

REVIEW OF *HOW TO BE GRATEFUL: AN AZTEC GUIDE TO THE ART OF GRATITUDE*

Translated and introduced by Frances Karttunen and Camilla Townsend
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Two of the world's foremost Nahuatlists, Frances Karttunen and Camilla Townsend, have teamed up to give us a flawless and highly readable English translation of the mid-sixteenth-century Nahuatl manuscript *How to be Grateful: An Aztec Guide to the Art of Gratitude*. (The original manuscript is untitled. Scholars commonly refer to it as the *Bancroft Dialogues* simply because of its ownership by the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley).¹ Karttunen and Townsend also offer readers an illuminating introduction chock full of details regarding the provenance and social-historical context of the text as well as interpretive tools needed for approaching the text. The English translation comes to roughly 65 pages, making it a very manageable size for teaching. Karttunen and Townsend are to be commended for including the original Nahuatl text side-by-side on opposing pages with their translation, thereby enabling more ambitious readers to compare the two. Nahuatl was the spoken language of the Mexica and of their neighbors in the central highlands of Mexico. Other Nahuatl-speakers included the Tlaxcalteca, Texcoca, Chalca, and Tepaneca. Although ethnically diverse (and often at war with one another), contemporary scholars refer to them generally as "Nahuas" and their shared philosophy as "Nahua Philosophy." Scholars sometimes use the term "Aztec" to refer to the Mexica alone, and other times to refer to all nearby Nahuas living in the central highlands of Mexico.

How to be Grateful makes available to scholars, instructors, and students a mid-sixteenth century, hybrid colonial document that presents indigenous Nahua moral thinking during the early days of *longue durée* of Conquest, colonization, and Christian evangelization. It also promises a glimpse into pre-Conquest Nahua ethics as well. Regarding the latter, however, one must proceed with extreme care

¹ Karttunen and Lockhart (trans & intro), *The Bancroft Dialogues* (1987).

(more anon). *How to Be Grateful*, as Karttunen and Townsend explain in their introduction, was one of a growing number of texts written in Nahuatl that were authored by native Nahuatl-speakers during the mid-sixteenth century. These were the first texts ever to be written in alphabetized Nahuatl seeing as pre-Conquest Nahuatl was not a written language. Although the Mexica and their neighbors had “books” and “writing,” these took the form of highly stylized glyphs, pictographs, and ideograms. Unfortunately, the lion’s share of these were immolated by Christian clerics seeking to extirpate all manner of past idolatry and replace it with Christian doctrine. Nahuatl thus only became lettered at the hands of the Franciscans and their native Christianized Nahuatl-speaking students and assistants, and only then principally—although not exclusively as Karttunen and Townsend -- in the service of imperial control and Hispano-Catholic conversion. Rarely, therefore, do we hear in the early colonial sources pre-Conquest Nahua voices unmediated or unaffected by the interests and consequences of colonization, conversion, policing, and extirpation.

The author of *How to Be Grateful*, who Karttunen and Townsend identify simply as “Pablo of Texcoco,” appears to have been one of a select few young native Nahuatl-speakers schooled by the Franciscans in written Spanish and Nahuatl.² Pablo hailed from Texcoco, a fellow Nahuatl-speaking, city-state (*altepetl*) that was allied with the Mexica and located across the Valley of Mexico on the eastern shores of Lake Texcoco. The denizens of Texcoco were ethnic Alcohua, not ethnic Mexica. Pablo himself lived one or two generations after the fall of Tenochtitlan (1521). The Nahua community in the valley of Mexico included elders who had survived the holocaust of invasion and plague and who retained memories of the pre-Conquest era. And yet, as Karttunen and Townsend explain, younger Nahuas “still lived very much within a [pre-Conquest] Nahua frame of reference” (p. xxix).

As Karttunen and Townsend tell it, Pablo’s text consists of conversations which Pablo “*had heard or read or imagined*” (p. xviii) (emphasis mine). It would seem, therefore, that *How to Be Grateful* should not be approached as a modern-style ethnography but more along the lines of a personal memoir consisting of real and imagined events, conversations, and people. This notwithstanding, the result was a text that “would ultimately convey to future generations the values of his

² For further discussion, see Burkhart (1989); Leeming (2022); Ríos Castaño (2014), and Maffie (2025).

people and the mental world they inhabited, one that revolved around gratitude to past generations and expectations of future ones" (p. xviii). What we find in *How to Be Grateful* are ordinary, daily conversations taking place within and across generations of Nahuas. Karttunen and Townsend point out that these conversations are united by a common thread: viz., gratitude towards others broadly construed as thankfulness, appreciation, and acknowledging the value of others' efforts. Nahua wisdom, they suggest, consists of "understanding oneself as a small part of a greater interdependent whole, not only of a living community but also of a collective constituted across generations" (p. xlvi). Although the conversations found in *How to be Grateful* do not make this clear, this greater living moral community also included what many contemporary anthropologists, Mesoamericanists, and indigenous scholars refer to as "other-than-human persons," i.e., earth, sun, moon, mountains lakes, animals, plants, and human artefacts such as statues, houses, cooking pots, digging sticks, and weapons.

Throughout *How to Be Grateful* we read dialogues in which Nahuatl-speakers express gratitude (as well as courtesy, appreciation, and respect); examples of Nahuatl-speakers demonstrating their gratitude in how they behave, talk, and treat others. What we see are *illustrations* of Nahuatl-speakers speaking to people before and after the Conquest. Conversing with one another in this manner was one of the ways both pre- and post-Conquest Nahuas actively promoted both personal and collective well-being and well-orderedness. The conversations also illustrate a wealth of other indigenous attitudes such as respect and concern for the well-being of others and the community. Accordingly, Karttunen and Townsend might also have appropriately entitled their translation *How to Be Respectful, How to Appreciate Others, or How to Act in a Manner that Produces Social Harmony*.³ We also read a sample of contemporary exhortations to young people regarding how they should behave (pp. 111-115)

What we do *not* find in *How to Be Grateful*, however, are dialogues in the *Socratic* sense of interlocutors exchanging syllogistic arguments "pro" or "con" regarding the moral status of gratitude. What we do *not* find are Western philosophical-style proofs aimed at *demonstrating* the moral value of gratitude and by such means convincing readers that they *ought* to be grateful. What we find instead are dialogues which aim at persuading people to be grateful *by example*. In this regard, then, what we find are dialogues that better resemble the

³ I owe this point to Alex Stehn (Mesoamerican Philosophy Reading Group (3/30/26)).

Analects of Confucius than the dialogues of Plato (e.g., *Gorgias*, *Crito*, or *Theaetetus*).⁴

Did Pablo compose this text for reading by future generations of literate Nahuas as well as Spaniards? Karttunen and Townsend imply as much. They stress that Nahuas such as Pablo did not operate solely as amanuenses to the Franciscans. Nahuas authored their own texts with their own purposes in mind, quite often unbeknownst to their Franciscan and Spanish overseers. Karttunen and Townsend write, "...sometimes they demonstrated clear Christian influence in their writings, but sometimes they simply wrote down what Nahua elders—who spoke no Spanish and knew little of Spanish culture -- wished them to record." *How to Be Grateful*, they conclude "demonstrates that [Pablo] could do both" (p. xxxii). This remark suggests that pre-Christian Nahua, Nahuatlized Christian, and Christianized Nahua speeches, concepts, and words are to be found side by side in the text. Disentangling them from one another (assuming one deems such a project fruitful if even possible) poses daunting challenges to scholars, instructors, and students alike. Karttunen and Townsend later remark (p. 159n18), "The purpose of these dialogues was partly to train clergy, to make them aware of polite forms and help them avoid being the object of mirth." This suggests that Pablo's principal intended audience (at least in the short term) consisted of literate Spaniards participating in the evangelical project and "spiritual conquest" of what is now Mexico. According to Karttunen and Townsend, the fact that the text's dialogical format was wholly alien to indigenous speech genres together with the didactic purpose of the text clearly indicate that "the original impetus" for writing *How to Be Grateful* "came from an outsider" (p. xl).

It seems therefore that Pablo was motivated *simultaneously* by the desire to record indigenous ways of talking and thinking about the world both before and after the Conquest, on the one hand, while also instructing Spanish clergyman how to speak Nahuatl properly so as to more effectively extirpate those very ways of talking and thinking about the world and replace them with new Christian ways, on the other. Karttunen and Townsend are fully aware of this apparent conflict. On the one hand, they write, Pablo's dialogues "serve the purposes of the Christian friars in the late sixteenth-century Mexico," while on the other hand, Pablo's "dialogues capture and convey a Nahua cultural framework" that Pablo

⁴ Greg Moses impressed this point upon me (Mesoamerican Philosophy Reading Group (4/27/26)).

“fervently wished to preserve for posterity” (p. xl). It would seem that these aims are at odds with one another, are they not? Regardless of how we choose to answer this question, the foregoing serves as evidence of Pablo’s own *agency* and *indigenous colonial perspective*—and thus serves as an instance of what Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Nation) calls indigenous “survivance” under colonialization.⁵ After all, Pablo writes what he himself has chosen to write. He is no mute dummy of Spanish ventriloquism.

Let’s take a closer look at the text. Karttunen and Townsend divide the original text into three parts (although no such divisions exist formally in the original). On what basis do they do so? They dub the first (pp. 5-29) and third (pp. 67-129) parts “The Present” seeing as they contain Pablo’s selection of contemporary, mid-sixteenth century dialogues among Nahuatl-speakers (including their ways of acting, behaving, talking, ways of greeting, exchanging pleasantries, of social interaction with others). The second part (pp. 30-65) entitled “The Past,” contains Nahua conversations from the pre-Conquest past. As mentioned above, Pablo’s text contains conversations that he “had heard or read or imagined” as well as selected and edited, and therefore do not amount to what we might think of as objective ethnographic reporting. Part II, according to Karttunen and Townsend, shows clear evidence of Pablo’s having read and drawn from materials culled in the 1550’s by Bernardino de Sahagún’s trilingual (Nahuatl, Latin, Spanish) Nahua assistants as part of Sahagún’s writing of Book VI of his magisterial, twelve-volume, bilingual Spanish-Nahuatl text, *General History of the Things of New Spain* (commonly known as the *Florentine Codex* (1578-79)).⁶

I suggest the first and third parts comprising “The Present” might appropriately be entitled, “A lesson in conversational Nahuatl, or how to speak to your parishioners like a Nahua while still thinking as a Hispano-Christian.” They present Pablo’s selection of proper Nahua ways of talking, greeting, exchanging pleasantries, and social interacting with others *through the normative lens of Christian morality*. What we see here are examples of conversations representative of everyday Nahua social life into which have been *interjected* Christian theological and Christian moral concepts and judgements. We also see Pablo aiming to instruct Spanish clergy on how to use Nahuatl effectively when

⁵ Gerald Robert Vizenor, “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice,” in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. University of Nebraska Press (2008), p. 1.

⁶ For supporting, argument, see Karttunen and Lockhart (trans) (1987), pp. 12-13.

speaking about Christian theology and morality and when passing moral judgments on Nahua behavior. In doing so Pablo employs what Ben Leeming calls “doctrinal discourse,” that is, the “language, both spoken and written, that was developed to communicate the dogmas of Hispano-Catholicism to the Indigenous people of New Spain.”⁷ As Leeming explains, doctrinal Nahuatl discourse consisted of the Nahuatl-Christian lexicon that was used to communicate the central concepts of Christianity to Nahuas. It was “a *bicultural*, hybrid linguistic discourse” based upon “the early intercultural exchanges of the 1520s through the 1540s.”⁸ We also witness clear examples of colonial discourse in Section II, “The Past,” albeit many fewer than in Parts I and III. Consequently, it would be a mistake to entitle Section II as “How Nahuas (really) spoke about things in the past.” Here, too, we see Pablo instructing Franciscan clergymen how to speak effectively to their Nahua parishioners and in so doing, participating in the Hispano-Catholic evangelical project by promoting his fellow Nahuas’ evangelization. If Pablo’s stated aim was to record faithfully how Nahuas spoke in a pre-Christian past, then he spoke disingenuously. Indeed, by importing language taken from contemporary colonial discourse into “The Past,” Pablo would appear to have been aiming at convincing colonial Nahuas that their ancestors employed Christianized Nahuatl concepts. Would they have known that these terms had been repurposed and *resemanticized* as part of the evangelical project?

How shall we understand Pablo’s text? Imagine a continuum of indigenous-authored, hybrid colonial discourse consisting of *Christianized* Nahuatl texts at one end, and *Nahuatlized* Christian texts at the other.⁹ What we find in Parts I and III of *How to Be Grateful* would seem to fall closer to the *Christianized* Nahuatl end of the spectrum, while Part II would seem to fall closer to the spectrum’s center. What’s more, although none of the works on this continuum authored by native Nahuatl-speakers are “authentically” pre-Conquest, one and all are nevertheless “authentically” Nahua, are they not? After the Conquest, we see Nahuas thinking and writing *as* Nahuas. We see active indigenous survivance, not passive

⁷ Ben Leeming, *Aztec Antichrist: Performing the Apocalypse in Early Colonial Mexico*. Louisville: Colorado University Press (2022), p. 92.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 111, 93 (emphasis mine).

⁹ For examples of what I consider to be *Nahuatlized* Christianity, see Leeming (2022) and Louise M. Burkhart, “The Amanuenses Have Appropriated the Text: Interpreting a Nahuatl Song of Santiago” in Brian Sawann (ed), *On the Translation of Native American Literatures* Washington, DC: Smithsonian (1992), pp. 339-355.

indigenous survival, as Vizenor argues.¹⁰ That is, we see Nahuas actively participating in the emergence of a post-Conquest, hybrid world. Needless to add, not all Nahuas participated in this project. Others, especially those in rural areas, resisted colonization and evangelization by continuing their old ways. They, too, were “authentically” Nahua.

Nahua doctrinal discourse, as Leeming explains, was generated in a variety of ways, two of which appear in *How to Be Grateful*. One consisted of creating neologisms in Nahuatl meant to express concepts that had no ready analogue in Nahua culture or language. Leeming cites for example, *cuaatequia*, “to throw water on the head,” for “baptism.” A second way involved repurposing already existing Nahuatl words to mean something new, something Christian. Here Leeming cites the Nahuatl word, *tlatlacolli* (*tlahtlacolli*), which as Louise Burkhart has shown, originally meant “spoilage or damage” but was repurposed to mean “sin.”¹¹ Pre-Conquest Nahua religion and ethics had no concept of sin, be it “original” (the sin of Adam) or “actual” (the sin committed by individuals).¹² (Pre-Conquest Nahua religion and ethics were also non-eschatological and non-soteriological.) As we’ll see below, Pablo uses “*tlatlacolli*” in this Christianized sense in a conversation occurring in “The Present.” The term does not appear in the conversations occurring in “The Past.” “The Past” also happens to be the section modeled after Sahagun’s Book VI, which purports to represent the pre-Conquest Nahua past. As Karttunen and Townsend point out, both Pablo’s “The Past” and Sahagun’s Book VI show irrefutable signs of Franciscan interference—albeit far, far less than other contemporary texts such as fray Juan Bautista Viseo’s *Huehuetlatolli*.¹³ Obviously, the degree of Christian editorial heavy-handed

¹⁰ See Vizenor, *Survivance* (2008).

¹¹ Leeming (2022), p. 93; Louise Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press (1989).

¹² Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth* (1989).

¹³ Karttunen and Townsend (p.146n30) argue that one of the most egregious instances of Franciscan manipulation is fray Juan Bautista Viseo’s *Huehuetlatolli* (Fray Juan Bautista Viseo, *Huehuetlatolli, que contiene las pláticas que los padres y madres hicieron a sus hijos y a sus hijas, y los señores a sus vasallos, todas llenas de doctrina moral y política*, México: s.n. [1601]). Although allegedly based upon fray Andrés de Olmos’ earlier (1547) collection of pre-Conquest Nahua *huehuetlatolli* or “wisdom discourses,” there is no evidence supporting the claim that Bautista’s collection of twenty-nine “wisdom discourses” actually included any of Olmos’ original *huehuetlatolli* (see: Julia Madajczak, “Sebastian Purcell: Discourses of the Elders. The Aztec Huehuetlatolli: A First English Translation,” *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* (2024); Andrew Laird, “Discourse of the Elders: The Aztec Huehuetlatolli: A First English Translation,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 01/14/25). Andrew Laird argues that even Olmos’ original text was already

editing, reconfiguration, and revision vary from one colonial-era text to the next, and even vary within one and the same text (as we see in *How to Be Grateful* and in Sahagún's *Florentine Codex*). Finally, what shall we make of the fact that Pablo restricts the lion's share of his terms taken from Nahua-Christian doctrinal discourse to "the Present"? Is Pablo implicitly (and intentionally?) indicating to his readers that these terms were *not* used in the pre-Conquest "Past," and that they are instead creations of the colonial Christian evangelical project? It is difficult to know. Yet it is important to remember that the conversations of "the Past" are not entirely free of colonial terms either.

So, what exactly are the evaluative terms taken from Christian-Nahuatl doctrinal discourse that Pablo employs in Parts I and III, "The Present"? By way of helping both readers and instructors navigate the hybridity of *How to Be Grateful*, I offer the following discussion of these Nahuatl terms and their Hispano-Christian *resemantization*.

(1) Page 9 of the text reads, "Beware lest you neglect yourselves; beware lest you follow the path of the rabbit, the deer; beware lest you fall from a precipice, lest you fall in the river." The corresponding Nahuatl phrases (p. 8) are: *tochtli*

heavily Christianized (Laird, *Aztec Latin* (2024), p. 181). Dr. Francisco de Loya (diocesan provisor for the indigenous peoples of Mexico City at the time) commented in his 1601 *Aprobación* of Bautista's text that Bautista "added and inserted new, important and necessary contents", with the consequence that "the twenty-nine speeches in Nahuatl and six translations in Spanish conveyed a Christian message and most of them addressed Christian themes (quoted in Laird, *Aztec Latin* (2024), p. 181; cf. also 94-5, 277-78).

Mónica Ruiz Bañuls argues that Bautista's collection essentially reproduces the *Proverbs of Solomon* and *Sirach* (or *Ecclesiasticus*) along the lines of the pedagogical prescriptions of Erasmus of Rotterdam, reflecting the influence of Erasmian humanism upon Franciscans at the time. (Mónica Ruiz Bañuls, *El huehuetlatolli como discurso sincrético en el proceso evangelizador novohispano del siglo xvi. Pról. de fray Francisco Morales OFM* (Rome: Bulzone Editore, 2009; see also Aysha Pollnitz, "Old Words and the New World: Liberal Education and the Franciscans in New Spain, 1536–1601," *Transactions of the Royal History Society*, 29 (2017), 142-46. For discussion of the influence of Erasmus upon Franciscan thought in Spain and Mexico, see Laird, *Aztec Latin* (2024) and Martin Austin Nesvig (editor and translator), *Forgotten Franciscans: Works from an Inquisitional Theorist, a Heretic, and an Inquisitional Deputy* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press (2011)).

As Julia Madajczak remarks, Bautista's huehuetlatolli is "the ideological work" of a sixteenth-century Spanish friar "pursuing an evangelizing and educational effort. Scraps of Nahua philosophy may still be lurking in [these] but the moral values and ideal behaviors they describe have been edited to become acceptable to Christians" (Julia Madajczak, "Sebastian Purcell: Discourses of the Elders. The Aztec Huehuetlatolli: A First English Translation," *Inter-American Journal of Philosophy* (2024)). In sum, it would amount to a grievous error to see Bautista's profoundly Christianized text as a window into pre-conquest Nahua ethics.

("rabbit"), *macatl* ("deer"), *motepexihuiti* ("fall from a precipice"), and *anatoyahuia* ("to throw oneself into a river").¹⁴ As Karttunen and Townsend explain, these were traditional metaphors used for telling people to avoid mischief and not stray from the straight and narrow path. According to Burkhart, the Nahuas conceived deer and rabbits as creatures who lived unbalanced, erratic, unstable, and chaotic lives in disordered places such as wild grasslands.¹⁵ This was contrasted with the well-ordered, stable, balanced, and indeed "civilized" lives that walking upon the straight and narrow path of morality promised human beings. Nahuas conceived straying from the moral path in terms of slipping, faltering, and tripping and in terms of falling off cliffs and falling into torrents.¹⁶ As Burkhart notes, pre-Conquest Nahua religion did not presuppose a Good v. Evil dichotomy. Indeed, Good v. Evil plays absolutely no role whatsoever in Nahua religion, cosmogony, or ethics. (Nor, for that matter, did they talk of "deities" and "gods." One wonders, therefore, are they properly understood as "religion"?)

The Nahua did not conceive the history of the world in terms of a Manichean-style struggle between Good v. Evil or between a benevolent God and malevolent Devil. The notions of good (goodness) per se and evil (badness) per se were wholly absent. As a result, the project of Christianizing the Nahuas involved imposing upon them a normative framework and conceptual superstructure that was entirely alien to them. Powerful other-than-human persons such as Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca acted in both benevolent and malevolent ways towards humans. The pre-Conquest Nahua world was not the simpleminded, black v. white world of Christianity. In sum, talk of deer and rabbit, like talk of falling into precipices or slipping into rivers, were autochthonous metaphors that were adopted and repurposed by colonial-era Christians (be they Spaniard or Nahua) for purposes of conversion.

¹⁴ See *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present). Karttunen and Lockhart translate the passage as follows:

Do not let yourselves go, do not follow wild ways; do not fall into the abyss of sin. Serve your God, your ruler; beware lest you neglect yourselves, beware lest you follow the road of the rabbit, the deer, beware lest you fall from a precipice, beware lest you fall in the river (Karttunen and Lockhart [1987], p. 109)

¹⁵ Louise Burkhart, "Moral Deviance in the Sixteenth Century: The Rabbit and the Deer," *Journal of Latin American Lore* 12 (1986), pp. 107-139.

¹⁶ Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth* (1989).

(2) Page 13 reads: "... and keep yourself so that you do not live badly and in vice." The corresponding Nahuatl passage (p.12) reads "*Titlapiaz* ("watch over yourself," "take care of yourself") *amo titlanempoloz* ("do not waste, do not spoil, do not damage") *ihuan* ("and") *timopiaz* ("guard yourself," "keep yourself") *amo* ("not") *teuhtli* ("dust," "filth") *tlazolli* ("garbage," "filth," "disordered stuff") *ticnemitz* ("to go around," "to live," "to dwell"). We see here an instance of the Hispano-Catholic appropriation and repurposing of pre-Conquest Nahua concepts to mean something new and different. The Christian evangelical enterprise appropriated and repurposed the autochthonous notions of *teuhtli* and *tlazolli* ("dust, filth, stuff out of place, anything disordered, disordering and disorderly") to mean "sinfulness, vice, immorality and moral corruption." They reconfigured *tlazolli* and *teuhtli* to make them fit onto Christianity's dichotomous, Procrustean Bed of Virtue v. Vice, Sacred v. Profane, and Good v. Evil.

Let's focus briefly upon *tlazolli*. *Tlazolli* acted as a basic pollution concept in pre-Conquest Nahua religion and ethics. *Tlazolli* traditionally referred to that which is rotten, worn out, used up, disintegrated, deranged, and decayed: e.g., excrement, vomit, nasal mucus, dirt, muck, slime, rags, and random bits of straw or hair. It referred, in short, to stuff out-of-place (or improperly placed). That which is characterized by *tlazolli* is disordered, deranged, and displaced. As such, it exists at the opposite end of a continuum from that which is clean, well-ordered, well-arranged, well-integrated—that is, stuff-in-place (well-placed or in its place). *Tlazolli* (filth, disorder) was seen as both cause and consequence of human misbehavior. It induced humans to slip into excessive, licentious, and perverse sexual behavior that sullied and besmirched both actors and those around them. *Tlazolli*-causing behavior rendered humans dirtied, damaged, imbalanced, and deranged. This could result in disease—both physical and mental, individual and communal—and even death.

Despite equating *tlazolli* with pollution, filth, and bodily discharges, Nahua religion and ethics nevertheless regarded *tlazolli* as entirely *sacred*. Both the well-ordered and the disordered, the pure and the polluted, and the clean and the dirty functioned as equally essential aspects of the sacred dynamic whole of reality. The sacrality of *tlazolli* is dramatically illustrated by the existence of *Tlazolteotl* (literally, "Sacred *Tlazolli*", more commonly mistranslated as "Goddess of Filth"), a powerful female-gendered, other-than-human person associated with pollution, filth, etc. *Tlazolteotl* played a prominent and essential role in the ecological recycling of the fertilizing life-energy of disorder throughout the Nahua cosmos.

What's more, Nahua religion and ethics knew nothing of the concept of "the profane" as opposed to "the sacred." Everything was sacred, including disordered stuff and disordering behavior. Consequently, in order to make *tlazolli* useful to the Christian evangelical project, *tlazolli* had to be denied its vital, life-renewing role in Nahua metaphysics. It had to be desacralized, reconceived, and shrunk in order to be squeezed into the profane side of Christianity's sacred v. profane dichotomy.

The passage above also equates *tlazolli* and *teuhtli* with vice or the morally vicious. But here, once again, this is a product of Christian handiwork. Pre-Conquest Nahua religion and ethics knew nothing of the concepts of virtue and vice (as conceived by Catholicism), i.e., as mental dispositions inclining one towards good and evil (sin), respectively. Although Nahua ethics obviously praised and condemned human beings and their behavior, it did *not* do so in terms virtue and vice. These are Christian concepts. One should not, therefore, be misled by the fact that Book X of Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* contains well over one hundred and twenty indigenous descriptions of different types of people (or social roles), accompanied by descriptions of good and bad examples of each: e.g., the good ("*virtuosa*") vs. the bad ("*viciosa*") mother, the good ("*virtuoso*") vs. the bad ("*vicioso*") father, child, warrior, commoner, ruler, scribe, featherworker, farmer, cacao seller, and so on.¹⁷ In the "Prologue to Book X", Sahagún explains that he had undertaken this task in order to make available to Catholic preachers ("*predicadores*") the Nahuatl words needed for cultivating Christian virtues and extirpating pagan vices.¹⁸ Towards this end, the *Florentine Codex* contains Nahuatl descriptions alongside Spanish ones, enabling priests to learn the Nahuatl words they needed for preaching, policing, and punishing. Sahagún is less interested in providing an ethnography of Nahua views of good vs. bad parents, children, rulers, etc., than he is in identifying, collating, recording, and highlighting indigenous ways of talking about these behaviors so that this language can be repurposed and redirected by Christian missionaries towards converting indigenous peoples. What's more, as Victoria Ríos Castaño argues Book X's categorization and lists of virtues and vices are ultimately derive from European discourses on virtues and vices, confession manuals, and the like.¹⁹

¹⁷ Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (1953-82), BK X:1-71.

¹⁸ "Book X: The People," in Sahagún, *Florentine Codex* (1953-1982).

¹⁹ Victoria Ríos Castaño, *Translation as Conquest: Sahagún and Universal History of the Things of New Spain* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2014), Ch.3.

(3) Page 89 includes the phrase “with our sins and wrongdoing.” The corresponding Nahuatl occurs on p. 87 and reads “*totlatlacocol*” (“our sin,” “our fault,” “our defect”) and “*totlapilchihual*” (“our wrongdoing,” “our fault,” “our sin”).

(3a) Let’s look first at “*tlatlacocol*.” *Tlatlacocol*” represents another instance of Christian appropriating and repurposing a previously existing Nahuatl word. Stephanie Wood (ed) glosses “*tlatlacocol*” as “mistake, fault, defect, sin, vice, a wrong, a mistake, something evil.”²⁰ “*Tlatlacol*” derives from “*tlacoa*,” meaning “to damage something or to sin.”²¹ As Burkart explains, although pre-Conquest Nahuas used the term to refer “mistakes and misdeeds... it did not have the sense of personal moral responsibility, an affront to God that induces guilt in the offender, that the Christian idea carried.”²² Here, once again, we see a pre-Conquest, autochthonous Nahua notion of error, defect, and fault being reconfigured in alien Christian terms of sin, moral evil, moral fault, corruption, and deviation from the commandments of a single, omnipotent, omniscient, and all benevolent divine legislator. More generally, we see pre-Conquest Nahua ethics being reconfigured as a morality, i.e., a moral system defined in terms of the existence of transcendent, universal moral truths, laws, principles, or commandments; and a moral system that evaluates the rightness vs. wrongness and virtuousness v. viciousness of behavior in terms of those. Pre-Conquest Nahua ethics, however, was not underwritten by this sort of timeless, universal, transcendent metaphysical foundation. Pre-Conquest Nahua ethics eschewed abstract, transcendent universal norms, laws, and commandments. It denied not only the existence of a fundamental metaphysical opposition between good and evil but the very concepts of goodness and evil per se. This does not mean, of course, that there was no such thing as good (*qualli*) and bad (*amo qualli*, literally, “un-good” or “not good”) behavior. Pre-Conquest Nahua ethics evaluated human behavior concretely, contextually, and consequentially in terms of furthering versus occluding human, societal, and cosmic balance. Furthermore, Nahua ethics

²⁰ *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present) <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tlatlacolli> (accessed 6/11/26).

²¹ *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present). <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tlacoa> (accessed 6/11/26).

²² Louise Burkart, “Nahua Moral Philosophy,” <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/home/nahua-moral-philosophy> (accessed 6/12/26).

was entirely “this worldly,” i.e., both “in the world” and “of the world” (to borrow Christian phrases). Ethically right behavior involved the creative negotiation and balancing of competing yet mutually complementary paired forces (such as hot v. cold, dry v. wet, above v. below, and male v. female) as they emerge in the concrete circumstances of our everyday lives.²³ In sum, following Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Gilles Deleuze in this regard, I submit that pre-Conquest Nahua ethics is more appropriately understood as an “ethics” rather than as a “morality.”²⁴ What see happening during the mid-sixteenth century in New Spain with texts such as *How to Be Grateful* is the attempt to *transform an ethics into a morality*, i.e., indigenous Nahua ethics into Judeo-Christian morality.²⁵

(3b) Consider “*totlapilchihual*.” Karttunen and Townsend translate it as “our wrongdoing.” Wood (ed) glosses *tlapilchihual* as “sin, defect, fault, failing.” The related term, *tlapilchihualiztli*, means “a defect; something poorly made or done; a sin; or the act of sinning.” Related, too, is “*pilchihua*,” “to commit a sin, to commit a fault.”²⁶ Here again, we see a normative albeit morally neutral pre-Conquest concept being repurposed as a morally charged, Christian concept.

(4) The phrase “other demons who are false gods” appears on p. 91. The corresponding Nahuatl “*itztlacateteto catca tlatlacatecolo*” appears on page 90. As Karttunen and Townsend explain (p. 156n7), pre-Conquest Nahuas had neither concept of nor word for “devil” or “demon.” Entirely malevolent (like entirely benevolent) beings simply did not exist in the pre-Conquest Nahua universe.

²³ For further discussion, see: James Maffie, “In Huehue Tlamaniliztli and la Verdad: Nahua and European Philosophies in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Colloquios y doctrina cristiana*,” *Inter-America Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2012): 1-33; James Maffie, “The Role of Hardship in Mexica Ethics: Or, Why Being Good Has to Hurt,” *American Philosophical Association Newsletter for Indigenous Philosophy*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2019): 8-17; and James Maffie, “The Nature of Mexica Ethics,” in Colin Marshall (ed), *Comparative Metaethics: Neglected Perspectives on the Foundations of Morality*. London: Routledge (2020), pp. 60-80.

²⁴ The distinction between ethics and morality was introduced by Spinoza, transfigured by Nietzsche in *Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, and then further developed by Giles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, Robert Hurley (trans). (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988) and Giles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Trans. Martin Jouhin (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

²⁵ For further argument, see Maffie, “In Huehue Tlamaniliztli and la Verdad: Nahua and European Philosophies in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s *Colloquios y doctrina cristiana*,” *Inter-America Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2012): 1-33.

²⁶ *Online Nahuatl Dictionary*, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present)
<https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tlapilchihualli>
<https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/pilchihua> (accessed 6/5/26).

Consequently, the Franciscans had to invent a neologism to refer not only to the Christian Devil (who was responsible for indigenous peoples' countless grave errors and confusions) but also to the many "demons" indigenous people falsely worshipped. So, with the help of their Nahuatl assistants, they came up with "*tlacatecolotl*." "Tlacatecolotl" or "human horned owls," combines the words "human being" ("*tlacatl*") and "horned owl" ("*tecolotl*"). Pre-Conquest Nahuas had already associated the horned owl misfortune, adversity, and affliction as well with ill-intentioned humans who possessed the power to assume the guise of animals (such as jaguars)—human beings known to the Spaniards as "sorcerers" and "shape-shifters." During the colonial period, "Tlacatecolotl" was used broadly to refer to anyone engaged in pre-Conquest religious practices.²⁷

Lastly, appearing throughout all three sections of *How to Be Grateful* are numerous pre-Conquest Nahuatl terms or phrases used traditionally to refer to powerful other-than-human persons such as Tezcatlipoca but repurposed by colonial discourse to mean "God" as conceived by Christian theology. Prominent among these is "*totecuiyo*," ("our *tecuhtli* ["our great lord"]") which was repurposed to mean "our great Lord God."²⁸ "*Totecuiyo*" also commonly appears a part of the diphrasing "*in tlacatl in totecuiyo*," meaning "His Person, Our Lord," and as part of the phrase "*totecuiyo in ilhuicahua in tlalticpaque in techihuani in teyocoyani*" ("Our Lord, Master of heaven and earth, progenitor [maker of people], creator of people"). Pablo also employs the repurposed Nahuatl "*ipalnemoani*" ("The Giver of Life")²⁹ and "*in tloque in nahuaque*" ("the All-Pervasive," "Lord of

²⁷ See: Online Nahuatl Dictionary, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present). <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tlacatecolotl> (accessed 6/12/26); Louise M. Burkhart, *Before Guadalupe: The Virgin Mary in Early Colonial Nahuatl Literature*, Institute for Mesoamerican Studies Monograph 13. Albany: University at Albany (2001), p. 26; Louise M. Burkhart, *Holy Wednesday: A Nahuatl Drama from Early Colonial Mexico* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (1996), pp. 183–184; Fr. Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex: General History of the Things of New Spain*, Book 10 -- The People, No. 14, Part 11, eds. and transl. Arthur J. O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (Santa Fe and Salt Lake City: School of American Research and the University of Utah, 1961), p. 31.

²⁸ Online Nahuatl Dictionary, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present) [humanities.org/content/totecuiyo](https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/totecuiyo) (accessed 6/12/26). See also: Katarzyna Granicka, "His Body Will Appear in All of the Mirrors: Explaining Christian Doctrine to the Nahuas in the 1548 *Doctrina Cristiana*," *Religions* 14 (2023). <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/14/12/1487> (accessed 6/10/26).

²⁹ Wood (ed) glosses this as: "'He Through Whom One Lives,' or that which, or by means of which, people live; Giver of Life; a deity that is part of the Ometeotl Complex, primordial parents of deities and humans, creation; also came to be used to refer to the Christian god." Online

the Near, Lord of the Close,” “The Always Imminent Lord”)³⁰ to refer to the god of Christianity.

The foregoing raises a host of intriguing questions. For example, does employing such pre-Conquest Nahuatl terms *Nahuatlize* (indigenize) the god of Christianity, *Christianize* pre-Conquest powerful other-than-human persons such as Tezcatlipoca, or both? What is the result? Does “*in tloque in nahuaque*,” for example, carry a pre-Conquest meaning in “the Past” but Christianized meaning in “The Present”? Does it refer to Tezcatlipoca in “The Past” but to the one true Christian god in “The Present”? How can we be sure which of these Pablo meant? Does Pablo leave the meaning intentionally vague in order to allow future readers (indigenous or European) to think that pre-Conquest Nahuas (in particular, his fellow Texcocans, as opposed to the Mexica) actually had a notion of (and worshipped) the one true Christian god all along (and that Texcocans therefore deserve favored treatment by the Spanish conquerors)?

Finally, the foregoing raises the possibility of a semantic gap between what the a monolingual Spanish priest *believed* he was saying to his Nahua audience when following Pablo’s script, on the one hand, and what his Nahuatl-speaking audience *heard* him saying (i.e., how they understood and interpreted what he said), on the other hand. It would seem we have plenty of reasons to think that these two were often not identical.

In sum, as a hybrid Nahua-Christian text, *How to Be Grateful* raises a panoply of exciting yet also stubbornly thorny questions for scholars, instructors, and students alike. If one is happy with lively classroom debate as I expect most instructors are, then this is your textbook. Impeccable and colloquial English translation, informative introduction, glossary, manageable size, and affordability make this an ideal text for undergraduate and graduate level courses on Nahua (Mexica, Aztec) philosophy, indigenous Mesoamerican philosophy, indigenous philosophies of the Americas, Mexican colonial-era religion, Latin American philosophy, and comparative world philosophy.

Nahuatl Dictionary, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present)

<https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/ipalnemohuani> (accessed 6/12/26).

³⁰ See Online Nahuatl Dictionary, Stephanie Wood, ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present) <https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content/tloque-nahuaque> (accessed 6/12/26). Willard Gingerich glosses it as “The Always Imminent Lord” (Mesoamerican discussion group 6/15/26). Pre-Conquest Nahuas commonly used the phrase to refer to Tezcatlipoca.

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