



The beginnings of philosophy and the principle of fiction

Jörg Ossenkopp, 27.11.2022

Introduction

- It is peak time for calls for narratives and for story-telling. Let all that be subsumed under fiction (where the focus is on how it is told or narrated and less on how it relates to something outside of the story, that includes e.g. poetry)
- Fiction these days is a weapon in our information wars, and can even be the understood as reason for wars (e.g. the fiction of an eurasian Greater Russia)
- At the same time, we are living in a crisis of philosophy, a crisis of truth and a crisis of the sciences
- One could think that philosophy, truth and science on the one hand side and fiction on the other hand side are opposites
- My counter-narrative would be: In this crisis of philosophy going back to the beginnings of philosophy means to discover the structural connection of fiction and philosophy, which can be called the principle of fiction. To elucidate that, I revisit both Ancient Greece and the Aztec around the Spanish Conquest.

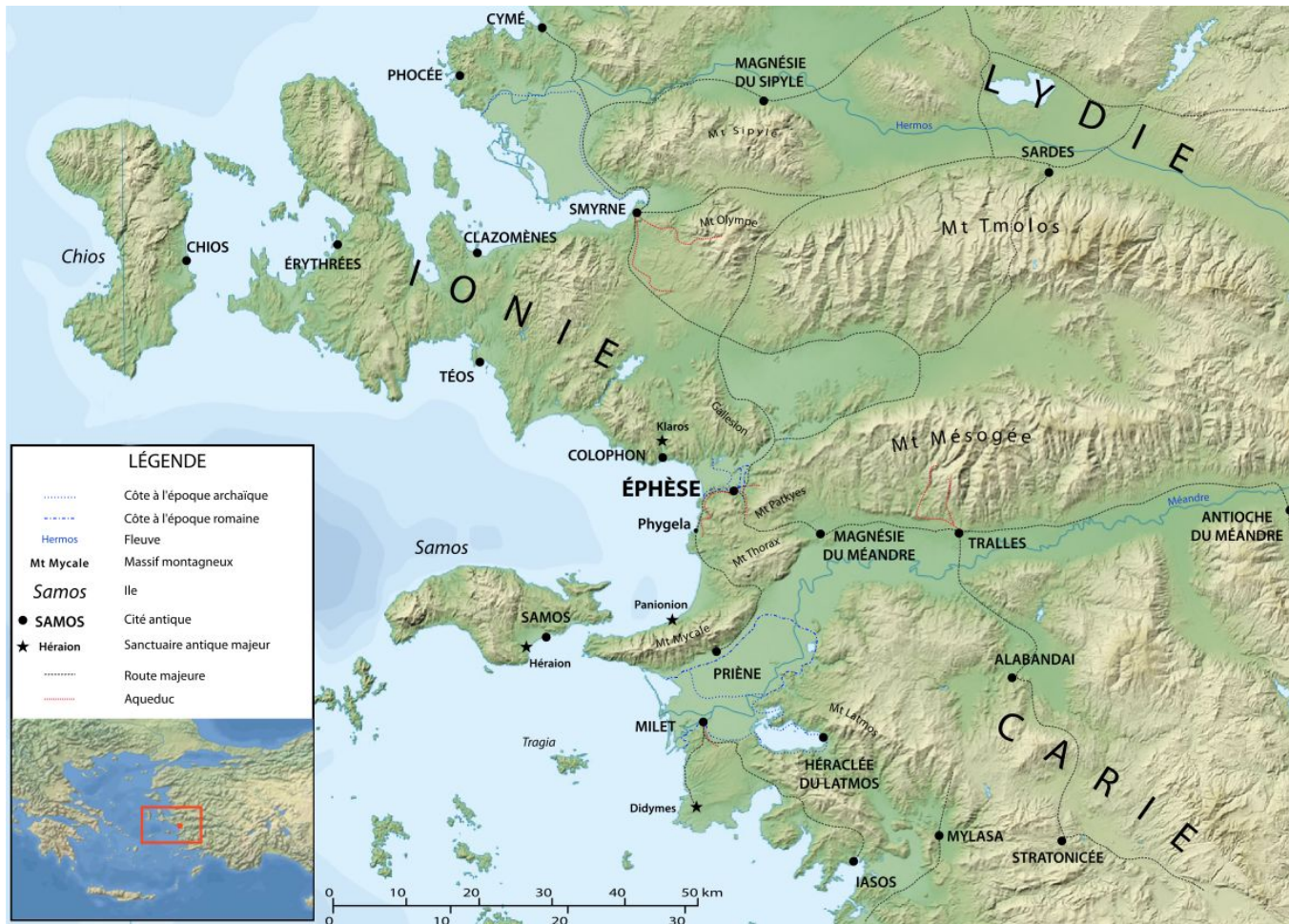
Introduction

- No definition, but a leap into a hermeneutical circle: Philosophy is the ensemble of all philosophical acts
- The paradigmatic philosophical act is the act of questioning in a radical way, not foreclosing answers along the way
- Acts of radical questioning nonetheless are disrupting, Plato calls this rupture wondering, *thaumazein*

One beginning of philosophy in Ancient Greece

The name of philosophy

- If philosophy is the ensemble of philosophical acts, these acts do not need to be understood by the actors themselves as philosophical, as long as they contain e.g. a radical questioning
- These acts do not need to be named by the actors as philosophical
- Philosophy as name probably came up with the Pythagoreans originating on Samos (~540 BC). It is documented the first time in a fragment of Heraklit of Ephesos (~480 BC)
- Even in the most traditional historiography of philosophy it is agreed upon, that philosophy started earlier than that in Ancient Greece



One beginning of philosophy in Ancient Greece

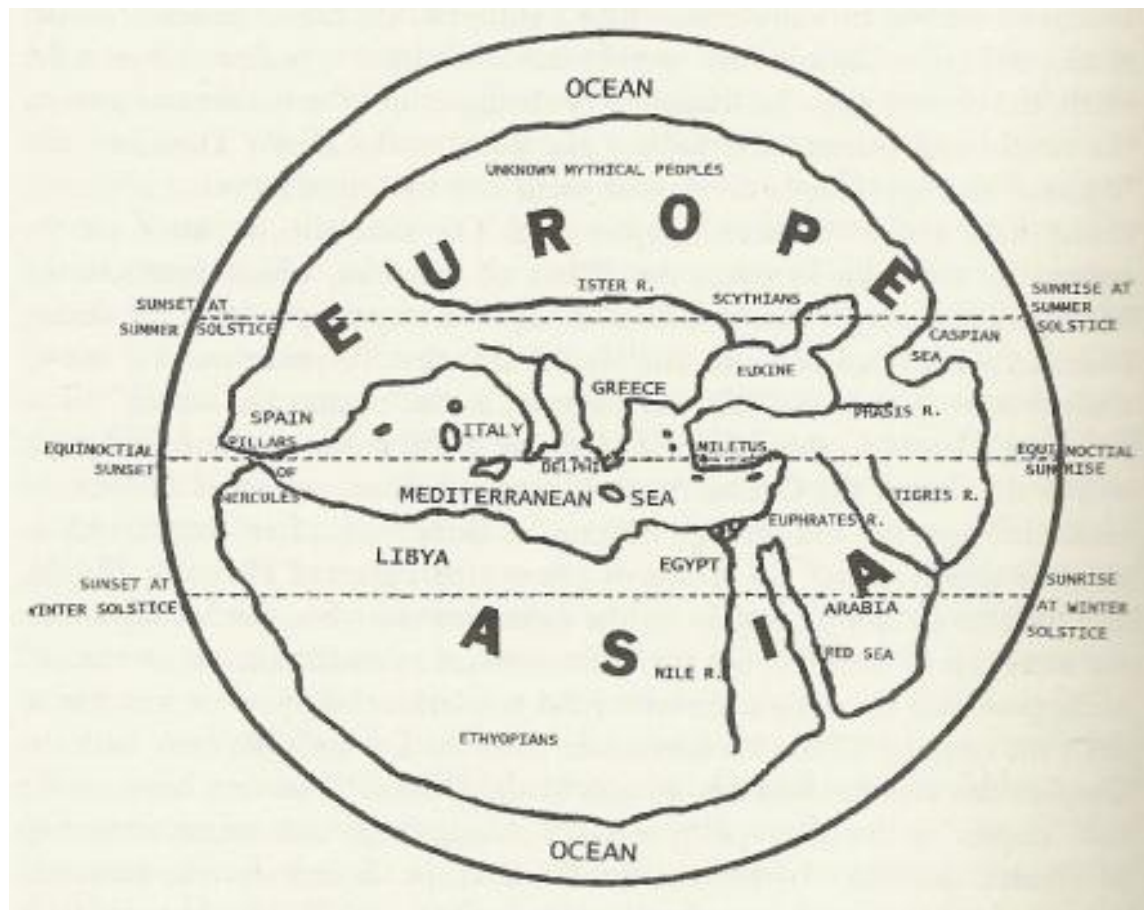
Philosophical acts before the name of philosophy

- Thales of Milet (~590 BC) usually is listed as the first greek philosopher. There is not much firmly known about Thales. Endeavors in Astronomy, Mathematics and Terraforming are attributed to him
- One of the first philosophical acts in Ancient Greece might be when he gazed into the heaven while walking and fell into a pit; inquiring astronomical phenomena and thus disrupting the connection to his immediate surroundings
- He is reported to have questioned existence in a radical way, inquiring about its origins and promoting water as the origin, or principle, of all things
- Thales lived before the first uses of the name philosophy, for all we know, nonetheless he seems to have performed philosophical acts without knowing it and without naming them thus

One beginning of philosophy in Ancient Greece

Consolidations of philosophy

- Philosophical acts consolidate to philosophy when there are cultural institutions or material artifacts
- The knowledge of Thales was not mystical, it was teachable. It is said that Anaximander of Milet (~580 BC) was his pupil, which could be a sign of an institution, a school
- Anaximander's occupation was Mathematics, Astronomy and Geography as well
- Anaximander created artifacts, among them the first known map of the known world, replacing traveler's stories for naval navigation
- He created a gnomon, a sundial indicating not just the time but the time in the solar year as well



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Consolidations of philosophy

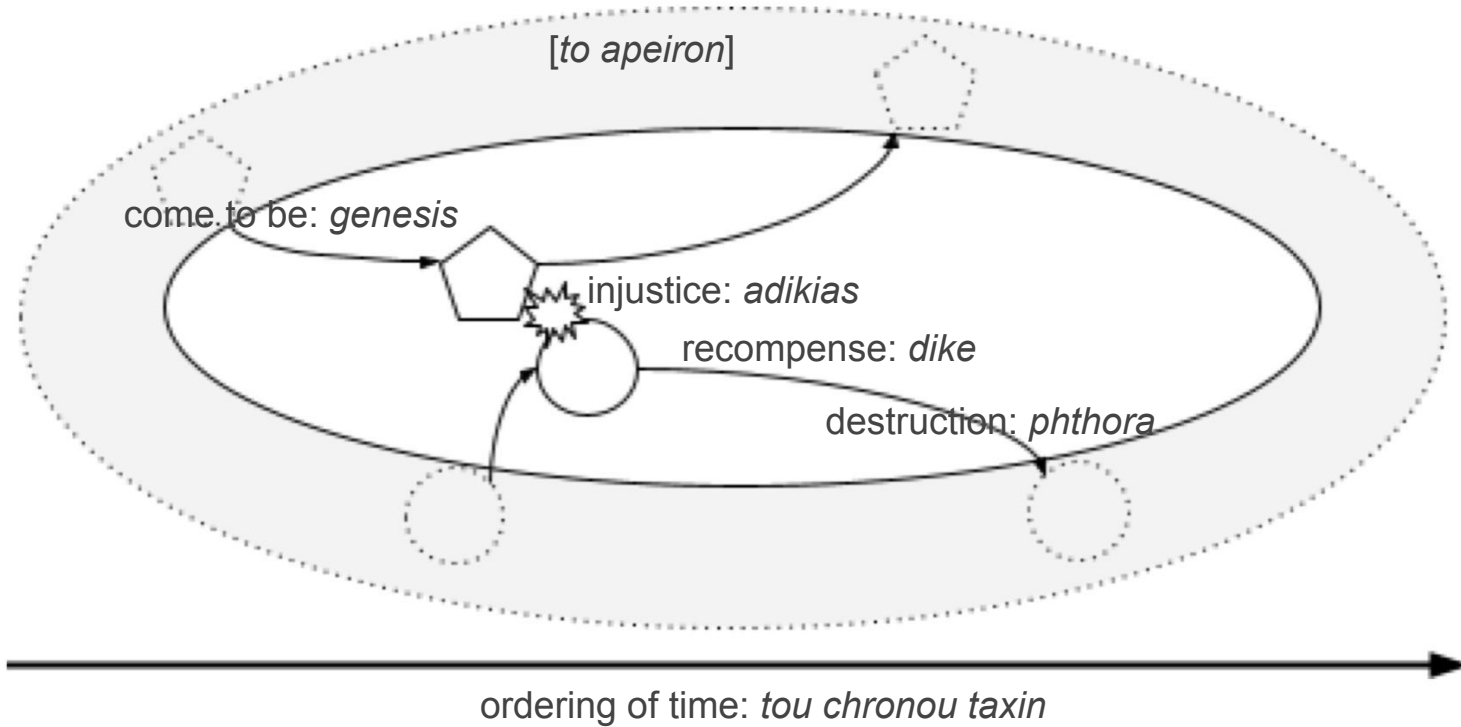
- Anaximander repeated the gesture of his teacher Thales, radically questioning existence, inquiring about its origins but promoted the unbounded, *apeiron*, as *arché*, the origin, or principle, of all things
- The *a-peiron* is the negation and opposite of the measuring and counting Anaximander excelled at. All existing things, measureable and countable, are not only opposed by the immeasurable and uncountable *apeiron*, they are stemming from it
- There is an extant fragment from a book of Anaximander titled “On Nature” in which he elucidates the *apeiron*. It is transmitted via the philosopher Simplicios from late antiquity, and it is the first fragment of philosophy

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The saying of Anaximander

“From what [...] existing objects come to be, into [this] too does their destruction take place, according to what must be: for they give recompense and pay restitution to each other for their injustice according to the ordering of time, expressing it in these rather poetic terms.”

according to what must be: *kata to chreon*



poetic terms: *poietikotera onoma*

One beginning of philosophy in Ancient Greece

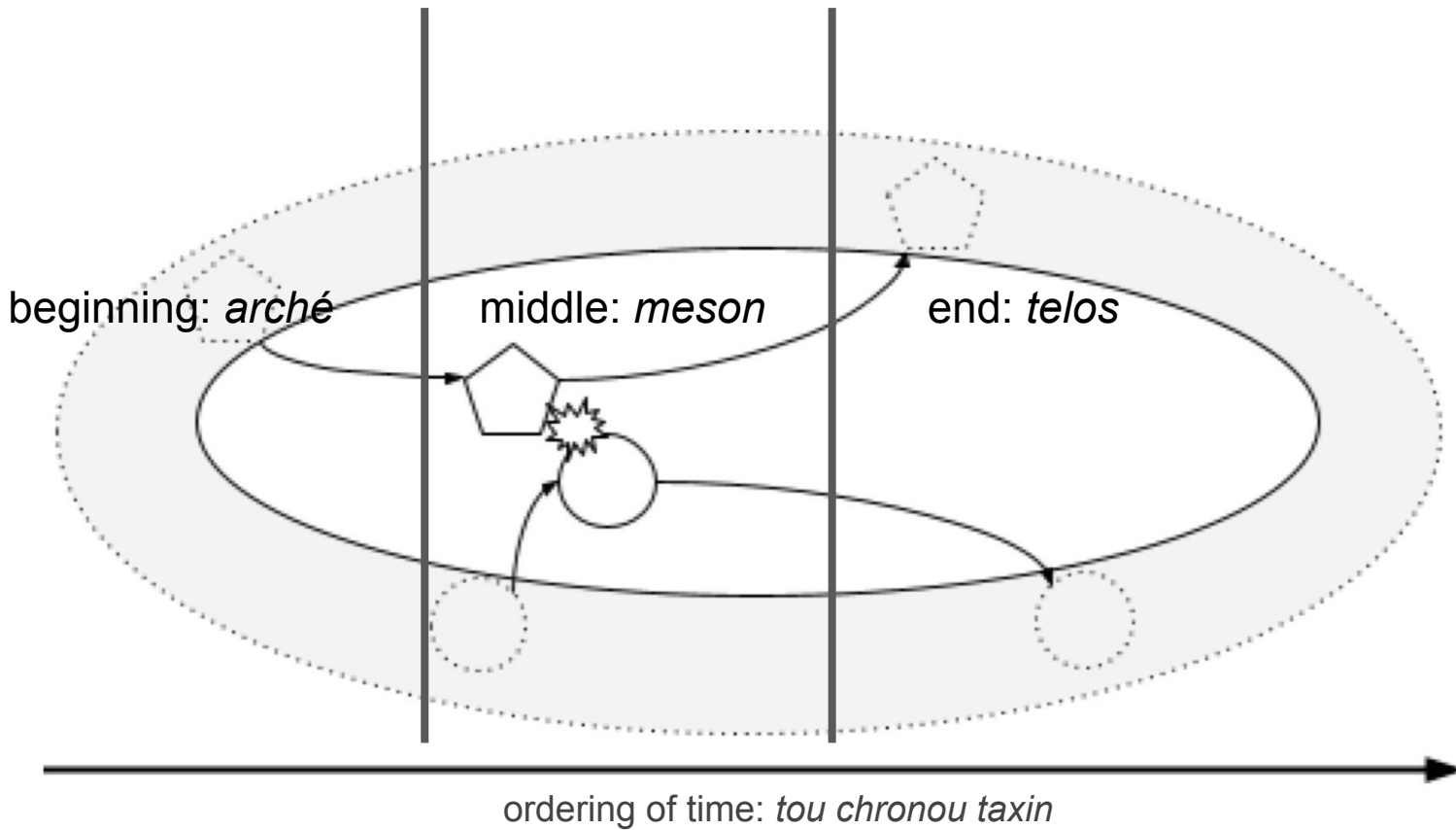
The saying of Anaximander: 1. *arché* as governance

- In classical Greece, *arché* is procedural rulership, compared to *kratos* as the victorious rule and *kuros* the succeeding rule
- justice, *diké*, and injustice, *adikia*, are political as well
- *arché* is generating that which counts and those who count into existence

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The saying of Anaximander: 2. Equality as a result of counting and measuring

- Out of the uncountable and unmeasurable the existing things (*ta onta*) are generated, existence implies countability and measurability, on a cosmological level as well
- Everything is commensurable, there is no intrinsic hierarchy of things and people which count
- Everything and everyone who counts underlie the same necessity: *isonomia*, equality, in front of justice, *dike*



beginning: *arché*

middle: *meson*

end: *telos*

ordering of time: *tou chronou taxin*

poetic terms: *poietikotera onoma*

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The saying of Anaximander: 3. Time

- Everything is part of the same structure of time, political, cosmological and poetical
- All things are ending in destruction, but this structure is not ending
- Aristoteles in his Poetics later described the tripartite beginning, middle and end, or *arché*, *meson*, and *telos* as the structure of fiction

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The saying of Anaximander: 4. Its authority claim

- Previous poets like Homer and Hesiod are claiming their authority from the muses, who are gods
- Even if the *apeiron* has a theological aspect, Anaximander does not claim his authority in his saying from the gods
- Anaximander seems to claim his authority from his alignment with “what must be” and “the order of time”. His authority claim is based on his works with chronometry and measuring nature (*physis*), but transgressing its border into the borderless, transliminal

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Anaximander's *apeiron* and the principle of fiction

- Anaximander uses a negation, *a-peiron*, to indicate the transliminality of his authority claim. It is not inside the borderful, the countable, the measurable, the empirical, it is outside of it and does not refer to it, but generates it
- Aristotle in his *Poetics* divided the poetic from the historical, indicating that the poetic is less distant from the necessary (that which must be) and so the poetic is more philosophical than the more contingent historical
- Simplicios labeled Anaximander's fragment himself as poetic.
- Expressing it non-negative, the *arché* of the *apeiron* is Anaximander's specific form of the principle of fiction

One beginning of philosophy in Ancient Greece

Consequences

- A monistic understanding of a single Greek beginning of philosophy, which had to wield the name of philosophy, *philosophia*, was a source of philosophical eurocentrism, and was pitted against the value of other cultural traditions which had nothing named *philosophia*.
- Having established the greek beginnings of philosophy without the name, against monism, opens up the possibility for a cosmopolitic and pluralist philosophy
- Anaximander's *apeiron* already is cosmopolitic in a special sense: it combines cosmological elements with political ones
- Principles usually have a generative and an epistemological aspect. The principle of fiction generates that which counts politically as well. Epistemologically, the principle of fiction enables to see this generative, producing effect.

Another beginning of philosophy with the Aztecs

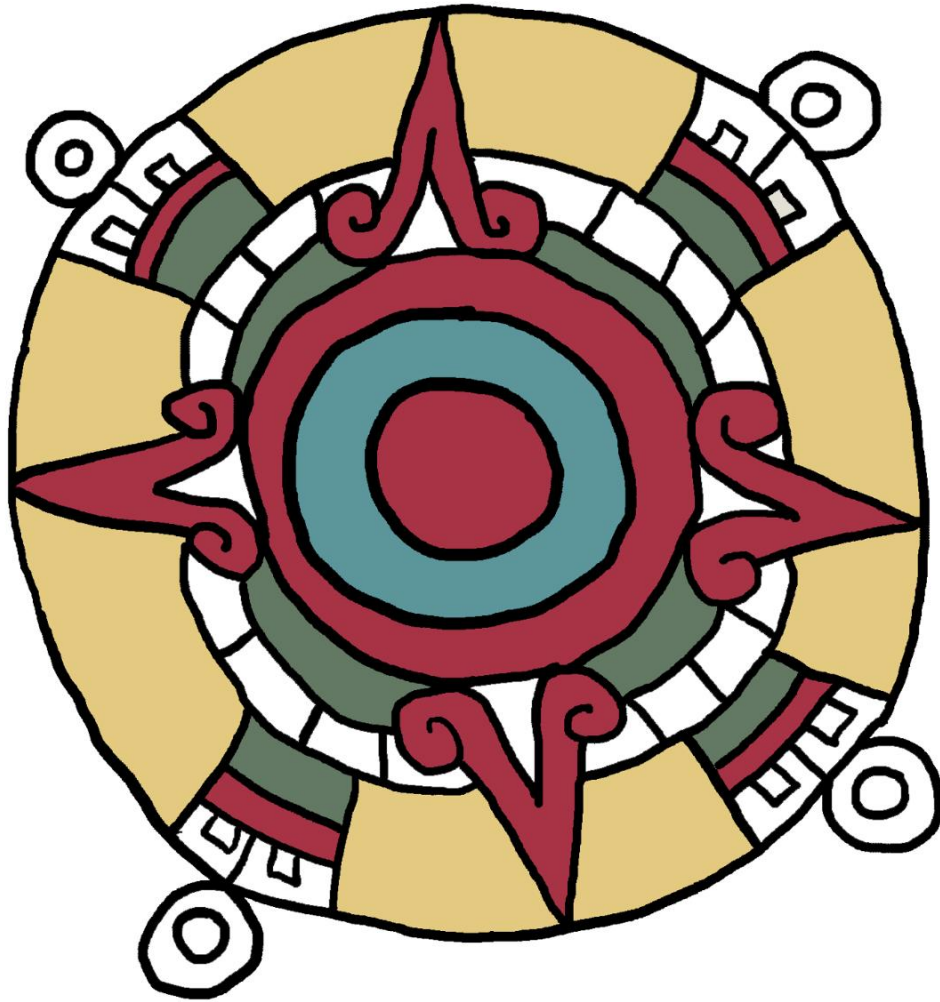
Consolidations of philosophy

- Whom we call the Aztecs since the late 18th century called themselves the Nahua or Mexica, so we comply with them and call them Nahua
- Counting Nahua thought as philosophy challenges many conceptions of philosophy, e.g. philosophy as footnotes to Plato (Whitehead), or philosophy as the rational, systematic analysis of concepts
- We have Nahua artifacts witnessing their astronomical endeavours, the 3,5m 24t Sunstone (~1510 AD) and nine books having escaped the Conquest bonfires with Nahua glyph language containing historical, calendric and religious knowledge
- Nahua songs from an oral tradition of several centuries have been recorded in the decades after the Conquest (~1550 AD)



East

Sunstone, ~1510
(Tenochtitlan/Mexico City)



Glyph *tonatiuh*, sun
(Codex Mendoza, 1541)

Another beginning of philosophy with the Nahua

Radical questioning as indication for philosophy

- A song which is ascribed to Tlaltecatzin (He of the earth or soil) of Cuauhchinanco (~1370 AD) might be the most ancient of the songs written down by native experts of Nahua songs after ~1530 AD
- In it, Tlaltecatzin asks, what happens after he dies, “Is anyone there who will become the owner of my heart (*yollotl*)?”
- This is radical, because this song covers the topic of impermanence and evanescence on the level of one’s own *yollotl*, which for Nahua is the philosophical organ par excellence. It is radical, because it does not lead to an easy answer, the answer is suspended and connected implicitly to a much larger frame.

Glyph *yollotl*, heart
(Codex Mendoza, 1541)



Another beginning of philosophy with the Nahuatl

Yollotl in Tlaltecatzin's song

- Tlaltecatzin creates a paradox in his song
- He says “my heart is a precious reality”
- The heart is at the same time an organ, an object and the site of one's feelings and personality
- He opens up the alternative between owning and lending
- The heart is not lent, as it is that with which you most intimately rejoice and feel, questioning that is radical
- Your heart is not really owned as well, your connection to it is too fragile
- Nothing is permanent on earth, *tlalticpac*, there is no permanent model, *machiyotl*

Another beginning of philosophy with the Nahuatl

Yolli and Nahuatl philosophers

- In the ethnographic history of Bernardino de Sahagun (1569), *tlatlaminime* are mentioned, keepers of the Nahuatl books, which he translates as “philosophers”
- Tlatlaltzin was a *tlatlaminini*, and he was *tlatlatoani*, speaker or ruler, of Cuauhchinanco
- The *tlatlaminime* usually were teachers in Nahuatl schools, *calmecac*, and taught Religion, Astronomy, History, and Poetry, in Nahuatl *in xochitl in cuicatl*, directly translated as “flowers and songs”, i.e. a *difrasismo*.
- Especially Poetry, *in xochitl in cuicatl*, was said to enable pupils to develop “face and heart”, *in ixtli in yolli*, in its performance
- We see that in Tlatlaltzin’s song the most frequently occurring noun stems are *yol*, heart and *xochi*, flower. The close connection of heart and flowers is captured in Tlatlaltzin’s expression directly following on his radical question inquiring the owner of the heart, as a non-answer: “Alone I must go, my heart covered with flowers”

Another beginning of philosophy with the Nahua

Yollotl and the solar world process, *teotl*

- Poetry, flowers and songs, develops the heart in the act of performance, when Tlaltecatzin will leave the world, his heart will be covered with flowers
- In the start, lines 3 and 4 of Tlaltecatzin's song render themselves as "with flowers is painted The Giver of life, the community"
- Painting here refers to the books of the *tlamatinime*, flowers refer to poetry, as the heart is covered with flowers, The Giver of life, *Ipalnemoa*, the personalized *teotl*, is painted with them
- Song transcends the everyday and establishes the connection to the divine, *teotl*
- The *teotl* is creating the world like painting and like poetry, it is created itself by itself in that way as well. In performing songs, the heart gets into connection with the solar divine and through that connection accepts the evanescence of the world process and its part in it, it develops itself on the grounds of *teotl* in unison with the way the *teotl* creates itself.

Glyph *teotl*, divine
(Codex Mendoza, 1541)



Another beginning of philosophy with the Nahua

In xochitl in cuicatl and the principle of fiction

- Epistemologically, the solar world process *teotl* is accessible via poetry, *in xochitl in cuicatl*.
- *Teotl* is generating itself and the evanescent world both using and producing flowers and songs, *in xochitl in cuicatl*
- Principles have this dual aspect, generative and epistemological, Nahua poetry has this epistemological and generative aspect, so this is the form the principle of fiction takes in this Nahua beginning of philosophy

Another beginning of philosophy with the Nahua

The principle of fiction as subversive resistance

- The Spanish Conquest of the Nahua was a genocidal war, trying to destroy the indigenous culture, actually killing an estimated 90% of the Nahua in order to create a cosmopolitical empire by force.
- Displaying the Nahua as primitive and without philosophy was one of the rationalizations of the inhuman exploitation of the indigenous peoples and the forceful extraction of precious metals under inhuman conditions
- The Nahua songs have a strong aesthetic attraction, the surviving Nahua could not be stopped to perform them, as Sahagun reported, so a cosmopolitical syncretism started, merging the Spanish christian tradition with the Nahua songs and cosmovision, merging Christian saints with Nahua gods
- The asthetic regenerating force of the songs stayed a subversive resistance to their and their culture's devaluation through the centuries, still are in the US and in Mexico. Listening to Tlaltecatzin as a philosophical voice in its own right is a way to renew a diverse and inclusive cosmopolitanism, conscious of its own exploitative past and trying to redeem it and to learn.

The beginnings of philosophy and the principle of fiction

Anaximander and the Nahua

- From Anaximander on, the concept of *arché*, or principle, is part and parcel of European philosophy
- Using principle as an interpretational tool to understand Nahua has a certain element of European prerequisites, at least Nahua scholars from the Americas and from Europe are doing it as well
- Principles are useful for a common interpretational framework; you have to be careful that you get the different contextualizations right, i.e. without interpretational overreach
- The principle of fiction allows a pluralistic ordering, without devaluations, with the goal of a truly cosmopolitical philosophy

Closing remarks

- Story-telling, narratives, poetry and song, all of which is subsumed here under fiction, will stay strong both in its generative force, generating ever new political schisms in order to create or strengthen communities. This is the principle of fiction. Keeping up with its epistemological aspects means to not foreclose and simply to listen.
- The crisis of philosophy, truth and the sciences might be the result of not recognizing the principle of fiction. Of ascribing the generative force of the principle of fiction to truth and the sciences on their own, or of the devaluing of the principle of fiction, as it can be scary from time to time.
- This presentation is a work in progress. Sorely and obviously missing are voices from Africa and Asia, this will be a task for the future.



Thank you!

Appendix: Another beginning of philosophy with the Nahuatl

Song of Tlaltecatzin, Cuauhchinanco

I come to guard the mountain,
somewhere is its story;
with flowers is painted
The Giver of life, the community.
You have been left in your home,
you, Tlaltecatzin,
you suspire there, you speak.

I alone I sing,
to Him, who is my God,
in our place where the lords command,
the flowering chocolate drink is foaming,
the one which intoxicates men with its flowers.

I yearn,
my heart has tasted it,
my heart has been inebriated,
my heart knows it.

O red songbird of the supple neck!
Fresh and burning,
you show your garland of flowers.
You, mother!
Sweet woman,
precious flower of toasted maize,
you only lend yourself,
you will be abandoned,
you will have to go away,
there will be a defleshing.

Here you have come,
before the lords,
you marvelous being,
in an erect pose.
Upon the mat of yellow and blue feathers,
there you stand proudly.
But, precious flower of toasted maize,
You only lend yourself,
soon you must be abandoned,
you will have to go away,
there will be a defleshing.
The flowering chocolate drink is foaming,
the flower of tobacco is passed round,
if my heart would taste them,
my life would become inebriated.
But here
on the earth,
you, O lords, O princes,
if my heart would taste them,
my life would become inebriated.
I only suffer and say:
may I not go
to the place of the fleshless.
My heart is a precious reality,
I am, I am only a singer
but golden flowers I carry,
I have to abandon them,
I only look at my house,
the flowers remain there.

Perhaps big jades,
broad plumages,
are my price?
Alone I must go,
sometime it will be,
alone I must go,
I will perish.
I abandon myself,
O my God, Giver of life,
I say: let me go,
my body will be a funerary bundle,
I a singer,
let thus it be.

Is anyone there who will become the owner of my heart?
Alone I must go,
my heart covered with flowers,
Quetzal feathers,
precious jades,
so perfectly polished,
will be destroyed.
Nowhere on earth is their model,
thus let it be,
but let it be without violence.