Journal of Mexican Philosophy | Volume 3, Issue 1 (2024): 98-104
www.journalofmexicanphilosophy.com
DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.26824786

REVIEW OF *DISCOURSES OF THE ELDERS: THE AZTEC HUEHUETLATOLLI: A FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION*

By Sebastian Purcell
Published by W. W. Norton & Company, 2023

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One day in the middle of the sixteenth century, a Nahuatl-speaking Mexica father exhorted his son, who was coming of age, in a lengthy and poetic speech. The older man told the younger how hard life would be, but promised that he would also experience great joy as long as he did his part and shouldered his share of the burdens that all humans have to bear. And he said a great deal more that people in future ages would long to be able to hear. An Indigenous man who had studied the Roman alphabet wrote down a good part of the speech, and later a Franciscan friar took those notes and worked with the Indigenous aide to prepare a treatise called Huehuetlahtolli (Words of the Elders). The manuscript was carefully preserved by the order, and at the end of the century, another Franciscan took the papers and prepared them for printing in a book. The publication had to pass by numerous religious censors and editors, so the friar took care to incorporate Christian principles whenever they could be worked in. Many generations later, in the 1980s, a renowned Mexican scholar prepared a new edition of the colonial publication, emphasizing the ways in which it stood as evidence of an Indigenous tradition of Philosophy. That book fired the imagination of a young man in the United States who was himself a philosopher by training and whose grandmother spoke Nahuatl, inspiring him to prepare a translation of the Spanish into English, in which he made minor adjustments be believed to be justified so as to argue the point that the Mexica (or at least some of the Mexica), like the ancient Greeks and the medieval Christians (or at least some of them) had believed that a person needed to display certain qualities in order to attain a virtuous life. Not long after, a young college student in the United States read the book and faced some confusion: she had been told that the book would reveal to her the very different ways in which another culture might conceive of goodness, but what she found was a young man being educated in the cardinal virtues. She put the book down in frustration.

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It was Sebastian Purcell's recent book, *Discourses of the Elders: The Aztec Huehuetlatolli, a First English Translation* that I handed off to a talented student without reading it first myself. After she returned it, I read it carefully and learned that the volume is tragically destined to continue to cause just such frustration. In the context of the long train of events between the sixteenth-century oral performance and the modern college student's reading of the volume, two problems in particular will of necessity undermine the book's success. The first is that the original notes do not survive, and all work must be based on the heavily Christianized text that was published by the Franciscan order in 1600. The second is that a person whose Nahuatl is far from proficient has taken it upon himself to adjust slightly the Spanish translation as he put it into English, without fully realizing how far he would then be moving from the original Nahuatl. It is worth addressing each subject separately.

I

The wise and poetic *huehuetlahtoli* (words of the elders) of Aztec Mexico possess something of a storied past, having been understood to be well worth studying from the sixteenth century onward. But the truth is that we have few direct glimpses of them. A brilliant Franciscan, fray Andrés de Olmos (c.1500-1571), who worked extensively with Indigenous aides, is understood to have collected material comprising huehuetlahtolli from several native speakers of Nahuatl. His manuscript does not survive, but he did copy a part of what he collected into his manuscript entitled *Arte de la lengua mexicana* (a manuscript that did survive until the nineteenth century, when it was published). The Franciscans apparently preserved the rest of Olmos's collection of huehuetlahtolli, for in 1600, another Franciscan working in Mexico, fray Juan Bautista Viseo (1555-c.1613), took it upon himself to publish a full volume. The title page read: *Huehuetlahtolli, que contiene las pláticas que los padres y las madres hicieron a sus hijos y a sus hijas, y los señores a sus vasallos, todas llenas de doctrina moral y política.* The book contained some of the same examples published in Olmos's *Arte de la lengua mexicana* as well as copious other speeches. Fray Juan made certain to incorporate Christian didactic points (if Olmos hadn't already done so). He had good reason to do this: before publication, the book had to pass muster in the eyes of the office of the archbishop of Mexico, the archdeacon of the cathedral of the city, the Commissary General of the Franciscans, as well as the well-known Jesuit scholar, fray Juan de Tovar. These men expressed approval of fray Juan in the opening pages of the book for having "collected, amended and augmented" (*recogió, enmendó y acrecentó*) the material. Miguel León Portilla (1926-2019) later suggested—quite logically—that the book must have been beloved and

passed endlessly from hand to hand, for today only two copies are known to exist.[1] Over the years, many people, both Nahuas and Spaniards, were fascinated by the idea of the elaborate, traditional speeches that once were given on special occasions.

In the 1980s, León Portilla worked on bringing the text into print again in Mexico. He wanted the all-Nahuatl book of the colonial era to appear in Spanish. His collaborator was Librado Silva Galeana (1942-2014), a student at UNAM whose native language was Nahuatl. In 1991, the Secretaría de Educación Pública published *Huehuetlahtolli: Testimonios de la antigua palabra.* The book contained one of the discourses in both Nahuatl and Spanish, and the rest in Spanish only. So much of the text was so obviously edited and amended by a Christian hand that Miguel León Portilla said he considered removing that material. Ultimately, however, he was forced to conclude (p.28) that it was too inextricably intertwined, and that the book should simply be accepted for what it was, a product of a moment in time in which Spanish friars worked closely with Indigenous aides to compose new materials.

Given the realities of the situation, one might well argue that a modern academic of today—Sebastian Purcell or any other—has no choice but to accept the hybrid nature of the materials that exist and make what he can of them. Indeed, numerous scholars have done and are doing ground-breaking work seeking Indigenous agency and perspective in the midst of such materials, illuminating the colonial world for us in breathtaking ways.[2] But Purcell tells his readers that he specifically seeks to understand the philosophy of the Nahuas of the pre-conquest era. In that case, one wonders why he did not choose to study two other closely related texts that demonstrate far less Christian influence: Book 6 of the Florentine Codex contains material that resembles the "Huehuetlahtolli" but betrays significantly less Christian influence, and the same is true of the "Dialogues" housed in the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley. Purcell has hardly worked with a "core set of Nahua philosophical documents"

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[1] These are located in the John Barter Brown Library in Providence, Rhode Island. The library has made all their Nahuatl-language holdings available online. León Portilla made his statement in his Introduction to his edition of the book (see next paragraph).

[2] A groundbreaking work in this arena was Louise Burkhart, *Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989). Numerous others have followed. Two recent excellent works are Berenice Alcántara, Mario Sánchez and Tesiu Rosas, eds., *Vestigios manuscritos de una nueva cristiandad* (Mexico City: UNAM, 20222) and Ben Leeming, *Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2022).

as he posits (xi). Perhaps the draw of the one he chose was that it had not yet been translated into English.[3]

II

Purcell's volume opens with some inspiring sentences. "This translation has been undertaken and supported by what is perhaps a timely optimism. After too long, professional philosophers in the anglophone world and the European continent seem to be recognizing the existence of other global traditions of philosophy and what contributions they might make" (ix). Purcell then asks sample questions, some of them incisive: "What would it mean to have a virtue of character that, in optimal circumstances, operated by way of shared agency—that is, in groups? If ever there was a philosophical question relevant to the Nahuas, it is that one. At the end of the first paragraph, I for one was prepared to be delighted.

Sadly, Purcell then plunges into an introduction that will always remain confusing for readers. There is much that is good within its pages, but it veers wildly between truth and fiction, and thus can never hope to convey what made the people of another culture tick. For instance, he has been taught in an introductory Nahuatl class that the language does not use the verb "to be". ("Nitemachtiani" translates word-for-word as "I teacher," though it means what I mean when I say "I am a teacher.") He therefore asks of the Nahuas, "How can one carry on a metaphysical inquiry without making use of 'being', either as a word or even as a notion implied through one's grammar?" (ix). He concludes that they could only think relationally, without any concept of a static presence. But the concept of "to be" most assuredly exists among the Nahuas; though it is elided in most surface utterances in the present, it often appears in utterances in the past and future tenses (*catca, yez*), and even in the present in the reverential mode (*moyetztica*). Numerous other languages are like this. In Russian, for instance, a word-for-word translation of the same sentence would also be "I teacher." But I don't think anyone would announce that Russians therefore have no metaphysical notion of "being".

Purcell acknowledges that Louise Burkhart, presently the leading expert in the field of sixteenth-century Nahua religious and philosophical beliefs, has argued that the Nahuas did not believe in "good" and "evil" in the way that

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[3] Purcell does include an addendum of "Social Role Descriptions" from the Florentine Codex, but he does not acknowledge the material found in Book 6 of the Codex, the Nahuatl and the English translation of which is available in the edition published by Charles Dibble and B. Anderson. The text in the Bancroft Library likewise exists as a published edition: Frances Karttunen and James Lockhart, eds. *The Art of Nahuatl Speech: The Bancroft Dialogues*. Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1987.

Europeans did; that they did not have an "abstract sense of what would be absolutely good, no matter what the context (xv). He acknowledges the truth of what she has amply demonstrated, but then immediately insists that the Nahuas had a sense of attaining "a good life" and besides this, "something approximating what 'Western' philosophy calls virtue." In fact, he eventually builds to an assertion that the Nahuas regularly emphasized *five* specific virtues: practical wisdom, humility, temperance, bravery and justice (xxxvi). He admits to a remarkable similarity to the four cardinal virtues of the "West" but notes that humility was a unique contribution of the Nahuas.

There can be nothing more tiresome—or more useless—than asking readers to listen to one scholar stridently insist that another is wrong, so I will not pursue such a path. It will be far more useful to demonstrate through examples the problems with the translation and the incorrect direction in which it leads readers. I will aim to make myself intelligible to those who have had even an introduction to the Nahuatl language.

Early in the text, Purcell begins to find instances of what he will translate throughout as "virtue." He comes across this line: *çan ihuiyan, çan icemel ximonemitiz, ca ye cualli, ca ye yectli*[4]. Librado Silva put it thus: "Sólo con tranquilidad, solo con tiento vive porque ello es bueno, ellos es recto" (54-55). But Purcell translates this as "Live only peacefully, only gently, because it is sufficient for virtue" (6). How does he arrive at this? He has been schooled in the notion of the Nahuatl *difrasismo*, a pairing of words that together have a third meaning. (A famous example would be *atl tepetl*, water and mountain, which together have the meaning of a socially recognized community.) He decides that cualli and yectli, when taken together, must yield the concept of "virtue". In addition, Purcell has looked up the word "ye" and found that it can mean "already." He thought he therefore had the following before him:

Only peacefully- only gently- live [imperative]-indeed-already-[cualli + yectli=virtue]. Thus he wrote: "Live only peacefully, only gently, because it is sufficient for virtue." Sadly, Purcell is ignoring two key facts: First, the Nahuas paired words and phrases regularly and constantly, and although sometimes these pairings took on a third meaning (as a difrasismo), most often, they were doubled up merely in order to emphasize the words' original meaning. That is the case here: the reason that neither Librado Silva nor anyone else has ever concluded that cualli + yectli = virtue is that there is no evidence that it is so. "Ca cualli" or "Ca ye cualli" alone is used at least as often in the exact same circumstances, meaning simply "It is good" or "it is right." Second, "ye" as an adverb meaning "already" never appears before nouns. Before a noun, "ye"

[4] This is found in the close of par. 4, f.3r, in Juan Bautista Viseo's volume.

indicates *yeh*, a form of *yehuatl* (an emphatic third person pronoun).[5] The sentence therefore means what Librado Silva said it meant. In English it would be something like, "Just live peacefully and happily, for that is right and good."

Further on, Purcell comes to the following passage:

> *Auh in iquin aço tlapanahuiya in itech tonehuatiuh in tocommonamictitiuh in tecoco, in tetoneuh in temamauhti, in teyçahui, in tecototzo*.[6]

Librado Silva was troubled by this sentence, being a modern speaker and apparently not having access to fray Horacio Carochi's seventeenth-century grammar, so he raced through it, omitting part and inserting a question mark that was not in the original. He gave it as "acaso es preferible que te vayas a … topar con lo que enferma a la gente, lo que atormenta…"(60-61). Purcell follows suit in English: "and so, is it best that you go near to, that you come up against what makes people sick, what torments them…?" (9). He comments in a footnote on their asking such a question: "This is one way that the Nahuas addressed the topic of preferences and the best life." But Carochi tells us very definitely that with "in" *iquin* ceases to be interrogative; in addition, *tlapanahuia* had a crystallized meaning of "to overtake others" or "to pass by."[7] Thus the sentence says:

> At the time when one who is suffering perhaps passes by, that is when you meet [or come face to face] with what sickens, torments, frightens, scandalizes, or depresses people.

It is simply a statement that no one can avoid human suffering. A confrontation with it will overtake you at some point in your life.

The next full speech is by a mother who is addressing her daughter about the life that is before her. At this point, Librado Silva and León Portilla ceased to include the Nahuatl, possibly because the prose becomes extremely difficult in places. Purcell apparently consulted only the Spanish found in León Portilla's edition, for once again he followed Librado Silva even when he made translation errors (that were quite understandable in a modern speaker working without sixteenth and seventeenth-century grammars, but are less excusable today.) But we can consult the 1600 edition in order to see the original words. At one important point, the original Nahuatl reads:

> *Ca ye qualli, ca ye yectli, xicmatto xicmamattie, xicmamattinemi in tleyn qualli in tleyn yectli, in tleyn ticchihuaz in ticmamaz, ye in chihualoni ye*

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[5] For copious examples illustrating grammatical usages in the early colonial era, I recommend Horacio Carochi, *Grammar of the Mexican Language, with an Explanation of Its Adverbs,* ed. by James Lockhart (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[6] This is found on the second page of par. 6, f.5r, in Juan Bautista Viseo's volume.

[7] Carochi, *Grammar*, 370-73. On the varied meanings of *-panahuia* see Fray Alonso Molina's dictionary.

immamaloni, in aço itechpatzinco in Totecuiyo, in ahnoço totech monequi in timacehualtin.[8]

Purcell is so determined that the passage shall give evidence to support his theory of people demonstrating certain virtues in order to attain what is defined as a good life—and thus being deserving—that he runs roughshod over the language that we actually have. He ignores what belongs to which clause (kindly marked for us with commas by our sixteenth-century guides), the modality and tense of the clauses, and pronoun referents. He gives the passage thus:

> Virtue requires that you know, that you carry on your back, that you lead your life bearing what is virtuous. What you should do, what you should bear on your back is what it is possible to do, what is bearable, whether that is by the side of our Lord, or what we, the deserving, need. (29)

It actually says:

> It is right, it is good. Know it, carry it,[9] live carrying whatever is right and good. Whatever you do, whatever you carry, is to be worthy of being done or being carried,[10] whether it is for our Lord, or what is needed by us humans [mortals].

For our purposes here, we can leave aside (as Purcell does) the obvious insertion of a Christian reference to "Our Lord." and focus on a more central element: The word *macehualli* is significant in this passage. At its root, it is related to the concept of "deserving" a share of the community's land, but that is not its surface meaning. On the surface, it relates ordinary beings to grander or more powerful beings. Most often, it is used to indicate commoners in contrast to nobility (*pipiltin*). After the conquest, it would be used to indicate Indigenous folk in contrast to Spaniards. In traditional songs and prayers and perorations, it is used to indicate mortals in contrast to divinities. But I have never seen it mean "virtuous" people in contrast to those who live unvirtuously.[11]

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[8] F.17r in Juan Bautista Viseo's volume.

[9] These are highly unusual forms of the imperative. Carochi in his *Grammar* cites similar examples, but posits that they only accompany the imperative of *ye* and *onoc* (256-57). I welcome suggested explanations. But in any event, the matter does not touch the translation questions that are central here, as the sentence is clearly in the imperative.

[10] Carochi, *Grammar*, 178-79, discusses the fact that the passive forms in -oni bear the connotation of worth, rather than conveying merely the fact of the action, at least in the texts of his era.

[11] This attempt to redefine the word is the work of Purcell alone. Librado Silva understood the colonial use of the word and translated it as "los hombres" (in contrast to "Our Lord", not to women, thus meaning "human beings" or "mortals"). However, he was aware of the root and added a second word after a comma, saying that "los hombres" were "los merecidos". At no point did he subdivide "los hombres" into "los merecidos" and those who were not deserving or not virtuous.

There are countless such examples in the volume, places where the translator has adjusted the Spanish ever so slightly in order to provide support for his theory. He has apparently done so without consulting the Nahuatl itself, or at least without a strong determination to be faithful to it. Employing the terms with which he is so familiar (as a western-trained philosopher), I would argue that such acts should be considered cardinal sins.

Yet I do not wish to preach hellfire and damnation. We should instead remain optimistic. There is a great deal of work waiting to be done: the future beckons to the young. But the work must be done by people who spend years studying early colonial Nahuatl and who consult others who have likewise spent years, or who are native speakers. It must be done by people who read widely in different texts, not just the one that most interests them, and who refuse to assume they already know the message of a particular text even before they translate it. It must be done by people who are willing to guard against pressuring the Nahuatl sentences to mean whatever one wants them to mean.

The Nahuas deserve more, for as Purcell himself says, they have much to teach us.