The religious world view of the Nahuas at the beginning of the sixteenth century is known today because of the work of such investigators as Eduard Seler, Alfonso Caso, Angel María Garibay K., and Justino Fernández. These scholars have reconstructed the Nahuatl Weltanschauung from direct sources, but with different points of view. Alfonso Caso, in particular, has recreated the essence of the Aztec concept of the universe, demonstrating that the various cosmic beliefs of the Nahuas revolved around the great solar myth which enthroned the Aztecs specifically as “the people of the Sun.”

If the Nahuatl wise men had done nothing more than create and preserve a rich mythology, their thought could not be discussed as philosophy. For although myths and beliefs constitute the primary attempts to solve the mysteries of the universe, true philosophic development requires conscious and formal inquiry.

To establish a universally acceptable definition of philosophy would be a formidable task. Genuine philosophizing arises from the explicit perception that problems
The second important idea is contained in the third and fourth lines. Man, a restless being, gives his heart to anything (*timójol ecelemna*), and proceeding without a definite destination or goal (*ahuicpa*), he loses his heart, again in the sense of his dynamic being.

Of urgent importance is the question in the last line, "Can anything be found on earth?" *In tlatlicpac can mach ti itlatiuht?* The poet questions the possibility of finding anything on earth (in *tlatlicpac*) capable of satisfying the heart (the whole dynamic being) of man. This last expression is frequently opposed to the idiomatic complex *topan, mictlan*, "that which is above us" (the world of the gods) and "that which is below us" (the region of the dead)—that is, the unknown. *Tlatlicpac* (that which is on earth) is consequently what is here, what changes, what is visible, what is manifest to the senses. The Nahuas, then, were aware of the problems involved in an attempt to establish values in a changing world.

Other Nahuatl texts in the National Library collection deal more explicitly with the urgency and difficulty of the search. The ambiguity of the final purpose of human action is thus expressed:

Where are we going?
We came only to be born.
Our home is beyond:
In the realm of the defleshed ones.⁴
I suffer:
Happiness, good fortune never comes my way.
Have I come here to struggle in vain?
This is not the place to accomplish things.
Certainly nothing grows green here:
Misfortune opens its blossoms.⁵

The Nahuas sought with equal anxiety an explanation of life and of man’s work, for both were threatened with extermination by the prophesied end of the Fifth Sun, the present age. According to their cosmogonic myth, there had been four historical ages, called Suns—those of earth, wind, fire, and water—and each had been destroyed; the present epoch was that of the Sun of Movement, *Ollintonatiuh*. During this Sun, their elders said, there would be earthquakes and famine, and finally mankind would vanish forever. To the conviction that all things must perish was added a profound doubt about what exists after death:

Do flowers go to the region of the dead?
In the Beyond, are we dead or do we still live?⁶
Where is the source of light, since that which gives life hides itself?⁷

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⁴ *Ibid.*, fol. 3, r. The term *Ximoayan*, “the abode of the defleshed ones,” was one of the Nahuatl expressions for the hereafter.
⁶ *Ibid.*, fol. 61, r.
are innately involved in the essence of things. A sense of wonder and a mistrust of the solutions derived from tradition or custom are requisite to the formulation of rational questions about the origin, the true nature, and the destiny of man and the universe. The philosopher must experience the need to explain to himself why things happen as they do. He directs himself to the meaning and true value of things, seeking the truth about life and life after death, even speculating on the possibility of knowing anything at all of that afterlife where myths and beliefs find their final answers.

Is there, then, proof that such an attitude actually existed among the Nahuas? Were there men who began to look skeptically upon the myths and to try to rationalize them by formulating questions in abstract and universal terms about man and the world? The Nahuatl documents discussed in Appendix I give an affirmative answer. These documents speak for themselves, but, in spite of every attempt at accuracy and fidelity to the original texts, the translations can hardly express the conciseness and subtle shades of meaning characteristic of Nahuatl. An analysis of various compound words for which only the roots are given in the Nahuatl dictionaries of Molina and Rémi Simeón illustrates this elusive quality. Nahuatl, like Greek or German, is replete with long compound forms juxtaposing various roots, prefixes, suffixes, and infixes. Since a complex conceptual relation can thus be expressed in one word, the Nahuatl idiom often becomes a marvel of "linguistic engineering." Nahuatl is, therefore, adequate for the expression of philosophical thought.

The Nahuas first expressed their doubts in the form of short poems. These poems, along with religious songs and epic and erotic poetry, are among the documents in the pre-Columbian collection of Mexican songs of the National Library of Mexico and in certain other collections.

A poem attributed to the famous Nezahualcóyotl questions the possibility of finding satisfaction in earthly things:

What does your mind seek?  
Where is your heart?  
If you give your heart to each and every thing,  
you lead it nowhere: you destroy your heart.  
Can anything be found on earth?³

Three philosophical attitudes expressed in this poem reveal the depth of thought of the Nahuas. The poet first asks himself what the mind and heart can discover of real value here on earth. The mention of the heart in line two alludes to the person considered in a dynamic sense—the being who seeks and desires something. In Nahuatl, yollotl (heart) is derived from the same root as ollin (movement), which may be defined as the dynamic quality inherent in the human being.

² For further discussion of the philosophical implications embodied in the Nahuatl language, see Agustín de la Rosa, Estudio de la Filosofía y Riqueza de la Lengua Mexicana. The most interesting part of this study was also published in a supplement to the journal Et Caetera, No. 1, March, 1950, pp. 1–15.

³ Colección de Cantares Mexicanos (ed. by Antonio Peñafiel), fol. 2.v. The original manuscript of this work is found in the National Library of Mexico.
These questions clearly imply a distrust of the myths concerning the hereafter. Those who questioned themselves in this way were not content with the answers provided by religious and traditional thought. They doubted; they admitted that much had not been adequately explained. They longed to see with greater clarity the real outcome of our lives, and, through this, to learn what importance there might be in this struggle. For if nothing except misfortune “grows green” on earth, and if the beyond is inscrutable, it is appropriate to question the meaning of human life, in which things exist for the moment, only to disappear forever:

Truly do we live on earth?
Not forever on earth; only a little while here.
Although it be jade, it will be broken,
Although it be gold, it is crushed,
Although it be quetzal feather, it is torn asunder.
Not forever on earth; only a little while here.⁸

Life in talticpac is transitory. In the end everything must vanish; even rocks and precious metals will be destroyed. Is there anything, then, that is really stable or true in

⁸ Ibid., fol. 17r. The compiler attributes this passage to King Nezahualcóyotl (1402–72).
this world? Such is the question the Nahuatl poet asks of Ipalnemohuani, the supreme god, the Giver of Life:

Do we speak the truth here, oh Giver of Life?
We merely dream, we only rise from a dream.
All is like a dream . . .
No one speaks here of truth . . .

The recurrent idea that life is a dream appears not only in these songs, but also in the moral exhortations of the Huehuetlatolli, the “discourses of the elders.” With the denial of all stability and permanence in tlalticpac, there arises the profound and anguished question: Has man any hope for escape from the unreality of dreams—from this evanescent world?

Does man possess any truth?
If not, our song is no longer true.
Is anything stable and lasting?
What reaches its aim?10

The word “truth” in Nahuatl, neltiliztli, is derived from the same radical as “root,” tla-nel-huatl, from which, in turn, comes nelhuayotl, “base” or “foundation.” The stem syllable nel has the original connotation of solid firmness or deeply rooted. With this etymology “truth,” for the Nahuas, was to be identified with well-grounded stability. The question, “Does man possess any truth?” should be construed as, “Does he have firm roots?” This idea is amplified by the next question: “Is anything stable and lasting?” which in turn acquires a much fuller meaning when related to the Nahuatl conception of a transitory temporal existence. Thus the Nahuatl concern about whether anything “is true” or “is stable and lasting” actually questioned the possibility of escaping the elusive present and finding something more certain than the emptiness of earthly things. One may speculate on the relationship of this attitude to Western European philosophical thought concerning the substantiality of what exists or appears to exist. The Scholastic philosophers believed that being was sustained by a transcendental principle. Other thinkers have associated reality with a universal immanent substance, as in Hegelian pantheism. Existentialists see reality as “existing,” without any foundation at all. In any case, what is of most interest here is the fact that the Nahuas, facing the unequivocally transitory nature of earthly things, became deeply involved in an attempt to discover a foundation—a true basic principle—for man and the universe. How else to interpret their questions: “What is there that is stable and lasting?” and “Does man possess any truth?”

To appreciate the intellectual progress indicated by such an acute self-questioning about the truth of man, we need merely recall that this same problem, stated in a

9 Ibid., fol. 5,v.; fol. 13,r.
10 Ibid., fol. 10,v.
similar way, did not emerge in Greek philosophy until the time of Socrates and the Sophists, approximately two centuries after Thales of Miletus. They were the first to apply philosophical modes of thought to the subject of man. The Nahuatl enunciation of such questions is sufficient evidence that they were not satisfied by myths or religious doctrines. Their writings evince a vigorous mental development, an interest in the value, stability, or evanescence of things, and a rational vision of man himself as a problem.

That such texts as these—chosen from many which touch upon similar themes—exist does not in itself prove that there were men dedicated to the intellectual formulation of metaphysical questions, or, above all, that there were men who attempted to answer them. Such speculations could easily have had a more or less spontaneous origin independent of the activities of professional wise men or philosophers. So the problem remains: Is there historical evidence that such scholars did exist among the Nahua? The answer provided by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and his native informants will next be considered.

References to the existence of Nahuatl wise men or philosophers occur often in Sahagún's General History. In the introduction to Book I, Sahagún writes: "The knowledge or science of these people has great fame, as will be observed in Book X, Chapter XXIX. It is stated that the first settlers of this land had perfect philosophers and astrologers." And in the prologue to Book VI, which contains his treatment of "the Rhetoric, Moral Philosophy, and Theology of the Mexican People" and is a treasure trove of Nahuatl beliefs and doctrines, Sahagún stresses the authenticity of his data.

In this book it will be seen very clearly that the claims of some rivals that everything written in this History represents lies and inventions are themselves intolerant lies. It would not be within the power of the human mind to invent what is written here, nor could any living man counterfeit the language set forth herein. If we were to question all the prudent and enlightened Indians, they would confirm that this language is indeed that of their ancestors and that it describes their activities and work.12

The original Nahuatl texts, it must be stressed, are not the work of Sahagún, but of his elderly native informants from Tepepulco and Tlateloco. They are describing what they saw and learned as young men in the Calmécac, the institutions of higher learning, before the arrival of the Spaniards, and they speak with authority on these matters.

In the text now to be considered there appears the marginal notation "Sabios o Philosophos [wise men or philosophers]," written in a hand unquestionably that of

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11 Bernardino de Sahagún, Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España, I, 13. All references are to the Acosta Saignes edition.
12 Ibid., I, 445–56.
Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. This is a clear indication that he firmly believed that these lines described the functions and activities of men who deserved to be called philosophers.

1. The wise man: a light, a torch, a stout torch that does not smoke.
2. A perforated mirror, a mirror pierced on both sides.
3. His are the black and red ink, his are the illustrated manuscripts, he studies the illustrated manuscripts.
4. He himself is writing and wisdom.
5. He is the path, the true way for others.
6. He directs people and things; he is a guide in human affairs.
7. The wise man is careful (like a physician) and preserves tradition.
8. His is the handed-down wisdom; he teaches it; he follows the path of truth.
9. Teacher of the truth, he never ceases to admonish.
10. He makes wise the countenances of others; to them he gives a face (a personality); he leads them to develop it.
11. He opens their ears; he enlightens them.
12. He is the teacher of guides; he shows them their path.
13. One depends upon him.
14. He puts a mirror before others; he makes them prudent, cautious; he causes a face (a personality) to appear in them.
15. He attends to things; he regulates their path, he arranges and commands.
16. He applies his light to the world.
17. He knows what is above us (and) in the region of the dead.
18. He is a serious man.
19. Everyone is comforted by him, corrected, taught.
20. Thanks to him people humanize their will and receive a strict education.
21. He comforts the heart, he comforts the people, he helps, gives remedies, heals everyone.13

COMMENTARY:

Line 1: The wise man: a light, a torch, a stout torch that does not smoke. The wise man: this is the usual translation of the Nahuatl word tlamatini.14 The word is derived from the verb mati, “to know.” The suffix ni gives it the substantive function, “he who knows” (Latin sapiens). The prefix tla before the verb form indicates that “things” or “something” is the direct object. So, etymologically considered, tla-mati-ni means “he who knows things” or “he who knows something.” The character of the tlamatini is here conveyed metaphorically by describing him as the light of a stout torch which illumines but does not smoke.

13 Códice Matritense de la Real Academia de la Historia, VIII, the last lines of fol. 118,r. and the first half of fol. 118,v. (All references to Vol. VIII are to the Francisco del Paso y Troncoso facsimile edition.)
14 Alonso de Molina, Vocabulario en lengua castellana y mexicana, fol. 126,r.
Line 2: A perforated mirror, a mirror pierced on both sides.
A mirror pierced on both sides: tézcatl nécuc xapo. The allusion here is to the tlachialoni, a type of scepter with a pierced mirror at one end. This object was part of the equipment of certain gods, who used it to scrutinize the earth and human affairs. Literally, as Sahagún notes, tlachialoni “means a lookout or observatory . . . because one observed or looked through it by means of a hole in the middle.” Applied to the wise man, it conveys the idea that he is himself a medium of contemplation, “a concentrated or focused view of the world and things human.”

Line 3: His are the black and red ink, his are the illustrated manuscripts . . . .
Here the wise man is described as the possessor of the codices and of the Amoxtli, the ancient Nahuatl books of paper made from the bark of the amate (wild fig tree) folded like a screen or an accordion. Only relatively few of these priceless manuscripts escaped destruction at the time of the Conquest. The fact that important philosophical concepts were preserved in these codices is proved by the Codex Vaticanus A 3738, the first “pages” of which contain stylized drawings of the Aztec conception of the supreme principle, the directions of the universe, and so on.

Line 4: He himself is writing and wisdom.
The Nahuatl expression used here, Tlilli Tlapalli, means, literally, that the wise man is black and red ink. But since these colors symbolize throughout Nahuatl mythology the presentation of and knowledge about things difficult to understand and about the hereafter, the obvious metaphorical implication is that the wise man possesses “writing and wisdom.”

Line 8: His is the handed-down wisdom; he teaches it; he follows the path of truth.
His is the handed-down knowledge or wisdom: This thought is expressed in Nahuatl by a single word, machize, derived from machiztli, with the suffix e indicating possession; thus “to him belongs . . . .” The compound loses the ending tli and becomes machiz-e. Machize is derived from the passive form of mati, “to know,” which is macho, “to be known”; accordingly, it may be called “a passive substantive,” wisdom known, handed down from person to person by tradition. Its correlative form is (tla)-matiliztli, wisdom or knowledge in an active sense; that is, acquired knowledge. This gives some indication of the subtlety of Nahuatl thought and of the flexibility of the language which can concisely express such fine shades of meaning.

Line 10: He makes wise the countenances of others; to them he gives a face (a personality); he leads them to develop it.
Three Nahuatl nouns of unsuspected depth enrich the meaning of this line: teixtlamachtiani, teixcuitiani, teixtomani. The word tlamachtiani means “he who teaches or communicates something to someone else.” The particle ix is an indefinite personal prefix indicating the receiver of the action of the verb or noun to which it is attached, “to the others.” Consequently, te-ix-tla-machtiani denotes “he who teaches or communicates something to the countenances of others.” The context shows that the

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15 Sahagún, op. cit., I, 40.
“something” is wisdom, since the wise man has been described as “teacher of the truth,” “the one who teaches truth.”

The other two words, te-ix-cuitiani, “the one who makes others to take a face,” and te-ix-tomani, “the one who makes others to develop a face,” are even more interesting, for they reveal that the tlamatini functioned as a teacher and psychologist. In this passage, as well as in lines 11 and 12, the word ixtlī, “face,” whose root ix occurs in all three compound terms, carries a meaning strikingly similar to that of the Greek word prosopon, “face,” not only in the anatomical sense but also in the metaphorical significance of personality. This figurative meaning of ixtlī appears very often in the discussions and speeches of Sahagún’s Indian informants and in many other Nahuatl documents.

Line 14: He puts a mirror before others; he makes them prudent, cautious; he causes a face (a personality) to appear in them.

Here the tlamatini takes on the role of moralist. In the word tetezcaviani, “he puts a mirror before others,” the basic element is tézcatl, “mirror made of carved and polished stone,” which, in Sahagún’s words, “faithfully reproduced the face.”16 From tézcatl is derived the verb tezcavia, which with the prefix te means “to place a mirror before others.” The ending ni gives the term te-tezca-via-ni the substantive character, “he who places a mirror before others.” The purpose of this action is then clarified: “to make them prudent and careful.” Again there is a similarity to the ethical thought of Greece and India: man needs to have knowledge of himself, the gnóthi seautón or “Know thyself” of Socrates.

Line 16: He applies his light to the world.

The Nahuatl conception of the world was designated by the term cemanáhuac, whose component parts are cem, “entirely,” “completely,” and a-náhuac, “that which is surrounded by water [like a ring].” The world was, then, “that which is entirely surrounded by water.” This idea had a certain geographical confirmation in that the so-called Aztec Empire was bounded on the west by the Pacific and on the east by the Gulf of Mexico, the latter being a veritable Mare Ignotum beyond which remained only the mythological “place of Knowing,” Tlilantlapalan. From the word cemanáhuac and the verb tlavia, “to illumine,” “to apply a light,” comes the composite “to apply a light to the world.” This attributes to the tlamatini the nature of an investigator of the physical world.

Line 17: He knows what is above us (and) in the region of the dead.

Here is another traditional aspect of the wise man: “he knows about that [which is] above us,” topan, and below us, mictlan, “the region of the dead,” that is, the hereafter. The idiomatic complex topan, mictlan carries the meaning, “what is beyond our knowledge, what is in itself beyond experience.” The Nahuatl mind formulated what we today would call a metaphysical order or noumenal world. Its counterpart is the world itself, cemanáhuac, “that which is entirely surrounded by water.”

At other times, as has been noted, a contrast is made between what is “above us, the beyond,” and “what is on the surface of the earth [tlalticpac].” The distinctness of this contrast and its frequent occurrence suggest strongly that, in their own way, the Nahuas had divined the duality or ambivalence of the world—a theme which has so deeply concerned Western European thought since pre-Socratic times. On the one hand, there is that which is visible, immanent, manifold, phenomenal, which for the Nahuas was “that which is upon the earth,” tlalticpac; on the other, there is that which is permanent, metaphysical, transcendental, expressed in Nahuatl as topan, mictlan, “what is above us and below us, in the region of the dead.”

Line 20: Thanks to him the people humanize their will and receive a strict education. Itech netlacaneco, “thanks to him, the people humanize their will”; such is the translation of the Nahuatl word ne-tlacaneco. Neco is the passive voice of nequi, “he desires;” “he is desired”; tlaca is the root of tlacatl, “man,” “human being”; ne is an indefinite personal prefix. The combination of these elements therefore means “the people are loved as human beings;” itech, “thanks to him [the wise man].”

Another function of the tlamatini, then, is to teach the moral quality existing in “that which is human.” In a sense the text points to the existence of a “humanistic” thought among the Nahuas, for it seems to indicate that this “humanizing of the will” was one of the basic tenets of a Nahuatl education.

Summarizing what has been said concerning the whole text, it might be noted that the Nahuatl philosopher was symbolically described putting together the most meaningful aspects of his intrinsic nature: he throws light upon reality; he is a concentrated vision of the world; “his are the illustrated manuscripts”; “he himself is writing and wisdom.” He also appears in his relationship with other men. He is a teacher (temachtiani), “the road”; “his is the handed-down wisdom”; “he is the teacher of the truth and he does not cease to admonish.” Moreover, he performs the duties of a psychologist (teixcuitiani), through whom “the faces of others look wise”; “he opens their ears . . . and is a master of teachers.” That he also functions as a moralist (tetezahuiani) becomes evident in these words: “He puts a mirror before others, he makes them prudent, cautious.” Immediately after this, his interest in examining the physical world is discussed: “cemanahuactlahuiani,” “he attends to things, he applies his light to the world.” One single sentence shows him to be a metaphysician, for he studies that which escapes our finite comprehension—“the region of the dead,” the hereafter. Finally, as though in summation of his qualities and in explanation of his principal goal, we are told that “thanks to him people humanize their will and receive a strict education.”

Thus it seems quite proper to attribute to the wise man—anachronously and by analogy, to be sure—the qualities of those men we designate today as teachers, psychologists, moralists, cosmologists, metaphysicians, and humanists.

A valuable corroboration for this may be found in the prologue to Ixtlilxóchitl’s History of the Chichimec Nation, which contains a résumé of the various types of wise men found in Texcoco. After referring to those who put “in order the events that happened each year,” those “in charge of genealogies” and “of the maps
concerning the boundaries and limits of the cities . . . and the distribution of land,"
those men familiar with the laws, and the various types of priests, Ixtlilxóchitl
writes:

And finally, the philosophers and wise men had charge of recording all the
sciences of which they had knowledge and of which they had achieved under-
standing, and of teaching from memory all the songs that preserved their sciences
and histories. All of this was changed with the downfall of the Kings and Lords
and with the suffering and persecutions of their descendants.\(^{17}\)

The tlamatinime were specifically responsible for composing, painting, know-
ing, and teaching the songs and poems in which they preserved their scientific
knowledge. For the Nahuas, like many other ancient peoples, found in the rhythm of
poetry an easy and accurate way of retaining in their memories what was inscribed
in their books of paintings.

Proof of the existence of philosophers among the Nahuas is also available in
negative form. For, while the Sahagún informants told of the true wise men, they also
mentioned the charlatans, who might indeed be called the sophists—in the pejora-
tive sense—of their time. Here is a Nahuatl depiction of the pseudo wise man:

The false wise man, like an ignorant physician,
a man without understanding, claims to
know about God.
He has his own traditions and keeps them secretly.
He is a boaster, vanity is his.
He makes things complicated; he brags and exaggerates.
He is a river, a rocky hill (a dangerous man).
A lover of darkness and corners,
a mysterious wizard, a magician, a witch doctor,
a public thief, he takes things.
A sorcerer, a destroyer of faces.\(^{18}\)
He leads the people astray;
he causes others to lose their faces.
He hides things, he makes them difficult.
He entangles them with difficulties; he destroys them;
he causes the people to perish; he mysteriously puts an
end to everything.\(^{19}\)

In this description of the amo qualli tlamatini, "the not good wise man," the
contrast between his characteristics and those of the authentic Nahuatl wise man is
clear and unmistakable. One, the good wise man, "to the others he causes to take a

\(^{17}\) Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxóchitl, Obras Históricas, II, 18.

\(^{18}\) Teixcuépane, "he makes the others turn their faces," which, as the following words of the text indicate, means
"he leads astray the people, he confuses them."

\(^{19}\) Códice Mattrídense de la Real Academia, VIII, fol. 188v. This entire passage follows directly the lines about the
wise men or philosophos.
face [teixcuitiani]”; the other, the charlatan, “to the others he causes to lose their faces [teixpoloa].” And while the genuine wise man “attends to things, regulates their path, arranges and puts in order,” the Nahuatl “sophist” “mysteriously destroys everything [tlanahualpoloa].”

They both actively aspire to influence the people: one teaches the truth and thereby “makes wise the countenances of others”; the other, like a witch doctor, distorts truth by “concealing things” and by “causing the people to perish and [by] mysteriously destroying everything.” Such is the testimony of Sahagún’s Indian informants. It shows conclusively that they clearly understood that boastful and vainglorious imposters existed among them—men who contrasted sharply with the real tlamatinime.

The problems of truth and “roots” formulated by the Nahuatl sages were the fruit of rational meditation and embodied doubt concerning the meaning of life and the infinite. This element of doubt attests to a divergence from religious thought. The priest, as such, believes. While he can systematize and study his beliefs, he cannot accept the existence of problems which conflict with the precepts of his religion. Therefore, although the tlamatinime might have belonged originally to the priestly class, as scholars they must have been something more than priests.

To demonstrate the range of their thought, I am quoting below an excerpt from the Colloquies of the Twelve, the origin and historic value of which are more fully discussed in Appendix I. It is sufficient to say here that the particular importance of this document lies in the fact that the Nahuatl wise men are openly and freely discussing and defending their concepts in opposition to the Spanish friars.

Apparently the discussion was provoked by the Spaniards’ missionary activity, when the friars were attempting to indoctrinate a group of the leading figures or lords of recently conquered Tenochtitlan and included condemnation of their ancient indigenous beliefs in the program. It is related that the Indians listened in silence. Only after the friars had finished the lesson did the unexpected occur. One of the principal lords rose and “with every courtesy and civility” cautiously voiced his displeasure at the attack upon customs and beliefs “so highly esteemed by his ancestors.” Confessing that he himself was not a learned man, he nevertheless claimed to have competent teachers—and he enumerated the various categories of priests, astronomers, and wise men—who could refute the arguments of the friars:

1. But, our lords,
2. there are those who guide us;
3. they govern us, they carry us on their backs
4. and instruct us how our gods must be worshiped;
5. whose servants we are, like the tail and the wing;
6. who make offerings, who burn incense,
7. those who receive the title of Quetzalcoatl.
8. The experts, the knowers of speeches and orations,
9. it is their obligation;
10. they busy themselves day and night
11. with the placing of the incense,
12. with their offering,
13. with the thorns to draw their blood.
14. Those who see, those who dedicate themselves to observing
15. the movements and the orderly operations of the heavens,
16. how the night is divided.
17. Those who observe [read] the codices, those who recite [tell what they read].
18. Those who noisily turn the pages of the illustrated manuscripts.
19. Those who have possession of the black and red ink [wisdom] and of that which is pictured;
20. they lead us, they guide us, they tell us the way.
21. Those who arrange how a year falls,
22. how the counting of destinies, and days, and each of the twenty-day months all follow their courses.
23. With this they busy themselves, to them it falls to speak of the gods.20

COMMENTARY:

Lines 2–7: There are those who guide us; they govern us, they carry us on their backs, and instruct us how our gods must be worshiped; whose servants we are, like the tail and the wing: who make offerings, who burn incense—those who receive the title of Quetzalcóatl.

The Códice Matritense de la Academia (folio 119, r. ff.) mentions more than thirty distinct classes of priests. This text from the Colloquies lists briefly the various types and concludes with a reference to the high priests who received the title of Quetzalcóatl. Sahagún also points out more than once that the title of Quetzalcóatl was reserved for high priests or pontiffs. Speaking of a high priest who had addressed a speech to the new king, he says: “The orator who gave this oration was one of the very learned priests and a great rhetorician, one of the three high priests who, as has been said elsewhere, were called Quetzalcóatl.”21

Line 8: The experts, the knowers of speeches and orations. Tlatolmatinime, whose literal meaning is “wise men of the word.” The reference here is also to other priests, for in the following lines a number of the principal tasks of these “knowers of orations” are listed.

Lines 14–15: Those who see, those who dedicate themselves to observing the movements and the orderly operations of the heavens . . .

“The movements and the orderly operations of the heavens”: in iohtlatoquiliz in inematacacholiz in ilhuicatl. Because of the rich ideological meaning of these terms,

20 Walter Lehmann (ed.), Colloquies and Christian Doctrine (Sterbende Götter und Christliche Heilsbotschaft), 96–97. At the beginning of Chapter II, which deals with Nahuatl concepts of God, the complete answer given by the Indian wise men to the Spanish friars is presented.

21 Sahagún, op. cit., I, 498.
a brief analysis is in order. *I-oh-tlatoquiliz* is composed of the prefix *i* ("its"), which refers to *ilhuicatl*, the sky; *oh*, the root of *ohtli*, "road" or "path"; and finally *tlatoquiliztli*, meaning the act of running. The literal interpretation of *i-oh-tlatoquiliz*, then, is "the running along the path of the sky," that is, the courses of the stars in their proper paths. The other term, *inematacacholiz*, is formed by the same prefix *i*, which again refers to the sky; *ne*, another indefinite personal prefix meaning "some"; *ma*, the root of *maii*, "hand"; *taca*, "to put," "to place"; and *choliz-(tli)*, a noun derived from the verb *cho laya*, "to flee." Assembling these elements, the word *i-ne-ma-taca-choliz* may be translated as "he places his hand upon the flight of the sky," or "he measures with his hand the flight or the crossing of the stars." That the Nahuatl astronomers not only observed but also measured the stars and plotted their courses is proved by the exact mathematical calculations involved in the calendar and by the even more obvious fact that the *maii* or hand was a Nahuatl unit of measurement.

*Lines 17–19*: Those who observe [read] the codices, those who recite [tell what they read]. Those who noisily turn the pages of the illustrated manuscripts. Those who have possession of the black and red ink [wisdom] and of that which is pictured . . . . Here is an allusion to one of the chief tasks of the *tlamatinime*: to read and make doctrinal commentaries on the codices. With striking vividness and realism, these men are described as "noisily turning the pages of the manuscripts." Since the long strips of amate paper on which the codices were painted were dry and hard, unfolding them produced a characteristic sound which inevitably became associated with the figure of the wise man.

*Lines 21–22*: Those who arrange how a year falls, how the counting of destinies, and days, and each of the twenty-day months all follow their courses.

This reference is to the priests in charge of the two calendars, the *tonalpohualli* and the *xiuhpohualli*. The former was the sacred almanac or divination calendar. It was used in casting horoscopes and interpreting the influences that affected men's lives from birth to death; it also dealt with the historical events of the world. The *xiuhpohualli* was the solar or year-count calendar. The Nahuatl year was made up of eighteen 20-day months, to which were added 5 additional days—the ominous and unlucky *nemontemi*, or "days left over"—in order to complete the solar year of 365 days. Since these calendars demanded complicated, minutely precise mathematical calculations, it may reasonably be held that the knowledge and calculations of these men came very close to true science.

This description of the *tlamatinime*, like the one given by Sahagún's Indian informants, portrays the wise men as the possessors and interpreters of the illustrated manuscripts, as the guardians of the black and red ink—*in tlilli in tlapalli*, "writing and wisdom." In both documents the wise man appears as a guide, a person who points out the path to others.

Moreover, the sharp distinction made between priests (lines 2 to 13) and wise men (astronomers, guardians of the codices and knowledge, experts in the calendars and in chronology—lines 14 to 23) corroborates the conclusion that both Sahagún's informants and the Indians who responded to the twelve friars possessed something more than mere traditional knowledge of the gods and the rituals.
There were Nahuatl men capable of perceiving problems in the "a-little-while-here" nature of all that exists, in the ephemeral quality of this life, in man's very being, about whose essence so little is known. They recognized problems related to the mysteries of the hereafter—where there may or may not be a new life, with songs and flowers. These men who were given to inner questioning were the same ones who composed the songs where the answers are found. To them belonged the black and red ink—writing and wisdom. They read and wrote the manuscripts. They were the teachers of truth; they "placed mirrors" before their fellow-men to make them prudent and cautious. And, above all, they investigated with insatiable curiosity; they applied their light to the world, to the conditions of tlalticpac. They boldly inquired into "what is above us, and what is below us, the region of the dead."

This is not all. Reflecting upon their own status as wise men and perceiving within themselves an irresistible desire to probe and fathom the unknown, they came to an understanding of what a contemporary Spanish thinker has called "being born condemned to philosophize." According to Indian tradition:

> It is said that prior to his [the tlamatini's] being born, four times from the womb of his mother he disappeared, as if she were no longer pregnant, and then he would reappear. When the child had grown up and had become a youth, his profession and way of acting evidenced themselves. It is said that he would be concerned with the region of the dead [Mictlan-matini], and with that which is above us [Ilhuicac-matini].

With this mental image of the tlamatini or Nahuatl philosopher, we may proceed to a study of his thought and his doctrines based on the texts. With the exception of Nezahualcóyotl and a few other wise kings and poets, there is little to be said about the names and biographical details of the men whose ideas are represented. There are two reasons for this. First, the men who handed down Nahuatl philosophical doctrines were generally not the wise men themselves, but rather former students of the various Calmecac. Although they had been taught the ideas prevalent in their time, they did not usually mention the names of their teachers. More significantly, the elaboration of Nahuatl philosophy, as in the case of Hindu philosophy contained in the Upanishads, cannot be attributed to isolated thinkers but to ancient schools directed by the wise men. It would therefore be a mistake to apply the criteria of the cult of the individual, which prevails in modern Western European culture, to the more socialized efforts of the philosophers of other times and places.

The development of Nahuatl philosophy from Toltec times must be credited to whole generations of wise men, known by ancient tradition as:

> Those who carried with them the black and red ink,
the manuscripts and the pictures,  
wisdom [tlamatiliztli].  
They brought everything with them:  
the song books and the music of the flutes. 23

And perhaps they were the men who conceived in that distant past the legendary symbol of Nahuatl knowledge—the great figure of Quetzalcóatl.

The paucity of biographical data does not mean that the tlamatinime were indifferent to the value of the individual. Many texts indicate that their attitude was quite the opposite. The passage quoted above, for example, describing the mission of the Nahuatl sage or philosopo as teaching men “to have and develop in themselves a face,” voices their interest in eliminating human anonymity, graphically expressed as man’s “lack of face.” The wise men also put “a mirror before their fellow-men,” so that self-knowledge might cause each individual to be prudent and careful.

23 Códice Matritense de la Real Academia, VIII, fol. 192,r.