

3 The Nature of Mexica Ethics

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Scholars of Mexica (Aztec) philosophy widely embrace the general claim that (1) reciprocity functions at the heart of Mexica metaphysics' understanding of the nature and continual becoming of the world as well as the role of human beings in contributing to the continual becoming of the world. They also widely embrace several more specific claims: (2) powerful creator beings engender the Fifth Age of the cosmos; (3) these same creator beings engender Fifth Age human beings; (4) they engender human beings by 'deserving' or 'meriting' humans' existence; (5) Fifth Age human beings are therefore those 'deserved' or 'merited' into existence by creator beings; (6) Fifth Age human beings are consequently born 'obligated' or 'indebted' to creator beings; and (7) Fifth Age human beings do so by providing for creator beings' continuing sustenance and existence. In what follows I flesh out some of the more important metaphysical and meta-ethical underpinnings and consequences of these claims.¹

1. Human and Other-Than-Human Reciprocity and Co-Participation in the Fifth Age

According to Mexica creation narratives (*tlamachiliztlatolzanilli*, literally, 'wisdom tellings' [Bierhorst 1992, viii]), the history of the cosmos consists of a series of five Ages or Suns. The succession of the first four Ages consists of the creator beings, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca, taking turns creating their own and destroying the other's Age. Each of the four Ages is populated by its own particular kind of human being who is also destroyed. Upon the destruction of the Fourth Age, Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca decide to work together in creating a final Fifth Age and fifth kind of human being. Present-day humans are of this fifth kind and inhabit this Fifth Age (Bierhorst 1992, 25–6, 146–6).

Because Quetzalcoatl, Tezcatlipoca, and the many other creator beings in the Mexica cosmos are neither perfect, omnipotent, benevolent, transcendent, nor 'supernatural', it is misleading to think of them as 'gods'. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the fact that they are vitally dependent upon human beings for their continuing existence (more anon).

They are better understood as agentive beings or personified forces who possess more power and life force than humans, animals, plants, and insects. Indeed, according to Mexica metaphysics, all things are animated, empowered, and vivified by one and the same life energy – what the Mexica called *teotl*. One and all are also constituted by *teotl*. The cosmos and all its inhabitants – from earth, lightning, rivers, wind, and sun to plants, birds, animals, humans, and deceased ancestors, from buildings, cooking pots, digging sticks, and knives, to artwork, incense, and musical instruments, and from stories and songs to dance, musical performance, and ceremonies – are vivified, active, and powerful. In short, the Fifth Age is by populated by human beings as well as what I call (borrowing from Hallowell 1976) *other-than-human* beings (Maffie 2014, 2019a).

The few Mexica ‘wisdom tellings’ that survived the Conquest do not say exactly why Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca create the first four Ages and the first four kinds of humans or why Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca destroy each of them.² The Quiché Maya creation narrative, the *Popol Vuh*, however, offers us tantalizing clues. The *Popol Vuh* relates that creator beings sought to create a race of beings who would properly worship, respect, and care for them – i.e., nurture, nourish, sustain, and in so doing literally recreate them – through such means as well-spoken words, music, incense, foodstuffs, and ceremony. The Maya creator beings first created animals, but animals proved unable to carry out this task since they lacked the ability to speak. They next fashioned humans from clay, but they failed for lack of being able to speak properly. Next, they made humans from wood, but because they lacked hearts and understanding, wooden humans were not able to properly worship their creators. Upon their fourth attempt the creator beings finally succeeded in creating human beings capable of respecting and caring for them properly. These last humans were made of maize (see *Popol Vuh* 2003, 67–90, 193–200).³

Although the surviving Mexica ‘wisdom tellings’ do not tell us why Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca create and the destroy the first four Ages and first four kinds of humans, they do tell us why Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca create Fifth Age humans. As in the *Popol Vuh*, they create humans in order to nurture, nourish, sustain, and in so doing ultimately regenerate the creator beings. While the similarity with the *Popol Vuh* does not entail that Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca create and destroy the first four Ages and kinds of humans for the same reason as the creator beings do in the *Popol Vuh*, it does certainly suggest this as a tantalizing possibility. Both creation narratives (along with countless other Mesoamerican creation narratives) assign a unique role to humankind (see Monaghan 2000). Let’s examine further Mexica creation narratives.

The ‘wisdom telling’, *Legend of the Suns*, tells us that as a consequence of the monumental effort (*tequitl*) and expenditure of life energy (*chichahualiztli*) involved in fashioning Sky, Earth, and moving Sun of the Fifth Age, Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcoatl, and the other creator beings become

enervated, 'hot' with hunger, imbalanced, and in life-threatening need of nourishment. In order to remedy their condition, Quetzalcoatl decides to undertake a series of hardships. He travels to Mictlan (the Place of the Dead below the earth's surface) where he successfully locates and retrieves the bones of Fourth Age humans despite the strenuous opposition of Mictlantecuhtli (Lord of the Place of the Dead). Quetzalcoatl brings the bones to Cihuacoatl, who grinds them into meal and places the meal in a jade bowl. Quetzalcoatl then fashions new human beings from the bone meal of Fourth Age humans by mixing into the meal the life energy contained in blood drawn from his virile member. The creator beings gift life to Fifth Age humans so that humans will cool, refresh, and rebalance them by nurturing, nourishing, and feeding them in return. (Hunger consists of an imbalance consisting of excessive heat, and eating food restores balance through cooling.) The Mexica see feeding and nurturing as ways of respecting, worshipping, loving, and honoring other beings (creator or otherwise). Such nourishment consists of well-spoken words (what we call 'prayer'), song, dance, music, ceremony, incense, foodstuffs (e.g., tamales), and human or animal blood. What's more, the continuing existence of the Fifth Age after its initial creation requires the vital energies of creator beings. Because sustaining the world continually enervates them, they are continually in need of nourishment from humans. In short, although the initial and continuing existence of Fifth Age humans (and all its inhabitants) are wholly dependent upon creator beings, creator beings themselves are subsequent to creation wholly dependent upon human beings. The continuing existence of creator beings depends *essentially* upon human nourishing, nurturing, and care (Bierhorst 1992, 146–6; see also Carrasco 1999; Köhler 2001; Maffie 2014, 2019a, 2019b).⁴

According to the 'wisdom telling', *Histoire du mechique* (Garibay [ed] 1965b, 91–116), Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca initiate the creation of the Fifth Age by capturing and splitting into two Tlaltecuhli (the great earth caiman, Earth Lady). In this way they form the sky and earth's surface. Human foodstuffs such as maize, beans, and amaranth grow from her body. Water flows from her eyes. As a consequence of the initial hardship (*tequitl*) she endured in being split into two and continuing hardship she endures in providing humans with foodstuffs, Tlaltecuhli demands reciprocity from humans. She demands to be fed in return; she demands human life energy.

Providing for the continuing existence and reproduction of the Fifth Age (along with its human inhabitants) with their vital energies continually exhausts the creator beings. As a consequence, they depend critically upon being continually fed and nourished by human beings. Preeminent among this nourishment are the vital energies of human beings themselves (i.e., human blood and hearts). In Book VI of the *Florentine Codex*, Bernardino de Sahagún records a prayer to Tezcatlipoca declaring that Mictlantecuhtli 'thirsts', 'hungers', 'pants', and 'cries out' restlessly for

human flesh day and night (Sahagún 1953–1982, Bk VI, 21). And yet this dependency is mutual. The continuing existence and continuing reproduction of Fifth Age humans – both as individuals (ontogenetically) and as a species (phylogenetically) – depend critically upon humans being continually fed and nourished by the creator beings’ energies in the form of foodstuffs (such as maize, amaranth, beans, and chia seed), sunlight, and water. Humans, too, thirst, hunger, pant, and cry out continually for the life energies of creator beings.

Humans and creator beings thus feed their vital energies to one other as well as consume one another’s vital energies. Feeding and eating are prominent means of energy transmission in the Fifth Age. Contemporary Nahuatl-speakers – Nahuatl being the language spoken by the Mexica and spoken today by one to two million people – of San Miguel, Sierra del Pueblo, Mexico, express their relationship with the creator beings in this way:

We live HERE on the earth (stamping in the mud floor)
We are all fruits of the earth
The earth sustains us
We grow here, on the earth and lower
And when we die we wither in the earth
We are ALL FRUITS of the earth (stamping in the mud floor)
We eat the earth
Then the earth eats us.

(Carrasco 1999, 169–70)

Alternatively expressed, “We eat the gods, and the gods eat us” (Carrasco 1999, 164), “We feed ourselves to the creator beings and they feed themselves to us”,⁵ and “We care for the creator beings and they care for us”.⁶

Humans and creator beings are thus mutually dependent, their relationship being aptly characterized as ‘mutualist symbiotic’ or ‘obligate mutualist’ (meaning one or both symbionts depend entirely on the other for survival) in the terminology of contemporary biology. Fifth Age creator beings and human beings rely equally upon consuming one another’s life energies. Because they feed humans, creator beings are said to be “mothers and fathers” to humans, and because they in turn feed creator beings, humans are also “mothers and fathers” to creator beings (Sahagún 1953–1982, Bk VI, 88; see also Taggart 2007; Good Eshelman 2011). I submit this mutual dependency is not gainsaid by the obvious disparity in their respective amounts of power (*contra* Monaghan 2000, 37). As insignificant as it is in comparison to the world-engendering life energies of creator beings, humans’ life energy nevertheless suffices to sustain creator beings. Each depends upon the other for its continuing existence. In short, reciprocity, mutualism, and symmetry do not demand quantitative equality.

Since creator beings sustain the Fifth Age and all its inhabitants, and since humans sustain creator beings, the Mexica regarded the ongoing reproduction of the Fifth Age as a *social* process involving the contribution of both human and creator beings as well as their mutual cooperation and ‘co-activity’ (see Pitrou 2016, 2017). The Fifth Age is the joint product of their social and interactive relationship of mutual feeding and eating. By participating in the ongoing existence and reproduction of one another, humans and creators *co-participate* in the ongoing existence and reproduction of the Fifth Age. Humankind, therefore, has a unique task, a unique load (*tlamamalli*) to bear, and a unique responsibility among inhabitants of the Fifth Age, viz. to sustain creator beings and the entire world. Indeed, this is precisely why creator beings create humans in the first place. Yet as we will see, the unique responsibility of humans to sustain the world does not confer upon humans a privileged or superior moral status *vis-à-vis* other inhabitants of the world. Humans are not given dominion over the world nor does creation exist for their benefit.

What’s more, by reciprocally feeding their life energies to one another and by reciprocally consuming one another’s life energies, humans and creator beings actively “participate in each another” (see Tambiah 1990, 108). Adopting for heuristic purposes the potentially misleading parlance of Western metaphysics and theology, humans become ‘divine’ and creator beings become ‘human’ (misleading because Mexica metaphysics does not see creator beings as divinities and does not see humans and creator beings as distinguished by a qualitative ontological gap); humans become ‘supernatural’ and gods ‘natural’ (misleading because Mexica metaphysics does not distinguish between the ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’). The conceptual repertoire of Mexica metaphysics does not include the concepts of nature, the supernatural, or the environment (as standardly employed by Western metaphysics and theology). Humans and creators consume and share one another’s vital energies. While they differ in terms of the quantity of energy they possess, they do not differ in terms of the quality of energy they possess. Both consist entirely of the single, dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating, sacred power, energy, or life force that is *teotl*. Their reciprocal eating and feeding result in an ontologically mixed and ambiguous, human-divine *tertium quid*: a human being-creator being unified duality and dual unity. This result fully accords with the Mexica’s ontological claim that everything consists of *teotl* (see Maffie 2014, chs. 1 & 2).

By dint of their reciprocal feeding and eating, humans and creators behave as mutually interdependent, mutually arising, alternatively dominating, complementary pairs – what Mexica referred to as *inamic* pairs or ‘matched partners’ (Maffie 2014, ch. 3). Humans and creators act as *inamic* partners alongside other more commonly recognized *inamic* partners such as life~death, light~darkness, male~female, hot~cold, order~disorder, and above~below. (I use the tilde, ‘~’ to designate this

relationship.) Indeed, the ongoing becoming of the cosmos is characterized by the ceaseless, cyclical processing of *inamic* partners. What's more, the ceaseless, cyclical processing of *inamic* partners creates a *tertium quid*: a unified duality and dual unity whose character derives from both partners in a non-mutually exclusive manner. For example, in sexual intercourse, male and female unite to form a single male~female duality and dual male~female unity that is neither male nor female, yet at the same time both male and female. I propose we add to the previous list of *inamic* pairs: feeding (feeder)~being fed, eating (eater)~being eaten, consuming~being consumed, nurturing~being nurtured, and giving care~receiving care. Humans and creator beings alternately actuate their *inamic* roles as feeder~being fed and nurturer~being nurtured in the same way that husband and wife and parent and child alternately actuate their roles as feeder~being fed and nurturer~nurtured.

The human~creator being relationship of mutual feeding and eating is captured by the semantic cluster of *nepan*-stem-constructed words of which *nepantla* is the best known. The processes designated by *nepan*-stem-constructed words include sexual intercourse, weaving, getting married, friendship, and reciprocal greeting, love, respect, and agreement. I call these *nepantla-defined processes*. Such processes are betwixt-and-betweening, back-and-forthing, and mutually reciprocating, middling, and intermixing. Furthermore, these processes create a *tertium quid*: e.g., the *nepantla*-defined confluence of rivers A and B creates river C, where C is neither A nor B yet at the same time both A and B. Reciprocal feeding~eating operates the same way as weaving (which middles, unifies, and transforms warp and weft into woven fabric) and as sexual commingling (which transforms male and female into male~female reproductive unity). Just as male and female cooperate and co-participate as *inamic* partners in the continuing reproduction of humankind, so likewise humans and creator beings cooperate and co-participate as *inamic* partners in the continuing reproduction of the Fifth Age (see Maffie 2014, chs. 3, 6, 8).

The ongoing reproduction of the Fifth Age is not only *consequent upon* but also *constituted by* human~creator beings' *nepantla*-defined reciprocal eating and feeding. As the constitutive product of their co-activity, the Fifth Age *consists of* an interwoven fabric of human and creator being energies. Or, adopting for heuristic purposes the misleading parlance of Western metaphysics and theology, the Fifth Age consists of a dual creator~human unity and unified creator~human duality that is neither human nor 'divine', yet at the same time both human and 'divine', and neither 'natural' nor 'supernatural' yet at the same time both 'natural' and 'supernatural'. This result, once again, is fully in keeping with Mexica metaphysics' ontological claim that everything consists of *teotl* (see Maffie 2014 *passim*). In sum, reciprocity is central to Mexica philosophy's understanding of the nature and continual becoming of the world

as well as the essential participatory role of human beings in the continual becoming of the world. Reciprocity acts “like a pump at the heart of the life” of the Fifth Age (to borrow from Allen 2002, 73; see also Maffie 2014, 2019a, 2019b).

2. The Metaphysics of Normativity: The Fifth Age as Moral Community

According to the *Legend of the Suns*, creator beings bring about the existence of the Fifth Age and Fifth Age human beings by means of a process referred to as *macehua*, meaning “to merit, deserve, attain, be worthy of, or acquire that which is deserved”, and by *tlamacehua*, “to deserve or merit something” (Bierhorst 1992, 146; see also León-Portilla 1993; Karttunen 1992; Köhler 2001; Molina 2001 [1571]; Lockhart 2001, 223). Kelly McDonough glosses *macehua* as “obtaining that which is desired through merit, of giving as part of the action of receiving” (McDonough 2017, 18). Let’s examine these two notions, as they are central to Mexica metaphysics and the normativity of the Fifth Age.

Macehua designates an *activity* undertaken by an *agent* who aims to bring about a desired outcome (event, process, activity, or arrangement). The Mexica conceived an agent (*chihuāni*)⁷ as an animate, vivified, and empowered being, one who is sensitive to the surrounding world and who also acts upon and responds to the surrounding world. Linda Brown and William H. Walker (2008, 298) write, “this agency is autonomous, purposeful, and deliberate, and arises from sentient qualities possessed by [animate beings], such as consciousness or a life-force” (see also Good Eshelman 2004, 2007, 2011; Maffie 2014). Agents differ from one another in terms of their degree of power, their ability to act upon and respond to the world, their histories, the scope and intensity of their social relationships (or active interrelatedness) with other agents, and their ‘personalities’ (i.e., their degree of consciousness, purposes, intentions, likes and dislikes, etc.). Agents possess the ability to act and respond socially to those around them. They have the capability of entering into reciprocal relations with other agents and may be more or less social in this respect. Agents may be human, but most are other-than-human: e.g., creator beings, earth, sun, rain, rivers, lakes, mountains, gemstones, animals, plants, gemstones, feathers, agricultural fields, and incense along with spoken words, dancing, singing, music, buildings, statues, and cooking, fishing, hunting, and farming tools. Deceased human ancestors are also agents. All agents are ontologically on a par with one another, seeing as one and all are transitory, concentrated stability patterns in the energy-in-motion of *teotl*. One of the principal ways by which agents make their way in and interact with this social world is by offering gifts to, accepting gifts from, and responding to gifts from other agents.

Macehua is a purposeful activity initiated by an end-seeking agent, an activity involving of effort, work, labor, suffering, or hardship (*tequitl*)

that, in turn, consists of expending vital life energy (*chicahualiztli*).⁸ *Macehua* consists of undertaking hardship (*tequitl*) in order to induce another agent into cooperating or co-participating with oneself in bringing about some desired end, and it involves transmitting an effortful expenditure of life energy (be it *tonalli* or *chicahualiztli*) as an offering (*tlamanaliztli*) or gift to another agent. By virtue of this expenditure of vital energy, one attains merit, becomes worthy, and comes to merit or deserve the outcome one seeks from the other agent. Although *macehua* involves an exchange, it should not be understood as a market-style exchange of commodities (as commonly occurs) (see Köhler 2001; Lupo 1995; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2017 for discussion). What's more, *macehua* must not also be confused with making amends, making atonement, or doing penance (as commonly occurs). Atonement, making amends, and doing penance are backward looking. They are related to past misdeeds or wrongdoings. *Macehua*, by contrast, is not conceptually related to wrongdoing (past or otherwise). Because it operates as a component in a process of cyclical reciprocity, *macehua* is simultaneously backward *and* forward looking. It is backward looking because it aims at giving thanks, gifting back, fulfilling the obligation to gift back, and restoring balance. It is forward looking since by gifting back one obligates the recipient to a future iteration of the gifting cycle and thus to give back to oneself (for discussion of making amends, see Radzik 2009).

Macehua is *ex hypothesi* an *inter-agent* process that takes place between two (or more) agents, one that engenders a *social* relationship between agents. One seeks to engender this social relationship by extending an offering (*tlamanaliztli*) or gift to the intended agent. This metaphysically conveys life energy from donor to recipient. (It is this process that Western scholars, students, and History Channel viewers typically misconstrue as 'sacrifice'. The concept of sacrifice *per se* plays no role in Mexica metaphysics or ethics.) The fact that humans and a variety of other-than-humans such as tools, weapons, labrets, houses, and cooking pots participate in *macehua*-defined interrelationships further supports the idea that tools, houses, and so forth are agents; as does also the fact that obligating others and being obligated to others are central to *macehua*, and these relationships apply to agents (and not lifeless things).

Macehua is a social process by which one agent tries to bring about movement, conduct, or change in another agent – by which one agent tries to get another agent to do something, to become something, or to *metamorphosize* in some way. Creator beings and humans, for example, endeavor to bring about desired outcomes from one another by means of deserving or meriting the outcomes. *Macehua* also aims at coaxing another agent into cooperating with oneself in achieving some end and thus into becoming a *social* agent (see Magazine 2012; Maffie 2019a, 2019b; Lupo 1995; Sandstrom 1991, 2003, 2008a, 2008b; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2017, unpublished manuscript, and Pitrou 2016, 2017). *Macehua* thus requires what we might call *social* 'know-how'. That is, it requires *knowing how*

to get along with other agents in a social world – i.e., one populated by a variety of different agents, both human and other-than-human, who are embedded in different social relationships and who possess different personalities and varying degrees of power) so as to induce them into cooperating with oneself. For example, Mexica farmers sought to merit and induce an agentive ensemble consisting of digging sticks, maize kernels, and agricultural fields along with earth, rain, wind, and sun into cooperating with them in producing an abundant maize harvest, and they did so by means of *tonalli*- and *chicahualiztli*-rich gifts including ‘prayer’, dance, music, song, incense, foodstuffs (e.g., tamales), pilgrimage, sexual abstinence, and human blood and hearts. In addition to the effort and expenditure of energy, social ‘know how’ also requires adopting an appropriate attitude of humility, honor, love, or respect toward the intended agent (see Heyden 1989, 1994; Good Eshelman 1996, 2004, 153–76, 2005, 2011; Sandstrom 1991, 2003, 2008a, 2008b; Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2017; Taggart 2000, 2007, 2017, 2018). ‘Social know how’ does not involve manipulation or coercion. In short, being practically effective in realizing one’s ends requires that one be socially effective.

The concept of *macehua* is a *normative* concept associated with similar normative concepts such as desert, earn, deserve, merit, reward, and due. *Macehua* refers to a *normative* process – not a descriptive, causal process in the sense of ancient Greek philosophy’s efficient causality or Newtonian-style, mechanical push-and-pull, cause-and-effect. I understand normativity as that which concerns how one ought to act, how one is obliged to behave or conduct oneself, what is appropriate or fitting for one to do, and so on. Normative facts, statements, and relationships possess an *oughtiness* that descriptive ones lack. For the Mexica, facts about agents’ interrelationships are simultaneously descriptive and normative (or prescriptive). For example, that Elaine is my mother not only tells me of my descriptive genealogical relationship to her; it also tells me of my normative *macehua*-generated relationship to her (viz. that she merited my birth through labor) and that I am obligated to behave toward her in certain ways. This genealogical fact prescribes how I *ought* to act.⁹

Macehua is a process by which one agent tries to induce another agent(s) into entering into a *normative* relationship, one that binds, obligates, or indebts the intended agent(s) into responding by doing something. The concepts of being bound, obligated, and indebted to another agent are normative. As Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Sandstrom explain, one does not petition another agent to do something; rather, one extends a gift or offering (*tlamanaliztli*) that *obligates* the other to return the gift in the form one seeks (Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2017, 110–12; see also Sandstrom 2008a, 2008b; Köhler 2001; Lupo 1995, 99). The transaction “creates a bond between the two that sets up a flow of power between donor and recipient”, writes Frank Lipp (Lipp 1991, 83; see also Good 1993; Good Eshelman 1996, 2004; Sandstrom 1991, 2003, 2008a, 2008b;

Sandstorm and Sandstrom 2017, unpublished manuscript). In this manner agents seek to “bind” the future actions of other agents within a normatively ordered fabric, according to William Hanks (Hanks 1990, 364). Through acts of meriting-cum-obligating that transmit energy and bind other agents, one attempts to arrange the future behavior of other agents in some desired way.

It appears to be a brute metaphysical fact about Mexica cosmos that a donor’s appropriate gifting and consequent meriting *together with* the recipient’s subsequent accepting of the donor’s gift and becoming obligated to gift back generates a *tertium quid*, viz., a normative relationship that binds donor and recipient – a normative relationship of mutual and cyclical obligation and attendant ‘ought’s’. By accepting the donor’s gift, the recipient binds herself normatively to the donor and becomes obligated to gift back. At the same time, the donor’s original gifting commits her to a normative relationship of mutual gifting with the recipient, since the recipient’s obligatory reciprocal gift, in turn, obligates the donor to gift back to the recipient, and so on, through countless cyclical iterations of reciprocal gift exchanging. (This cycle continues after death, as the living continue to interrelate with the deceased who, despite having died, remain agents.) Humans settling their obligation *vis-a-vis* the creator beings and the creator beings accepting this repayment thus obligates creator beings, in turn, to gift back to humans and so on.

The alternating cycle of human-creator being mutual feeding and eating is therefore not merely a descriptive phenomenon. It is also a *normative* phenomenon since it entails the normative obligation to reciprocate. When conceived in terms of *macehua* (i.e., merit achieved *via* appropriate and respectful gifting and regifting), the dialectic of mutual feeding and eating has both descriptive and normative dimensions. In this manner, the alternating cycle of humans and creators feeding and eating weaves together humans and creators into cyclical normative interrelationships, and in doing so, both weaves the cosmos into a well-ordered fabric and fuels the ongoing becoming of the Fifth Age. It is in this way that life energy keeps circulating throughout the Fifth Age and keeps fueling its continual processing.

In addition to fulfilling their obligation to creator beings for their existence (both ontogenetically *and* phylogenetically), humans also engage in *macehua*-defined activities in hopes of inducing and obligating creator beings into acting in various other ways, e.g., putting an end to drought by bringing rain for their crops. More broadly, in this manner humans attempt to weave the behavior of creator beings, other human beings, and other-than-human beings into a well-ordered, normative, cosmic, social fabric.

The activity of *macehua* consists of giving in order to receive something in return by way of reciprocal gifting. One gifts something of value in order to receive something of value. By virtue of her gifting, the donor

merits or deserves what she seeks from the recipient. This activity is commonly characterized as “giving to receive”, “giving so that you will give”, or “giving to have” (Deloria 1998, 68). The normative principle ordering the relationship between giver and recipient may be expressed as: “To give a gift is to obligate the receiver”,¹⁰ “A gift implies an obligation to return”, and “To accept a gift is to assume an obligation to reciprocate”. By receiving the initial gift, the recipient obligates herself to reciprocate by providing the donor with what she seeks. In receiving a gift, one obligates oneself to the donor.

The *Legend of the Suns* tells us that Quetzalcoatl and other creator beings merited Fifth Age human beings into existence by means of *macehua*-activities that involved expending their life energies (Bierhorst 1992, 145–6). But if so, doesn't this contradict the foregoing analysis of *macehua* according to which *macehua* is an inter-agent or social process that takes place between two (or more) agents? After all, Fifth Age humans did not exist prior to being merited into existence by creator beings and therefore could not have acted as recipient agents in the social relationship of gifter–recipient. So we seem to have a problem. Is the initial creation of humankind a counterexample to the foregoing analysis, an acceptable exception to the foregoing (since perhaps it concerns the unique process of bringing into existence Fifth Age humankind)? Or do we not yet properly understand the bringing into existence of humankind? I suggest the latter.

Quetzalcoatl adds his energy-rich blood upon the ground bones of Fourth Age humans. The stealing of bones, grinding of bones, and giving blood to mix with bone meal count as *tequitl*. But who is the recipient of the energy conveyed *via* this *macehua*-defined transaction? Who is the intended subject of this meriting? I submit the bones of Fourth Age humans. Like other Mesoamericans past and present, the Mexica regarded the bones of the dead not only as alive but as active and agentive – i.e., as agents. Jill McKeever Furst writes, “Skeletal remains were – and in fact continue to be – regarded as the seat of the essential life force and the metaphorical seed from which the individual, whether human or animal or plant, is reborn” (McKeever Furst 1978, 318; see also McKeever Furst 1982). I thus suggest that it is the bones of Fourth Age humans who as agents receive the creator beings' life energy gifts, obligating them to *metamorphosize* into Fifth Age human beings, and that Fifth Age humans are as a consequence born obligated to reciprocate with their own life energy. This interpretation has the additional virtue of upholding the key Mexica metaphysical thesis that there are not absolute creations (beginnings) or absolute destructions (endings), i.e., no creations from nothing or destructions into nothing. There are only *transformations*.¹¹

In the socially woven world of the Fifth Age, successfully attaining one's ends and accomplishing one's goals requires that one enter into *macehua*-defined, normative relationships with other agents that induce their cooperation and co-participation. In order to get things done in the

Fifth Age, humans must engage in such relationships not only with creator beings but also with other humans, deceased ancestors, mountains, rivers, agricultural fields, plants, seeds, houses, cooking pots, fishing nets, and digging sticks. Humans must know *how to get along* with all other actors in order to farm, hunt, fish, spin, weave, cook, rear children, make war, and construct houses, temples, and cities successfully. If one fails to respect one's obligations to others – which Mexica philosophy readily acknowledges as being far too easy for humans to do, likening it to “slipping in mud”¹² – then one's efforts will certainly fail. One's crops fail, one's house collapses, one's food spoils, one's tools break, one's water dries up, one's health declines, and one's children die. Indeed, there is no clear separation between economic, material, utilitarian, religious, and moral dimensions of life, seeing as Mexica philosophy weaves all together into single, holistic fabric. Prudence and morality overlap – if not collapse into one another. It is always prudent to meet one's *macehua*-generated obligations to others. (I argue that these obligations are moral obligations.) In sum, initiating and maintaining well-balanced social relationships is essential to getting things done in the Fifth Age. It is also essential to the continuing existence of the Fifth Age. By such means humans also seek to weave the actions of creator beings, human beings, and other-than-human beings into a well-ordered, Fifth Age, normative social fabric.

Having said this, however, we need to avoid the error of emphasizing the normative and social to the exclusion of the descriptive, causal, and non-social (as Stanley Tambiah [1990, 108] rightly warns). After all, the latter also plays an indispensable role in getting things done in the Fifth Age. For example, successful farming requires that a farmer intelligently and vigorously apply his own life energy when sowing, irrigating, weeding, and harvesting. If he lacks the willingness to work hard or lacks the practical skill needed for successful sowing, weeding, and harvesting, then he will certainly fail – all the gifting in the world notwithstanding. No amount of gifting will induce maize seeds to sow, weed, irrigate, and harvest themselves. The normative-social, on the one hand, and the descriptive-causal-non-social, on the other, are therefore both individually necessary for successfully attaining one's ends in the Fifth Age.

Macehua-defined processes consist of actions that engender relationships defined by *nepantla*-defined cycles of reciprocal offering or gifting that are both *social* and *normative*. Reciprocal feeding-and-eating, for example, weaves together participants into a social fabric and in so doing *socializes* them. It transforms eater and eaten, feeder and fed into *socialized* agents who become creative participants in a *tertium quid*: an *inter-agent or social* relationship characterized by dual unity and unified duality (see previous section). At the same time, reciprocal feeding-and-eating also weaves together participants into a normative fabric and in so doing *norms* them (in the sense of binding them together in a normative relationship). It transforms eater and eaten, or feeder and

fed into *normed* agents who become creative participants in a *tertium quid*: a normative relationship characterized by dual unity and unified duality. More generally, *macehua*-defined processes transform participating agents into *normed beings* who are bound together by normative interrelationships of meriting~being merited, gifting~receiving, and obligation-creating~obligation-incurring. In sum, *macehua*-defined processes engender a quintessentially social and normative relationship of mutual obligatedness – one which is not reducible to either individual agent in isolation.

Reciprocal gifting~receiving, meriting~being merited, and obligation-creating~obligation-incurring function as normative *inamic* pairs alongside descriptive *inamic* pairs such as life~death, male~female, hot~cold, and order~disorder. Reciprocal gifting~receiving and so forth are instances of agonistic *inamic* unity, i.e., the alternating struggle between paired, interdependent, complementary opposites that results in the creation of a *tertium quid*: a unified duality and dual unity. The Fifth Age is therefore characterized by the ceaseless, cyclical processing of descriptive *inamic* partners such as male~female and hot~cold as well as normative *inamic* partners such as gifting~being gifted and meriting~being merited. Humans and creator beings *act* as *agonistic inamic* partners when *enacting* and *participating in* reciprocal processes such as meriting~being merited. Indeed, the continuing reproduction of the Fifth Age is consequent upon humans', creator beings', and other-than-human agents' co-active participation in these *nepantla*-defined processes. Participating in these processes helps maintain the balance of oneself and of others *within* the Fifth Age while also helping to maintain the balance *of* the Fifth Age itself.

The *Legend of the Suns* tells us that humankind is born obligated or indebted to creator beings because creator beings merited its existence. As we saw, creator beings expend effort (*tequitl*) comprised of their own life energy in meriting humankind. By dint of this, humankind is born obligated to reciprocate. Indeed, this condition both defines what it is to be human as well as what distinguishes humans from animals, plants, insects, etc. In short, it expresses the *raison d'être* of humankind (Bierhorst 1992, 146). Animals, plants, birds, and insects, by contrast, apparently fulfill their obligation 'naturally' as it were in the course of their normal daily activities and biological life~death cycles. What's more, their repayment apparently does not suffice to nourish and replenish creator beings for their efforts in creating the Fifth Age. In addition, extrapolating from the *Popol Vuh*, plants, animals, and so forth are unable to worship and thus nourish creator beings properly because they lack the ability to speak properly. Speaking Nahuatl (literally "audible, intelligible, clear, agreeable sound" [Karttunen 1992, 156–7]) enables humans to nourish creator beings with properly spoken words. As we've seen, Fifth Age humans are created expressly for this purpose. They are *ex hypothesi* obligated to provide for and hence participate in the continuing existence

of the creator beings and hence the continuing existence of the Fifth Age. It is this load (*tlamamalli*) that they alone carry. Humans are accordingly aptly characterized as “those made worthy [of existence] by divine sacrifice” (León-Portilla 1993; see also Köhler 2001), “those deserved through sacrifice” (Matos Moctezuma 1995, 42), and “the merited ones” (León-Portilla 2001 [1956], 384).¹³ Finally, satisfying the demands of this collective burden requires both individual and collective action on the part of humans.

In sum, humans are born into and defined by a preexisting web of *normative* relationships with creator beings that entails their normative obligations to those creator beings. Humans are also born into a preexisting web of *descriptive* relationships with creator beings since they depend upon their life energies for their continuing sustenance and survival. The Fifth Age consists of a vast, all-encompassing social fabric of descriptive and normative interrelationships and interdependencies. Creator beings, humans, and other-than-human beings conduct their lives within this normative-cum-descriptive ontological fabric.

The *Legend of the Suns* and other ‘wisdom tellings’ function both descriptively and prescriptively for the Mexica. They tell the Mexica: (1) how they came to exist: by being merited by creator beings; (2) how they continue to exist: by meriting the life energies of the creator beings through fulfilling their obligations to reciprocate with the creator beings; (3) how the Fifth Age continues to exist: by creator beings and humans co-participating in a normative relationship of mutual gifting; (4) that moral obligations such as to respect, care for, nourish, gift-back, and reciprocate with others emerge from relationships such as being mothered, fathered, and provided for by others; (5) who they are: they are those deserved into existence by creators in order to nourish creator beings and consequently those born obligated to creator beings; (6) how they ought to behave toward creator beings: they ought to meet their obligation by reciprocating, honoring, respecting, caring for, and worshipping them, i.e., by recycling life energies; (7) how they ought to go about getting things done in the social world of the Fifth Age: they ought to merit what they seek by inducing the cooperation of other agents by undergoing effort, hardship, and struggle that convey vital energy to other agents. The creators’ originary acts of *macehua* serve as prescriptive models for human behavior, examples to be emulated by humans in bringing about what they seek in everyday life. Here we see, once more, the overlapping (if not blurring together) of morality and prudence. And finally, they tell the Mexica (8) how one ought to act in order to become a well-ordered, well-centered, well-balanced, and morally upright, genuine human being (*neltlacatl*, *nelli tlacatl*) – as opposed to a deranged, disordered, uncentered, wild, and unbalanced anti-social “not-human, inhuman, morally bad human” (*atlacatl*) (Molina 2001, 8r), “bestial human” (*atlacaneci*) (Molina 2001, 8r), “lump of flesh, lump of flesh with two eyes” (*tlacamimil*, *tlacamimilli*

[Sahagún 1953–1982, Bk X, 11) or “a great piece of meat with two eyes” (Sahagún 1953–1982, Bk IV, 95, note no. 4).

Humanness, moral goodness, and participation in reciprocal relationships are isomorphically interrelated for the Mexica. The more one participates in reciprocal relations with others, the more human and more morally upright one becomes. The newborn child is only potentially human or “humanoid”.¹⁴ She is not yet truly or completely human. In order to *become* truly human, she must not only be passively woven into the social fabric of the community by her family by means of such activities as feeding, caregiving, and education, but she must also actively weave herself into the social fabric of the community by participating in reciprocal relationships with others (e.g., beginning at an early age by carrying out age-appropriate chores such as carrying water, cleaning house, and washing clothes; see Sahagún 1953–1982, Bk VI, chs. 30, 37–40; Berdan and Anawalt 1997, folios 56v–63r, Eberl 2013; Joyce 2000; Good Eshelman 2011; Maffie 2019a, 2019b; Pitrou 2016, 2017). Participating in *nepantla*-defined social relations with others contributes to the child’s *transformation* from potential to genuine human. In so doing, she also becomes morally upright. By failing to do so she fails to develop into a true human. Similarly, in order to continue being genuinely human one must continually renew existing and initiate new reciprocal relationships – on pain of slipping into inhumanness. Socially isolated and antisocial individuals are (in varying degrees) poorly woven into the social-cultural-normative fabric and consequently (in varying degrees) neither truly human nor morally good. Humanness occurs only within the dynamic fabric of socially and culturally defined practices of reciprocity. As such, humanness is therefore neither fixed nor given; like existence itself, humanness is dynamic and relational. In brief, the genuine human is the socially acculturated human is the moral human is the reciprocating human. One is defined by one’s activities and one’s social relationships.

The creators’ originary, Fifth Age *macehua*-defined activity serves as the objective, non-anthropocentric source of ethics, ethical obligation, and ethically appropriate behavior in the Fifth Age. Through their *macehua*-defined activities they weave morality into the very fabric of the Fifth Age and weave human beings into that moral fabric. Morality is not imposed upon humans by means of top-down edicts or commandments, nor is it the product of a covenant with creator beings (*contra* Monaghan 2000, 38). The scope of Mexica ethics includes *all* living things and as such is non-anthropocentric. It focuses on maintaining well-ordered and well-balanced transmission of energy throughout the Fifth Age world community and on maintaining a fabric of well-balanced, reciprocal social relationships in the Fifth Age. Since all human activities sooner or later affect other agents and world balance, all fall under the scope of ethics (from how one walks, talks, eats, dresses, sings, dances, and plays music

to how one cooks, farms, weaves, constructs buildings, parents, governs, and makes war). While human well-being is a consequence of humans maintaining well-balanced reciprocal relationships with other members of the Fifth Age moral community, neither human well-being generally nor individual human well-being specifically are the primary aims of Mexica ethics.

What conclusions may we draw from the foregoing regarding the Mexica's understanding of the nature of normativity in the Fifth Age? Normativity is a brute fact about how the Fifth Age works. The creators' originary *macehua*-defined activity serves as the objective, non-anthropocentric source of normativity in the Fifth Age. Their originary *macehua*-defined activity and the relationship it engenders introduce normativity into the Fifth Age. As a species, human beings are therefore born into and defined in terms of a world that is *already* normatively ordered. As we've seen, normative processes contribute vitally to the continuing regeneration and becoming of the Fifth Age. Normativity is neither reducible to nor eliminable in favor of some set of descriptive facts, properties, relationships, or activities. Normative processes, facts, and relationships exist alongside descriptive ones in the Fifth Age – the two do not occupy distinct, non-natural, and natural ontological spheres (respectively).

On this view, normativity is essentially *relational* and *inter-agentive*, like parenthood, sisterhood, and friendship. It is not a property of isolated agents, actions, states of affairs, events, or ends. Normativity is also *non-anthropocentric* in the sense that it is conceptually independent of *human* choices, decisions, interests, conventions, and indeed, even human existence. While human actions may engender and sustain normative relationships, humans are not the sole source of normativity in the world. As we've seen, the actions of other-than-humans also engender normativity. As individuals (ontogenetically), human beings are born into and defined in terms of a world that is *always already* interwoven with normative actions and relationships. Fulfilling their normative obligations to others enables humans to maintain well-balanced life-world

Normativity is consequent upon what agents *do*, i.e., upon the normative activity of *macehua* ('deserving and indebted'). Creator beings weave normativity into the ontological fabric of Fifth Age in the very process of fashioning the Fifth Age – not via commandments, covenants, or edicts. Normativity *emerges* in the creating-meriting of humans. It is bottom-up and immanent – not top-down or transcendent. Human and other-than-humans contribute to weaving the fabric of the Fifth Age by initiating, responding to, and maintaining well-balanced normative relationships. As a consequence, both the weaving of the Fifth Age and the Fifth Age itself qua woven product are normatively ordered and arranged. Creator beings and humans (along with all other Fifth Age other-than-human agents) function as members of a single cosmic fabric of normative interrelationships.

Notes

1. This chapter has benefited from conversations with Alan Sandstrom, Pamela Sandstrom, James Taggart, R. Joe Campbell, Cecelia Klein, Markus Eberl, Laura Speckler Sullivan, John Milhauser, Richard Conway, Julio Covarrubias, and audience members at the Lost Voices at the Foundations of Ethics conference, University of Washington, 2018. Special thanks go to Colin Marshall for his very helpful comments on an early version of this chapter.
2. See Bierhorst (1992), Garibay (ed.) (1965a, 1965b).
3. Seeing as Mexica and Quiché Maya philosophies – like those of other Mesoamerican cultures such as Classic Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Toltec – spring from the common well of Mesoamerican philosophy, we may reasonably expect them to voice similar themes – what López Austin (1997, 5) calls the “hard nucleus” of Mesoamerican myths, beliefs, practices, and values. Despite 500 years of settler colonialism, contemporary indigenous peoples in Mexico continue to draw from this same well in constructing their philosophies. For further defense of this view, see Sandstrom (2017), Good Eshelman (2005, 2011).
4. James Taggart shows how contemporary Nahuatl-speakers understand care, respect, and love in terms of feeding and nurturing (Taggart 2000, 2007, 2017, 2018; see also Good Eshelman 2011).
5. Read (1988, 268) refers to this as the “phagocentric character” of Mexica cosmology. Hunt (1977, 89) characterizes the Fifth Age as a “phagohierarchy”. Unlike Hunt, I do not see this arrangement as hierarchical or asymmetrical since humans and creators depend equally upon consuming one another.
6. See Good Eshelman (2011, 198).
7. *Chihuani* is an agentive noun that derives from *chibua* (“to make something, do something, engender, perform”) (Karttunen 1992, 51).
8. *Tequitl* involves expending life energies (such as *chicahualiztli* and *tonalli*) and includes work, playing music, singing, dancing, ‘praying’, preparing foodstuffs, making pilgrimages, conducting ceremonies, fasting, curing, childrearing, giving advice, and crying (Good Eshelman 2007, 2011; see also Good 1993; Good Eshelman 1996, 2004, 2005; Sandstrom 1991, 2003, 2008a, 2008b; Maffie 2019a, 2019b).
9. As Winona LaDuke (White Earth Ojibwe) remarks, “Genealogical bonds are normative bonds, generating moral responsibilities to the natural world and the living beings it sustains; they give rise to ‘reciprocal relations’ that define ‘responsibilities . . . between humans and the ecosystem’ (quoted in Whitt et al. 2001, 10). LaDuke’s remark sheds light on the kind of view I attribute to the Mexica. I do not mean to suggest that all Native peoples hold identical views.
10. Sandstrom (2003, 61). Sandstrom adds that contemporary Nahuatl-speakers regard “spirit beings as social beings who respond to the normal exchanges that lie at the heart of all human interaction”. See also Sandstrom (1991, 2008a, 2008b), Sandstrom and Sandstrom (2017, unpublished manuscript), Watanabe (2007).
11. See Maffie (2014). One may similarly address the ontogenetic problem that humans are born obligated to creator beings, parents, and ancestors. The Mexica understanding of gifting and obligation differs from that commonly embraced by modern Western liberalism since the latter requires that one actively consent to receiving a gift before incurring an obligation to reciprocate. For defense of the latter, see English (1991).
12. Sahagún (1953–1982, Bk VI, 228); see Taggart (2007) for a contemporary discussion.

13. *Contra* León-Portilla (1963, 111, 1993, 43), the word commonly applied to humans, *macehualtin* ('commoner'), does not mean "those deserved into existence by the gods" (see Karttunen 1992, 127, 130, and Lockhart 2001, 223).
14. Talk of potentiality is mine. I borrow "humanoid" from Cordova (2007, 147).

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