Did the Aztecs Do Philosophy?
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Abstract

In *Aztec Thought and Culture*, Miguel León-Portilla argues that the Aztecs, or Nahuas, addressed traditional problems in philosophy. In this presentation, I will evaluate León-Portilla’s argument, which is important for two main reasons. First, it will help determine how we approach the philosophical study of the Nahuatl people and their thought. Second, León-Portilla’s view provides an interesting case for revealing common meta-philosophical presuppositions about the boundary between philosophy and non-philosophy or whether such a boundary exists. Ultimately, I am addressing León-Portilla’s argument in order to address the question of whether the Nahuas explicitly did philosophy, which thereby leads to the question of what distinguishes philosophy from non-philosophy. I argue that León-Portilla’s argument is inadequate, but despite the problems with his argument, it is still plausible to think the Nahuas did philosophy.

To address the question of what distinguishes philosophy from non-philosophy, I will suggest that philosophy is best understood as a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” concept. On this construal, there is no one thing that is common to all instances of philosophy; instead we see, as Wittgenstein says, “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.” (PI 65) Given this, there is no sharp boundary between philosophy and non-philosophy; instead, there are closer and further similarities to characteristics that philosophers commonly associate with genuine philosophizing. Seen from the prism of this “family resemblance” view, it might have at first seemed that the Nahuatl texts exhibited characteristics that only slightly resembled those that we associate with
philosophy, but upon closer examination the texts bear a much stronger resemblance that places them well within the domain of philosophy.