1 The Nature of Philosophy in Mesoamerica

In this chapter, I consider the issues of the role of philosophy in Mesoamerica and its sources. Offering an expansive account of philosophy, I argue that the sources of philosophy in ancient Mesoamerica include, but are not limited to, textual material. While there is a long textual tradition in Mesoamerica, particularly in Maya and Aztec cultures, we find philosophy in other sources as well, including architecture, art, oral tradition, and performance. I describe the ways philosophy can be found in these numerous sources and argue for the importance of philosophical interaction with anthropology, art history, and other relevant fields.

What Is Philosophy?

Mesoamerican philosophy, as a particular representative tradition or cluster of traditions, has long been neglected as such. While the philosophical traditions of various Mesoamerican cultures have been studied and explored by a number of excellent scholars across numerous disciplines (most often archaeology, sociology, linguistics, and art history), few philosophers have brought the insights and tools of philosophy to this project. There are likely a number of reasons for this, some of which are interrelated.

First, within the discipline of philosophy, the history of philosophy has been largely seen as a European phenomenon. Many texts still today chart this history as beginning with the ancient Greeks, running through Rome and then Medieval Europe into the modern period and finally to the contemporary philosophy of Europe and the extended European colonized world

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(Anglo America, Australia, etc.).[1] Today, there are some signs of this slowly beginning to change, as more histories add at least nods to the so-called "Non-Western" traditions (i.e., the philosophy of everyone in the world outside of Europe and the European colonized world). There are still large parts of the globe left out of the story of philosophy told in academia, however. Mesoamerica is one glaring omission. The decolonization of philosophy is revealing the existence of these traditions to philosophers, as we reenvision what the discipline is and can be.

Second, philosophy's self-conception in the West has long been as a text-based tradition. While there are numerous texts in Mesoamerican traditions, from both before and after the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas, these texts give us only a partial picture of the philosophical systems of Mesoamerica. One of the unique features of Mesoamerican philosophy is its lack of complete reliance on text. It is not that people in Mesoamerican traditions did not see text as important and playing a role in preserving ideas, but rather that the role of text was not as central as it was in a number of other global philosophical traditions. We will see, in precontact texts in Mesoamerica, that the kinds of things selected for inclusion in text tended to be commemorative or instructional. In the precontact texts, we find almanacs, ritual manuals, divination guides, and histories. After the colonization of the Spanish, we find a host of other texts, often written in Mesoamerican languages using Latin script, giving us a deeper glimpse into Mesoamerican philosophy. Texts such as the *Popol Vuh* of the K'iche' Maya and the Aztec text known today as the *Codex Magliabechiano*, as well as Bernardo de Sahagun's late sixteenth-century study of the Nahua, known today as the *Florentine Codex*, show us a more detailed picture of Mesoamerican philosophy in

[1] Here, my use of "European colonized world" refers not to all of the areas in the world that were colonized by Europeans but specifically to ones in which Europeans became a majority and affiliated with the "dominant" culture of this new place. Thus, nations such as the USA, Canada, and Australia count, while nations such as India, Nigeria, and Malaysia do not. In the case of the latter countries, while they were colonized, Europeans never became a majority of the people of these nations and did not transplant their people or culture as fully as in the previously mentioned places. Another group of nations not on the list is somewhere between these – such as the nations of Latin America that came under the rule of the Spanish and Portuguese in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

text. Why, we might ask, were these ideas not included in earlier texts before the arrival of the Spanish? One part of the answer to this question, I contend, is that a great deal of philosophy was not done in text prior to the Spanish colonization. We find explicit claims to as much in texts such as the *Popol Vuh*, which explain that the contents of the text are being written down because they can "no longer be seen." Among the last lines of the *Popol Vuh* are contained:

> Xere k'ut u k'oje'ik K'iche', ri'rumal maja b'i chi ilb'al re, k'o nab'e ojer kumal ajawab', sachinaq chik.
>
> Here then is [written] the essence of K'iche', because there is no longer the means to see it [the *ilb'al*]. That which was enacted by the ancient kings (*ajawab'*) is now lost.[2]

The *Popol Vuh* was originally meant to be performed with ritual performance, enacting the story of creation and the emergence of humanity. Philosophy done in this way, in the Maya tradition and other Mesoamerican traditions, was *performative* in nature. Not simply oral, in the sense of information passed through discussion, but performative in the sense of movement, speech, song, and enacting of character and events meant to uncover particular aspects of the world.[3]

In philosophy today, we tend to deal with *texts* when thinking about and uncovering the past. Philosophical traditions, we assume, were always textual traditions. Accordingly, when we work on the history of philosophy, we translate, interpret, and discuss texts and textual traditions. While our focus on text is clear, we also recognize that philosophy can be done without text. Indeed, the philosopher often pointed to as the archetype of philosophy itself, Socrates, has no writings attributed to his name, and we only know of him at all through his students and others who knew him. While we access Socrates through Plato (and to a lesser extent Xenophon and others), we are willing to recognize what he did, in oral and not textual transmission, as not only philosophy but the very definition of

[2] *Popol Vuh*, 8710, author's translation. From K'iche' text, in Christenson, *Popol Vuh: Literal Translation,* p. 304.

[3] Mesoamerican philosophy shares this feature with other traditions of the Americas, in particular North American indigenous thought, which placed emphasis on performance in similar ways. See Welch, *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System*.

philosophy.[4] This recognition that philosophy is not necessarily (or perhaps even originally, or mainly) something done in text should open for us new possibilities of understanding. If philosophy might be done independently of text, in what other ways might it be done? How much philosophy might we be missing in the world and its history due to our overreliance on text? It turns out, quite a bit. Not only is there philosophy in oral tradition and transmission as in Socrates' case, which we find in numerous traditions throughout the world (including in Mesoamerica), but philosophy can also be done through other nontextual media. We find philosophy in art, architecture, monumental construction, and other aspects of material culture. This, of course, would not be news to art historians, archaeologists, and other scholars who attempt to draw meaning from nontextual material artifacts. Yet it can be a stumbling block for philosophers.

The act of translation needed for interpreting nontextual material is different from that required for translating one language to another. Here, images must be translated into words, cultural practices interpreted for philosophical meaning. This is not to say that there are no texts to work from as well. Indeed, there are – the Mesoamerican philosophical tradition is the sole tradition of the pre-Columbian Americas that we know of with a precolonial textual tradition. As we will see, the Maya, Aztecs, Mixtec, and Zapotec (the other four traditions covered in this book) all had systems of writing, and numerous texts containing religious, political, philosophical, and historical ideas, long before Europeans arrived in the Americas. Even given this, however, there is much to be found in Mesoamerica, including these traditions, in aspects of material culture. Even in cultures that had textual traditions, we find philosophy outside of texts. After all, ancient Greek society was literate and had texts as well; yet Socratic philosophy was not textual in nature at its inception. According to Plato, Socrates' practice of philosophy was an oral activity, within a world with a robust textual tradition. Socrates lived in a world with numerous texts, including the massive historical

[4] Numerous scholars have written about the issue of oral philosophy in various cultural contexts, for example "sage philosophy" in African traditions. Lucius Outlaw discusses the issue of Socrates and the textual/oral in "African Philosophy; Deconstructive and Reconstructive Challenges," 230. There are additional sources of philosophy beyond the oral or textual, discussed in the following text.

works of Herodotus, the Homeric epics (which were transmitted orally for many years before they were put into print in the eighth century BCE), vast numbers of poems and plays, and many other texts. So it can hardly be said that text was rare or difficult to produce when Socrates lived. Yet philosophy for him proceeded differently, not through text but through conversation. And even when we see the move of this style of philosophy to text, with Socrates' students such as Plato, it still mainly takes place through conversation, but conversation now translated into print, as with the Socratic dialogues of Plato. Though there were other forms of philosophy during the time that were text based, this Socratic form of philosophy (which Plato identified exclusively with philosophy) was first done primarily orally.

This all raises the question of just what the nature of philosophy is, so as to determine in what sense Mesoamerican philosophy should be considered a part of this wider phenomenon. It turns out that we do not need to significantly expand or relax the conception of philosophy used by those in academia in order to see that Mesoamerican philosophy, like a number of other philosophical traditions that have been neglected in the West, falls perfectly within the category. That is, even *by our own lights*, Mesoamerican philosophy is clearly philosophy, and so barring it from that designation cannot but be for reasons falling outside of our determination of the definition of philosophy.

Thought about the nature of philosophy in the West (focusing here on contemporary philosophy in the Western academy), despite debates and disagreements, has been somewhat surprisingly consistent over the past half century or so. It has been a common move in defining philosophy to point back to the views of the originators of the term, in ancient Greece. Here, we see that *philosophia* (from *philosophos*) is understood differently from the way many of today's professional philosophers understand their work. The term seems to have originated initially as an insult to flag people who arrogantly strove and failed to become *sophoi*, political advisors. The association of philosophy with "love of wisdom" was a later reenvisioning of the name by those who had by then adopted it as their own.[5] On this later conception, immortalized by Plato, a philosopher was understood as

[5] Christopher Moore, *Calling Philosophers Names*, 1.

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a person who strives for truth, through attempting to uncover definitions. This is a very broad description, of course, and if applied to our own time, could capture every single academic field. Plato's conception of philosophy is much closer to *academic research in general* than it is to any particular field.

Even by the definition of the activity of philosophy found in the works of the ancient Greeks, however, a far wider range of global cultures engaged in philosophy than those most often picked out by the Western philosophical tradition, and our departments of philosophy today. Current day descriptions of the activity of philosophy likewise pick out a wide range of activities throughout the world and history that we seem nonetheless unprepared to accept as philosophy. The twentieth-century American analytic philosopher Wilfrid Sellars famously wrote: "[T]he aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term." While many philosophers today accept this, and refer to Sellars' famous quote, they often fail to extend this to people who engaged and still engage in this activity in areas we associate with the "developing world" (a somewhat insulting phrase that has come to replace the also problematic but less insulting "Third World" of the Cold War era).[6]

The self-conception of philosophy in the Western academy has changed over time, and continues to change. While decades ago, the religious philosophy of the medieval period of Europe (and sometimes the Middle East) was seen as a key part of the history of philosophy, today it is less so, except at religious institutions. Today, philosophers in the academy affiliate themselves for the most part with the sciences (with some exceptions), and the naturalistic methods of the sciences, as well as the assumptions and intuitions of a world fully explained by the sciences, are often assumed.

[6] I take it that "Third World" is less problematic because it at least has no normative connotations. The phrase referred originally to unaligned nations in the Cold War struggle between the West ("First World") and the Soviet sphere ("Second World"). The phrase came to take on implications of poverty and global insignificance, presumably because many of the unaligned nations were poorer and/or less connected to these larger conflicts. But the phrase "Third World" itself has no such meaning, in the way "developing world" contains in its meaning the assumption that a region or nation is lesser than some compared nation or region. We could just as easily find things that the wealthiest or Western nations struggle with compared with the nations classed as "developing" and describe them as "developing" on the basis of that.

While philosophers often accept concepts, ideas, and positions that cannot be fully captured in scientific explanation, they attempt to make these views as consistent as possible with the dominant scientific positions of the day. Often, views such as those of the ancient Mesoamericans are dismissed because of the sense that they are inconsistent with contemporary scientific views (a sense that is not always accurate). We should be careful to notice, however, that for the most part, our contemporary Western philosophical views *also* fail to maintain consistency with scientific naturalism as such, as does most premodern Western philosophy. The only fully consistent view would be a kind of scientific reductionism that rendered almost every metaphysical concept eliminable. While some philosophers, particularly in the previous century, did take such a line, such views are far less prevalent in philosophy today and even more rare in the history of philosophy anywhere in the world.

Many scholars have challenged the idea that philosophy is something limited to the European "West" and to the methods and styles of thinkers of this tradition. Philosophy, like religion and culture more broadly, is as old as humanity itself. It is almost inconceivable that any human ever existed anywhere without thinking about the nature of his or her life and world, and using the tools enabled by his or her brain to think through these issues in an extra-empirical way. We would be much better served following the general rule that *anything that is found in one place, or among one people or person, is almost certain to exist elsewhere too*. That is, we are much more likely to be correct if we operate from the assumption of our ordinariness (or that of anyone else we find) than of our uniqueness. When we allow our cognitive biases that give us a sense of personal value into our attempts to understand the world, we cannot be surprised when we get things wildly wrong. And perhaps the mistakes of this bias can teach us something important about how we construct value, and suggest different possibilities for doing it. Why do we have to be *different* to have value? Why not think that there is value in the common?

When we talk about philosophers, *whom* are we talking about? Seemingly, it cannot be only people working at academic institutions and publishing in journals of philosophy, because we refer to many historical figures who did nothing anywhere close to this as philosophers. And for most of the population, the term "philosopher" refers to these

bygone historical figures rather than modern-day academics. "Philosophy" is tantamount to "history" or "history of philosophy" for most people outside of the walls of academia. But even if we stick to the views of professional philosophers, the category of "philosopher" must be broad enough to include at least diverse figures such as Plato, Aquinas, Kant, Descartes, Nietzsche, and Frege, people whom all professional philosophers will accept as philosophers. How can a category broad enough to capture all of them fail to capture figures such as Dharmakirti, Ibn Arabi, Xunzi, or the Aztec *tlamatinime*?

Sources of Philosophy in Mesoamerica

We will not spend much time here considering the questions, then, of whether there is Mesoamerican philosophy and whether the content of this book counts as philosophy, rather than culture, religion, or something else. All philosophy usually counts as something else besides. The more important question for our purposes here is *how* philosophy was done in precolonial Mesoamerica, and *where* it could be found – that is, what were the sources of philosophy in early Mesoamerica?

Precolonial Mesoamerica did have textual traditions. Texts were written throughout the region, on stelae and architecture, as well as in bark paper books, some of which are still extant today. Most of the paper books from the precolonial period have been lost due to a combination of reasons. Such books generally do not keep well in the conditions of most of Mesoamerica; even when texts have been found by archaeologists in burial sites, they are generally so badly decayed that they are unreadable. Another reason is the Spanish suppression of native textual traditions in the colonial period. Texts were not copied in their original forms, instead shifting to Latinized versions of native languages, such as we see with the K'iche' Maya *Popol Vuh*. Nonetheless, today we have access to a handful of precolonial Mesoamerican books, including Maya texts such as the eleventh century CE *Dresden Codex* and *Maya Codex of Mexico* (formerly known as the *Grolier Codex*),[7] as well as the fourteenth-century Mixtec *Codex Tonindeye*

[7] Precolonial texts are given such names as there are no titles affixed to the texts; thus, we do not know what they were called when they were written and read.

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(also known as *Codex Zouche Nuttall*)[8], and the fifteenth-century Aztec *Codex Borgia.* In addition to these texts, there are a host of colonial period texts likely based on earlier lost native texts, such as the *Popol Vuh* of the K'iche', the *Chilam Balam* books and the *Songs of Dzitbalche* of the Maya in the Yucatán, and Aztec texts such as *Cantares Mexicanos* and *Florentine Codex.*

In addition to text, however, there are a number of other important sources of philosophy in precolonial Mesoamerica. Indeed, text may not have even been the most important or primary source of philosophical thought, even though it is one that philosophers and other scholars working on Mesoamerica today need, because of our lack of access to the performances, artwork, and discussions that the people of early Mesoamerica had (and which some still have today in these regions). We are then working at something of a disadvantage – we have a window into early Mesoamerican philosophy, but it is one that is muddied and unclear. Like the authors of the *Popol Vuh*, we have to rely on the texts, remnants of artifacts, and words of people today in Mesoamerica to glimpse early Mesoamerican philosophy, because to a large extent, it can "no longer be seen" in its original character. Of course, this is also true for the philosophy of the style of Socrates and his followers in ancient Greece or Confucius and his students in ancient China. Texts, artifacts, and oral histories, for example, allow us to get a handle on what philosophy would have been like in the times and places we are considering. From this, we can try to *reconstruct* a philosophical tradition, always keeping in mind a fact that Mesoamerican philosophers knew (and know) well – that any reconstruction is always a partnership between the source and the observer. Just as nature itself is constructed via the cooperation of the gods and human beings, reconstructions of philosophical systems can never be pure transmission from earlier times and places. They are products of cooperation between the material and the interpreter. This is why translation and interpretation remain valuable, even when texts or traditions have been translated and interpreted many times before.

[8] Many precolonial Mesoamerican texts were given modern names after Western collectors or places associated with the text – some have attempted to give these texts names more appropriate to their cultural and linguistic context – such as in this case the Dzaha Dzaui (Mixtec) term *tonindeye* ("lineage history"). See Jansen and Perez-Jimenez, "Renaming the Mexican Codices," 269.

When we look at textual sources of philosophy in Mesoamerica, we have to consider the question of genre, style, and the relevance of each for philosophy. *Poetry*, or rather ritual verse, intended for performance, was a key textual style of philosophy in Mesoamerica. The best-known texts of the region, such as the *Popol Vuh* and the philosophical songs of the Aztec ruler Nezahualcoyotl (recounted in the sixteenth century *Romances de los señores de Nueva España*) are in poetic form, as are many of the greatest philosophical texts in human history. There is something particularly powerful about the poetic form for invoking the suggestive, incomplete, interpretive, and cooperative nature of human understanding of the world. A poetic rendering of philosophy makes clear the role of our own creativity in making the world as it is – a key feature of Mesoamerican philosophical thought. As we will see, this human creative role does not, however, entail that truth is simply invented by us. While we *assist* in making the world as it is, we cannot make the world any old way we like, we cannot change the features of the world that bind our creative operation. Just as with the molding of clay into a statue – we cannot make the underlying characteristics of the clay other than how they are, and we are limited in what we can mold by the medium. What we create will always still have the features of clay, but using this medium, we can create a host of things. It is the human mind that makes the clay shaped a particular way into an image of a person, or a tree, or a bird, etc. Considered outside of the perspective of the human, such a shaped clay is still just clay. It is the human mind that makes this shaped clay more than just clay. Notice that the clay does not take on the features of a person when we shape it in a certain way so as to resemble a person in our eyes. The clay formed into a statue has the exact same physical features as the clay that has been naturally shaped into the form of a rock. The statue will appear to a bird the same as will an unshaped piece of clay. It will show up on an infrared sensor the same way as a piece of clay will. What makes one the statue of a person and one a rock is our own recognition and accordance of meaning. We can see that this is not something that happens just as a result of the world itself, as if through natural processes, a piece of clay formed into something that perfectly resembled Abraham Lincoln, we would

consider it an image of Abraham Lincoln. But the difference between the construction of this clay and the rock is our recognition, our conceptualization. We can see this in the way we recognize or conceptualize certain natural features of the world as objects such as faces, or familiar human items. We see the image of a face in a rock, for example(a commonly recognized feature in human society, given the human brain's tendency to interpret visual features faces[9]), or the image of a man in the moon. These are all human conceptualizations and constructions we impose on our natural environment – no less so than the ways we create or recognize the image of a person in a molded piece of clay that we shape specifically to resemble a certain person, or the mixture of pigments and paint to resemble a certain landscape, or the ways we manipulate pixels on a television screen to present to us an image that seems to perfectly resemble a scene of our choice. Human creation of the world from the natural stuff of the cosmos happens on numerous levels – not only the construction of artifacts and tools, as in the case of the television, but also in the ways we conceptualize and perceive the untouched parts of "nature." Poetry can help capture either of these senses of human creation – making more explicit the ways in which the human mind works in shaping our world. This can all-too-easily be hidden behind the language of technical analysis. When we describe a rock face using the terminology of the sciences, we often miss the ways our own conceptualization contributes to the formation of what we are discussing. It makes it seem as if we are observing something completely independent from us.[10] Poetry, on the other hand, in its creative play with language, brings right to the fore the sense in which human creativity is involved in the way we grasp and understand things in the world, and necessarily so because human creativity is central in the construction of the things in the world as we understand them.

[9] This phenomenon, known as face pareidolia, likely evolved in humans due to our reliance on social cues to navigate interpersonal activity. See Palmer and Clifford, "Face Pareidolia Recruits Mechanisms for Detecting Human Social Attention."

[10] Although today plausible interpretations of quantum mechanics show us that we can never get away from the fact that observation makes a difference in the states of things in the world.

This is why we see that philosophical systems, schools, and traditions that stress the human role in the construction of nature, such as many systems in early Mesoamerica, as well as the Daoists in China, certain schools of Buddhism in south and east Asia, and Western figures such as Nietzsche or Wittgenstein (who wrote "one should only really do philosophy as poetry"[11]), often express their positions in poetic form.

The *Cantares Mexicanos*, a sixteenth century collection of Aztec poems, and the K'iche' Maya *Popol Vuh*, a ritual text on the origin of the cosmos and humanity,[12] show us two examples of philosophical texts in poetry and verse. The Aztec "flower and song," according to the *Cantares Mexicanos*, expresses truths about the world that can be expressed in no other way, and gives us insight into the human condition as well. While the *Cantares* is clearly heavily influenced by Spanish ideas, particularly Christianity, the poetic form of the text is likely an older structure in the Aztec tradition. Poetry, according to a number of the verses in the text, is both a balm to human suffering and a way to access other worlds, including that of those who have died. One poem in the collection reads (in Bierhorst's translation):

> Flowers are our only adornment. Only through songs does our pain on earth subside. […]
>
> I suffer and grieve, I, Prince Nezahualcoyotl. With flowers, with songs, I recall the departed princes Tezozomoc and Cuacuauhtzin.
>
> Do we truly live in the Place Unknown? Let me follow these princes. Let me bring them our flowers. With good songs let me touch this Tezozomoc, this Cuacuauhtzin.[13]

Just as the poetry of "flower and song" accompanies one into other generally unseen parts of the world, such as the places where the dead still live on, we can gain access to these other realms through ritual performance of the kind of poetry written in the *Popol Vuh*. A passage near the beginning of the *Popol Vuh* explains why it was written down in this textual form, when the *Popol Vuh* had previously been primarily performed (although there is also suggestion here of earlier glyphic text):

[11] *Culture and Value*, 24, Z#160.

[12] Though both of these texts were written during the colonial period, their contents are almost certainly older.

[13] *Cantares Mexicanos*, song 40, Bierhorst trans., 213–215.

> This account we shall now write under the law of God and Christianity. We shall bring it forth because there is not longer the means whereby the Popol Vuh may be seen, the means of seeing clearly that had come from across the sea – the account of our obscurity, and the means of seeing life clearly, as it is said. The original book exists that was written anciently, but its witnesses and those who ponder it hide their faces.[14]

In addition to poetry and more straightforward verse, we find a number of different sources for philosophy in early Mesoamerica. These sources will perhaps be most unfamiliar to readers steeped in the traditions of the Eurasian continent, as in those traditions, philosophy is most closely associated with text and textual tradition. In the Mesoamerican context, text certainly plays a role, but we also find philosophy in monumental imagery, art, architecture, performance, ritual, language, and construction of tools. In this and later chapters, I look to all of these sources to clarify Mesoamerican philosophy. In the West, we are unaccustomed to looking at these sources for philosophy, so this will require a certain extent of *retraining* one's philosophical sense. Fortunately, this is something that can be done, and indeed something we *already* do in numerous ways, and simply fail to understand this activity as philosophical. My hope is that once we see these ways of understanding philosophy via other nontextual sources, we will recognize the enormous number of philosophical tools in both the Mesoamerican tradition and outside of it, that we often leave unutilized, and the rich areas we leave unexamined. The philosophical terrain of human culture is a vast continent with sweeping mountain ranges, deserts, swamps, lush forests, rolling rivers, seemingly eternal plains – but we often limit ourselves to a small clearing, a grove within a single woodland, rendering the rest of the world on our map with dragons.

While I do not have the space here to discuss *all* of the ways we can encounter philosophy in the world, I can discuss some of the central ways beyond textual culture that we find practiced in Mesoamerica. We often find poetry in oral tradition, particularly in premodern history.

[14] *Popol Vuh*, Christenson trans., 55–56. One interesting issue here is the question of whether this passage refers to earlier textual versions of the *Popol Vuh* in native Maya scripts. It is likely that such texts existed, as we find references to events from the *Popol Vuh* in the Classic Period imagery. The glyphic text itself, however, as we will

The epics of ancient India, the Homeric epics of Greece, and even the *suttas* of early Buddhism were passed down through memorization and recitation long before they were rendered into textual form. Another source of Western knowledge of oral tradition is, of course, the robust oral tradition of the indigenous Americas. Most readers of this book (i.e., English-speaking audience) will be familiar with the emphasis of indigenous groups throughout the Americas on knowledge contained in and passed through oral tradition. Much (but not all) of this oral tradition has been put into text over the years, by native people themselves, and students of their traditions. There are still things that have *not* been put into text, however, and on purpose, following the view that there are certain ideas that can only be understood and appreciated in non-textual forms.

Likewise, some ideas can only be properly understood against some background context, as developing other ideas. Just as we would not expect someone with no background in analytic philosophy to get much from a specialized journal article on metaphysics, philosophy of mind, or any of the other areas in which we work, we could not expect someone without the requisite ritual, performance, or aesthetic formation to understand the nuance, complexity, and significance of certain ritual performances, constructions, artworks, etc. And since this context, for many

see in the chapter on identity, would have been understood as itself a performance, with the words containing the essence of the entities referred to. This suggests a different understanding of the relationship between language and reality than obtains with a text written in Latin script. The Maya authors of early Latin script forms of the *Popol Vuh* were likely familiar with the very different conception of the relationship between language and reality of the Spanish, and their understanding of text, which differed from native Maya understanding of text. It is possible that these different theories of language were associated with the use of particular languages or scripts – that is, writing in Latin script entailed Western conceptions of the connection between language and reality, whereas writing in Maya script entitled native conceptions. Native conceptions of language held glyphs to have identity with the represented things – the glyph for a god contained the essence of that god, for example. Spanish conceptions of language relied on reference rather than identity or manifestation of essence. Thus, writing about the world in Latin script was perhaps seen as referencing the world, while writing about it in Maya script would be understood as presenting or manifesting the world, such that it could be *seen*. This is likely what the author has in mind when claiming that the Popol Vuh can no longer be seen.

non-native readers, will be very unfamiliar, we must learn some of this background – this is something I will attempt to translate for readers throughout this book.

Performance, particularly ritual demonstrations in presentations of important "plays" or ceremonial events (the two categories were not completely separated, though there could be longer and shorter such everts), was one source of philosophy in early Mesoamerica. While some important performances, such as those recounted in the *Florentine Codex,* the *Chilam Balam* books, or the *Popol Vuh*, were ultimately written down after Spanish contact, while others were not. Fortunately, some of these performances, or at least descendants of them, are still made by people in Mesoamerica. It is thus important, in understanding the philosophical traditions of Mesoamerica, to look to anthropology, sociology, and the practices of the current day indigenous communities of Mesoamerica. While their practices cannot tell us *exactly* what their ancestors practiced, they can give us important insights and hints that we can combine with other sources (in addition to being valuable in their own right). We are fortunate to be able to draw from the extensive work of generations of anthropologists and sociologists who have studied the practices of current day Mesoamerican indigenous groups, as well as people from these communities who have explained their practices to outside communities, scholars, and audience.

Often such ritual performances relied on nonlinguistic features of movement to express meaning. This is an issue that has been discussed to some extent by philosophers in aesthetics. It has not been fully appreciated by philosophers across the field, however, that physical movement, nonlinguistic sound, color, and motion can convey philosophical meaning or content. This is a very important feature of Mesoamerican performance. In performances of the K'iche' Maya *Rabinal Achi*, and presumably also the *Popol Vuh* before it, particular motions, colors, and sounds have important meaning and significance, and understanding the import of the performance requires attending to those features. Reading a text of the *Rabinal Achi*, for example, will leave one who does not understand this perplexed, as the textual content itself seems sparse and repetitive. But focus on the text obscures the fact that the most important aspects of the performance are given in *movement*, in a way that cannot be captured in text without

elaborate description and translation, and even then text misses something crucial inherent in movement.

We find other examples of such things in traditions across the world. Even if Mesoamerican ritual performance is unique in just how much of the work of communicating meaning is done through the nontextual aspects of performance, and the sense in which philosophical content particularly is expressed this way, we do find the idea of movement as expressing meaning in cultures and traditions throughout the world. In the West, we are familiar with the notion of dance as expressive in communicative ways. In everything from Broadway musicals to ballet, we find meaning expressed through physical movement – whether emotion, statement, or other communication. We also recognize the ways movement can (perhaps to a lesser extent) express meaning in the context of sports, or even gestures between people. A shrug of the shoulders, for example, can express that one is uninterested, or a particular kind of glance can demonstrate surprise, interest, boredom, or many other things. The movements of boxer or MMA fighter in the ring or octagon can communicate confidence, arrogance, respect, timidity, or a host of other meanings. We all know of the idea of "jumping for joy," which can happen at a sudden victory in sport, or a sudden unexpected windfall for an individual – an acceptance letter or call from a school or a job, a notification of winning the lottery, and other such things. And while emotion is commonly expressed through movement, we can express other meanings as well. Wide motions can express directness, wooden and still stances can express guardedness, careful and ritualized motions can express a sense of importance or significance.

We see that movement can express basic ideas. At a more abstract and complex level (which we are less familiar with concerning movement, but that is common in Mesoamerican performance), movement can express more technical, complex, and philosophical ideas. Some forms of dance in the West have attempted to move in this direction, and it is in the area of the movement arts that we find most discussion and understanding of this. In the historical Indian philosophical tradition, there was also focus on performance both in terms of the significance of sound and recitation (retained today in the importance of the chanting of mantras or texts in ritual and religious contexts), as well as on the spiritual and philosophical

significance of certain forms of movement.[15] Recently, some philosophers in Western academia have also developed views of movement as expressive of meaning.[16] Some readers may find this aspect of Mesoamerican Philosophy particularly new, unusual, or confusing, and I will try my best to unpack the issues associated with this source of philosophical thought and the cultural background necessary to understand it in the following chapters of this book.

Physical art and architecture are perhaps the most unique ways Mesoamerican philosophy was presented. As with performance, many of us will recognize the ways art and architecture can bear meaning – any course in art history or even a stroll through your local art museum will reveal this. The creative physical arts – painting, sculpting, printing, construction, and more – have always held and been intended to impart meaning. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of artworks depicting people, scenes, events, or places. We shape things into a likeness, a representation of some original, including the artist's interpretation of, commentary on, or way of thinking about this original. Representational art shows us that there is no "view from nowhere," no perspective-independent view on a scene or thing. Even a photograph is taken from a particular location, under particular lighting, at a time and angle, through human eyes, etc. And the subjective mode is more pronounced in other art forms. When we look at Picasso's "Guernica," we see not just a historical scene, but a particular take on the emotions, the terror, the chaos, the dissonance of that scene. Volumes have been written on particular paintings, sculptures, and other artworks to explain their meaning in text form. We recognize such artwork as a potentially extraordinarily rich source of meaning and information (think of the common phrase "a picture is worth a thousand words"), but we are for some reason less inclined to take such artwork as the source of *philosophy.* In the Mesoamerican traditions, philosophy emerges through such artwork.

[15] The concept of *natya,* or stylized movements meant to express certain emotions and ideas through dance, was extensively discussed in the *Natyasastra*, a text on drama dating to somewhere between the second century BCE and the second century CE.

[16] See for example recent literature in philosophy of dance, such as Katan-Schmid, *Embodied Philosophy in Dance*; Welch, *Choreography as Embodied Critical Inquiry*; among numerous others. Also see Nail, *Being and Motion*.

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A natural question one might ask here is whether Mesoamerican traditions *intentionally* presented philosophical ideas through artwork, performance, and the other sources we are discussing, or instead whether scholars of Mesoamerican philosophy are *finding* philosophical meaning in these sources, in the same way we might find philosophical meaning in artworks and performances in other cultures, even when such meanings were not intended or explicitly given to the artwork? There are a few additional questions raised by this: 1) does doing philosophy require a conception by the people engaged in it of themselves doing philosophy as such, or at least a single coherent activity, whatever they might call it? 2) Is explicit philosophical intention in creation of a thing necessary for that thing to convey philosophical ideas?

Let's take the second question first. While we know that there are certainly *some* ideas and content that do not require creative intent to be carried by an object (artwork, text, etc.), we generally take philosophical meaning to require particular kinds of intent. This may be the result of our tendency to think of philosophy as involving something like conceptual analysis and related projects, or along the lines of the physical sciences, which shows why many reject the idea that poetry can be a source of philosophy. If philosophical meaning can be held by poetry, though, there must be some hermeneutic freedom, some sense in which authorial intention does not constrain philosophical meaning. If this is so, the question becomes just what the role of such intention is, and whether *any* such intention is necessary for something to carry philosophical meaning. If not, then it seems that natural objects, or anything else in the universe, could carry philosophical meaning. But is this what we want to say? It turns out that this is very much what Mesoamerican traditions will say, and for a number of reasons. First, the structure of the world *is* at least in part created by the human mind, according to a dominant view in these traditions. The ways we conceptualize and conceive of the world, which completes it and makes it what it is, can be found within the natural world itself, and investigating these things can reveal much about these ways we conceptualize the world – the patterns in which we do so. Though perhaps we don't *intentionally* create things in this way, we do create them through conceptualization, and insofar as philosophy can be understood as engaging with concepts (including conceptual analysis!),

these objects in the world can be understood as providing philosophical meaning. But is there any sense in which *philosophical positions* are to be found in these objects (or artworks, etc.?) Even if the stuff of nature gives us something we can philosophize *with*, this is different than the claim that philosophy is going on and is presented by the objects in question. Concepts themselves are not philosophy, even though we can do philosophy with them. In Mesoamerican philosophical views, however, objects do not just contain the static concepts we have constructed, but also convey the activity of continually constructing these objects. That is, investigation of objects reveals the ways humans think about and construct our world through conceptualization, not only the concepts themselves. And this activity, conscious or not, is the activity of philosophy. Much of Mesoamerican philosophy is concerned with explaining and uncovering the ways human conceptualization works, revealing the structures of the world that turn out to be identical to the structures of our own thinking and activity. So this is one way that objects, including human-made objects, can present philosophical content. When we think about created objects such as artwork or architectural construction, there is another level of presentation involved. What we will find here in Mesoamerican philosophy is works constructed so as to *draw our attention to* particular ways we engage in conceptualization and thinking about the world, and creation of the world. The inherent meaning in objects, even natural objects, is vast, and certain operation on objects by humans can reveal or be suggestive of certain aspects of those objects. For example, one well-known way of thinking about sculpture reveals this thinking. A block of stone has many potential shapes contained in it, and a particular statue is created by cutting away the parts of that stone that do not immediately reveal this shape. When we see Michelangelo's David, we are seeing a block of stone, and the initial block of stone contained that which we see before Michelangelo ever carved his statue. That same block potentially also contained an image of Abraham Lincoln, or the Great Wall of China, or many other things (and still does, as the stone can be cut down further to reveal those things). The view here is that all of those images are inherent in the stone itself, that the stone can be conceptualized so as to represent (and thus contain the essence of) a particular thing, and that a particular carving brings out this inherent feature of the thing. We will

find different views on this in Mesoamerica, including the view that such a carving establishes or actualizes the essence of an object, where multiple essences are *possible* because of the containment of all possibilities of conceptualization within the object.

Ways of Accessing the Philosophy of the Past

As shown above, there are numerous sources of philosophy in precolonial Mesoamerican thought. But we also have to be thoughtful about the ways we *access* this philosophy. Understanding the philosophical views of people using such a variety of sources also requires the ability to access and understand those sources. Thus, we have to look beyond texts and to rituals, practices, oral traditions, architecture, and more. The history of philosophy must become more methodologically diverse in order to allow for our access to such information.

We find patterns when we see them emerge across a range of different ways of thinking. We have to go out and do the work of investigating people and places and different worldviews, and also to look for different sources of thought and use different methodologies to access it. Looking for particular kinds of argument structure and drawing those out of texts (generally removed from historical context) may give us *something*, but it will obscure much of philosophical value when we investigate a tradition or text. To use an analogy – when we're asking what a house is made of, it's not going to suffice to stay in one room and look at the wall. We have to have a broader understanding of the different rooms, parts of the house, and how they fit together. Is it possible to do this "from the armchair," as the philosopher generally (but not always) works? Does the philosopher have to become a field archaeologist or materials expert? At least in part – yes! But fortunately, twenty-first century technology has given us massive assistance in making this a less daunting task than it would have been not long ago. We have an enormous amount of information at our fingertips, and can learn a great deal about other times, places, worldviews, etc. from our own homes. We have this incredible resource that we often fail to use, for a number of different reasons. First, we still have not learned great strategies to navigate this high-information environment, and this is apparent in the growth of online echo chambers, disinformation, etc.

One of the seeming drawbacks is that because all of this information is so easy to access, it can be overwhelming, and we can become unable to evaluate what we encounter. Information overload can lead to a simple breakdown in our ability to process things. We have to develop a strategy to move through such environments that allows us to skillfully navigate them without being overwhelmed – we need to form guiding principles, otherwise it becomes all too easy to get lost in the woods.

One potential response to the information overload is to retreat back into narrower ways of thinking, as a protective response. I suspect this is at least partly the explanation for the rise of nationalism, conservatism, and a certain antiquarian kind of traditionalism around the world. This new world can be baffling and overwhelming, especially when we have not developed strategies to deal with it, and a natural response to what is overwhelming can be to retreat to a place of safety, a place in which all features of the environment are defined, well-known, familiar. But this response is in essence a failure – a failure to make use of and learn from an incredible opportunity. Instead of retrenching in narrower forms of thought, we should invest our energy in discovering and learning strategies for navigating this new situation, so as to take advantage of it, to make use of what it promises. The enormous wealth of information online makes it possible for the philosopher to widen the scope of their investigations beyond text and pulling arguments from text, without having to take on the completely new tasks of learning field archaeological techniques or having practical experience with the physical properties of clay. Such experience, of course, will still be immensely valuable for the philosopher who aims to understand a particular tradition, and absent constraints of time, energy, etc., we should all aim to gain such intellectual breadth, as it will aid our understanding of philosophy. But it is not strictly necessary to do all of this today, with the invaluable treasure of what the Internet makes possible, thus making it possible for a wider range of philosophers to access and understand the variety of ways philosophy is approached across global traditions.

Even when we cannot fully access or understand a particular philosophical tradition (and this is inevitable, as we cannot hope to learn *everything* relevant to understanding a tradition), we can do enough to have a sufficient handle on it, particularly in the ways it differs from traditions we

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are more familiar with. A guiding principle of the project of learning from the history of philosophy should be that our own worldviews are incomplete, necessarily narrow, and always in need of development. Learning stops where certainty begins, so the more confident we are that our own ways of thinking are the correct or only ways, the less inclined we will be to learn from others, whether of other times or other places. And at that point we become trapped in our cage, unable to recognize the value of anything else, unable to change, to grow. We can only learn from others when we think that there is something we have to learn, can only appreciate different insights and ways of conceiving of the world when we recognize that our own ways are not the only or necessarily the best ways. Faced with information overload, we can entrench in our own worldviews and thus become impervious to learning – that certainly is one way to handle it. But a better way is to make use of the abundance of information to learn and reshape our worldviews into something better, more flexible, more inclusive, more informed.[17]

Philosophical traditions like those of Mesoamerica, which are (sometimes radically) different from those most of us in the contemporary West

[17] I use the language of "we" and "our" here with some hesitation. The reason for this is that in this discussion I do not want to exclude those from *outside* Western ways of thinking about these ideas, such as those familiar with or within Mesoamerican traditions, from being assumed part of the readership of this book. I stick with this terminology mainly because the point here is to suggest to philosophical audiences in the West, most of whom are unfamiliar with Mesoamerican philosophy (as most readers of this book will probably be reading it to gain some knowledge about this area – it is after all an *introduction*) that *they* stand to gain in these ways from understanding Mesoamerican philosophy. For those readers familiar with Mesoamerican traditions or who have connections with these traditions – it is not my intention to leave you out here. Indeed, the ways we think about what reflexive group terminology refers to is an essential point, but one we often do not think about. What does it mean when an author uses terms like "we" or "our"? Who are they referring to? I want to be explicit here that I am referring to something like "academic philosophers in the West without familiarity with Mesoamerican traditions." This "we" is of course rhetorical, as it is one that does not even include the author of this book who employs the terminology. I am an academic philosopher in the West, but I also am familiar with Mesoamerican philosophy, take its worldviews seriously, and am committed to the development of broader worldviews (as I hope should be clear from the discussion above).

are familiar with, have much to teach us about what is possible, about the limitations and boundaries of our own philosophical presuppositions, and about how we might modify our own narrow conceptions of the world. These systems can not only help us to see new (to us, perhaps) ideas, ways of thinking about the world, and ways of understanding what we are doing when we do philosophy.

One thing I try to minimize throughout this book, and for reasons connected to the above discussion, is the use of familiar Western philosophical categories or Western thinkers to frame Mesoamerican philosophical ideas. One might argue that I have already violated this principle by using "philosophy" as a way of understanding a particular kind of intellectual activity in precolonial Mesoamerica. While this is true to some extent, I use this term in a flexible way, not assuming a particular kind of activity as connected with it. Thus, rather than using the idea of philosophy as a tool to narrow the investigation of Mesoamerican thought to particular kinds of ideas, I use it as a starting point from which to enter Mesoamerican thought, trying to allow the major concerns of Mesoamerican philosophers to determine our categories of investigation.

Finally, it is also important to point out that our understanding of precolonial Mesoamerican philosophy, like our understanding of other aspects of Mesoamerica before European contact, is very much dependent on interpretations of the existing material. The issues I discuss in this book are very much still live, and there are robust scholarly debates surrounding interpretations of Mesoamerican sources. While I present a number of these interpretations here, including my own, in order to offer a coherent big-picture view of Mesoamerican thought, the reader should not take from this that what I offer here is settled academic consensus on the issues. In some discussions later in the book, I explicitly reference interpretive debates, while in others, I bypass these. This is all done for the sake of presenting as clear of an overview of the main themes and views of Mesoamerican traditions as possible. For almost every position about Mesoamerican traditions found here, alternatives or disagreements can be found somewhere in the scholarly literature. This is generally the case for any philosophical tradition, but even more so for Mesoamerican traditions, because of the relative paucity of extant textual sources (compared to traditions like those of China, India, or Greece), our relatively new and

still changing understanding of precolonial glyphic written language in Mesoamerica, and the fact that academic scholarship on Mesoamerican philosophy is still very much in its infancy by comparison with scholarship on many other philosophical traditions. I aim to help the reader gain a big picture understanding of the Mesoamerican philosophical traditions, but I also invite the reader to learn more, to see and verify for him or herself, to grapple with the material, learn the languages, become familiar with the areas, and then challenge our interpretations and offer new ones.

Important Philosophical Themes in Mesoamerica

The philosophical concerns of Mesoamerican traditions, while to some extent overlapping with those of philosophers today in the English-speaking West, do not perfectly align with those concerns and interests. There are conceptual differences, as well as differences of focus even where the same concepts or issues are dealt with. It is important to keep these differences in mind even as we find parallels between precolonial Mesoamerican thought and that of the modern West, because this will ultimately help us to better understand and to learn from Mesoamerican philosophy. At the same time, we should be careful not to overemphasize such differences, as it becomes easy to find them where they do not exist and force our interpretations so as to create desired alternatives to certain aspects of contemporary Western thought. But we should try as much as possible to attend to native Mesoamerican ways of accessing concepts and thinking about the world, in order to achieve insight into those traditions. In the following text, I outline a few themes central to Mesoamerican Philosophy, around which the remaining chapters of this book are organized.

Creation – A common theme in Mesoamerican philosophical traditions is the robust human role in the creation of the cosmos, as well as the continually unfolding and ongoing nature of creation. Mesoamerican philosophers recognized that the world we inhabit, and our access to that world, is dependent at least partly on us. The world as we perceive it, as we understand it, is dependent on our communal activity in creating aspects of culture, and cooperating with the gods in the construction and maintenance of the cosmos. This happens continually, rather than at a single

time at the beginning of the cosmos. Creation is connected to the issue of the nature of reality, as it is an ongoing process, and being is thus linked with continual creation. The cosmos must be continually ordered in order to stay in existence. It is understood more properly as a process or event than a static and self-enduring object. This is the reason for the necessity of continual renewal as well. As we will see, the focus on sacrifice (a sadly misunderstood concept in Mesoamerican thought) and rebirth in Mesoamerican traditions is connected to the continual creation and thriving of the cosmos.

We find numerous accounts of the continuous and cooperative nature of creation in Mesoamerican accounts. Creation accounts are found in textual sources, performance and oral tradition, and imagery from early sources such as pottery, architecture, stelae, and wall paintings. We will look at a number of these creation accounts, most prominently the K'iche' Maya *Popol Vuh*, the Yucatec Maya *Chilam Balam* books, the Aztec *Florentine Codex*, but also a number of other texts, including Mixtec and Zapotec accounts, as well as discussions of early Mesoamerican imagery and oral tradition. Creation is a central issue in almost all of the precolonial and colonial period texts available to us, and is linked to ritual. Ritual itself plays an important role in discussion of creation because it is largely through ritual that humans contribute to creation of the cosmos. As we will see, humanity contributes to the formation and maintenance of the world through upkeep of rituals connected to calendrics, sacrifice to the gods (in the variety of different senses), and (re)enactment of formative events.

Personhood and Essence – Conceptions of the person in Mesoamerica for the most part surround conceptions of essence or vital energy – concepts captured by a number of different terms representing a cluster of related concepts. There are a number of distinct concepts referring to essential aspects of the person, associated with spirit, soul, co-essence, and other individuating features. There are numerous conceptions in Mesoamerica of what makes a person, how a person is identified, and the relationship between the person and the essential parts, personal identity, and the connection between the person and nonpersonal aspects of the world.

Time – The topic of time has been of great interest to scholars and the general public, in part because of the unique and interesting calendric systems of Mesoamerica that have been passed down through text and

ritual practices. The role of time and its maintenance is clearly central to numerous Mesoamerican traditions, which can be seen in the memorialization of calendric ideas, dates, and events in ancient texts, as well as the centrality of ritual practices associated with time even into the colonial period and persisting today. While time *may* be overestimated as a foundational concept in Mesoamerican thought due to the nature of the physical record (monuments involving and referring to time, in rock, survived the ravages of time that more ephemeral sources did not), it is still clearly an important topic in Mesoamerican Philosophy. Particularly central to the Mesoamerican concern with time is the idea of correlation between time and other aspects of the cosmos, such as humanity, the gods, and different unseen realms. Each thing that exists can be expressed in terms of time, and has a fundamental relationship with time that makes this concept central to Mesoamerican metaphysics.

Ethics and action – The questions of proper action in Mesoamerican Philosophy focus on role performance, the responsibilities of individuals and the community in the maintenance of the world, and the individual relationship with the community and the cosmos. There is a focus on what we might call individual and collective character traits or virtues. Central ethical concepts include sacrifice, humility, and balance – all of which have important political implications as well. The organization of society is based on these virtues, which are supposed to be represented by the ruler, thus the elaborate rituals tying the ruler to the community through sacrifice, commitment, and public display of role activity.

Vision and Knowledge – The concerns with knowledge in much of Mesoamerican philosophy are with the means of generating knowledge, rather than with the issue of what knowledge is. Knowledge is associated with *vision*, the ability to understand the world, what things are in it, and how these things operate. This is thought of in terms of sense, as the ability to see connects to the ability to use, predict, and navigate. We generate this ability in a number of ways, with certain kinds of ritual central to the process. There is a great deal of focus in Mesoamerican traditions on particular classes of people with the role of bearing knowledge for the community, in terms of calendrics, medicine, and general learning. These classes were in the precolonial period connected to forms of government, and persist in new forms still today in the region.

Further Reading

For excellent overviews of some Mesoamerican philosophical traditions, including discussions of the nature of philosophy in Mesoamerica, see Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy*; Leon-Portilla, *La filosofia náhuatl* (translated as *Aztec Thought and Culture*); Schele, Friedel, and Parker, *Maya Cosmos*; Knowlton, *Maya Creation Myth;* Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*. For some of the primary sources from the colonial period that offer the fullest accounts of Mesoamerican philosophical traditions, see *Popol Vuh* (Christenson trans. or Tedlock trans.), *Florentine Codex* (12 volumes, especially Volume 6. "Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy," Dibble trans.). The *Chilam Balam* books, such as the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (see Roys trans.) and the *Chilam Balam of Tizimin* (see Edmonson, *The Ancient Future of the Itza*) contain much on this as well. For more on performance, see Tedlock, *Rabinal Achi.* Full publication details for all of these works can be found in the bibliography.

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