vasconcelos, what distinguished Latin America from the Northern settler colonialism was the way in which racial integration and miscegenation had become more acceptable in Spanish society. White supremacy still reigned, but the particular features of social and political life made the development of a variety of mixed racial identities possible (indeed, during the Spanish and Portuguese colonial period, places like Mexico and Brazil recognized *hundreds* of possible racial identities and combinations).⁵ Founding figures in Latin American independence during the nineteenth century, from Simón Bolívar and José Morelos, all recognized that Latin American republics would have to contend with multi-racial identity and the abolition of race-based slavery and caste in order to succeed and be stable.⁶ Vasconcelos did not believe that race-based discrimination had been eliminated in Latin America, but merely that the image of a white utopia never took root as deeply as it did in the North.

What made me think of Vasconcelos in the context of the Trump victory is that he identified white supremacy as part of the profound United States—that is, as part of the deep

tendencies that lie underneath modern society in North America. According to Vasconcelos, the United States has learned very well how to develop over time the practices and institutional policies of exclusion, marginalization, and eradication of non-white peoples; these are the ready-to-hand tools that are reached for in moments of fear and crisis for white Americans.

Trump’s campaign reached deep into *los estadounidenses profundo*—the deep white supremacist toolbox. Voting data reveals that, overwhelmingly, a majority of white people—men and women, rural and suburban, educated and non-educated alike—felt called to defend a society that Trump described as under attack by Mexicans, Muslims, and urban Blacks. Despite his misogyny and promises to undo reproductive rights, most white women felt summoned to protect that deep United States vision now in ways they did not just eight or even four years ago when they turned out for a Black president. This is not to say that all white people, or even the majority of white people who voted for Trump, have particular racial animus toward non-white people. I think what Vasconcelos would say is that these voters heeded the dogwhistle of white supremacy—the appeal to return to center and to keep menacing peoples at bay—that lies deep in U.S. culture and is turned on when times are uncertain in order to solidify a certain power base.

And it is this part of Vasconcelos’s analysis that keeps me from paralyzing despair. It means that what happened with the Trump victory should not be understood as something new, something unexpected, or strangely out of place. It is something profoundly American. That doesn’t mean it isn’t something to worry about, and that some groups shouldn’t now worry about their safety and security; but it is a reaction that has happened time and time again in U.S. history from the very beginning of our founding. To think that the habits of whiteness were eradicated with a decade-long Civil Rights movement and that eight years of a Black president have ushered us into a post-racial society is to naively underestimate *los estadounidenses profundo*.

Vasconcelos offered a way forward. *The Cosmic Race* is an attempt to sketch an alternative to the white utopia of the United States: a cosmopolitan world in which our racial categories would no longer work because there would be so much interbreeding that the ordinary person would be profoundly mixed. It would be a place in which each person would see a part of themselves in others, racially speaking, and parts of others in themselves. Racism would become an irrational kind of self-hatred. The new religion of such a community would be based in faith that emphasized love and compassion for one another. The politics would be socialist—a world in which everyone had an ability to participate in decisions, and goods are distributed according to need.

There are many problems with Vasconcelos’s utopia of the Cosmic Race. The history and politics of racial mixing in Mexico and the rest of Latin America is fraught with lingering effects of racism toward indigenous and African populations. Vasconcelos glosses over these events in order to sharpen his contrast between North and Latin America. And he doesn’t offer very much in terms of institution

building—beyond hand waving at love and socialism, he doesn't say much about what kinds of structures need to be put in place to build a world that stands up to the power of the white supremacist utopia.

But what Vasconcelos aspires to is thinking about the history and politics of race in the Americas in order to develop radical alternatives and possibilities, ones that respect and esteem the kind of racial mixing that was despised, and even made illegal in the United States in 1925. He wanted to imagine a utopia of elation, erotic attraction, and passion in which people would "feel towards the world an emotion so intense that the movement of things adopts rhythms of joy."⁷ I think he calls on us not to despair in the face of white supremacy with its fears, stupidity, and its ugliness, but to envision a beautiful world of playful togetherness and sympathy amid our differences as we struggle for a better world of social justice. Indeed, this kind of attitude is one that motivates the social and political philosophy of several Latin American theorists, including Ignacio Ellecuria, with his notion of "fiesta" as an alternative to capitalist consumerism, and Graciela Hierro's conception of "pleasure" as an alternative to the patriarchal fascination with control and death.⁸

Vasconcelos's project reminds us that social organizing is not just a dry, practical matter of political pragmatism. Radical imagining, writing, and theory building is also organizing work that makes another world possible. As the science fiction author Ursula K. LeGuin said upon her being awarded the National Book Award in 2014: "Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being and even imagine real grounds for hope. . . . We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable—but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the arts of words."⁹

NOTES

1. Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*, trans. Phillip A. Dennis (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 41–58.
2. Jose Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Didier T. Jaen (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 19.
3. *Ibid.*, 18.
4. Terrance MacMullan, *Habits of Whiteness: A Pragmatist Reconstruction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 25–42.
5. Kevin Terraciano, "Indigenous Peoples in Colonial Spanish American Society," in *A Companion to Latin American History*, ed. Thomas H. Holloway (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011), 136–39.
6. See Simon Bolivar, "The Jaimaca Letter," in *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia and Elizabeth Millan Zaijbert (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), 63–66; and Jose Maria Morelos, "Sentiments of the Nation," in *Mexican History: A Primary Source Reader*, ed. Nora E. Jaffrey, Edward Osowski, and Susie Porter (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 184–87.
7. Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race*, 29–30.

8. See Ignacio Ellecuria, "Utopia and Prophecy in Latin America," in *Towards a Society that Serves Its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador's Murdered Jesuits*, ed. John Hassett and Hugh Lacy (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 62; Graciela Hierro, "Gender and Power," trans. Ivan Marquez, *Hypatia* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 173–83.
9. Ursula K. LeGuin, "Ursula K. Le Guin's Speech at the National Book Awards: 'Books Aren't Just Commodities'," *The Guardian*, November 20, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/20/ursula-k-le-guin-national-book-awards-speech>

Repealing Obamacare: An Injustice to Hispanics

Susana Nuccetelli

ST. CLOUD STATE UNIVERSITY

On January 13, 2017, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives approved by a 227–196 vote the formation of committees charged with preparing legislation to repeal the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA), in a move regarded as the first step in one of Donald Trump's key policies during his presidential campaign. In spite of grand language to the contrary, as shown here, the move targets those PPACA mandates that have broadened access to a decent minimum of health care, mostly for individuals from low socioeconomic status and/or underrepresented groups, including Hispanics. I argue that no morally acceptable reason can justify the narrowing of health-care benefits for these groups.

SOME FACTS ABOUT OBAMACARE AND HEALTH-CARE COVERAGE FOR HISPANICS IN THE U.S.

Medicine is increasingly making possible services for which there is great demand but also limited availability and high cost. Under these circumstances, the moral question of what counts as a fair distribution of health-care resources is particularly pressing for societies with the means to provide access to "a decent minimum" coverage for all. Many countries, including some in the developing world, do provide such access for their residents. They include most European countries as well as Australia, Canada, Cuba, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, and Taiwan. Their approaches to financing and organizing universal access vary from a single-payer system of health care administered by a health authority and funded by taxes (in, e.g., Australia, Britain, and Canada) to multi-payer systems (in, e.g., Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland). By contrast, the U.S. long stood alone among developed nations in failing to ensure a decent minimum of health care for its residents. Only in 2010 did it conform to the emerging standard among industrialized nations by adopting a multi-payer system with the enactment of the PPACA, known informally as "Obamacare" or "ACA." Initially, some ACA critics charged that it was unconstitutional, but that objection was largely put to rest in 2012 by the U.S. Supreme Court. Yet the public debate over health-care reform in the U.S. continued beyond 2010, as shown by the House's resolution designed to repeal some of its provisions. Although it is still unclear which ones are being targeted, "radical" ACA mandates include that

- 1) Every (authorized) resident must either be insured or pay a special tax.
- 2) Exchanges to buy insurance, in part subsidized, are made available.
- 3) Medicaid, an existing insurance program for economically disadvantaged workers that is funded from both federal and state sources, is expanded.
- 4) Insurers remove annual and lifetime caps on coverage, offer coverage to all, eliminating discrimination on the basis of age, sex, or pre-existing condition, and eliminate some co-pays on services such as preventive screening and reduce other co-pays.
- 5) Employers either “play or pay.”

These provisions have expanded significantly the number of people with health coverage in the United States. By 2014, the number of uninsured residents in America had fallen about 5 percent, according to the RAND Corporation, the Commonwealth Fund, the Gallup Poll, and the Urban Institute.¹ As a result of the ACA, about 20 million people gained health coverage, a considerable number given that in 2010 there were 50 million uninsured in the U.S.² According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the ACA’s impact on Hispanics is evident:

- Approximately 8 in 10 gained access to a decent minimum of health care because of the ACA mandates (2) and (3) above—together with the Children’s Health Insurance Plan.
- Four million adults gained health-care coverage
- The uninsured rate dropped 11.3 percent (from 41.8 percent to 30.5 percent)
- About 35 percent of Hispanic patients relying on Community Health Centers for their health care gained access to them because of the ACA investment of \$11 billion in those centers.³

True, the number of uninsured Hispanics went from 29 percent in 2013 to 40 percent in 2016, at a rate higher than any other underrepresented group.⁴ But since unauthorized immigrants, among whom Hispanics are more numerous proportionally, are included in these numbers, the data only points to the injustice of providing access to a decent minimum of health care *only to authorized residents*—a flaw affecting many systems of universal coverage.⁵ As a result, the data does not undermine the conclusion that the ACA amounted to moral progress given the reasons to be considered next.

FAIR EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND THE RIGHT TO HEALTH CARE

An influential account of moral obligation in bioethics contends that people have a positive right to health

care. Accordingly, society has a duty to provide universal coverage, and that duty may be defeated or overridden only by (i) more stringent moral obligations, such as other obligations of justice or respect for persons; or (ii) practical considerations concerning society’s means, whether financial or technical. In Norman Daniels’s Fair Equality of Opportunity account, this conclusion follows directly from the application of Rawls’s principles of justice to health care.⁶ Roughly, according to Rawls, when bargaining behind the veil of ignorance about society’s basic structure, the contractors would choose to distribute primary social goods fairly for the self-advancement of all individuals. Among the sets of such goods is “freedom of movement and choice of occupations against a background of diverse opportunities.” Daniels regards health care as derivative from this set of goods because of the special value of health. People who have, as a result of injury or disease, lost “species-normal functioning” are deprived of a Fair Equality of Opportunity for self-advancement.⁷ Physical and mental impairments reduce individual opportunity relative to what’s normal range of opportunity for members of the species. Given this account, the following argument supports a right to health care for all:

- 1) If justice in health care requires protecting fair equality of opportunity, then there is a right to health care for all.
- 2) Justice in health care does require protecting fair equality of opportunity.
- 3) *Therefore*, there is a right to health care for all.

This right may, however, be overridden when society lacks the appropriate resources.⁸ But affluent nations such as the U.S. do have the means, and therefore, the *prima facie* obligation to promote fairness of opportunity by taking the steps necessary for prevention and treatment of disease for all. Since, as shown by the above list of facts, the ACA is a step in that direction; therefore, unless the current plan to repeal it comes without an appropriate replacement, it should be condemned as a moral injustice.

A PLURALISTIC GROUND FOR THE ACA

Furthermore, the moral obligation to provide universal access to a decent minimum of health care may exist even if there is no right to health care. On Allen E. Buchanan’s Pluralistic Account, since the category of human rights is a contested one in political theory, a more plausible strategy for universal access relies on multiple reasons. First, affluent societies must provide such coverage for all because they owe compensation to the victims of past wrongdoing. Historic injustice creates a duty of reparation to make fair restitution to victims. In the U.S., the grievances of racial and ethnic minorities and other underrepresented groups justify the provision of a decent minimum of care for all as a fair restitution. Second, some prudential considerations support the same claim: they concern emergency room costs for uninsured people from low-income groups, and the consequences for labor force’s productivity (and defense personnel’s fitness) of lacking appropriate care. Third, humanitarian reasons concerning

avoidance and prevention of harm recommend access to a decent minimum of health care for all.

LIBERTARIAN PRINCIPLES FOR REPEALING THE ACA

Rawlsian and Pluralistic accounts suggest that limiting access to a decent minimum of health care on the basis of income or racial and ethnic identity is a serious moral injustice. What moral reasons, if any, might justify the current plan to repeal the ACA? Bioethicist H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., for example, has invoked libertarian principles to argue that “A basic human secular moral right to health care does not exist—not even to a ‘decent minimum of health care.’”⁹ After all, in order to fund health-care coverage for all, the government would have to use its coercive power for collecting and redistributing the needed financial resources. But that violates people’s negative rights to liberty and property, for it requires the government to (i) coercively take their property through taxation, and (ii) regulate a health-care system, thereby limiting individual free choice in health care. From the libertarian perspective, this is a deeply unjust arrangement that conflicts with a free-market system of health care where services are delivered according to ability to pay, through the private, voluntary purchase of insurance by individuals or groups. In fact, libertarians often emphasize the difference between negative and positive rights, doubting the very existence of positive rights and arguing that only negative rights have correlative duties, because they are easily fulfilled just by doing nothing. But such claims are misleading since it is not exactly true that duties of forbearance are easier to fulfill. At the very least, they require governments to keep criminal law systems, revenue services, police departments, military forces, and other protective branches. Other libertarian objections to the ACA focus on its failure in securing (i) consumer choice, (ii) quality care, and (iii) cost containment. Yet objection (i) is weak because the ACA does not render private financing of extra levels of health care incompatible with universal access to a decent minimum for all: those who have the means to purchase extra levels can do so. Objections (ii) and (iii) are empirical claims that remain unconfirmed by data gathered so far. In fact, a close look at the annual averages of health-care costs per capita in Canada and the U.S. since 2010 does point to the superiority of Canada’s system,¹⁰ which is not exactly what those seeking the ACA repeal have in mind. In the absence of better arguments justifying such a repeal, I submit that any restrictions to the already limited scope of the ACA amounts to a serious injustice that should be condemned on moral grounds.¹¹

NOTES

1. Troy Higgs et al., “Is the Affordable Care Act Working?” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2014.
2. See Norman Daniels, “Justice and Access to Health Care,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Ed Zalta, 2008/2013, accessed 4/22/2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justice-healthcareaccess/>; see also Margot Sanger-Katz, “The Biggest Changes Obamacare Made, and Those That May Disappear,” *The New York Times* January 13, 2017, accessed 1/13/2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/13/upshot/the-biggest-changes-obamacare-made-and-those-that-may-disappear.html?_r=0

3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), “The ACA Is Working for the Latino Community,” July 21, 2016, accessed January 14, 2017, <https://www.hhs.gov/healthcare/facts-and-features/fact-sheets/aca-working-latino-community/> HHS 2016... Data about the ACA role in expanding healthcare coverage for Hispanics also include: 8.8 million Hispanics with private health insurance now have access to preventive services like mammograms, cervical cancer screenings, or flu shots with no co-pay or deductible; 913,000 Hispanic adults between the ages of 19 and 26 who would have been uninsured now have coverage under their parents’ plan; 4.2 million Hispanics (ages 18–64) gained health insurance coverage, lowering the uninsured rate among Latinos by 7.7 percentage points.
4. Gillian Mohny and Amber Robison, “More Hispanics Uninsured Despite Obamacare Gains, Report Says,” *ABC News*, August 18, 2016, accessed November 3, 2016, <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/hispanics-uninsured-obamacare-gains-report/story?id=41482778>
5. As in other multi-payer or single-payer systems, unauthorized immigrants, who amount to approximately 12 million people in U.S. at present, are left out of “universal” coverage.
6. Norman Daniels, “Health-Care Needs and Distributive Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10, no. 2 (1981): 146–79; also Daniels, “Justice and Access to Health Care.”
7. Daniels, “Health-Care Needs and Distributive Justice.”
8. Daniels, “Fair Equality of Opportunity and Decent Minimums: A Reply to Buchanan”; also see Allen E. Buchanan, “The Right to a Decent Minimum of Health Care,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13, no. 1 (1984): 55–78. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 1 (1985): 106–10.
9. H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., “Rights to Health Care, Social Justice, and Fairness in Health Care Allocations: Frustrations in the Face of Finitude,” Chapter 8 in *Foundations of Bioethics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 336.
10. Raisa Deber, “Health Care Reform: Lessons from Canada,” *American Journal of Public Health* 93, no. 1 (2003): 20–24.
11. I would like to thank Gary Seay for his comments on this paper, and for allowing me to use ideas first discussed while co-writing our *Engaging Bioethics: An Introduction with Case Studies* (Routledge, 2017).

Latinx and the Future of Whiteness in American Democracy

José Jorge Mendoza

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL

INTRODUCTION

For Americans on the left of the political spectrum, there are not many positive takeaways from the 2016 presidential election. However, one potential silver lining could be the dramatic increase in the Latinx vote. This increase gave Hillary Clinton a rather easy victory in Nevada, a state that many pundits had considered a toss-up going into Election Day, and made usually solid republican states, such as Arizona and Georgia, a lot more competitive than they had been in recent elections. The increase in the Latinx vote is also the reason Clinton was able to hold on to the state of Virginia, a state which on election night was much closer than polls had predicted. Those of us on the left of the political spectrum might be tempted to take comfort in this and might even tell ourselves that despite the disappointing result, the future of progressive politics in America remains bright and this is in no small part thanks to the browning of America.

At one level this makes a lot of sense. Latinx are the fastest growing minority group in the United States, so much so that by around 2050 it is estimated that Latinx will comprise almost a quarter of the U.S. population. This will make Latinx not only the largest minority group in the U.S., but also the driving force behind the U.S. becoming a minority-majority country. In other words, it is estimated that by around 2050 the U.S. will be a country in which more than 50 percent of its citizenry will be nonwhite.¹ The leadership in both the Republican and Democratic parties agree that this change in demographics could forever alter the American political landscape. This is because Republican candidates rarely get above 30 percent of any minority group's vote and this lack of appeal among minority groups has made Republican politicians accustomed to winning elections by capturing a sizeable majority of the majority (i.e., winning 55 percent or more of the white vote). Given the oncoming demographic changes, which will be driven primarily by the growing Latinx community, it would stand to reason that Republican candidates will find it increasingly difficult to continue their current electoral strategy and expect to win national elections.

In this respect, the state of Florida might seem like a strange outlier. Ever since the infamous 2000 presidential election, Florida has been a very closely contested state and this year was no different. Back in 2000, Latino/as made up approximately one sixth (15 percent) of that state's population. Sixteen years and four presidential elections later, Latino/as now comprise almost a quarter (25 percent) of the state's population. Given what was just outlined above, it should stand to reason that in this year's election Florida should have been a fairly reliable Democratic state. Instead, Donald Trump carried the state by nearly two percentage points! So is the case of Florida merely a hiccup in the forward march of progressive American politics, or does it actually foretell something else? In this essay I want to suggest, following the work of critical race theorists such as Ian Haney López and Derrick Bell, that Florida is not an aberration but instead provides us with an underappreciated insight into American "whiteness" that should trouble progressives who optimistically believe that we are merely living through the final throes of white supremacy.

Whiteness, as most race theorists have noted, is neither fixed, essential, nor bounded. In other words, whiteness can and does change depending on context. We also know from past experience that in order to obtain or maintain a dominant position—even and especially in democratic political communities—whites have resorted to either eliminating (e.g., genocide) or isolating (e.g., apartheid and segregation) any threatening non-white group(s). There is no doubt that these sorts of strategies continue in the U.S. today, as is evident from everything from calls for stricter immigration enforcement focused primarily on keeping certain kinds of immigrants out, to the gerrymandering of congressional districts and voter ID laws whose real aim is to suppress or dilute the non-white vote. What is less discussed, however, is a third strategy that can and has been deployed when these other two strategies have proven insufficient. When a sizeable majority of the majority in a multi-racial democracy is no longer enough to

guarantee electoral victory, that majority group (in this case whites) have also historically shown themselves amenable to expanding the boundaries of whiteness and coopting key segments of the non-white population. By "key" segments here I do not mean most or even many, but just enough nonwhites and only those whose inclusion into whiteness would require the least amount of change or dilution.

What I am suggesting in this essay is that Trump's election, and especially his win in a state like Florida, is in fact signaling a change in American whiteness but not the kind of change that some progressives might have been hoping for.² What the results of this past election seem to show is that certain segments of the Latinx population (e.g., the Cuban community in Florida³) are and will continue to be coopted into whiteness. To be clear, this offer to be included into whiteness is not open to all Latinx, but to just enough to both keep whites as a perpetual majority and only to those Latinx whose inclusion would require the least amount of change or dilution to our current conception of whiteness. In other words, a state like Florida is not so much an aberration or outlier in our current political climate as it is a harbinger of American whiteness to come and of Latinx role in it.

SPACE TRADERS REVISITED

Recently, Ian Haney López has popularized the phrase "dog-whistle politics."⁴ This phrase refers to a strategy for winning democratic elections in societies with a large white majority. The underlying premise of dog-whistle politics is that most whites are still willing to vote, oftentimes even against their own better economic interests, for candidates that affirm their fears, anxieties, and prejudices about nonwhites. Given the political climate in the U.S., where at least since the end of Civil Rights Movement racist, nativist, and even xenophobic appeals have been considered politically out-of-bounds, candidates have had to signal their sympathy for white supremacy in more coded language. In an anonymous interview given in 1981, Republican Party strategist Lee Atwater famously outlined how this coded appeal to white voters worked for Richard Nixon in his 1968 presidential campaign, a campaign whose methods have come to be collectively known as the "Southern Strategy."

You start in 1954 by saying "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "Nigger." That hurts you. It backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states rights and all that stuff and you get so abstract. Now you talk about cutting taxes and these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that's part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract and that coded, we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. Obviously sitting around saying we want to cut taxes and we want this, is a lot more abstract than even the busing thing and a hell of a lot more abstract than nigger nigger.⁵

Haney López's principle claim is that despite Barack Obama's electoral victory in 2008 and his subsequent reelection in 2012, dog-whistle politics remain alive and

well in American politics. Nowhere is this claim more evident than in Donald Trump's recent election—where Trump blew the dog whistle so loudly that his racist message became audible to even the most racially tone-deaf of Republicans like Mitt Romney. The result of this was that Trump won almost 58 percent of the white vote, but in turn lost nearly 75 percent of the non-white vote—an outcome that is consistent with traditional uses of dog whistle politics. Despite the pommeling Trump took among non-white voters, Trump was still able to win the election because nonwhites comprised only about 25 percent of the electorate. In other words, Trump could afford to lose a super-majority of the non-white vote because a substantial (although not necessarily super) majority of the white vote was still enough to win a national election in the U.S. The effectiveness of dog-whistle politics is not only clear to those of us on the political left, but has also been clear to many on the far-right who for years have openly implored Republican candidates to use this strategy more.⁶

Even if all of this is true, would it not also follow that as nonwhites become a larger percentage of the electorate—as is expected to happen in the near future, thanks largely to the growing number of Latinx—the less likely it will be that dog-whistle politics will remain effective and, in fact, might backfire and come to haunt the Republican party for decades?⁷ Furthermore, is this not also what most reasonable Republicans (i.e., the non-far-right conservatives) also believe and why so many of them have been so dismayed with the recent Trump phenomenon?⁸ The short answer to these sorts of questions is yes, but only if we assume that American whiteness in 2050 will look the same as it does today. I want to suggest that we have good reasons to believe that this assumption will not hold up. Instead, I believe that for the foreseeable future white supremacy will continue to play the pivotal role it has been playing in American politics, and it will do so because of (and not in spite of) the changing nature of American whiteness. This is a conclusion that I think is not only consistent with but also follows naturally from the work of renowned legal scholar Derrick Bell.⁹

In perhaps his most well-known work, "The Space Traders," Bell poignantly articulates both his "permanence of racism" and "interest convergence" theories.¹⁰ In this piece, Bell recounts a science-fiction story about visitors from outer space that come to Earth and offer the American people marvelous gifts which will solve most of their pressing domestic concerns in exchange for every Black American. In the story the majority of Americans accept this bargain with the space traders and once again show themselves willing to sacrifice the lives of Blacks when it is in their best interests to do so—despite their professed abhorrence of racism.

The point Bell is trying to make with this story is that the view most of us have of "racial progress" in the U.S. can be a dangerous illusion. It can lull us—especially us good progressives—into thinking that racial justice in America has a forward bent to it, which can at times be slowed but never stopped. Bell does not necessarily deny that in some ways things have gotten better for Blacks in America. Slavery, after all, is abolished and segregation is no longer legally

permissible. Still, he wants to emphasize that racism is a permanent feature of U.S. society (i.e., not an aberration) and that what might look like forward progress has really been just a collection of historical moments where the interests of a significant number of whites just happened to converge with those of Blacks. The concessions that Blacks have been granted with the help of a majority of white Americans (e.g., Civil Rights legislation) has been the result not of moral persuasion (i.e., not out of the better selves of whites) but because of interest convergence (e.g., when Jim Crow segregation became a liability in the context of the Cold War). When those interests are no longer aligned, when they diverge as they do in the story of the Space Traders, whites have and will continue to take those concessions back and then some.

The Space Traders story, with its underlining themes about the permanence of racism and interest convergence theory, can help us understand what happened with states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. The simple truth of the matter is that Clinton lost the election because she could not hold on to these three usually reliable Democratic states. These states were considered so "in the bag" that she hardly campaigned in those states. Some pundits have argued that the tipping point in those states, the white working class that has traditionally voted Democratic, voted for Trump this time around because they had grown tired of how the new globalized economy was negatively impacting them. Most of these voters have come to believe that both Democrats and Republicans are committed to promoting the kinds of trade policies that have driven down their wages and, in many cases, eliminated their jobs altogether. A vote for Trump represented for them a break with the current status quo and a harkening back to better days.¹¹ In other words, their vote for Trump was motivated more by economic fears than by a desire for white supremacy.

To a large degree I think that something like this account is ultimately correct, and I don't mean to downplay these causes or to claim that most working-class whites are racists. But let us also remember that in the Space Trader story, most whites who voted to make the trade were not living in the best of circumstances nor were they necessarily racist either. Bell's point is that they made the trade not so much because they hated Blacks, but because of what the aliens promised to give in return. Trump, much like the aliens, promised to "make America great again," and it makes sense why this appeals to many good-hearted people. The problem is that there is an underside to this bargain, which someone has to pay for. Trump promised to make places like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania great again, but only in exchange for further ostracizing nonwhites. It is a very small consolation to nonwhites that most of the white working-class who voted for Trump might have been repulsed rather than attracted by his racism. The only thing that really matters is that they went ahead and made the trade anyway. When their interests no longer aligned with those of nonwhites, no amount of moral exhortations were strong enough to get them to vote against white supremacy.

Let us now retell the Space Traders story, except this time let us imagine that it is 2050 and that demographic changes have occurred as they have been predicted to

occur. America is now a minority-majority country and the visitors from space ask Americans to sacrifice all nonwhites in exchange for marvelous gifts that will solve their most pressing domestic problems. Keep in mind that in this scenario, members of groups who in 2016 were considered nonwhite (e.g., Black, Asian, Latin, Middle Eastern, and Native Americans) now collectively outnumber members of the group that in 2016 would have been considered white. It would seem reasonable to predict today, taking a good progressive view about the future, that in 2050 there would not be the numbers to make such a trade—in fact, nonwhites could probably band together and make a trade in exchange for whites.

This hopeful view of the future, however, rests on the assumption that whiteness in 2050 will look a lot like it does today. This is an assumption that I find faulty for at least two reasons. First, American whiteness was not the same in 1950 as it was in 1850, so why assume that it will look the same in 2050? Second, Latinx are not a homogenous racial bloc and if given the opportunity, many Latinx would probably jump at the chance of being white.¹² If this is so, then there is good reason to be suspicious that mere demographic changes will be enough to ensure that in the future nonwhites no longer get “space traded” by whites.

AMERICAN WHITENESS

American whiteness and American democracy have always been closely aligned. This history can be traced all the way back to the initial exclusion of Blacks and Native Americans from U.S. citizenship and thereby the vote. It also extends to the various efforts that were and continue to be made to suppress their vote even after they were granted U.S. citizenship. Similarly, Asians for a long time were denied the opportunity to become naturalized U.S. citizens because from 1790 until 1943, naturalized U.S. citizenship was reserved exclusively for whites. So while Black, Asian, and Native Americans have historically been the exemplars of non-whiteness in the U.S., American whiteness has itself never been a definitive or fixed concept. For a long time, American whiteness was reserved exclusively for people of Northern European descent and even then only to certain segments of Northern Europe, so Irish and Polish were initially denied full white status.

The worry that U.S. elections might be decided contrary to the will of the majority of whites began to arise sometime in the mid-1800s—well before Blacks, Asians, or Native Americans could become citizens—and it led to the creation of the now infamous Know-Nothing Party. The majority of people who joined the Know-Nothing party did not come from very wealthy or elite backgrounds. In fact, a lot like the populist movements we see today, its members came largely from lower- and working-class backgrounds. The platform of this party was based around nativism and, in particular, an opposition to Catholic immigration. The worry about Catholic immigrants was that they were coming in droves and were bringing with them a subversive religion. The fear was that Catholics planned to have as many children as they could in order to eventually have the numbers necessary to vote in a government that would be more loyal to the Vatican than to the U.S. constitution.

For this reason, the *modus operandi* of the Know-Nothing Party was to do everything in its power to prevent Catholics (which came to be associated with both Irish and “Latin” European immigrants) from obtaining any political post and also deny them jobs, arguing that American business owners had a patriotic duty to employ only true Americans. They were also certain that Catholics were already trying to rig elections by having non-citizens vote. Know-Nothing activists would therefore stand watch at polling stations during elections, and this would often lead to violent confrontations.

By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the worry about Northern Europeans losing their majority status went from a fringe conspiracy theory to a mainstream crisis. This concern was exemplified in the writings of people like Madison Grant, who in 1916 wrote the widely influential book *The Passing of the Great Race*. In that book Grant argued that the founding race of the United States, the Nordic race, was heading towards extinction because of various factors, none of which was more pressing than the continued immigration of inferior races into the United States, especially of the Alpine (i.e., Eastern Europeans) and Mediterranean (i.e., Southern Europe) races.¹³

The initial reaction to this threat was to try to keep out non-Northern Europeans through immigration restrictions. This was the reason U.S. immigration policy was radically changed in 1924, adding quotas for the first time on Southern and Eastern European immigrants. This, however, did not solve the supposed problem. Immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe continued at a much higher rate than immigration from Northern Europe. Eventually, the solution that was settled upon was to expand the notion of American whiteness and include Southern and Eastern Europeans, who at least were closer to embodying American whiteness than Blacks, Asians, or Native Americans (as a kind of aside, it is also around this time that Arabs came to be legally classified as “white” in the United States¹⁴).

The usual reason cited for how and why Southern and Eastern Europeans came to be included in American whiteness is the advent of World War II. As the story goes, the utter hypocrisy of morally condemning fascists who held a similar racial ideology as we did, coupled with the need for a united American front to fight European fascism, provided to be too much. American whiteness had to be expanded, and this project of expanding American whiteness was not much of a secret. It was made explicit in projects that we can still see today, such as the award winning short film *The House I Live In*. In that film, Frank Sinatra stars as himself and makes the case to a group of multi-ethnic young boys (all of whom we would today consider white) that they should not let their differences in religion or nationality divide them because at the end of the day they were all Americans who stood up against everything fascism represents. By the end of WWII various immigration reforms were passed, removing various immigration restrictions and adopting instead policies that put Southern and Eastern Europeans on par with Northern Europeans.

The result was that by 1950, American whiteness was no longer what it had been in 1850. If whiteness had not undergone this change, America would have already been considered a minority-majority country. In fact, this is what gets covered over in the assimilationist claim that America has always been a “nation of immigrants.” A claim that for most of its history was, in fact, used as a derisive slur about oncoming demographic changes.¹⁵ The fact is that American whiteness changed and while this change had dramatic effects that reshuffled the electoral map, the basic structure of American democracy—where a sizable majority of the white majority was sufficient to carry the day—remained the same. In a way, Latinx might today be playing a similar role as Southern and Eastern Europeans did in the early part of the twentieth century. Even as their continued migration is currently decried, thirty years from now certain segments of the Latinx population might seamlessly come to be seen as just another part of the white melting pot.

CONCLUSION

In short, it’s not clear that changing demographics alone will be enough to sever the link between white supremacy and American democracy. White supremacy has shown that it is not only willing to resort to the elimination and isolation of nonwhites, but that it is also willing to expand and recruit from certain segments of the non-white population if that is what is necessary for it to maintain its dominant position. By doing so it will ensure that political decisions continue to be made by a significant majority of the majority and, even more troubling, that dog-whistle politics will remain an effective political tool for the foreseeable future.

NOTES

1. Pew Research Center, “Projected U.S. Population by Race and Hispanic Origin, 2015–2065, with and without Immigrants Entering 2015–2065” September 24, 2015, accessed December 26, 2016, http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/modern-immigration-wave-brings-59-million-to-u-s-driving-population-growth-and-change-through-2065/ph_2015-09-28_immigration-through-2065-a2-06/
2. See, for example, Linda Martín Alcoff, *The Future of Whiteness* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015).
3. Jens Manuel Krogstad and Antonio Flores, “Unlike Other Latinos, About Half of Cuban Voters in Florida Backed Trump,” *Pew Research Center*, November 16, 2015, accessed December 26, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/15/unlike-other-latinos-about-half-of-cuban-voters-in-florida-backed-trump/>
4. Ian Haney López, *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press; 2014).
5. Quoted in Andrew Rosenthal, “Lee Atwater’s ‘Southern Strategy’ Interview” *New York Times*, November 14, 2012, accessed November 25, 2016, http://takingnote.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/14/lee-atwaters-southern-strategy-interview/?_r=0
6. For example, see Ann Coulter, *Adios, America: The Left’s Plan to Turn Our Country into a Third World Hellhole* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2015).
7. For example, see Peter Beinart, “The Republican Party’s White Strategy: Embracing White Nativism in the 1990s Turned the California GOP into a Permanent Minority. The Same Story May Now Be Repeating Itself Nationally,” *The Atlantic* July/August 2016, accessed December 26, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/07/the-white-strategy/485612/>
8. For example, see Ellen Carmichael, “Minority Outreach: The GOP Must Do Better,” *National Review*, February 10, 2016,

accessed January 19, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/431069/minority-outreach-gop-must-do-better>

9. As an aside, there are disturbingly few philosophers who take the work of Derrick Bell as seriously as it deserves to be taken up. One notable exception is Tommy J. Curry. See Tommy J. Curry, “Saved By the Bell: Derrick Bell’s Racial Realism as Pedagogy,” *Ohio Valley Philosophical Studies in Education* 39 (2008): 35–46; and “From Rousseau’s Theory of Natural Equality to Firmin’s Resistance to the Historical Inequality of Races,” *CLR James Journal* 15, no. 1 (2009): 135–63.
10. Derrick Bell, “The Space Traders,” in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, 158–200 (New York: Basic Books, 1993).
11. For example, see Alexia Fernández Campbell, “One Reason the Rust Belt Turned Red: A Republican-Led Battle to Weaken Labor Unions May Have Helped Trump Win in Several Democratic Bastions in the Midwest,” *The Atlantic*, November 14, 2016, accessed January 19, 2017, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/11/one-reason-the-rust-belt-turned-red/507611/>
12. For a satirical parallel, see George Samuel Schuyler, *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A. D. 1933–1940* (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1931).
13. Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race: The Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922).
14. Khaled A. Beydoun, “Boxed In: Reclassification of Arab Americans on the U.S. Census as Progress or Peril?” *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 47, no. 693 (2016): 706–08.
15. See Donna R. Gabaccia, “Nations of Immigrants: Do Words Matter?” *The Pluralist* 5, no. 3 (2010): 5–31.

ESSAYS

Eudaimonia and Neltiliztli: Aristotle and the Aztecs on the Good Life

Winner of the 2016 APA Prize in Latin American Thought

L. Sebastian Purcell

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT CORTLAND

1. EUDAIMONIA AND NELTILIZTLI

How shall we live? What sort of life would it be best to lead? Does that life entail obligations to other people? If so, which? These, briefly, are the questions at the heart of ethical philosophy. The first two, concerning the best sort of life, address the topic of the good. The latter, concerning our obligations to others, address the right. Among many of the philosophers of classical Greek antiquity, including Plato and Aristotle, questions concerning the good were understood to be conceptually prior to those of the right. They held, in short, that one needed to know what kind of life one sought to lead before one could raise questions about what sorts of obligations followed. The best life, they maintained, was the happy or flourishing one—a life of *eudaimonia*.¹ They considered, moreover, the skillful leading of such a life to be a virtuous one, and that is why this form of ethics has been called a eudaemonist virtue ethics.

What the present essay argues is that the pre-Columbian Aztecs, or more properly the Nahuas, the people who spoke Nahuatl in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, held a view about ethical philosophy that is similar to Aristotle’s. They held to a conception of the good life, which they called *neltiliztli*,

and they maintained that understanding its character was conceptually prior to questions about rightness. What this thesis suggests is that they also held to a form of virtue ethics, though one different from the eudaemonist sort that Aristotle and Plato championed. Since *neltiliztli* means rootedness, one might call it a rooted virtue ethics.

One consequence of this thesis is that it articulates an alternative understanding of the good life which, while similar to Aristotle's *eudaimonia* in the way it guides our thinking about right action, raises a new problem for ethical philosophy: Just how closely linked is pleasure (*hēdonē*) to the good life? There is a similarity here with the fundamental ethical problem of classical antiquity, which asked whether virtue was sufficient for happiness (*eudaimonia*). Yet the focus of the present problem centers not on virtue's relation to the good life, but on just what counts as a good life in the first place. Can one really have a conception of the good life that does not have any internal relation to elevated or positive emotional states (*hēdonē*)? The Nahuas would have us believe that we can and must, at least for any life led on what they called our "slippery" earth.

A second consequence is that this essay makes some strides in filling a gap in comparative philosophy. The Nahuas are finally beginning to receive philosophic attention among Anglophone scholars, but this work has so far tended to focus on their metaphysical views.² This is generally true even among Spanish-speaking scholars, who have been better in addressing the Nahuas philosophically.³ The present essay, then, moves some direction in developing our understanding of Nahua philosophy by articulating their conception of the good life.⁴ Since the matter at hand is rather complicated, I begin with the features of *eudaimonia* and *neltiliztli* as the highest end.

2. THE HIGHEST END

There are two key features of the good life which have a reasonable parallel in Aztec and Aristotelian thought, namely, that the good life is the highest end of action, and that this highest end may be spelled out by its relation to the human condition. On this last point, however, Aristotle differs somewhat from the Aztec approach since he relates *eudaimonia* to the human function (*ergon*), while the Aztecs draw their reasoning from a wider characterization of what life is like on our earth, on what they called *tlalticpac*.

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* (N.E.) rather (in) famously by making a case for the good as the highest or ultimate aim of our actions as follows:

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly, every action [*praxis*] and every decision [*proairēsis*] is thought to aim at some good; hence men have expressed themselves well in declaring the good to be that at which all things aim. But there appears to be a difference among the ends; for some are activities, others are products apart from [the activities which produce] them.⁵

The quality of the reasoning at stake in this passage has been the source of scholarly controversy. Just because

every inquiry, action, and decision aim at some good, it does not follow that the good is that at which all things aim. This would be a little like arguing that all roads lead somewhere, so all roads lead to the same place. Piecing together what Aristotle intended, then, has occupied scholars for some time.

With respect to the controversy, briefly, it seems that two points clarify what Aristotle had in mind. First, recall that Aristotle's method for ethics is to find "a view [that] will be most in harmony with the phenomena."⁶ To do this, he begins from a piece of reputable wisdom, an *endoxa*,⁷ and then proceeds to tease through possible implications to arrive at a better statement.⁸ In this case the *endoxa* is the statement: "hence men have expressed themselves well in declaring the good to be that at which all things aim." What the rest of the passage is meant to do, even if it is not fully complete, is to bridge the gap between the first observation, as a premise, and the *endoxa*, as a conclusion. In brief, the argument he develops runs thus:

- [1] If the goods of each (inquiry, action, etc.) are hierarchically ordered (and they are),
- [2] And if goods do not go on to infinity (which would be absurd),
- [3] Then there is a highest good.

The conclusion, [3], is the highest good at which "all" things aim in the opening line.⁹

Since Aristotle, a little later, identifies the highest good with *eudaimonia*, what the opening argument suggests is that the good life is that sense of happiness that emerges when one considers one's life as a whole, when one considers the ordered relation among one's goals and hierarchizes them.¹⁰ While a variety of commentators have noted that Aristotle does not quite complete this argument in the opening passages of the N.E., they tend to agree that this is the sort of argument he intends to make.¹¹ If that is so, the real difficulty is not the quality of the inference from the premises to the conclusion but the soundness of [1]. It is not clear that all of our goods are hierarchically ordered. Aristotle makes his argument by analogy to the sciences, and while it is true that *they* may be hierarchized, individual human aims often are not. Aristotle even acknowledges this much in accounting for the different sorts of pleasures that are sought.¹² It turns out, then, that some sort of skill will be necessary to manage this relation—and this, in brief, is the purpose of the virtues: those excellent qualities of character that enable a person to live her life well.

Still, there is disagreement concerning just what that highest end should be, and in the first book of the N.E., Aristotle proposes to settle the matter by appealing to the proper activity or function (*ergon*) of human beings. He writes:

If, indeed, the function of humans is the soul's performance according to reason, or not without reason, and if we acknowledge that the function of an individual is also that of a good individual in a generic way, just as is the case with a lyre

player and a good lyre player, and so on for all the others without qualification . . . if it is thus, then the human good would be the soul's performance according to virtue, and if there are many virtues, according to the best and most complete.¹³

Given the way that Aristotle loads in premises to his argument, mostly here marked by ellipses, it is not surprising that the grounds for his claim have also been the subject of some rather intense philosophic scrutiny. The core of his reasoning, without addressing much of the metaphysical backdrop behind it, appears to turn on the thesis that to be is to be good. Expressed differently, he holds that to be a thing of a certain kind, say a lyre player or a bicycle, or whatever else, is to be a good lyre player, or a good bicycle, or a good anything else.¹⁴ For example, if my bicycle were to be damaged, so that its wheel were bent slightly, it would ride poorly. As a result, it would be a worse bicycle. If the bicycle were to lose its chain, then it would resemble something closer to a scooter. Were it to lose its wheels altogether, then it would cease to be a bicycle and would, rather, be only a bicycle frame. What goes for bicycles, other objects, and practices also goes for humans. The human function is to make use of reason, understood in a broad sense (i.e., as *logos*). Activities, insofar as they are properly human, thus make use of *logos*. To be a good human, by the same reasoning, is thus to be one who leads a life by means of *logos*, or at least not without it. To the extent that one fails to use *logos*, one leads a bad or vicious human life.

In sum, the good *human* life is the one which exhibits human excellences or virtues. The bad one is that which exhibits human vices. Since this understanding articulates (some of) what it means to lead a human life at all, it establishes a basic set of conditions for our highest *human* aim, for *eudaimonia*. We are obligated to pursue it, if we should seek to lead a human life at all. This argument settles the dispute concerning happiness by establishing objective conditions for all human pursuits. Finally, and to connect these points to one of Aristotle's arguments in Book 10 of the *N.E.*, it is only by pursuing this sort of life that we can enjoy *human* pleasures at all.

For the Nahuas, just as for Aristotle, it is the human condition that limits and enables one to pursue the best sort of life. Unlike Aristotle, for the Nahuas it is the character of our circumstances as humans on earth that primarily determines this condition, not a property of what we are as animal beings, like *logos*. For the Nahuas, our lives are ones led on earth, on *tlalticpac*. This place has three pertinent characteristics which set the conditions for the sort of life that we can hope to lead. It is, first of all, a slippery place. This point is amply recorded in extant Nahuatl texts. For example, the sixth volume of *Florentine Codex* (F.C.) has a catalogue of common sayings. There we read the following one:

Slippery, slick is the earth.
It is the same as the one mentioned
Perhaps at one time one was of good
life; later he fell into some wrong, as if
he had slipped in the mud.¹⁵

The "one mentioned" is the saying which is listed just above in the codex, which reads:

How is this? Look well to thyself, thou fish of gold.
It is said at this time: if one some
time ago lived a good life [and] later
fell onto some [other one]—perhaps he took
a paramour, or he knocked someone
down so that he took sick or even died;
and for that he was thrust into jail:
so at that time it is said: "How is this?
Look well to thyself, thou fish of gold."¹⁶

A few observations are in order. A first is that the range of things that are slippery (*tlalahui*) includes the sorts of actions that we might commonly include in the ethical, because they are under our volition, and those that are not, because we have little or no control over them. We would say that taking a paramour is a choice, while knocking someone over, by tripping for example, is a bad outcome, but pardonable because out of our control. Yet these are descriptions of our condition on earth, and their point seems to be that regardless of individual choice, this is just the sort of place where we can expect these lapses. We may have to go to jail as a result, so that appeal to the condition of *tlalticpac* is not exculpatory, but it is descriptive of the general character of our human lives. A second point is that the slipperiness of *tlalticpac*, then, is not something that one can hope to avoid by reasoning well. One does not slip through an Aristotelian *hamartia*, an error in the practical syllogism of one's reasoning.¹⁷ Rather, this is just the sort of place in which one is prone to slip, where lapses in judgment will occur. The ideal for one's life, as a result (and third), cannot be one that includes no errors, no lapses in judgment. Purity in this place cannot be the goal after which we strive asymptotically. Rather, it must be the sort of ideal that recognizes that these slips occur, and yet manages them as well as possible.

A second feature of our human condition, life on *tlalticpac*, is that it is transitory. Again, this point of view is well attested in extant texts, yet no one is a better spokesman on this point than Nezahualcoyotl. In a work of poetic philosophy entitled "*Ma zan moquetzacan, nicnihuan! / My friends, stand up!*" he writes the following (this is the piece in its entirety).

My friends, stand up!
The princes have become destitute,
I am Nezahualcoyotl,
I am a Singer,
head of macaw.
Grasp your flowers and your fan.
With them go out to dance!
You are my child,
you are Yoyontzin.
Take your chocolate,
flower of the cacao tree,
may you drink all of it!
Do the dance,
do the song!
Not here is our house,
not here do we live,
you also will have to go away.¹⁸

The character of this piece cannot but strike one as of a similar character as 1 Corinthians 15:32, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Still, the context is much wider in Nahua thought. For Nezahualcoyotl, in fact, this is *the* basic problem of our existence (and not merely the slipperiness of our lives). For not only is it true that our lives are ephemeral, but it is also the case that even the structure of the cosmos is ephemeral in character. The fifth age, the one with a sun of motion, is one which, like the previous four, will sometime pass.

These considerations lead one to the third feature of life on *tlalticpac*, namely, that it is far from clear that it is a happy place. As part of an extended poem, Nezahualcoyotl writes:

Is it true that we are happy,
that we live on earth?
It is not certain that we live
and have come on earth to be happy.
We are all sorely lacking.
Is there any who does not suffer
here, next to the people?¹⁹

For Nezahualcoyotl's own work these considerations led him to seek the only sort of stability and eternity for which one can hope, namely, that to be found in philosophical-poetic reflection, in the composition of "flower and song." For the Nahua's broader ethical outlook (more below), these reflections supply the reason why the pursuit of happiness is not something that they thought could be a suitable objective for one's life's plan. The transitory and slippery character of life on *tlalticpac* would make elevated emotional states, i.e., "happiness," a foolhardy goal.

The general aim of Nahua ethics, then, is not happiness but to achieve rootedness (*neltiliztli*) on *tlalticpac*. To support the idea textually, it will be helpful to have in mind a linguistic point. Should one like to form a new word in Nahuatl, the language is well equipped with the capacity for compounding, much as ancient Greek was. Yet one may also make use of what Angel Maria Garibay has called a "*difrasismo*," which is the expression of one idea in two words.²⁰ Examples in English might be "with blood and fire," or "against wind and tide." This sort of expression was extremely common in Nahuatl, and one must be careful to catch the metaphorical meaning at work. For if taken literally, the meaning of a *difrasismo* is almost totally lost. One of the commonest of these in a philosophic context is the phrase *in xochi in cuicatli*, which, translated literally, means "with flower and song," but taken metaphorically means something like "poetry."

Returning to the discussion of rootedness, I would like to examine the short piece "Flower and Song / Xochi Cuicatli," found in the *Cantares Mexicanos*, which was composed and recited before a meeting of wise men and poets in the house of Tecayehautzin. The question at stake in the piece is how to achieve some sort of permanence. Lord Ayocuan is said to be acquainted with Life Giver, one of the names for the single being of existence, *teotl*. Invoking and recalling the lord, the suggestion of the piece is that it is by creating "flower and song" that one finds this permanence.

We read the author's realization that this (poetic creation) must be the answer to the transitoriness of life on *tlalticpac* in the following lines:

So this is how that lord, the vaunted one,
comes creating them. Yes, with plume like
bracelet beads he pleases the only-being.
Is that what pleases the Life Giver?
Is that the only truth [*nelli*] on earth [*tlalticpac*]?²¹

So the author comes to the conclusion that by writing flower-song, especially the type that addresses the greater problems of our human existence, one is best able to find "truth" on the slippery earth.²²

What matters for ethical purposes is obscured in the English translation. The phrase "*aço tle nelli in tlalticpac*" is best translated as "Is that the only truth on earth?" But the word *nelli* is related to *nelhuáyotl*, which is a root or base.²³ The metaphorical idea behind the Nahua understanding of "truth," then, is that it is a matter of being rooted like a tree, as opposed to sliding about on our slippery earth. The goal, the solution to our human problems, then, is to find rootedness, which as an abstract substantive would be expressed in Nahuatl as *neltiliztli*.

An important point here is that the context of the poem makes clear that one is to find rootedness in the only being of existence, in *teotl*. Just as is the case with Aristotle's function argument, there is equally a metaphysical backdrop to the Nahua account of the good life. The Nahuas were pantheists of a sort and took our world to be an expression of the single fundamental being of existence. A rooted life, then, is not only our highest end, but carries a similar normative force. One ought to seek rootedness not only on prudential grounds, but because rootedness is the way that one truly *is* given our circumstances.

The philosophic poem "Flower and Song" provides one source of evidence for the normative similarity between Aristotle and the Nahua understanding of the good life. For additional textual evidence, one might turn to the tenth volume of the F.C., which addresses "the people" of the Nahua culture. There one finds descriptions of persons at work in socially recognized roles. The codex author Bernadino de Sahagún is responsible for asking what the good and bad forms of each is, e.g., asking, What is a good feather worker? What is a bad one? So one cannot say that the Nahuas would have formulated the matters explicitly in terms of good and bad. What one can note is that in their responses, one finds their general understanding of how approval and disapprobation were allotted in each case, and how they reasoned about what ought to be. In describing an adult nobleman, we read the following:

The good [*qualli*] middle-aged man is a doer, a worker [who is] agile, active, solicitous.

The bad [*tlauelilloc*] middle-aged man is lazy, negligent, slothful, indolent, sluggish, idle, languid, a lump of flesh [*quitlatzcopic*], a lump of flesh with two eyes [*cuitalatzcocopicitli*], a thief.²⁴

Similar statements are found throughout the F.C. so that one can be certain that this sort of language is not isolated. The suggestion is double. First, good adult men are those who perform their duties and roles well, while the bad ones are indolent. Second, bad adult men hardly resemble men at all. They become, rather, mere lumps of flesh. Stated otherwise, there are conditions for leading a life in a human community, and should one not observe them, one tends towards not leading a human life at all.

To bring all these points together, one might write that Aristotle and the Aztecs both held to a conception of the good life as one that is the highest aim one could have, or, more aptly, live out. They differed in the grounds they provided for their views. Aristotle’s argument turns on a thesis about the function (*ergon*) of a human being, while the Nahuas held that one should aim for rootedness as (i) a reasonable response to our circumstances on earth, and as (ii) a basic condition for leading a life in the human community as part of *teotl*. What needs to be clarified now is how exactly this understanding of the good life could guide our actions.

3. VIRTUE AND ACTION GUIDANCE

To spell out how their accounts are action guiding, one must broach two questions. First, Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* is clearly linked to his discussion of excellence, *arētē*, but this close link between *neltiliztli* and excellence has not been shown for the Nahuas. While the above shows that they had an understanding of the human good which supports this line of reasoning, is there a Nahuatl word or phrase that serves roughly the same role as *arētē*, and is it connected to an account of rootedness? Second, even though the above shows that the Nahuas had a conception of the good life, it does not show that *neltiliztli* functioned in the way required. Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill both had conceptions of the good life, but neither was a virtue ethicist. How do we know that *neltiliztli* functions like Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* and not the *summum bonum* for Kant and Mill?

I begin with the matter of “virtue.” In some ways the topic is difficult because of the abundance of possible terms available. One should recall that *arētē* in Greek is derived from the god Ares, and in Homeric times the word meant primarily nobility and strength on the battlefield. Over the

following several hundred years of recorded Greek texts, one finds the term slowly changing from a quality of character primarily focused on competitive activities to one focused on cooperative ones—ones that foster life in the city state (*polis*). Plato and Aristotle, moreover, played a significant role in this change, rather willfully adapting common terms to their purposes.²⁵ “Virtue” or “human excellence,” in short, did not spring from Zeus’ head fully armored, but was a concept developed over the course of several centuries among the Greeks. One should be wary, then, of finding an exact equivalent in other cultures. Additionally, one should not expect the Nahuas to have only one such term just because Hellenistic philosophers ultimately settled on one. In the Confucian tradition, for example, one finds two words used for “virtue,” namely, *de* and *ren*.²⁶ It might turn out that the Nahuas had more than one term. The proposal that I venture here is that there is one broad phrase for excellence, and that there may be further, more specific terms for excellence available in other ways, just as *de* is the broad term for virtue in the Confucian tradition, and *ren* the more specific term focused on human relations.²⁷

To begin, in Nahuatl, as in Greek, there are several words for the good, the noble, and the beautiful. Generally, the most broadly used term for “good” is “*qualli*,” and I have indicated it in brackets in above quoted texts.²⁸ The root of the word derives from the verb *qua*, which means to eat. The general idea indicated, then, is that something is good because assimilable, edible in a way that will aid in one’s flourishing. Another common word is *yectli*, which is something good because it is straight. Likely the best translation for *yectli*, then, is rectitude. The Nahuas also made use of a *difrasismo* with these two words as components: *in qualli in yectli*, meaning, too literally, “with goodness and straightness.”²⁹ My suggestion is that this is the Nahua way of expressing “excellence.” In the tenth volume of the F.C., for example, one finds a description of the “good” daughter which reads: *ichpuchtli in iectli in qualli, in qualli ichpuchtli*, which might be translated as “the excellent daughter, the good daughter.”³⁰

In this passage, one also finds an explicit connection between excellence, so understood, and the good life as rootedness. Since the matter is critical, I provide a word-by-word translation and commentary in the table below.

yn tecuheuh yn ichpuchtli	One’s daughter [who is]	This is a phrase indicating the whole idea of a daughter in her relation both to a male and female speaker.
quiztica, macitica, vel,	unspoiled, perfect, good,	These terms are all difficult to translate, because Christianity had already influenced the meaning of the words. Yet, none of them in Nahuatl have a fundamental connection to Christian understanding of virginity.
nelli,	rooted,	Dibble and Anderson omit this word in translation, as it fits poorly with the Christianized interpretation of the Nahuatl description. ³¹ It is the root of <i>neltiliztli</i> .
ichpuchtli in iectli in qualli,	[who is] the excellent daughter,	There is no sentence break in the Nahuatl, so the idea is continued: the rooted daughter is the excellent one ...
in qualli ichpuchtli . . . ³²	the good daughter ...	the good one, <i>et cetera</i> .

One here finds a description of the “good” daughter as one who is rooted, who is leading the best life possible, and one who is excellent in doing so. The passage is a difficult one to analyze and translate because some Christian influence was present at the time that it was recorded, but it does indicate that the Nahuas thought to connect virtue (*in yectli in qualli*) and rootedness (*neltiliztli*). The best life available on earth, in short, is one that is performed excellently.

I turn now to the question whether the Nahuas understood the good life in the way required for a virtue ethics. One may begin by recalling what is distinctive about *eudaimonia* as it functions for action-guiding purposes. For eudaimonists generally, action guidance follows from the priority of the good to the right. This is to say that in the order of justification, one appeals to a conception of the good first, and then concludes to a judgment of right action. A eudaemonist, then, might argue that one ought not cheat on one’s partner, or that cheating on one’s partner is morally wrong, because it harms her by inhibiting her flourishing. For a modern philosopher who holds to the priority of the right to the good, as Kantian deontologists do, moral wrongness functions in a premise to one’s conclusion. One ought not cheat on one’s partner because it is morally wrong, and one can discern this moral wrongness by appeal to an independent test, like the categorical imperative procedure.³³

If this difference in the order of justification is what distinguishes Aristotle from Kant on the good, then what distinguishes Aristotle from Mill on the good? Utilitarian consequentialists also appeal to a conception of the good, say, a maximum of average utility, in order to determine whether an action is right. How is Aristotle, or the eudaemonist generally, different?

To answer this question, one is returned to an untranslatable point in the second line of the N.E., since it is there where Aristotle introduces an important qualification about the character of the highest good as an end. He writes: “But there appears to be a difference among the ends; for some are activities, others are products apart from [the activities which produce] them.”³⁴ In writing this, Aristotle distinguishes between two sorts of activities: *ta erga* (productions) and *hai energeiai* (performances/activities).³⁵ Productive actions are of the sort that yield a product apart from the action, such as a potter’s vase. Performance actions are those that are actions (*erga*) in (*en*) themselves; the doing constitutes what they are. They are like a dance or a jazz solo. Importantly for Aristotle, the highest end, *eudaimonia*, is a performance. This means that he is thinking of it in a fundamentally different way than a utilitarian would. To clarify, in the opening lines of *Utilitarianism* Mill writes: “All action is for the sake of some end, and rules of action, it seems natural to suppose, must take their whole character and color from the end to which they are subservient.”³⁶ Happiness, as Mill understands it, then, is the *product* of acting in such a way as to promote the happiness of the greatest number. For Aristotle, by contrast, *eudaimonia* is not conceived of as a product, the end result of action, but the performance of living one’s own life well. It is your life performed well, not a set of mental states. As a result, it would be incoherent to speak

of maximizing this sort of happiness, apart from living it better—with more virtue.

Did the Nahuas think of *neltiliztli* as Aristotle thought of *eudaimonia*? One may answer in the affirmative for two reasons. First, in no extant literature is there a discussion of an independent test for assessing right action, so they did not think of it in the way that Kant does. Second, if one looks to their analysis of good and bad performance of social roles, one sees that they justify assessment by appealing to a harm or help rendered. For example, here is how the philosopher, or *tlamatini*, is described in volume ten of the F.C.:

The good [*qualli*] *tlamatini* is a physician, a person of trust, a counselor; an instructor worthy of confidence, deserving of credibility, deserving of faith; a teacher. He is an advisor, a counselor, a good example; a teacher of prudence, of discretion; a light, a guide who lays out one’s path, who goes accompanying one. . . . The bad [*amo qualli*] *tlamatini* is a stupid physician, silly, decrepit, pretending to be a person of trust, a counselor, advised. . . . [He is] a soothsayer, a deluder, he deceives, confounds, causes ills, leads into evil.³⁷

What one notes in this description is the way in which a person performs her social role, the quality of her contribution to the community, is the source of praise or blame. The bad [*amo qualli*] philosopher specifically causes ill, both to the person counseled, and to the community at large. The good [*qualli*] philosopher is he who is a light and a mirror for his patients and the community. Assessments of right action, then, follow from an understanding of what it means to lead a good human and communal life. I think it clear, then, that the Nahuas reasoned about the good and the right in the same sort of way as eudaemonists do.

4. WAYS OF LIFE

At this point one might have some further pertinent questions. Aristotle’s understanding of *eudaimonia* is connected to a way of life, the contemplative, and a program for general living. To what extent is something like this present in the Nahuatl understanding of *neltiliztli*? The answer, I think, distances the Nahuas from Aristotle, since the Nahuas do advocate for two (or more) approaches to rootedness, but they have no notion that is like the Greek *bios*.

Beginning with Aristotle, much of the picture for his understanding of *eudaimonia* emerges from the foregoing. Each of us leads her life by organizing and deliberating about her ends. This is not something that happens easily, and so it requires skill, virtue (*arētē*), to perform such organizing well. Moreover, Aristotle tells us that the way that we lead our lives as humans, the way that we enjoy human *Eudaimonia*, is to employ *logos*, to employ reason broadly understood.³⁸ The special virtue of *logos* for ethics is, of course, prudence, *phronēsis*. And it is *phronēsis* which acts in consort with the other virtues to enable each of us to live well, to lead a *eudaimon* life. None of this, however, tells us what sits at the top of the telic hierarchy. Is it just anything we could choose?

Aristotle's answer is somewhat elliptical, but it looks as though he suggests that what sits at the top of the telic hierarchy is a way of life, a *bios*. He writes:

For three ways of life stand out most; the one just mentioned [i.e., of pleasure], the political, and third, the theoretical [*theōrētikos*]. The many appear to be quite slavish in deciding [*proairoumenoi*] on a way of life [*bion*] fit for livestock, but their argument has support on account of the many of means who share the sentiments of Sardanapalus. The refined, on the other hand, and those of action decide on a life of honor; for the life [*biou*] of politics has nearly this end [*telos*].³⁹

In this passage Aristotle gives a few brief rebuttals to the life of pleasure, and that aimed at honor, though he waits until book 10 to provide a full defense of the life of contemplation. What matters for the present is what Aristotle's comments suggest for the structure of *eudaimonia*, namely, that a *bios* is decided on as an end (*telos*). This is not the same, however, as choosing a particular outcome, or set of outcomes. For a way of life is a characteristic way of choosing and ordering one's ends so that their performance is of a typical kind. At the top of our telic hierarchy, then, is not a final goal, but a way of life.⁴⁰ And Aristotle later argues (in book 10) that only one such way of life, that typified by theoretical contemplation, is suitable to humans as a complete goal.⁴¹

There is an additional point which proves helpful for a comparison with the Nahua conception of the good life. One of the reasons Aristotle so hastily dismisses the life of pleasure is that he identifies it with one that is fit for livestock, *boskēmatōn*—literally for fattened animals. Implicit in Aristotle's language is a distinction between a way of life, *bios*, and mere life, *zoē*. In the opening passages of his *Politics*,⁴² Aristotle distinguishes between a natural tendency, like procreation, which he does not think is the result of a decision (*proairēsis*), a natural union, like a household, which is an association to meet the needs of daily life, and a state, which "exists for the sake of living well."⁴³ While humans also lead a life of *zoē*, one of satisfying those necessities like eating, we also decide on certain goals for the sake of living well. When we engage in activities or practices (like music and dance) for these latter ends, we are leading a way of life, a *bios*. This is why it is a sort of category error, for Aristotle, to decide on a way of life that would be co-extensive with the activities needed for mere survival. It also means that *eudaimonia* ultimately concerns the performance of one's life by organizing ends that are chosen above and beyond necessities.

The specification of which way of life is best for Aristotle has been a source of controversy, not because it is unclear, but because scholars have been puzzled in trying to explain the compatibility of the intellectualist account of *eudaimonia*, in book 10, with the comprehensive account that is articulated in the rest of the N.E.⁴⁴ I shall not here try to provide my own sense of the compatibility of these two accounts in Aristotle. Rather, I would like to note that the Nahuas also seem to give an account of the good life that is in some ways split between a comprehensive and

an intellectualist approach. Yet, because they do not make use of anything like *bios* as a concept, they do not have a similar tension.

To understand why the Nahuas may have this advantage, it might be helpful to recall that *neltiliztli* is recommended both on prudential grounds and on the grounds that one takes root in *teotl*, the way things are. So that if one is to lead a life in a human community, one must lead a rooted life. Surveying the existing literature and anthropological record, one finds that for the Nahuas one's life appears to take root at four related levels: in one's body, in one's psyche, in one's community by social rites and role, and in *teotl*.

Rootedness in one's body was made possible by participating in a number of practices. The Nahuas held that the body serves as a temporary location for three forces which animate us: *fonalli*, which resides in the head and provides the energy needed for growth; *teyolia*, which resides in the heart and provides memory, emotion, and knowledge; and *ihiyotl*, which resides in the liver and provides passion, bravery, hatred, and love, among others.⁴⁵ Anthropologists have recovered many figurines posed in ways that look like yoga poses; they include, for example, a position almost exactly similar to the lotus position. From the description of the body and its movements, one gathers that a regular practice of yoga-like movements was thought to help balance or root some of our bodily energies.

An additional way in which one sought a rooted life was in one's psyche—bearing in mind that the difference between psyche and body was not nearly as sharp as our current understanding. The point in this regard is that if one learns to assume an identity, a certain kind of personhood, one gains rootedness. For example, in the *Hueheutlatolli*, the *Discourses of the Elders*, one finds a congratulatory speech in which the elders discourse with the new bride and groom, new owners of a face and heart. The groom, for example, responds to the elders, stating,

Ye have shown me favor, ye have inclined your hearts [*amoiollotzin*]; on my behalf ye have suffered affliction. I shall inflict sickness on you, on your face [*temuxtli*].⁴⁶

In this case the face (*ixtli*) and heart (*yollotl*) together indicate the whole person, one's character. The groom's responses address both facets of the elder's personality. In marriage, likewise, the elders bind the couple together as a new identity, by tying the man's cape to the woman's skirt, and speak both to their faces and their hearts. The suggestion is that in such a way they gain personhood, a way by which they will stand here on the slippery place. Character virtues, then, primarily find their place at this level in facilitating the acquisition and maintenance of one's "face and heart," one's character.

Yet, these points already slide over into rootedness in the community, the third level of rootedness. For the bride and groom are not only bound together, but bound within and before the community. Participation in one's community, then, was carried out in festivals and social rites of various

sorts. In the marriage ceremony described, for example, the fathers, mothers, grandparents, and related family members all have specific roles to play. It was, moreover, the role of the *tlamatinimê*, the philosophers, to foster the acquisition of a face through counseling, and the goal of education to teach young Nahua children the dispositions that would sustain healthy judgment. One's character, then, enabled one to execute the offices of one's social role well, but these not only had more specific demands, they also served the purpose of training or habituating one into that character.

A final way to achieve rootedness was in *teotl* directly. The three dimensions of rootedness just discussed are, of course, ways to be rooted in *teotl*, but in an indirect sort of way. The Nahuas appeared to have held that there were also a few other, more direct, ways to be rooted in *teotl*. In the above quoted passage from "Flower and Song," the specific answer given to achieve rootedness is to compose philosophic poetry. This is not too distant from Aristotle's insistence on the life of the mind. In some of the more mystical passages, it appears that some thought the use of hallucinogenic substances was perhaps another way. Any of these ways, though, were thought to be ways to make something of beauty of our short time on *tlalticpac*.

At this point, one might wonder how the Nahuas are not saddled with the same sort of difficulty that faces Aristotle. Rootedness appears to have both a comprehensive meaning, and an intellectualist one, reserved for those who can compose flower and song. In response, I think the problem is at least not so acute among the Nahuas. A *bios*, to recall, has two important features. First, it is a characteristic way of choosing among our goals and ordering them in the telic hierarchy of our life's plan. This is the sense in which it sits atop that hierarchy. Second, it is a form of life that is chosen above and beyond the necessities of *zoë*. While the Nahuas did have various social roles, which in the case of a philosopher, or physician, might be counted as a characteristic way of choosing among ends, they did not distinguish such ways as something distinct from the necessities of mere living. All people, then, were to aim for rootedness at the levels of mind, psyche, and community. It just turns out that for some people, participation in the community also afforded the possibility for a more direct rootedness. The philosophers, for example, found rootedness in their communities, in part, by composing "flower and song," which just happened to be a direct way of finding rootedness on *tlalticpac*. The ways are complementary among the Nahuas, then, rather than exclusionary, as they appear to be in Aristotle.

5. MORAL MOTIVATION

While the discussion concerning ways of life (*bioi*) highlights one difference between Aristotle and the Nahuas on the good life that might count in favor of the Nahuas' view, another related topic might pose a challenge for it. That topic concerns the role of pleasure, *hēdonē*, or elevated emotional states for the good life. The specific difficulty is that by retaining a connection between pleasure and the good life, Aristotle also solves an important problem for moral motivation. To the question, why should we be good? Aristotle can answer: because it is more enjoyable than not

being good. If the Nahuas do not retain this connection, then it would appear that they lose this advantage.

In response, one might begin by recalling the grounds for Aristotle's argument in the N.E.⁴⁷ For Aristotle, pleasure perfects, in the sense of completes, the performance of *eudaimonia* as an "end which supervenes like the bloom of youth to those in the prime of their lives."⁴⁸ If it is not a constitutive or essential component of *eudaimonia*, then it is internally related as its completed form. The reason for this is that *eudaimonia* spells out what it means to lead a life as a human, as opposed to the life of a beast or angel. This life must make use of *logos* in some way, and it is ultimately led in the company of others (as the arguments in Aristotle's *Politics* makes clear). The pleasure that follows for this life, as a result, is a properly *human* pleasure, and this is the only way to achieve it. While misfortune may intervene, as Aristotle's discussion of Priam suggests, even in those tragic cases "the beautiful shines through."⁴⁹ Only by living well could Priam have had *human* happiness anyway. Should fortune favor us, moreover, then our lives enjoy not only happiness, *eudaimonia*, but blessedness, *makaria*.⁵⁰

For the Nahuas, life of *tlalticpac* has no similar perfection. The good life, understood as *neltliltzli*, bears only an accidental relation to elevated emotional states, to one sense of *hēdonē*. Composing flower-song, or uniting one's face and heart, makes for a better and more beautiful, if still transient existence. It is better and more beautiful, finally, because it is ultimately one rooted in *teotl*, in the way things are through their changes.

While it is too much for the Nahuas to think that pleasure is more than an incidental feature of our life's performance, one nevertheless has reasons to act for it that are distinct from prudential or dutiful considerations. This is why the rooted life ought to be considered a conception of "the good life," and why the Nahuas do not face a problem concerning moral motivation. The argument so far has reviewed some of the many roles and rites at work in Nahua culture. What one sees in these descriptions is that the feather-worker acts out of a passion for his craft. The philosopher acts for a love of wisdom. And mothers and fathers act out of love for their children. These reasons—namely, passions and loves—are neither prudential nor dutiful, and yet they provide us with reasons for acting. They are, moreover, some of the more common motivations that we have for undertaking action. Seeking to leading a rooted life, then, ultimately means that one is seeking to lead a worthwhile life. Even if pleasure is incidental to this way of life, one still has the greater bulk of reasons to pursue it.

6. CLARIFICATIONS

The present argument has so far established a number of points of agreement and noted a few differences between Aristotle's conception of the good life and that of the Nahuas. Yet, I must now pause to clarify two points regarding the analysis of Nahua understanding of *neltliltzli* specifically. I pose these points as objections and supply responses in order to clarify the nature of the claims so far made.

A first concern might run as follows. Does the present analysis of *neltiliztli* cohere with broader Nahua conceptions? For example, in the popular religious beliefs of the Nahuas, mothers who died in childbirth went to the heavens of the afterlife. Their understanding of rewards and punishments, then, seems to be rather fatalistic. How is this religious understanding compatible with the account so far outlined, in which deliberation about ends, or at least highest ends, seems to play so central a role?

Two distinctions could aid in answering this question. One concerns the difference between *neltiliztli*, which is a conception of the good life here on *tlalticpac*, and whatever rewards were thought to follow in the afterlife. It is true that in common religious belief, warriors who fell in battle (in specific ways) and women who died in childbirth were both thought to go to Tamoanchan. But they would not, then, be leading lives on *tlalticpac*. There is nothing incompatible between the idea of leading a rooted life on *tlalticpac*, and that of receiving rewards in the afterlife on account of a very specific occurrence. What seems to be at stake in the question is a broader sense of justice that would obtain between actions performed in this life and rewards in the afterlife. Yet it is not clear to me that the Nahuas held to such a (Christian) view. In broaching religious beliefs, however, one is led to a second pertinent distinction.

The second distinction concerns the character of the present study. My goal, unlike that of anthropologists, has not been to reconstruct the general understanding of the good life among ordinary Nahuas. Philosophers of classical antiquity look to understand specific philosophic claims among the Greeks and Romans, and so they do not try to make their arguments consistent with wider cultural notions like miasmatic contamination. I do likewise here, and so have prescind from a consideration of the broader Nahua understanding of *tlazolli*, which is remarkably like the Greek *miasma* in certain respects.

We have evidence that the elders and *tlamatinimê* (plural of *tlamatini*, i.e., “philosopher”) often did break with ordinary understandings. Nezahualcoyotl, for example, openly wonders whether there is an afterlife, or if it is only a comforting fable. In a philosophic poem entitled “I Am Sad,” he writes:

I am sad, I grieve
 I, lord Nezahualcoyotl.
 With flowers and with songs
 I remember the princes,
 Those who went away,
 Tezozomoczin, and that one Cuacuhtzin.
 Do they truly live,
 There Where-in-Someway-One-Exists?⁵¹

Nezahualcoyotl is in these lines clearly expressing doubt about life in a place after death. It must be a place where one in some, non-fleshy way exists? This doubt in the afterlife, further, explains Nezahualcoyotl’s ongoing preoccupation with death, since he is little comforted by the ordinary stories. In brief, the philosophers and elders⁵² broke with established religious beliefs in their recorded writings, and so it would seem unreasonable to criticize

the present philosophic study for not conforming to the religious beliefs of other segments of the population.

An additional concern is that in presenting *neltiliztli* in relation to Aristotelian eudaimonism, I have shaped the Nahua claims in a way that is too “individualist,” especially in my focus on action guidance and the search for the good life. How does that square with the broader, more sociocentric, understanding of the Nahua culture that anthropologists have described?

In response, one notes that “individualism” and “sociocentrism” are slippery terms. What I hope to have shown is that the Nahuas were in two specific ways more “sociocentric” than Aristotle. This is the case, first, in the multi-leveled way in which one achieves rootedness. While I believe that Aristotle is often misunderstood in contemporary scholarship as focusing exclusively on the individual pursuit of happiness, the Nahua emphasis on finding rootedness through one’s specific social role in the community adds a social dimension that is not present in Aristotle’s account. Indeed, a greater part of action guidance for the Nahuas turns on how well one executes the offices of one’s social role, and this is strikingly different from Aristotle’s focus on excellences that any human should develop. Second, the way that social rites and practices were thought to be an essential part of character formation finds no parallel in Aristotle. He nowhere discusses character formation by way of participating in social rites, but the Nahuas do often rather elaborately. The above excerpts are taken from exhortations by elders for youths engaged in just these rites. In these two ways, then, I believe that the Nahuas were more community oriented, or “sociocentric,” than was Aristotle.

There is *another* sense, however, in which it might be thought that the Nahuas were more “sociocentric” than Aristotle. They might be thought to have held to a sense of ethical life that is socio-holistic. On such an understanding, the Nahuas would have held that the fundamental unit of moral concern was the community and not the individual. If this is right, then the present development of *neltiliztli*, especially in those sections concerning action guidance, would be true, but rather misleading.

In response, I do not think it accurate to claim that the Nahuas held that the fundamental unit of moral concern was the community, rather than the individual. In the texts reviewed above, various agents are criticized for harming other people directly, and not for harming the community by way of harming individual people. The texts themselves, then, conflict with this interpretation. Moreover, socio-holism is problematic from a philosophic point of view,⁵³ and so I think it counts toward the greater cogency of their position that the *tlamatinimê* were not inclined to support it.

7. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The present essay hopes to have taken a first step toward serious philosophic reflection on the ethical understanding of the good life, *neltiliztli*, among the Nahuas. Their conception is in many ways like Aristotle’s understanding of *eudaimonia*. What one seeks in life, they held, is a response

to the basic conditions of life on *tlalticpac* is rootedness. What one seeks in choosing ends that are above mere necessities, Aristotle held, is *eudaimonia*. For the Nahuas philosophical poetry provides the best kind of answer, the best rootedness, in response to the slipperiness of *tlalticpac*, since flower and song outlast and are more beautiful than other transient creations. For Aristotle, the life of theoretical contemplation is that which is best suited to an animal which leads its life by means of *logos*. For both, however, this best way of life is related to the broader aim of living well in other activities, which require excellent qualities of character (i.e., virtues) to achieve. Finally, in both cases, right action is assessed by appealing to a conception of what is good, how one flourishes, which is thus justificatorially prior to a conception of the right.

At the end of these reflections, then, one is presented with two different articulations of the good life. Most of us, I would venture, would like to believe that pleasure is somehow internally connected to the best performance of our life's act on the world's stage. Yet we also recognize that perhaps this may be but much hopeful thinking. Nor is it clear, moreover, that this sort of difference is one that can be resolved simply by an analysis of concepts. Aristotle and the Aztecs each have a different preferred sense of "pleasure," and so different understandings of its relation to the good life. Which sense is better for ethical purposes is not a matter which could be resolved only by looking to the meanings of the terms under consideration. Rather, it must take its measure from the broader coherence of the ethical theories as a whole, and their respective abilities to illuminate our moral lives. The present reflection on the Aztecs, as a result, highlights less a problem for resolution than a problem of the human condition. It challenges us, moreover, to question the received (Western) wisdom about the good life. And we should be better for it, whether, as Aristotle contends, because it will bring us pleasure in perfecting our activities as beings possessing *logos*, or whether, as the Nahuas held, that it makes a more beautiful pattern of our activities on the slippery earth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Versions of this essay were presented at the Trans-American Experience conference at the University of Oregon in Eugene (2015), and the Latinx Philosophy conference at Columbia University in New York City (2016). I would like to thank many members of both audiences, as well as the anonymous reviewers for the *Newsletter on Hispanic/Latino Issues in Philosophy*, for the helpful feedback on the ideas developed here.

NOTES

1. Aristotle identifies *eudaimonia*, or "happiness," with the highest aim in *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, rev. ed., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), at 1095a15–20. As a note, translations of Aristotle are my own.
2. I have in mind especially James Maffie's *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (Boulder: Colorado University Press, 2014). Maffie has, in his entry "Aztec Philosophy" for the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aztec/> (last accessed September 30, 2016), provided what is likely the most philosophic overview of Aztec ethics. His purpose there, however, was much broader.
3. In this respect, I have in mind especially Miguel León-Portilla's *La filosofía náhuatl: Estudiada en sus fuentes con un nuevo apéndice*, new ed., prologue by Angel María Garibay K. (Mexico City: UNAM, 2001 [1956]). The present essay is much indebted to some of the remarks León-Portilla makes in this book. I have also profited greatly from his *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study*

of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind, trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).

4. Of course, anthropologists and art historians have long been interested in Nahuatl ethics, but their concern is rather with what might be called an analysis of cultural mores. Two pieces in English that have been particularly influential for the present essay are Louise M. Burkhart's *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989) and Pete Sigal's *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahuatl Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011). In the former case, one learns to be cautious of Castilian influences and interpolations, even in the construction of Sahagun's *Florentine Codex*, on which much of the present essay relies. In the latter, one comes to recognize the rather tendentious approach to (especially) sexual ethics one finds presented in almost any recorded work, including the *Florentine Codex*. Alfredo López Austin's *Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciones de los antiguos Nahuas*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Mexico City, UNAM, 1984), has also proven helpful for understanding the general Nahuatl worldview, though the implications of his study are more immediate, I think, for Nahuatl metaphysics.
5. N.E., 1094a.
6. *Ibid.*, 1235b.
7. *Ibid.*, 1145b.
8. Richard Kraut has a fine review and assessment of Aristotle's method in ethics in "How to Justify Ethical Propositions: Aristotle's Method," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut, 76–95 (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).
9. Technically, it cannot be that at which all things aim, since inanimate things do not aim at anything. The sense seems to be restricted to human agents. This portion of the argument is taken from (and developed) in my essay "Natural Goodness and the Normativity Challenge: Happiness Across Cultures," *American Catholic Philosophical Association* 87 (2013): 183–94.
10. N.E., 1095a.
11. C.D.C. Reeve, for example, has a line-by-line analysis of the opening passages of the N.E. and comes to just this conclusion. See especially chapter seven of his *Action, Contemplation, and Happiness: An Essay on Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Daniel Russell comes to a similar conclusion in his *Happiness for Humans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
12. N.E., 1099a.
13. *Ibid.*, 1098a.
14. I have explored this metaphysical backdrop at length in my "Natural Goodness and the Normativity Challenge: Happiness Across Cultures."
15. Bernadino de Sahagún, *The Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, ed. and trans. Charles E. Dibble and Arthur J. O. Anderson, 12 vols. (New Mexico: University of Santa Fe, 1969), Vol. 6, 228. Translation modified.
16. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, 228.
17. For a fuller development of the practical syllogism for Aristotle, see Paula Gottlieb's "The Practical Syllogism," in *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Richard Kraut, 218–33 (New York: Blackwell Publishers, 2006).
18. One may find the Nahuatl transcription in *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain: The Codex Romances de los señores de Nueva España*, transcription and translation by John Bierhorst (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), fols. 3v-4r. The translation quoted, however, is Miguel León-Portilla's in *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 92. León-Portilla's text also includes the Nahuatl to accompany each translation. Bierhorst's interpretation of Aztec culture is rather widely disputed, and his translations tendentiously support his position, so that I have entirely avoided using his translations and, when necessary, have translated the texts myself. For a review of the difficulties with Bierhorst's "ghost songs" hypothesis, see León-Portilla's response in the "Introduction" to his *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, especially pages 41–44.
19. For the Nahuatl transcription, see *Ballads of the Lords of New Spain*, fols. 21 r.—22 v. The translation is from *Fifteen Poets of the*

- Aztec World, 91.
20. Angel María Garibay, *Llave del Náhuatl, Colección de Torzos Clásicos con Gramática y Vocabulario, para utilidad de los Principiantes* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Press, 1981), 112.
 21. One may find the original Nahuatl in *Cantares Mexicanos: Songs of the Aztecs*, transcription and translation by John Bierhorst (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985), fol. 9v. The translation, for the above noted reason, is substantially modified.
 22. An important implication of this point, but which I cannot develop at length here, is that the Nahuatl sense of “truth” is rather different from a correspondence theory of truth—something which I’ve often thought to be Aristotle’s stance on truth. For the Nahuas, one not only comes to know the truth, but most fundamentally comes to live the truth.
 23. Rémi Siméon’s *Diccionario de lengua Nahuatl o Mexicana*, 2nd ed., trans. Josefina Oliva De Coll (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1981) reads: “nelhuayo adj. Provisto de raíces, que tiene raíces. R. nelhuayotl.”
 24. *Florentine Codex*, vol. 10, 11. Translation modified.
 25. This topic has long been the subject of study among classicists. While Werner Jaeger develops this thesis to some extent, I have in mind the patient argument which A. W. H. Adkins develops in his *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece: From Homer to the End of the Fifth Century* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1972). The whole of the book is devoted to supporting the points just made.
 26. For the specifics on the Confucian tradition on virtue as *de* and *ren*, see chapter one of Jiyuan Yu’s *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue* (New York: Routledge Press, 2007).
 27. Following Lopez Austin, in *The Human Body and Ideology: Concepts of the Ancient Nahuas*, trans B. Ortiz de Montellano and T. Ortiz de Montellano (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 189, another possible candidate would be the “upright man,” *tlacamelahuac*. This term derives from *tlacatl*, meaning human, and *melaucayotl*, meaning rectitude or making something straight. The term, however, likely had a more specific sense. I tend to think it a closer candidate for Aristotle’s *phronimos*. Another possible candidate is *tlacoyotl*, which is sometimes translated as “excellence.” Yet this term derives from *tlacotli*, which means valuable or expensive, and so is more likely a term for inherent worth, or (better) highest worth.
 28. In what follows, it may be helpful to bear in mind that Nahuatl does not have a standard orthography, though current scholarship tends to use a modified Franciscan lexicography. The F.C. in particular tends to make non-standard use even from one line to the next. One should bear in mind, then, that “i” and “y” are often substitutes, and “j” and “i” are as well. In the F.C., the existence of glottal stops and breathers is most commonly indicated with an “h.”
 29. In fact, the “-ness,” indicating an abstractive substantive in English, is not present in the Nahuatl. I added it for the purposes of readability.
 30. *Florentine Codex*, vol. 10, 2. These translations are my own. Dibble and Anderson render the entire phrase as “the good daughter.”
 31. To be fair to Dibble and Anderson, one purpose of their translation was to stay in contact with the insights that informed the Spanish which Sahagun rendered in his original transcription, but without translating through Spanish to English. If Sahagun interpreted the Nahuatl in a specific way, then their task was to make that known in English as well. My goals are different ones.
 32. *Florentine Codex*, vol. 10, 2. Translation is my own.
 33. Of all the authors that make this contrast, John Rawls is likely the clearest. For his account of the categorical imperative procedure and its difference from the categorical imperative itself, see his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), especially chapter ten on the categorical imperative. He makes the contrast between orders of justification in *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed., 24–30 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
 34. N.E., 1094a.
 35. “*ta men gar eisin energiai, ta de par’ autas erga tina*” (1094a2-3).
 36. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (New York: Hackett Press, 2001), 2.
 37. *Florentine Codex*, vol. 10, 29-30. Translation modified.
 38. N.E., 1098a.
 39. *Ibid.*, 1095b.
 40. This approach to the organization of our preferences, so that (1) *eudaimonia* is the skillful (i.e., excellent) management of our telic hierarchy, and (2) a way of life is what sits atop the hierarchy would appear to enable Aristotle to avoid the sorts of concern Larry Temkin raises in *Rethinking the Good: Moral Ideals and the Nature of Practical Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). A key objection Temkin raises is that our preferences cannot be demonstrated to be strictly transitive, so that preference orders (and so equivalence relations) cannot be said to obtain for our preferences. This spells trouble for informed preference consequentialists and anyone who agrees broadly with John Rawls’ descriptive account of the good in part three of *A Theory of Justice*. Aristotle’s conception of the good, if the above is correct, would appear to allow him to avoid this sort of concern, since a *bios* requires only a characteristic way of putting goals in relation to each other, and not anything like even a partial preference order. The matter, clearly, is more complex than can be addressed here, but I thought it worth noting that Aristotle’s approach may avoid a number of modern headaches concerning the good.
 41. This is Aristotle’s argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a10-178a10.
 42. Aristotle, *Aristotelis Politica*, ed. W. D. Ross (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957).
 43. *Ibid.*, 1252b.
 44. For a taste of the controversy, see Thomas Nagel’s criticism in “Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 7–14 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), and J. L. Ackrill’s tentative reply in “Aristotle on *Eudaimonia*” in the same volume *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, 15–33.
 45. These points have been made at length in Lopez Austin’s work as well as David Carrasco’s *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmivision and Ceremonial Centers* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1990).
 46. *Florentine Codex*, vol. 6, 127. Translation modified. Incidentally, this phrase, which looks to be an insult, is a compliment in Nahuatl culture. One “balances” one’s wishes of good fortune with bad fortune in order to wish another well. The section ends, for example, by welcoming the new couple into the society by telling them that they are abandoned. The statements read: “for it is our way of doing things on earth (*in tlalticpac*); for no one is concerned with anyone; for we have already abandoned thee. Take heed of this,” 132–33. Translation modified.
 47. The present discussion makes use of points that Aristotle develops in books 1 and 10 of the N.E., but for the sake of clarity, I have omitted Aristotle’s distinct discussion of pleasure in book 7. I do not think the present argument turns on the difference between pleasure understood as an uninterrupted activity, as one largely finds it in book 7, and pleasure as a sort of perfection of our other activities. See Julia Annas’ essay, “Aristotle on Pleasure and Goodness,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 285–99 for an account that reconciles Aristotle’s various statements on this topic.
 48. N.E., 1174b.
 49. *Ibid.*, 1100b.
 50. *Ibid.*, 1099b.
 51. *Cantares Mexicanos*, fols. 25r and v. Translation is slightly modified for readability from Miguel León-Portilla’s in *Fifteen Poets of the Aztec World*, 93.
 52. I write “philosophers and elders” to indicate the possibility that these were distinct groups, though they likely were not.

53. I think the problems are well-known. Yet, to be a little more specific, a principle problem facing any morally “holist” account of action guidance is that forms of fascism come to be readily supportable. If the community is the ultimate unit of moral concern, then the sacrifice of an individual is of no more consequence than the sacrifice of a gangrenous finger to save the life of the individual (maybe even less so).

Tsotsil Epistemology: An Intangible Inheritance

Manuel Bolom Pale

Edited and translated by Carlos Alberto Sánchez

When we think that reality is constructed, what we are doing is considering a space needing of conquest.

—Hugo Zemelman

INTRODUCTION

In what follows, I will reflect on originary peoples [*pueblos originarios*]. Specifically, my reflections will focus on the thought, cosmovision, and philosophy of the *Tsotsil* peoples of Huixtán, Chiapas. The main objective of this work is to propose arguments that will allow us to better understand the postures and forms of resistance that characterize the thought of these people, as well as their communal practices, their principles, enunciations, and sayings, so as to open up the possibility of reconsidering our own reality, especially in the realm of education.

Authors such as Leopoldo Zea, Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo, Anibal Quijano, Arturo Escobar, Edgardo Lander, Francisco López Segrera, Hugo Zemelman, Boaventura Sousa Santos y Daniel Carlos Gutiérrez Rohán share as a common theme the advent of a new Latin American thinking; however, it is not my objective to take up the critical apparatus of these authors, but rather, what interests us here is to show that there are other forms of thinking and other points of departure that can be found outside [established] theory and external to academic philosophies, namely, the philosophical practices of originary peoples.

In our study, we have decided to look at thought, experience, and knowledge from the standpoint of the specific philosophical practices of the *Tsotsil*, risking, of course, that we have involuntarily situated ourselves in the myopic vision of our own perspective. Affirming “our own perspective” means that we also accept the existence of “other” perspectives; even if it is just in the act of indicating this or that, we present ourselves with every judgment of comparison, and we make distinctions because there are certainly things about us that we recognize but would rather not. For this reason, we must distinguish, in the construction of knowledge, between thought and practice.

The study of thought requires vigilance and, simultaneously, the capacity to admire. Thus, we are allowed to contemplate the otherness of the indigenous given that the myth

of homogeneity has been, finally, demolished. This is significant since in the past the problem has always been the negation of indigenous knowledge, brought about by the need to legitimate the paradigms of the great theorists, and has also made it so that other, more urgent things in relation to thought have to be kept out of consideration. Thus, in what follows we aim to see past a fissure, with critical eyes, toward the thought of originary peoples, namely, the thought of the *Tsotsil*.

With the *Tsotsil*, knowledge is constructed in accordance with certain categories that point to the profundity of their historical thinking in relation to practice. This means that practice has a lot to do with the construction of subjects; as such, the objective of this text will be to undertake an approximation of a *Tsotsil* philosophy in order to reflect on the different perspectives that this philosophy takes and, thus, broaden our own sociocultural historical horizon. For this reason, and as we go, we will introduce certain concepts that will allow us to reflect on diverse philosophical categories, such as *p’ij*, *p’ij o’ntonal*, *pasel*, *ich’el ta muk’ o na’el*.

P’IJ

The concept of *p’ij* has several layers. We’ll mention just a few in what follows. To begin with, we should mention that *p’ij* refers to something that is found in its fullness, complete, and mature [*íntegro, completo y maduro*]. In one linguistic variation, the peoples of San Juan Chamula call it *bij*; however, both roots can be traced specifically to a numerical root in the *tsetsal* language referring to things or objects which are circular. Moreover, *bij* is the capacity of the subject to fulfill himself as subject, or a subject that has the necessary qualities to live in the community.¹ This implies a moment in which the subject becomes complete, something that may not have much to do with the way in which this completeness comes about, but which is, rather, about an analogy between knowledge and the capacities of the subject, for instance, with dialogue, which has its beginning and its end, *slikeb* and *slajeb*,² referring to a circling around a conversation. These two elements have to do with Mayan numbering practices. Furthermore, the person who is *p’ij* has knowledge, is wise, manages wisdom [*sabiduría*]; we could say that this person is a person who knows about life, a person with common knowledge.

Outlines of what will eventually become knowledge are manifested in dreams (*vaech*); dreamers then project these outlines in conversation [*plática*] and coexistence as a form of sharing. Much of what these outlines become, these knowledges, are not going to be written in texts, but will remain at the level of dialogue, in the construction of possible worlds, in which dreams constitute a pre-comprehension and pre-construction of reality and of the world; moreover, this is knowledge that must be put into practice—elders say that words have *ch’ulel*, they contribute to the constitution of subjectivity.

Concepts for reality and constitution are but schemas or frameworks that subjects construct on an individual, familial, and community basis and point to a complexity of interconnections, a complexity that has neither a center or a simple multiplicity of centers, but a species of

interpenetration which is continuous and all encompassing. The concept of *p'ij*, *vaechil* transmits, to a certain extent, the idea of an epistemological rapture in the very same concept of knowledge. Preconstruction is what grounds the composition of the relationship of knowledges; what is given in it are the structural, symbolic, and temporal aspects that make possible the construction of the relationships of thought.

Dreams (*vaech*) are an anticipation of what is to come; in this sense, through dreams the relationship is announced, which is like prophesy since through dreams the future configuration of life is made present and evident. Dreams are thus a medium about which one can learn and which can be shared, and having been shared can allow others to prepare; it is something real; it is not fictitious; it is as the prophesy of a future life. This is possible because actions lead to ends and motives in regards to that which one anticipates and in regards to why one anticipates.

The conceptualization of doings (*pasel*) and of cultural horizons demonstrate a typology of schemes. Every conceptualization has within it certain symbolic forms, which are cultural processes that articulate experiences. Ultimately, it is the horizon of human labor that allows for the possibility of comprehending and narrating a world bridging two realities: one is the reality of dreams and the other is what is commonly thought as the real. Both parts make up living reality, and those knowledge schemes are what make possible our understanding of these two realities as unified, tied in the same knot.

The configuration of that other reality which is dreaming (*vaechil*, meaning cricket sleep, from *vay*, to sleep, and *chil*, cricket) mirrors real action; in this way, dreaming provides an articulated temporal narrative that connects the reality of dreaming and the reality which is lived. Dreaming lends evidence to a possible world, and reality is where the result is executed in the form of schematic construction; the construction of the schema is the synthesis of both realities. Thus, a significant totality is generated in which events are interweaved into practice. This totality is made obvious in those elements of the schema that serve as points of narrative creation, which, in turn, evidences the encounter between word and communion.

The events of both dimensions become facts and actions in the schema. Because of that schema, narratives relate those events that are foundational to the culture. This circularity is represented in the idea of the spiral or the snail [*caracol*], which is posited as a principle for *chan*, which refers to the idea of an end that appears as a beginning, insofar as *chanubtasel-p'ijubtasel*. This principle is rooted in the initial conditions that make it possible, and so the beginning appears as a recapitulation of an entire life or of an entire experience, just as a beginning, and that beginning can be the end of another stage.

In that beginning there is a particular configuration of thought. Those two encounters, or knots, of knowledge generate a new seed wherein the beginning is what is given and established, but comes together with an innovation in thinking; that thinking is being itself. When

we speak about a new seed, we refer to the creation of a narrative scheme or schema which is, on the one hand, a process of the creative imagination and, on the other hand, a historical process, an aspect of paradigms grounded on a community's tradition. The construction of a schema for communal thought is product of the imagination, life, and praxis, in such a way that the schema presents a certain dynamism as a consequence of a socialcultural and historical deployment. Tradition consists in once again narrating an entire practice or an entire experience laid out in history and innovation; in this way, tradition, being itself an ontological truth, remains the same in spite of change and innovation through *slikeb* and *slajeb*.

The experiences of dreams and of life are configured in dialogue; dreaming and living represent the duality of real world and possible world projected in narrative: here we have the construction of thinking. The narrator organizes a sense and, simultaneously, reconfigures reality. This happens when the narrator takes as his point of departure a lived experience that he is familiar with or when he interprets a fact; interpretation forcefully summons the imaginary, which makes the individual represent within himself a specific form, in such a way that the narrator configures the context from his own schemes, generated from the experiences of his own life. As such, the construction of thought, through the word, and through communal education, are plotted as labor made possible by the unity of circumstance and subject. This is why narrative only comes alive in the act of sharing. To understand always implies interpretation, and all interpretation and application begins with a pre-understanding. At work in understanding, there is always an idea of what one wants to understand, and what one wants to understand is rooted in the situation of the one who interprets; that is, I understand the other from my understanding of his horizon, and I understand the horizon of the other from an understanding of mine.

P'IJIL O'NTONAL

Sk'an chi jlo'ilaj xchi'uk ti kontontike is part of a profound reflection undertaken in order to understand oneself as subject, and it implies dialogue with one's heart in order to know one's self. *Kaibetik sk'op ti ko'ntontike* is to listen to the suggestions of the heart. As such, to think with one's heart is important to *Tsotsil* culture. *P'ijil jol o'nton* refers to the intellect or the capacities of one's head and heart, but the connection between thoughts and emotions has to do with the way of being *tsotsil*. *Lek o'ntonal kerem* refers to a child with a good heart and is also a synonym of learning. *Jamal yo'nton* refers to an open heart, that is, to the existence of a disposition to know or to learn. *Sna' yo'nton* means that one's heart knows, but also that one's heart remembers. *T'abesel ta o'ntonal*, *vulesel ta o'ntonal* refers to a return to the heart.

The heart is that which carries *p'ijilal*, that wisdom that distinguishes persons from other types of living beings; it must be developed by all individuals following . . . the directions of one's life (or following the guidelines given by day of one's birth). When a person fails to act in accordance with the directives of his *p'ijilal*, it is said that he has no heart, that he is incomplete (*mu ts'akaluk*), or, simply, that he has no head nor heart.

The heart is the intermediary for the relation between the individual and the world. In this sense, we consider as fundamental that the person utilize her heart in the business of everyday, that is, that the person must analyze, reflect, and corroborate her social practices before making any decision. Thus it is said that the heart, in relation with the head (*jol*), fulfills an important role for the group to which one belongs because it allows individuals to think for themselves, that they understand their environment and their relations with others. The formation of the *Tsotsil* individual is constructed, moreover, on the basis of a vital principle, which is the heart in relation with the *ch'ulel*, that is, with his interior, his being, his heart, his center, and his nucleus.

That vital principle which is the heart is perceived as a specific place for thought to take place, but also for the emotions, as is *alo ti k'usi xchi ti avo'ntone* ("say what your heart thinks or feels"), which is an expression of feelings, what identifies and knows your heart; on the basis of this expression, certain other feelings are identified which are derived from personal, familiar, communal, or social situations or problems. *Ja' ti k'usi chai ti avo'ntone* ("what my heart feels") and *ja' ti k'usi tsnop ti a vo'ntone* ("what your heart thinks") are expressions used to manifest the emotive state and certain types of feelings and sensations of *p'ijilal*. Moreover, the heart is where the cognitive, emotive, and sensational processes take place, those that express the experiences of the *Tsotsil* people in accordance with their own reality.

It is clear that whoever educates must be aware of the proper way of understanding the world that surrounds him in order to be part of it, that is, to be *p'ij* in the heart of a culture or society. For that reason, preparing the youth means to allow them to take ownership of themselves, to have them be responsible in the culture, that they are capable of lending life to their word, that they are capable of self-criticism. They must listen to their parents and to the words left behind by their elders; that is, it is not about listening to words divinely dictated, but rather to those words spoken which are the product of actual experience and self reflection. In this way, children are educated so that they may be capable of dialogue with their heart, so that they may be owners of only one heart.

There are three great imperatives related to one's speaking with one's heart. They are:

- *Lo'ilajan xchi'uk ti avo'ntone.*
- *K'opojan xchi'uk ti avo'ntone.*
- *Chi'no ta lo'il xchi'uk avo'nton.*

These imperatives constitute the manner in which one must educate and develop oneself in order to understand the word of the heart. *Lo'ilajan xchi'uk ti avo'ntone* means to dialogue with one's heart; it is a way of talking with one's heart. *K'opojan* is dialogue itself and *chi'no* refers to bringing one's heart to a conversation with others. When we speak of reflection, thought, dialogue, or ideas, we refer to a thinking from the heart, to that speaking with oneself, to being with oneself in the act of dialogue; this is why we speak of unfolding oneself, since that is the way

to understanding.

Analyzing each one of these concepts would take some time, since about each one of them a book could be written. But the central idea is that understanding each concept awakens the heart, as well as the individual's social conscience. Each expression tells us how to behave in some determinate context—individual, familiar, or communal—and each word, each proclamation, aims to attach itself to thought and to the heart so that one is able to reflect the wisdom of *totil- me'iletik, bankilal, jnitvanej, jam k'opetik*, those who open dialogues. . . .

All of this makes possible that the heart is not lost. The heart is forged by the word and the *chanubtasel, p'ijubtasel*, which is the only action capable of forming the human heart and of orienting it in accordance with the desires of the community, since only through *chanubtasel, p'ijubtasel* does each man and each woman give meaning to their lives, a meaning that goes beyond the meaning given in everyday existence. *Yut o'ntonal* refers to a place within the heart, which is a type of sacred place for wisdom. The heart is characterized by its capacity to think and to live—what my heart says, *ja' ti k'usi chal ti ko'ntone*. The heart has its word, it speaks its own tongue, in a murmur that is unintelligible but magnificent. . . . [W]hat the heart dictates is what words express so that words become but a part, a vibrant thing, rhythmic and sonorous that . . . refers to the soul and those feelings of which it speaks. There are words that violently strike and there are words that lovingly embrace, hard and terse words, some acidic, others sweet, others bitter, others poisonous. That is the way of the heart, and the word that is spoken is the profound ancestral word that is deposited in our heart. Previous words watch over us, they educate us, and in naming them the elements appear. Some condition us through time; others change from one episteme to another according to the expressions of our hearts, giving them the possibility to understand and name our world.

Nicolas Bolom tells us, *sk'an xch'ani jutuk ti ko'ntontike* (to silence the heart is a primordial act) because the word is born from silence given that the intellect is able to feel non-verbally (*ak'o snijan sba ti avo'ntone yu'un chchan*). It thus appears that silence is really communicative when it is contrasted with speaking. As such the word that comes from the heart's education is not lazy, idle, or empty, but it knows what it wants to say or express; it is consciousness and *ch'ulel* and it goes together with other human attitudes. Moreover, it is impassioned and rebellious since it is not written on paper but is read in the heart. We can ask ourselves why the words are so jealously guarded in the heart, and perhaps our answer will be that learning requires a perfect silence in order to speak; it is a means to return to the origin, to the first principle, to the *slikeb* of what is expressed. In the originary language, abstract ideas are frequently expressed through the use of the word heart (*o'ntonal*), as such, some fundamental existential expressions emanate from it.

OJTIKINEL IN RELATION WITH NA'EL

Ojtikinel and *na'el* are verbs that have great significance in the *Tsotsil* language. The first means to be acquainted

with [conocer]. If the child is acquainted with something, it is because he adopts a manner of being and knowing in which he can identify any other kind of knowing and how it applies to everyday life. That is, *ojtikinel* implies an approach to the real from a place of dynamic complexity; this is because the space is made up of a system of relations between multiple communal subjects. This is why the child must dutifully confront the equilibriums or disequilibriums between different faculties that make up the subject, giving importance to intuition and imagination, as well as will, over analytic and synthetic cognition and relating specialized cognition with cognition in general.

The second verb, *na'el*, has to do with knowledge and memory. *Na'el* means to know, but it also means to be, knowing how to be, and knowing how to do. It suggests that whoever thinks must live in accordance with his context and is at the same time recalling knowledge. . . . This verb is never separated from *ojtikinel*. Both concepts relate and complement each other because when the child is acquainted with or knows, then he is becoming complete even if he lacks *ch'ulel* (consciousness).

Appreciating acquaintance and knowledge, *k'uxubinel ti ojtikinele xchi'uk ti sna'ele*, is extremely important since it constitutes the genealogy (*slikeb*) of all that has been known and confronted. If these are not appreciated, this means that they do not form part of one's thought, one's practice, and one's being in *Tsotsil* life.

What has been said refers to the formative resources available to *Tsotsil* individuals as they seek to develop themselves in an integral fashion so as to adequately participate in their society. As such, elders (*totil-me'iletik*) propose various value concepts of great importance that determine the character and personality, signified by *sna'el snopel*, *spasel*, and, consequently, the form of comportment in society and with nature. These concepts or values are

- *J-abtel*: a person with initiative, solidarity, economic power, and hard working.
- *P'ijjal*: a person with wisdom, good thoughts, and respectful.
- *Jtak'ivanej, j-al mantal*: a person with strength of mind and spirit, capable of addressing others with wisdom and philosophy.
- *Chanel*: a person that learns new things daily.

These four values, concepts, or principles are significant because they not only have to do with the comportment and behavior of human beings but also with nature. For the raising of children, different interrelated aspects of *Tsotsil* culture intervene. These are *k'el bail, k'an bail, tak'iel*, as grounds of personal and social identity; *ich'bail ta muk'ta p'ijubtasel*, which makes possible the transmission and generation of spiritual and religious cognitions; and *k'otesbel yo'nton, ak'bel yil*, as the forms themselves of education and formation, aspects that are developed in the process of socializing individuals into *Tsotsil* culture.

The main instrument for the transmission of these values is language, which allows sharing the symbolic universes of culture itself.

NOTES

1. A subject who is responsible, that knows how to work, that has initiative, that has principles that accord with the context in which he finds himself, that has the reflexive capacity to participate in an assembly. In the case of women, that she knows how to sow, prepare meals . . . take care of fowl, garden, and knows how to care for the children, etc.
2. *Slikeb* is the beginning, but it is not numerical. Rather, it is represented by the figure of a snail, a seed, or a flower. Each one of these elements is fundamental: the snail represents the beginning or the end, and in iconography is used in Maya's numbering practices; the seed represents the birth of all being and the flower represents the beginning for the fruit or the seed. This means that Mayan thought is cyclical, but not infinite, as it is limited in its numbering to 1 to 20. *Tsotsil* thought is likewise organized into units of 20.

Luis Villoro: Universal Mexican Philosopher

Mario-Teodoro Ramírez

Translated by Carlos Alberto Sánchez

INTRODUCTION

Luis Villoro, the most important philosophical figure of contemporary Mexico,¹ was born on November 3, 1922, and died on March 5, 2014. He began his academic and intellectual activity in the late 1940s in the context of the impact produced by the Mexican Revolution of 1910 in all areas of national life. Along with other young philosophers—Leopoldo Zea, Emilio Uranga, Jorge Portilla—Villoro helped to found el grupo *Hiperión*, which sought to apply to the national situation the ideas of the European philosophical currents in vogue at the time, in particular, historicism and existentialism.² Overall, the group set out to philosophically think the Mexican problem and produced, in its brief existence (1948–1952), some of the most significant essays in Mexican philosophy of the twentieth century, e.g., Emilio Uranga's "Analysis of Mexican Being,"³ or the "Phenomenology of Relajo" by Jorge Portilla.⁴ Villoro published two books in this time: *Great Moments of the Indigenismo in Mexico* (1950),⁵ and *The Ideological Process of the Revolution of Independence of 1952*,⁶ which showed a sophisticated and original combination of philosophical talents and historical skill. Villoro is clear that the question about Mexican being should be answered on historical-critical grounds and not purely on conceptual or philosophical grounds or in a psychological or sociological manner.

However, dissatisfied with certain derivations and nationalist/ideological questions opened up by *Hyperion*, Villoro refrains from these issues and sets out to seek, or better yet, build a philosophical conception appropriate to his own worries and purposes. He thus undertakes some valuable reflections on Eastern philosophy, Husserlian phenomenology, modern philosophy (Descartes, in

particular), analytical philosophy, Marxism, philosophy of culture, etc., which give him theoretical tools that allow him to work and contribute to issues in such diverse philosophical disciplines as philosophical anthropology, epistemology, the critique of ideology, ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and others. But beyond specific issues, trends, and doctrines, Villoro was and wanted to be primarily a philosopher, that is, someone who intended to think the totality of existence in its complexity and in its realization. He had the ability and interest to deal with universal themes, to dedicate the rigor that the philosophical discipline requires, and yet he also had the sensitivity to address the problems of his concrete historical and social reality, i.e., the Mexican reality. In the tension between the universal and the particular—a string that stretches across the entirety of twentieth century Mexican philosophy—Villoro was able to situate himself in the realm of the “concrete,” that is, the universal-individual or the particular-universal, where there was no denying any of these two poles. The task was not, for the Mexican philosopher, to simply find a “dialectical solution” to the universal-particular dilemma but, moreover, to know how to move intelligently and with sensitivity from one pole to another, from one dimension to another.

The conception that Villoro deploys onto the relationship between culture and values better allows us to understand his notion of the meaning and *place* of philosophical practice (which is also a varlorative practice). As a matter of principle, regarding the nature of value, the Mexican philosopher questions both the universalist conception as well as the particularistic conception, that is, both the position that values are simply universal as well as the position that holds that values are relative to a context or are particular, historically and geographically situated in a world.⁷ For Villoro there is no direct apprehension of values, rather values are mediated by culture, by the specific cultural world in which the human subject unfolds and properly exists.⁸ This because, and we can propose this by our account, values are not concepts or formal definitions that can be grasped by a purely intellectual process. Values are qualities that are said of objects, events, or people and are understood—valued [*valorados*—in the context of a specific socio-cultural world. However, this does not mean that values as such are something “particular,” that every culture has its own distinctive set of values, and thus that the cultures are incomparable or incommensurable in their axiological conceptions. What is unique is the way we apprehend and understand values, not values as such. Now, if there is no direct apprehension of values, then there is no “universal culture,” which is the most questionable assumption of axiological universalism leading to that vice that we call ethnocentrism, and, more precisely, “Eurocentrism” as the assumption that European culture (and Western-modern, in general) is the “universal culture,” the culture that does not need a culturally mediated apprehension of values—which is simply a contradiction and, therefore, allows itself the right to impose its conception to other cultures. According to Villoro, “axiological universalism” is an ideology that legitimates domination. But “value relativism” is not the solution, as it disarms cultures of their critical-rational capacity: that is, if all cultures are “equal,” then we have no

basis to criticize the dominant, hegemonic, or ethnocentric cultures.

For our philosopher both are true: values are indeed universal, but there is no universal culture; each particular culture is a way of apprehending, understanding, and realizing universal values. Thus, there is no incommensurability between cultures, which are all, in their complex diversity, pointing one way or another to those values. To the extent that every culture is capable of apprehending values (universal values), every culture has the ability to transcend its closed particularity and be open to the Other, to separate it. Certainly, a culture can deny that openness and stay in a self-affirmation of identity, but this means precisely that culture refuses universal values, i.e., the *value*. A culture thus ends up denying itself, ceases to be, properly, culture. This implies, and Villoro holds this to be the case, that the essential dimension of what we call “culture” consists of evaluative possibilities (autonomy, authenticity, meaning, effectiveness⁹). Each culture is a way of valuing, or making values: justice, freedom, equality, dignity, solidarity, truth, beauty, etc., and, simultaneously, values are nothing and signify nothing—they have no worth—but only to the extent in which they are realized, in which they are brought to bear on the living space of their social-practical application.

We can now define the Villorian conception of philosophical activity.¹⁰ We can say that for him there is no universal philosophy but merely a particular access which culturally mediates the philosophical universal. But it is just not about making philosophy which is “particular” philosophy, identified with a specific context and peculiar features, alienated from the major themes of universal thought. But neither is it about denying any reference to the particular, identified only with an abstract and general philosophical activity, which is the same for everyone. What our particularity determines is the way we treat philosophical universality: the order of importance of the topics, the meaning or nuance we give them, the consequences we draw from our treatment, and the context to which we direct our theoretical and philosophical contributions. We bow to the universal while not denying our uniqueness but deepening ourselves in it, radically thinking its conditions and essential features, and noting that these are not contrary or too distant to our ends or to what every thinking human being posits for herself anywhere in the world.

For Villoro, to philosophize is to build that space of “concreteness” where the universal and the particular, far from opposing each other, resonate with each other and configure a thinking that, as universal, continues to show signs of socio-cultural particularity, and being particular continues to open horizons and vectors of universal significance. This mutual determination, this movement of double reversibility, is what constitutes the form of philosophical practice that Villoro exercises and somehow constitutes a reference or even a model for philosophers in Mexico and elsewhere.

On the basis of this relationship between universality and particularity, we can now explain what we consider the three basic philosophical contributions of Luis Villoro: 1)

the epistemological contribution, as a theory of the plurality of knowledge; 2) the ethical contribution as a political philosophy of the community from the experience of the indigenous peoples of Mexico; and 3) the metaphysical or ontological contribution, as anticipation of current philosophical realism, both a new and old philosophical and universal perspective.

1. THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

As we said a moment ago, Villoro conceives philosophy as an essential and integral activity. His activity as a philosopher is not exhausted by any philosophical discipline or assignment to any current or doctrine of thought. Villoro is not thinking theories or philosophies but reality as such and the problems it poses. Philosophy is not an end in itself but a means to understand what there is and how to act and live in the world. Philosophy has a *telos* that points beyond itself, is not thinking for the sake of pure thinking.

From this perspective we must locate the important theory of knowledge that our philosopher develops and presents in his book *Creer, Saber, Conocer*.¹¹ We want to make clear, first, that Villoro's aim is not to construct a theory of knowledge *per se*, but it must be understood in the context of questions posed by his overall philosophical quest. The problem Villoro raises as the basis for his project, and considering the Mexican context of his reflection, is whether we can have an adequate theory of the relationship between knowledge and practical-social life, or, more generally, between thought and life, between reason and praxis. That is, can we have a rational practical or philosophically oriented life? Can knowledge help us live better, allowing us to overcome violence, domination, injustice? This point is what allows us to observe that the specific contribution to the theory of knowledge that Villoro makes is found in the third epistemological category he analyzes, "conocer," i.e., personal knowledge and wisdom.¹² Somehow Villoro believes that the tradition of the theory of knowledge has forgotten or ignored that third possibility of knowledge, focusing solely on the analysis of the first two: belief (belief, ideology) and knowledge (valid belief, science), and forcing us to choose between one or the other: social practice can only be either ideological, based on a more or less valid ideology, although insufficiently rational, or scientific, founded on a scientific and technical know-how, on the knowledge of experts and a purely methodical-objective rationality. None of these options is acceptable to Villoro, as both have had questionable and disastrous consequences in the world of practical life.

It's worth noting those definitions that our philosopher provides for those epistemic terms that give title to his book. He understands "creer" (belief) as a disposition of the subject to behave in a certain way under the assumption that something is the case. This assumption, "the belief," can be justified on motives or reasons that the subject can claim. The *motives* are purely subjective motives for belief and can refer to desires, interests, conveniences, emotional states, or convictions which are religions or of some other kind; negatively put, these are conditions of the belief that have no objective and rational basis. On the contrary, the *reasons* for a belief are the arguments that an individual can give in order to hold

it. As such, the belief becomes a "saber" (knowing) when the reasons that support it have a character of objectively and are methodically supported. The reasons affirm that the object of belief is the case and, therefore, that it exists regardless of what the particular subject creates. Villoro states that the "objectively reasonable reasons" are those that a particular *epistemic community* assumes as accepted according to the epistemological criteria governing the community. In this way we can explain the intersubjective character that, for Villoro, scientific knowledge possesses.

As for the definition of "conocer," it is important to note the fundamental difference between it and *creer* (belief) and *saber* (knowing). While the latter epistemic functions refer to the world of beliefs, "el conocer" refers to a reality as it is apprehended through personal and lived experience. "Conocer" is to have an experience of the thing or situation; it is knowledge about the entity and its real qualities. In Spanish, there is a big difference between saying "conozco a Carlos" ["I know Carlos"] and saying "I believe Carlos is michoacano" or "I know Carlos is michoacano." The first formula expresses knowledge that can be justified on real experiences or data or evidence to realize that this experience is real. The second formula is based on grounds or probable reasons, more or less certain (other beliefs, certain assumptions), while the third formula is based on reasons that are considered objectively valid (his birth certificate, his identity card, or other objective) tests. It can even be the case that it can express the third but not the first formula; for example, I can say "sé quién es Donald Trump pero no lo conozco"—"I know who Donald Trump is but I do not know him" (or want to know him). Thus, it is clear that "conocer" (*familiar knowledge*) constitutes a kind of knowledge which is original and irreducible to the other types.

"Conocer" refers to all the forms of knowledge we have of reality or of the human world through those experiences that cannot be reduced either to ideology or science. This includes not only personal knowledge, but also interpersonal knowledge, aesthetic knowledge, emotional knowledge (religion as a form of experience and not as ideological doctrine), and ethical-axiological knowledge (i.e., understanding of values). According to Villoro, "conocer" can be formed into a set of consistent concepts and shared communally, which is what is designated by the term "wisdom," which is not mere belief or mere knowledge, but a way of being and living. Says our philosopher, "A scientist is not necessarily a wise man. For a sage it is not one who applies theories, but applies lessons learned from life experiences."¹³

Now, in the same way that ideology can refer, albeit vaguely or extrinsically, to a certain group or social class, and that scientific knowledge is held in the rules and procedures of an epistemic community, wisdom refers to what the Mexican philosopher calls "sapiencial communities," or better yet, we could name them on our own terms as "cultural communities," i.e., a set of subjects that concretely and experientially share in certain knowledges, experiences, values, ways of acting and living, of feeling, etc. Thus we have, for example, a community of artists, or teachers, a professional community or a religious

community; finally, an ethnic community or one that exists in a particular geographical area and shares a common tradition of ideas, values, and social practices, such as the indigenous peoples of Mexico.

For Villoro, knowledge (*sabiduría*) constitutes a form of self-knowledge (*conocimiento*) and also possesses a kind of specific rationality that lies in the notion that beliefs (convictions) of knowledge (*sabiduría*) are founded on real praxis or, more precisely, on the consistency between the subject that believes and thinks and that which that subjects makes or lives. Although this consistency may be the subject of theoretical justification, it is usually a practical “justification”; that is, it is shown in action, in the work or behavior of an individual. Naturally, this requires the existence of other individuals who can testify to that justification.

Finally, with respect to modern epistemological discussion, Villoro proposes an alternative: to recover and observe the value of wisdom (*sabiduría*) as a specific and fundamental form of human knowledge and the exercise of human reason. Against those visions that reduce reason to its scientific form and which leave for practical life the dominion of non-rational, ideological forms of thinking, the Mexican philosopher finds that the possibility for human life lies elsewhere, in another place, in another dimension: it lies in a rationality that is rooted, vitalistic and practical, and communitarian. In general, Villoro sees wisdom (*sabiduría*), as a form of thinking that is different from both science and ideology, the alternative for social and human life.¹⁴

2. THE ETHICAL CONTRIBUTION

A turn or change of perspective occurs in the intellectual trajectory of Villoro sometime in the early 1990s. This shift consisted, in line with the same preoccupation with praxis and the vital existential dimension, in his passing from an epistemological critique of ideology and a general proposal for the living of life under rational-epistemic parameters to a political critique of ideology and the more specific proposal of ethically grounding social praxis. In the same way that we find in philosophical thought and wisdom an alternative to the ideology-science dichotomy, in the practical field we can find an alternative to the dichotomy between ideological morality and rationalist utopianism: that is precisely the alternative of ethical thinking. This ethical-political trajectory is best reflected in Villoro’s *Power and Value*.¹⁵

In that book our philosopher deals with various issues of ethical theory and political philosophy; both are treated under the hypothesis that both issues should be closely linked. To think ethically in political terms and to think politically in ethical terms is the proposition that allows us to overcome the impasses of both a pure ethical theory (and its inveterate idealism) and a pure political theory (and its incorrigible pragmatism). Between the ideological idealism of established morality and the immorality of a policy subject to power one finds, according to Villoro, a double mediation between ethics and politics: an ethics that is not as such if it does not position itself in the matter of its own socially effective realization and a politics that is a sign of a human failure if it does not allow itself to be guided by

ethical values. Ethics—that is, a life according to basic and universal values—is only plausible if it arises in the social context and in the struggle for the *common good*, that is, if it knows to link itself with a commitment to political praxis, to rationally coordinated social action. At the same time, political life suffering from a lack of ethical guidelines is reduced to a mere mechanism for the reproduction of social order and loses all critical and emancipatory possibility. For Villoro there is no purely “individual” ethics, but rather all ethical commitment involves a commitment to others. And there is no political or relevant collective social action without the assumption of values and ethical principles.

Starting from the question into the possibility of an ethically oriented social life, according to the universal values of freedom, autonomy, equality, and, particularly, as the value of solidarity justice, Villoro engages in a critical analysis of the forms of socio-political organization or state in which they have existed. He discusses three types: the State for Order, the State for Freedom, and the State for Equality.¹⁶ The first is the form that prioritizes the value of order (security, survival of the social group, etc.) and operates under the principle of the subjection of individuals and social groups to an autonomous power that supposedly guarantees the smooth running of society. The second type of state, which is a product of modern revolutions, aims to ensure individual rights and the exercise of freedoms; it sets limits to authoritarian forms of the State for Order. The third type of state, which actually is a complement of the second, is the state that seeks to guarantee social or collective rights under the purpose of achieving greater and fairer equality and adequate conditions of life for all its members.

Villoro considers the three types of states as having been unable to create a just, free, harmonious, and creative social life. This is because the nature of the state is to become a structure of domination on the social body, i.e., to abide by politics that always subordinates values to power, social life to the interests of class or group. In general, Villoro questions the various modern political ideologies. Neither liberalism nor socialism, neither nationalism nor social democratic approaches are attractive, not only in relation to the particular conditions of Mexico but also in terms of a universal conception of justice. Therefore, Villoro proposed to interpret and assume the perspective of indigenous groups in our country, particularly those of Chiapas indigenous groups organized around the EZLN and that came to the world’s attention in 1994.

The indigenous political philosophy (Zapatista) that Villoro reclaims is structured around the following principles or normative ideals: a) the construction of social life guided by ethical principles, where power is subjected to value; b) the practice of direct and participatory democracy, which monitors and prevents that political representation alienates itself from the community by positioning itself as a separate power “over” the community (this is the Zapatista principle of “govern by obeying”); c) the *freely assumed* priority (an area on which the critical spirit of Villoro is highlighted) of the community over the individual, namely, the questioning of the forms of egoistic and anti-social individualism that characterizes modernity, but also of authoritative and taxing forms of social integration; d)

the recognition of the values of cultural tradition as a source of meaning for contemporary life, a respectful relationship with nature, and a holistic and decentered conception of the sacred as a meaning for life in its totality, as universal communion of all beings.¹⁷

Hence, Villoro finds in the indigenous world an alternative, a political-cultural-ethical model, with which to address disorders and insufficiencies of modern society. We must clarify two important points: 1) the Mexican philosopher also argues that we should not abandon the valuable achievements of modernity, as the scientific spirit when it is well understood, that is, without dogmatism and reductionism, the defense of freedom and the value of Individual freedom (without the excesses of selfish, and even nihilistic, individualism); 2) also Villoro is aware that the ethical and political indigenous model cannot be simplistically extrapolated to modern life: rather, it's about taking its principles as guidelines concerning social and political transformation in our own time. In any event, what we must change is our perception and appreciation of indigenous cultures under a generously multicultural perspective. Beyond the recognition of the rights of indigenous communities, we must also, and perhaps this is the most important point, be willing to learn from indigenous thought and practice, to see what *they* can teach us.

3. THE METAPHYSICAL CONTRIBUTION

Along with the great philosophical issues to which we have referred, i.e., the epistemological, ethical, and political, Villoro was also interested in the ultimate questions about the meaning of existence, the Self, the Holy, the Divine, etc.¹⁸ He expressed this interest in a somewhat lateral and discreet way, which he framed within the broad outlines of twentieth-century thought—analytic philosophy, phenomenology, Marxism. Our author was aware that his theological-philosophical, metaphysical, and ontological interests had no place (and would not be well regarded) under those theoretical paradigms, which all coincide in rejecting metaphysics and assuming some form of atheism. However, the recent crisis in the theoretical paradigms noted above as well as the emergence of new philosophical conceptions proposed so far in this century, as the ontological turn of speculative realism, can retrieve and assess the metaphysical intuitions of Villoro and allows us to give them a fair and essential place in the whole of his thought.

First, we must recall the ontological realism that Villoro maintained as the ultimate thesis in his theory of knowledge. Against epistemologies of a formalist pragmatic kind, that is, against the assumption that the analysis of the processes of knowledge exhausts any ontological question or, in other words, against the assumption that epistemology eliminates the need for Ontology, Villoro points in *Creer, saber, conocer* that the assumption that there is a reality independent of the subject and its frameworks of knowledge is a condition for the possibility of objectivity and the truth of knowledge. "The existence of a reality independent of the subject," explains Villoro, "onto which judgments can be adapted, is the only rational explanation, both of the coincidence of the objective

justifications of a plurality of subjects, as the progress of knowledge itself."¹⁹

However, hesitant to return to any metaphysical thought in the classic mode (as dogmatic and unfounded), Villoro cannot find the theoretical means to support his assertion of the primacy of reality and the possibility of an ontology. In his last essay "On Truth,"²⁰ he stretches, we believe fruitlessly, phenomenological conceptions and linguistic pragmatics to seek to justify the classical definition of truth as "correspondence" or a reference to a trans-subjective reality. Regardless of the issues of method, it is clear that our philosopher refuses to believe any "idealistic" position, but at the same time never settles on overly restrictive guidelines of analytic philosophy and ideological scientism, so that his reflection in some way points to speculative realism (which also opposes both the idealism and the empiricist or positivist realism) which has recently been proposed by various thinkers such as Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, and Markus Gabriel.²¹

Clearly, Villoro is aware that an ontological-realism stance is needed in order to escape the skeptical and relativistic implications of modern and postmodern thought. In the search for this stance he found the mystical path as the possibility of accessing a completely other reality, absolutely other, with respect to the human subject and all its determinants and relativities. Thus, in his writings on philosophy of religion, Villoro advocates a holistic conception of the divine as silent and irreducible to any conceptualization or religious-ideological or intellectual fixation. Although he does not take a definitive position on the issue, it is understood that there is no rational way to the Divine, only a mystical way. We believe this position can be problematized. Similarly to Wittgenstein, the Mexican philosopher also finds a way to "talk about that which cannot be spoken." His conception of the Divine is grounded, in fact, in a phenomenological-rational reflection rather than a purely emotional posture, one that is simply irrational. In his beautiful text "The Blue Mosque,"²² Villoro presents more than a theoretical discussion about God and the sacred but a description of a mystical experience in the first person, that is, the experience that Villoro himself says he had while visiting the famous church in Istanbul. Now, this does not rule out the possibility of a metaphysical discourse (ontological-rational) about the Divine and, in general, on the existence of an absolute reality beyond human determinations. This possibility of a critical-rational discourse about God (or the idea of God) is what new realism has proposed in this century, particularly in the version of the French thinker Quentin Meillassoux. What this author proposes is the possibility of a (logical-speculative) rational demonstration of the existence of a reality-in-itself independently of consciousness and human life, that is, one that is absolute.²³ This route would not be inconsistent with the defense of rationality Villoro assumes in his philosophy, though it would certainly force the opening of the discussion about the possibility of metaphysical, ontological, and speculative thought in the sphere of Mexican philosophy and Latin American philosophy in general.

In some ways, the epistemological position of analytic philosophy or the ideological-political currents in Latin American thought generally have demonstrated their

insufficiency and incapacity to respond to the real necessities of life and thought in our countries, where philosophy normally lies between the form of thought which is totally alien to our concrete realities or a form of thought strongly committed to these realities but grounded on strong ideological positions which are at times simplistic and merely schematic. The general lack of interest in Latin American philosophers, in their accounts of the basic philosophical questions of metaphysics or ontology, is revealed as an inability of our philosophies to rationally justify an understanding of reality and an orientation for reliable and effectively binding praxis in our communities.

We believe, finally, that while our philosophy does not come to deal directly with basic metaphysical questions, the project of an autonomous and creative Mexican and Latin American philosophy will remain pending, in regards to its effective implementation. The line opened by the rigorous, consistent, and systematic philosophical elaboration of Villoro can be taken up and developed, certainly, under new contexts and new provisions, and according to new theoretical and practical-social challenges.

NOTES

1. Cf. Mario Teodoro Ramírez, *La razón del otro. Estudios sobre el pensamiento de Luis Villoro*, México: UNAM, 2010.
2. Luis Villoro, "Génesis y proyecto del existencialismo en México," *Filosofía y Letras* 18, no. 36 (1994): 233–44.
3. Cf. Emilio Uranga, *Análisis del ser del mexicano* (Guanajuato: Gobierno del Estado, 1990).
4. Cf. Jorge Portilla, *Fenomenología del relajo*, México: FCE, 1984. In English, see Carlos Alberto Sánchez, *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press).
5. Luis Villoro, *Los grandes momentos del indigenismo en México* (México: El Colegio de México, 1950).
6. Luis Villoro, *El proceso ideológico de la Revolución de Independencia* (México: UNAM, 1953).
7. Luis Villoro, *El poder y el valor. Fundamentos de una ética política* (México: FCE, 1997).
8. Luis Villoro, "Sobre relativismo cultural y universalismo ético," en *Id., Estado plural, pluralidad de culturas* (México: Paidós/UNAM, 1998), 141–54.
9. Villoro, "Aproximaciones a una ética de la cultura," 109–40.
10. This is laid out in a polemical, yet respectful, exchange with Leopoldo Zea, a significant figure in Latin American philosophy and proponent of a specifically Latin American philosophy. Cf. Luis Villoro, "Leopoldo Zea: la posibilidad de una filosofía latinoamericana," en *Id., En México, entre libros. Pensadores del siglo XX* (México: FCE, 1995), 90–118.
11. Luis Villoro, *Creer, saber, conocer* (México: Siglo XXI, 1982). Translated into English as *Belief, Personal and Propositional Knowledge*, trans. David Sosa and Douglas McDermid (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998).
12. *Ibid.* See especially Ch. 9: "Conocer y saber," 197–221.
13. *Ibid.*, 226.
14. *Ibid.*, chapter 10, Tipos de conocimiento, 226.
15. Cf. Luis Villoro, *El poder y el valor*, *op. cit.*
16. *Op. cit.* See especially Cuarta parte. La asociación política, 251 y ss.
17. *Op. cit.*, chapter 16, La comunidad, 359 y ss.
18. Cf. Luis Villoro, *Vislumbres de lo otro. Ensayos de filosofía de la religión* (México: Verdehalago/El Colegio Nacional, 2006).

19. Villoro, *Creer, saber, conocer*, 195.
20. Luis Villoro, "Verdad," en *Id.* (compilador), *El conocimiento. Enciclopedia Iberoamericana de Filosofía*, vol. 20 (Madrid: Trotta, 1999), 213–32.
21. Cf. Mario Teodoro Ramírez (coordinador), *El nuevo realismo. La filosofía del siglo XXI* (México: Siglo XXI, 2016).
22. Villoro, "La mezquita azul," incluida en: *Id., Vislumbres de lo otro, op. cit.*, 49–86.
23. Cf. Quentin Meillassoux, *After finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

In Search of the Philosophical Impulse: Zea and the Greeks

Django Runyan
SAN JOSE STATE UNIVERSITY

The preoccupation with identity in the philosophy of Leopoldo Zea is part of a greater set of concerns in Latin American philosophy in general. However, the issues that Zea raises and the emergence of Latin American philosophy give way to questions about philosophy as a whole. In this paper I will examine some of the issues that Zea opens up in relation to the larger philosophical project. One particular passage from Zea will instigate this investigation and serve as a call to go back to the origins of Western philosophy. Throughout what follows I will examine the very possibility of philosophy in light of Zea's observations, and I will attempt to show how Zea is closer to the spirit of the original philosophical impulse that drove the Greeks and, from there, examine the possibilities and questions this raises for the future of philosophy based on Zea's thought.

Philosophy begins with a question—the authentic philosophical question begins in wonderment; any theory or treatise will always be an extension of this initial questioning. And so we have reached an era where perhaps our new, authentic sense of wonderment will be in relation to this question, "What is philosophy?"—What are the key terms of this investigation?—wonderment, question, authenticity, and philosophy. The nature of this paper is such that the definition of these terms are preliminary and that we remember that we want them to remain preliminary—tools for opening what we search for, attempting to remain humble about hasty assertions.

So I begin in brief with these definitions, of which I acknowledge their malleability:

- Wonderment – The space that opens before the question, the sense of awe at one's own ignorance.
- Question – The notion of a question is also tied to authenticity, but part of the question of the question is this: Do I remember to keep the question? That is, does the question remain pressing, urgent, or is it easily satisfied or clouded out by existing theories? Does the history of philosophy sometimes prevent the emergence of original questioning?

- Authenticity – Here I define what is authentic, as that expression which is truly one's own, with the understanding of all conditioning and circumstances that influence what is one's own.
- Philosophy – philosophy will be, for now, intimately related to these other terms; perhaps for now, we will say that it is a search for wisdom that begins from the knowledge of the lack of that wisdom.

With these terms loosely established, I hope to come to a deeper understanding of them through the investigation that follows.

In one of Zea's earliest articles, he concerns himself with the identity of Latin American culture and Latin American philosophy. In a key passage in this article, Zea's affirmation of Latin American philosophy reveals a unique insight into what drives the philosophical impulse. Zea says that for Latin American philosophy to exist, it needs a Latin American culture from which to derive its content. So, Latin American philosophy will exist if we can affirm Latin American culture. But he goes on to say, "the formulation and attempt to solve this problem, apart from the affirmative or negative character of the answer, are already Latin American philosophy, since they are an attempt to answer affirmatively or negatively a Latin American question."¹

What is exciting about Zea's idea is that in attempting to ground philosophy in culture, he is actually grounding philosophy first, and grounding it universally. He reveals that the very method of questioning brings philosophy into existence. Here it is not yet philosophy based on tradition; it is philosophy as an essential human concern. Zea does not go on to clarify this idea precisely, but it brings many questions about the nature of philosophy to the foreground.

First, there is a novelty to this expression; Zea writes as if he were the first person to discover himself doing philosophy. He can't deny that it is philosophy because he is asking a philosophical question, a question about identity. It is the unique historical point in which Zea and Latin American philosophy exist that reveals a question that is fundamentally essential, that has an urgency and authenticity to it that at the same time stands to remind the larger philosophical enterprise of the importance of the question. In a sense, Zea is showing himself and his predecessors to be in the tradition of those pre-Socratics who had reached an impasse in their inquiry that could not be addressed by myth alone. These first philosophers began on totally new ground, from a place of wonder, as Aristotle famously said of them, "It is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize. . . . And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant . . . therefore since they philosophized in order to escape from ignorance, evidently they pursued science in order to know . . ." (Arist. *Met.* 1.2,982b10-20).² Aristotle here says that "men both now begin and at first began to philosophize . . ."

What makes Zea unique in this regard? I argue that the spirit of Zea's questioning is closer to that initial impulse of the pre-Socratics, that it has a similar urgency, spontaneity,

and newness to it. While, obviously, the starting points of concern for the pre-Socratics and Latin American philosophy are different, the spirit of their beginnings have strong similarities. Although the Greeks already had a rich history, there was no written precedence for philosophy, for these questions that initially centered on cosmology.

For Latin American philosophy, as Zea portrays it, the crisis in European culture, to which Latin American culture had always been so entangled, now found itself in a completely new situation. This situation, of no longer being able to rely on European culture while at the same time not having a firm identity without it, made the task of philosophizing more authentically attached to the questions it was asking. So in this way the question itself, while not resolving the issue of identity nonetheless reveals an identity. In stopping to appreciate that the questioning is itself philosophy, Zea is giving a piece to Latin American identity: to be Latin American will be, at some level, to be intimately engaged with this question of identity. All of our key terms have come into play and been expanded by Zea's thought.

For Aristotle, the pre-Socratics were able to be open to these new philosophical ideas, to this sense of wonder, because they were able to be at leisure.³ For Zea, the circumstance for wonderment arises from crisis. In both cases something of the old cultural guideposts begs to be shed so that the emerging questions can find light. In both cases the old is not destroyed but assimilated. This sense of wonderment seeks independence but must acknowledge the ground on which it stands—the circumstances of its arising. Thus, Xenophanes can now look to the existing cultural norms established by the mythological poets and say, "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things that are blameworthy and disgraceful for men: stealing, committing adultery, deceiving each other [F 17]," and propose a new possibility, "One God, greatest among gods and men, not at all like to mortals in body nor in thought [F 35]."⁴ This new independent thought takes stock of the circumstances and yet boldly attempts a new and independent proposition. For Zea, a similar approach arises in dealing with the influence of Europe and the possibility of a Latin American identity, the cultural framework of Latin America is, for Zea, inherited from Europe, and he says,

To become disengaged from it would be to become disengaged from the heart of our personality. We can no more deny that culture than we can deny our parents. And just as we have a personality that makes us distinct from our parents without having to deny them, we should also be able to have a cultural personality without having to deny the culture of which we are children. To be aware of our true relations with European culture eliminates our sense of inferiority and gives us instead a *sense of responsibility*. This is the feeling that animates the Latin American man today. He feels that he has "come of age," and, as any other man who reaches maturity, he acknowledges that he has a past that he does not need to deny, just as no one is ashamed of having a childhood. The Latin American man knows himself to be the heir of Western culture and now demands a place in it.⁵

Thus, having seen the importance of assimilating European culture, Zea can assert his new proposition about Latin American philosophy in its particular circumstances and as part of the larger philosophical project. Latin American philosophy will contribute to the philosophical issues of its own culture while at the same time contributing to the universal issues of European philosophy the issues of "being, knowledge, space, time, God, life, death, etc."⁶ So just as the unique circumstances of the pre-Socratics allowed for a plurality of contributions as to the workings of the Universe and was born out of this sense of wonder, so too do these remarkable ideas of Zea's propose a future wherein a plurality of cultures that have at once assimilated and outgrown the dominant philosophies might renew philosophy itself and restore philosophy as an essentially universally human impulse. Before I pursue the implications for the future of philosophy based on Zea's insights, I want to continue with this comparison to the Greek tradition and look at how Zea defines philosophy and how philosophy came to be defined in practice by Socrates.

In their respective approaches to philosophy, there are two ideas that link Zea with Socrates. These are the concepts of "lack" and of "search," which I will return to after broadly laying out Zea's conception of philosophy. In *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought*, Ofelia Schutte summarizes Zea's conception of philosophy. Philosophy is, for Zea, the highest expression and the foundation for culture. Philosophy serves the purpose of supplying lasting meaning to the lives of human beings given the constantly changing circumstances of everyday life. Where the varied expressions of culture attempt to supply meaning in a given social situation, for Zea, Schutte says, "philosophy represents the highest level of this attempt because it tries to offer not only an enduring but a universal representation of the meaning of human existence. Through philosophy a culture acquires a type of self-consciousness, that is to say, philosophy is the most significant cultural instrument through which an individual or a people can acquire self-knowledge."⁷ Philosophy will be that which gives meaning to the historical person who is always changing in the struggles of her own circumstances.

Philosophy, in short, pushes beyond the current moment to provide something lasting. Schutte continues: "Zea may be interpreted to mean that where there is a lack of ideals that give meaning to life beyond the mere 'living for the day,' the conditions for culture (as well as for philosophy) are lacking."⁸

The ideas of the philosopher, no matter how abstract, are meant to serve everyday reality. With each ensuing crisis of cultural values, philosophy stands ready to fill the need for new values. Medieval philosophy yielded revelation to modernity and reason, and the crisis in Europe, Zea believes, will force reason to yield to new values also. But philosophy will always be grounded in the particular, and claims to universality will have to contend with this fact. But Zea believes that Western reason "has tried to affirm itself in abstraction from this cultural mark."⁹ Universality will happen historically, it will be arrived at by a collective accounting of "particular perspectives."¹⁰ What Schutte's

summary highlights is the problem of contemporary philosophy, a problem of hegemony.

What I argue, in contrasting Zea's views with the Greeks, is that there was a greater plurality of views and of discourse in the Greek era than we tend to recognize and that in keeping with Zea's conception we ought to remember that, as abstract as our Greek philosophers may have been, it was always with an eye to bringing those ideas back to a grounding of ethics and public life. As it has been said a million times over, for the Greeks, philosophy was first and foremost a way of life. Furthermore, I would suggest that it is not the Greeks who are responsible for the hegemony that philosophy finds itself in today; they were merely the source that was exploited.

The Greeks did exactly what Zea asks of philosophy: where there was a lack of ideas to supply the culture with enduring meaning, the philosophers came to the fore and gave rich ideas which, at least on the ethical level, we are still hard pressed to contend with today in an era that sees a rise in the study of Aristotelian virtue ethics and is only beginning to revamp the ethical theories of Stoicism. We can see Zea's concept of creating new value when the cosmological views of the pre-Socratics would be found useful but lacking as Plato and Socrates give way to "the ethical turn," and just when philosophy had begun to become too "theoretical," the Roman era makes an even stronger turn in the practical direction with the Stoics and the Pyrrhonian Sceptics.

Returning to the theme of "lack" and "search," what Zea has been showing us all along is that philosophy begins from this sense of lack. The crisis in European culture and the question of Latin America's cultural and philosophical identity reveal a "lack," an emptiness which creates the aforementioned wonderment, the conditions for seeking a solution. Philosophy, then, begins when this wonderment is addressed by a question, and this is the "search." In Zea's description it will be the continuing "search" for giving meaning to the human conditions and addressing the need for new values in times of social crisis. And what about Socrates?

Beginning with Socrates' portrayal in *the Apology*, we come back to one of the most oft repeated stories in philosophy, Socrates' search for the wisest man in Athens. Here we can see Zea's conception of philosophy played out in the individual. Being told by Chaerephon that the Oracle at Delphi has proclaimed Socrates the wisest man in Athens, Socrates is brought to this wonderment we are investigating and searches the city only to find that all those who proclaim knowledge do not really know what they claim. Socrates is thrown back on himself and proclaims in relationship to his interlocutors, he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know" (Plato, *Apology* 21d-e).¹¹

Now, I know we have all heard this story a thousand times, but it bears repeating here as we try to discover both what is unique about the spirit of Zea's questioning and in appreciating the very nature of an authentic

philosophical question. Here Socrates might help us in registering what can make this impulse authentic, and it is in his appreciation of his own “lack.” This “lack” is what will instigate him to harass his fellow citizens and engage them in philosophy. Part of the goal of this paper is to remove Greek philosophy from its assumed position as the source of our current hegemonic philosophical system. Part of doing that is to be reminded of the lucidity of Greek thought. The fact is that Plato’s dialogues do not typically end with concrete assertions but rather in *aporia*, where the very process of questioning is always highlighted above and beyond any proposed theory. This fits well with Zea’s notion of particular historical perspectives coming together to form agreed upon universality. Plato does not demand allegiance in his dialogues but rather searches for universals that might apply to human needs. Most of the Socratic dialogues pursue a particular virtue but never pin down a specific definition of that virtue. Instead, we are led to a greater appreciation of pursuing the “search.” Where Socrates gives us a universal, it is in a return to appreciating the question of which he seems to be the only one not to lose sight of—the question itself, that we should pursue it with vigor, this is universal for Socrates. Heidegger uses Socrates when declaring that our most thought-provoking thought is that “we are still not thinking,” and that what gives us food for thought is at the same time drawing away from us, which somehow makes it near to us, and he says,

Once we are so related to what withdraws, we are drawing into what withdraws, into the enigmatic and therefore mutable nearness of its appeal. Whenever man is properly drawing that way, he is thinking—even though he may still be far away from what withdraws, even though the withdrawal may remain as veiled as ever. All through his life and right into his death, Socrates did nothing else than place himself into this draft, this current, and maintain himself in it. This is why he is the purest thinker of the West. This is why he wrote nothing. For anyone who begins to write out of thoughtfulness must inevitably be like those people who run to seek refuge from any draft too strong for them. An as yet hidden history still keeps the secret why all great Western thinkers after Socrates, with all their greatness, had to be such fugitives.¹²

Heidegger’s mysterious quote might here help in this exploration of an authentic philosophical question. If I read him correctly, I think Heidegger’s interpretation of Socrates shows a man who feels and appreciates this “lack” to such a degree that even resorting to the written word is a retreat, a refuge from the philosophical “search.” And in the search for cultural identity Zea, in relation to this question, has revealed both the difficulty and the necessity of staying with this question. It seems, for Zea, to be a call that cannot be ignored. The “lack” and the “search” are maintained all the way through. I have thus far examined Zea and the origins of the philosophical impulse, but what can we glean from him for the future of philosophy and the pressing question that faces us today: What is philosophy?

We have touched on the issue of hegemony in philosophy,

and this issue becomes apparent when we look at the debate between Zea and the Peruvian philosopher Augusto Salazar Bondy. Bondy will draw some fundamentally opposed ideas about Latin American philosophy in contrast to Zea. Where Zea finds the use of poetry, maxims, aphorisms, etc., in the history of Western philosophy to be legitimate forms of philosophical discourse, Bondy, trained in the analytic tradition, believes that philosophy is a technical and specialized field which should not be confused with poetry or literature. Bondy does not believe that Latin America has produced a significant philosophy and that the cause of this is imperialism. For Bondy, philosophy should be “of a cultural product expressing the life of the community in a rational form.”¹³

Culture is connected to communities, and a culture can be either genuinely authentic or defective. An underdeveloped culture will not completely respond to the needs of its community. What marks a culture as defective is when it wrongly appreciates inauthentic works as authentic philosophy.

He uses three criteria for authenticity: originality, authenticity, and peculiarity. In accord with this criteria, any work that is repetitive, imitative, or peculiar will be inauthentic. So, for Bondy, since the history of Latin American philosophy meets the criteria of inauthentic, it is defective. We see again the connection between cultural identity and the possibility of a Latin American philosophy: because Latin America is an alienated culture, it lacks identity; because it lacks an authentic cultural identity, it cannot produce a genuine philosophy.

Bondy proposes a “philosophy of *liberation*” as the way towards an authentic Latin American philosophy. In order for Latin American and Third World countries to produce their own philosophy, they have to break free from underdevelopment and domination. This new philosophy will begin from this place of liberation.¹⁴

Bondy has added to the conversation of Latin American identity and philosophy and put forth some issues that cannot be ignored. What Zea has offered us is a new way of thinking about what philosophy can be from where we are standing. The question that seems hard to avoid with Bondy is this question of the hegemony of philosophy and his entrenchment within the hegemony. In all that came before this section, we have been searching for the authentic philosophical impulse. In bringing the Greeks into this picture, the aim has been to see if we can unearth what made this philosophy possible in the first place. The Greeks, like the Chinese and Indian philosophers of the ancient world, existed in a historical time and place, and in that place they felt a “lack”; this “lack” itself brought philosophy into being. Why should the contemporary philosopher or a philosopher such as Zea be deprived of philosophy when philosophy has never needed ideal circumstances for its existence but, rather, has always thrived precisely in the recognition of what it is lacking? The lack could be whatever is pertinent to the philosopher and his circumstances; for the pre-Socratics, it was the lack of understanding of the Universe, for Plato and Socrates it was the recognition of the lack of wisdom that lead to the

search for it, and for Zea, it is the lack of a coherent cultural identity that drives his “search.”

The notion that philosophy must adhere to strict principles of a profession and skill that Bondy wants to push does several things: one, it removes philosophy from the public and keeps it locked in academia, which betrays the notion of the philosophical impulse; it delays and therefore denies human beings existing in the world—right here, today—the possibility of philosophy until some ideal state has been reached. The hegemony of philosophy begins when a history of philosophy becomes a doctrine of how philosophy ought to be applied and thereby denies fresh voices and new thought.

I did not return to the origins of philosophy in the spirit of nostalgia, but to see if we might unearth what made philosophy new, when it was new. By contrast, this might be exactly what is standing in the way of a future philosophy or even a “now” philosophy: the search for an authentic question is being drowned by an adherence to philosophical doctrine that rather demands interesting reactions to pre-existing ideas. This should not mean that we be rid of the past but that we assimilate it and build from our own unique perspective and questions.

The idea of contrasting Zea’s philosophy with Greek philosophy comes from the following:

[Those who question whether there has been any philosophy in Latin America] forget that in the history of philosophy they want to turn into a model [of philosophizing] . . . [one may find] not only the systems of Plato and Aristotle but the poems of Parmenides, the maxims of Marcus Aurelius, the thoughts of Epicurus, Pascal, and many others. In short, there are forms of philosophizing that are expressed just as much in ordered systems as in a maxim, a poem, an essay, a play, or a novel.¹⁵

It is interesting that but for Pascal, all of Zea’s examples of the plurality of philosophical approaches come from the Greeks, from the very beginning of philosophy. In taking Zea’s approach beyond Latin America, we can wonder if the hope it gives to this discipline is to prepare it for the inevitable loosening of the rigidity of the current hegemonic position. If it can prepare us to better appreciate philosophers from other nations, our own banished philosophers of the recent past, it might cause us to reflect on the possibility that the adherence to this hegemonic philosophy has colonized the colonizer. The notion of Western philosophy done in a particular manner has deprived philosophy of new insights, of its own independent identity, and of the value of other insights. What I hope to have added to this conversation is an appreciation of an authentic philosophical impulse and the need to retain that impulse in our philosophical thinking.

NOTES

1. Leopoldo Zea, “The Actual Function of Philosophy in Latin America,” in *Latin American Philosophy for the 21st Century: The Human Condition, Values, and the Search for Identity*, ed. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert and Jorge J. E. Gracia, 358–59 (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004).
2. Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Daniel W. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 109–11.
5. Leopoldo Zea, “The Actual Function of Philosophy in Latin America,” 364.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Ofelia Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 91.
8. *Ibid.*, 92.
9. *Ibid.*, 92–93.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1997), 21.
12. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 381–82.
13. Schutte, *Cultural Identity and Social Liberation in Latin American Thought*, 98.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 104.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Manuel Bolom Pale is Maya tsotsil, born in Jocotic, Huixtán, Chiapas. He earned his degrees at the Universidad Maya and the Instituto de Estudios de Posgrado. He is a writer, translator, and researcher. He is the recipient of Chiapas’ Prize in Indigenous Art (2016) and the Medal of Academic Merit (2016). He has published several books, including *Y el bolom dice...* (2004), *Pueblos y palabras* (2005), *Pat O’tan* (2008), *K’anel, funciones y representaciones sociales en Huixtán, Chiapas* (2010), and *Sueños de pájaro* (2015). He is currently professor and coordinator for the Department of Social Services for the Intercultural University of Chiapas. He is a member of the Mexican Philosophical Association, Red América Latina y el Caribe (ALEC), Red de Etnoecología y Biodiversidad de Saberes, and La Nueva Escuela Chiapaneca.

José Jorge Mendoza is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and is co-editor of *Radical Philosophy Review*. His areas of specialization are in moral and political philosophy, philosophy of race, and Latin American philosophy. He is also the author of *The Moral and Political Philosophy of Immigration: Liberty, Security, and Equality* (2017).

Susana Nuccetelli is professor of philosophy at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota. Her articles in ethics, philosophy of language, and Latin American philosophy have appeared in many edited volumes and journals. She is the author of *Latin American Thought: Philosophical Problems and Arguments* (Westview Press, 2002); with Gary Seay, of *Engaging Bioethics: An Introduction with Case Studies* (Routledge 2017), and *How to Think Logically* (2e, Pearson, 2012).

José-Antonio Orosco is associate professor of philosophy at Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon. He received his B.A. in philosophy from Reed College (1992) and Ph.D in philosophy from the University of California, Riverside (2002). His areas of specialization are in social and political philosophy (focusing on democratic theory, social movements, and peace and nonviolence studies), philosophy of the Americas (North and South), and issues in multiculturalism and immigration. He is also interested in theories of anarchism and utopian/dystopian political thought. He is the author of *Toppling the Melting Pot: Immigration and Multiculturalism in American Pragmatism* (Indiana University Press, 2016) and *Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence* (University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

L. Sebastian Purcell is an assistant professor of philosophy at the State University of New York at Cortland. His work centers on moral, political, and Latin American philosophy. In his contemporary scholarship, he is concerned with articulating the insights from the tradition of Liberation philosophy for global and environmental justice. In his ancient and comparative scholarship, he focuses on virtue ethics and the related approaches Aristotle and the Aztecs take.

Mario-Teodoro Ramírez received his doctoral degree from UNAM. He is currently professor-investigator at the Universidad Michoacana, in Morelia (México). He has served as president of the Mexican Philosophical Association (2012–2014). He has written countless Works on Mexican philosophy. On Luis Villoro he has published: *Humanismo para una nueva época. Nuevos ensayos sobre el pensamiento de Luis Villoro*, México: Siglo XXI, 2011; *La razón del otro. Estudios sobre el pensamiento de Luis Villoro*, México: UNAM, 2010. Como coordinador y co-autor: *Luis Villoro: pensamiento y vida. Homenaje en sus 90 años*, México: Siglo XXI, 2014.

Django Israel Runyan received his M.A. in philosophy from San Jose State University in 2016. His work is focused on ancient Eastern and Western philosophy. He is currently enjoying a “gap” year in China, after which he plans to pursue his doctoral studies in ancient philosophy.