

Don Juan's Reality Check: Seeing the World in *Journey to Ixtlan*

Kirkland Eater

Humanities 104

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1 May 2024

Carlos Castaneda published his third book, *Journey to Ixtlan*, in 1972. Throughout his book, Castaneda follows his account of apprenticeship to the Yaqui shaman, don Juan Matus. Initially, Carlos comes with the intent to study psychotropic plants, but the shaman pushes him to study under him as an apprentice.¹ Castaneda frequently attempted to rationalise the inexplicable phenomena he observed using don Juan's methods, which whittled at his certainty in the world he believed to inhabit. This progression portrays the titular *Journey to Ixtlan*, derived from don Juan's friend, don Genaro. Ixtlan as a location represents a point of origin that don Genaro perpetually feels pulled to, away from everywhere else.² In stopping the world, don Juan explains, the sorcerer (or man of knowledge) experiences the real world. This experience causes the sorcerer to continually journey towards the 'Ixtlan,' a metaphor for the real world, leaving the rest of reality and society ephemeral.³ Experiencing the erosion of Castaneda's own confidence in the scientific method and rationality raises questions about the relationship between the subjective experience and the objective reality. Due to Carlos's progression in scepticism, *Journey to Ixtlan* has a strong affinity with phenomenological and humanistically psychological traditions, conceptualised and advanced by scholars like Dr. Ernest Berger and Dr. Phia Salter. This analysis will engage Castaneda's work with these frameworks to demonstrate their relationship, offering Castaneda's account as a portrayal of multiple realities and the contemporary discussion of their intentionality. Readers will gain insight into the construction of their experience and the implications entailed by using Castaneda's work as a foundation for understanding the world.

¹ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 10.

² Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*: 201.

³ Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan*: 200.

Introducing the principle of social construction lays the cornerstones to connect Castaneda's work with the theories of understanding reality, as it pertains to how the subject of experience observes the world. Susanne Langer, a philosopher roughly contemporary with Castaneda, sought to define humans as having an "inherent and irrepressible urge to symbolise."⁴ Langer's conception of the human mind has the capacity to conceptualise objects without needing them present.⁵ According to her, the human mind acts as a transformer, as the 'current' of experience undergoes a change in character. The mind therefore actively assigns meaning to the sense perceptions. Langer cites the human need to organise and make meaning of all data as the reason for this assignment.⁶

Later scholars, such as Peter Berger and Ernest Becker developed this theory of mind into a theory of instinctual nature. These thinkers characterise humans as lacking the same instinctual structures as nonhuman animals, without the same sort of set actions that perpetually drive animals.⁷ Becker advances this theory by observing this inferior set of instincts prevents humans from perceiving an inherent direction to life, and therefore a person must act and fabricate meaning in the world. By observing that nonhuman animals have very firm instinctual response patterns, and characterising these instincts as reactions to aspects of reality, Becker asserts that these instincts give way to a perpetually galvanised existence with pre-programmed meaning.⁸ Humans, because they lack this framework, must create their own symbolic meaning to bring meaning to reality. In doing so, humans inadvertently form societal beliefs. A few years later, two phenomenological thinkers Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner engaged in analysing the

⁴ Larry Baron, "Slipping in the Crack Between Worlds: Carlos Castaneda, Alfred Schutz, and the Theory of Multiple Realities." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 23, no. 2 (1983): 54.

⁵ Baron, 54.

⁶ Baron, 54.

⁷ Baron, 55.

⁸ Baron, 55.

nature of marriage. In their analysis, the two found that interpersonal relationships like marriage provide meaning and stability to the world for those involved, which Berger later refined and broadened to describe the mutual influence that social relations have on humans.⁹ He stated that the credibility each person assigns to their meanings varies based on social support.¹⁰ According to Berger, “put simply, obtain our notions about the world originally from other human beings, and these notions maintain plausibility because others continue to affirm them... in conversations, in the broadest sense of the word, that we build up and keep going our view of the world.”¹¹

In Berger’s concept of social support, a person’s beliefs or notions implicitly have a very tangible effect on the world, which bridges to Dr. Phia Salter’s concept of intentional worlds and how Castaneda grappled with escaping his structured reality. The theory of intentional worlds stems from Richard Schweder’s claim that “psyche or culture ... make each other up,” which he defined as *mutual composition*.¹² Dr. Salter, a psychologist engaged with culture and society, proposed that much of the research investigating cultural psychology has overemphasised the “cultural constitution of psyche.”¹³ In her study, Dr. Salter prefaces in explaining that the neglected direction reveals that “the everyday ecology of the human organism is ... not just natural, but instead emerges through everyday actions as people realise.”¹⁴ These everyday actions include how people interface with objects and each other. Dr. Salter offers the following definition for intentional worlds as “human artefactual worlds populated with products of our

⁹ Larry Baron, “Slipping in the Crack Between Worlds: Carlos Castaneda, Alfred Schutz, and the Theory of Multiple Realities.” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 23, no. 2 (1983): 56.

¹⁰ Baron, “Slipping in the Crack Between Worlds,” 56.

¹¹ Baron, “Slipping in the Crack Between Worlds,” 56.

¹² Phia S. Salter and Glenn Adams, “On the Intentionality of Cultural Products: Representations of Black History As Psychological Affordances,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, no. 28 (2016): 2.

¹³ Salter and Adams, “On the Intentionality of Cultural Products,” 2.

¹⁴ Salter and Adams, “On the Intentionality of Cultural Products,” 2.

own design.”¹⁵ The objects that humans create or influence do not have an inherent neutrality, according to her, because people infuse objects with beliefs.¹⁶ This concept echoes Berger’s idea for the necessity of assigning meaning, as the immediate meaning-assignment symbolically imbues the object with some belief. Not only do these intentional worlds show prejudice, but they importantly “afford some forms of experience, constrain other forms, and direct action toward particular ends.”¹⁷

Intentional worlds direct action particularly towards the preservation of the intentional world. Castaneda’s own struggle with his desires to rationalise and categorise indicate this. In the chapter “Becoming Accessible to Power” in *Ixtlan*, Castaneda and don Juan share a dialogue about the nature of dreams. Carlos complains to don Juan about a sequence of nightmares, and don Juan insists that Castaneda should believe that his dreams do not differ from reality, as he does.¹⁸ Castaneda’s inability to believe that don Juan truly sees his dreams and reality as equal recalls back to the concept that intentional worlds affirm their plausibility through artefacts. A lack of tangible objects renders dreams less plausible as reality. Castaneda’s stubborn refusal to see the mundane reality as equally instantiated as what he refers to as dreams arises due to a lack of negotiability for the dreaming world. Ernst Berger stated that “society is a product of the man and the man is a product of society,” which shares a similarity with the mutual composition principle.¹⁹ Schweder’s mutual composition deals with the broader influencing power of culture. Both of these theories reflect Castaneda’s disbelief by implying an inconsistency in negotiation.

¹⁵ Phia S. Salter and Glenn Adams, “On the Intentionality of Cultural Products: Representations of Black History As Psychological Affordances,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, no. 28 (2016): 2.

¹⁶ Salter and Adams, “On the Intentionality of Cultural Products,” 2.

¹⁷ Salter and Adams, “On the Intentionality of Cultural Products,” 2.

¹⁸ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 79.

¹⁹ Larry Baron, “Slipping in the Crack Between Worlds: Carlos Castaneda, Alfred Schutz, and the Theory of Multiple Realities,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 23, no. 2 (1983): 57.

The former theory states that a person's understanding of reality constantly relies on the ongoing process of negotiating and renegotiating with society, in verbal and nonverbal communication.²⁰

The reality of the self evolves as a result of the reactions around the person. In the real world, friend-groups of children will develop similar social behaviours, as their negotiation occurred most frequently with a set group of others.²¹ Dr. Salter's intentional world theory pertains more closely to cultural elements. The self in this theory experiences constant bombardment of cultural signals from the world around them, including advertisements, buildings, and generally most objects that one interacts with on an everyday basis, which all carry symbolic meaning.²² Jerry Gill, an interdisciplinary philosopher studying Castaneda, believes that reality's structure "is a function of interpretation."²³ This starts to loop back to the concept of necessary symbols. People imbue objects with inherent meaning just by harbouring and expressing beliefs about them. Regarding don Juan's stance on dreams, intentional worlds and self-society composition both would make dreams often fail to seem real to an ordinary person, for a lack of consistency between dreams, as well as the 'objects' within them.

The distinction that don Juan's perspective on dreaming, given the context of the importance of negotiation for the intentional and mutually composite world, allows for a reader to grasp what he refers to as 'power'. Later, in the same chapter, don Juan states that ordinary

²⁰ Larry Baron, "Slipping in the Crack Between Worlds: Carlos Castaneda, Alfred Schutz, and the Theory of Multiple Realities." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 23, no. 2 (1983): 57.

²¹ Lee Jussim and D. Wayne Osgood, "Influence and Similarity Among Friends: An Integrative Model Applied to Incarcerated Adolescents," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (1989): 99-101.

²² Phia S. Salter and Glenn Adams, "On the Intentionality of Cultural Products: Representations of Black History As Psychological Affordances," *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, no. 28 (2016): 2.

²³ Jerry H Gill, "The World of Don Juan: Some Reflections." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 57, no. 4 (1974): 390.

people do not seek the manipulation of power that the warrior does, and thus they only dream.²⁴

A warrior does two things differently regarding dreaming, given this information. They treat dreams and reality in the same way, and they seek power through that treatment. However, this does not entail that they treat the dream *like* reality, and don Juan corrects Castaneda on this error, saying that a warrior “doesn’t take anything as anything else.”²⁵ Using the schema provided by Dr. Salter and Berger, one can understand that the warrior does not accept dreams as reality, but rather *rejects reality as reality*. This allows the warrior to treat dreams and reality as the same. In not accepting reality, one gains literal ‘power,’ or even freedom. The power don Juan refers to always exerts upon the individual that accepts mundane reality because it enforces that same reality. Negotiations and ideas of other people compose this power, acting similar to a contract. The agreement of reality established by and amongst multiple people inherently requires a tradeoff of ‘power’ in the sense that to participate in their shared reality, one must allow the society’s beliefs to have influence, or *power*, over them.

Rejecting mundane reality poses a complex challenge. Provided Dr. Salter and Berger’s elements that advocate for reality, it would at the least require a fluid existence that gets minimally informed by the aspects of negotiation. According to the two theories, negotiations occur between the self and other people, objects, as well as ideas. Unsurprisingly, don Juan focuses on each of these in Castaneda’s apprenticeship. In the chapter named “Erasing Personal History,” the shaman attempts to explain to a confused Castaneda the value of erasing personal history, as one of his first lessons. Carlos repeatedly pries at the names of don Juan’s family, to no avail, and sceptical in both the ability and value of the process.²⁶ Castaneda asks him next

²⁴ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 79.

²⁵ Castaneda, 79.

²⁶ Castaneda, 14.

how he could erase his history, given Carlos already knew don Juan's Yaqui history. However, don Juan responds with the fact that Castaneda does not truly know that or not, and "only when someone else knows that does it become personal history".²⁷ This history, as a collection of facts about a person, represents the same sort of power that serves as the currency of negotiation. Don Juan confirms this later in the same dialogue, proposing that Castaneda's friends and family had irrevocable power over him, and that power allows others to tie him down with their thoughts.²⁸ Recalling social construction, the underlying unifier to the intentional world and self-society composition theories, indicates that reification of a person by others occurs as a result of the others acting on the beliefs about that person. Don Juan teaches Carlos that concession of power spawns when that same reification leads to some sort of expectation, predictability, or specific attitude that others will harbour, most specifically towards a person's actions.²⁹ Concretely, if the rest of a society has already negotiated that one trait a person has makes it embarrassing for them to do some action, then naturally they will experience embarrassment for doing that thing because they understand the cues and contract that they negotiated. Thus, in retaining facts about oneself, a person can maintain and reclaim the power lost through social negotiation.

The next of don Juan's lessons in the restoration of power takes place in a chapter called "Disrupting the Routines of Life."³⁰ The chapter opens with don Juan showing Castaneda rodents they will hunt, placing emphasis on the observation of their patterns and predicting when the creatures would stop moving in order to kill them.³¹ In themselves, the rodents illustrate how patterns or habits take away one's own power. They moved predictably enough that don Juan

²⁷ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 15-16.

²⁸ Castaneda, 17.

²⁹ Castaneda, 16.

³⁰ Castaneda, 63.

³¹ Castaneda, 63.

could consistently scare them into a waiting trap. Shortly after they begin constructing traps, don Juan insists that Castaneda does not develop patterns in hunting, and as he does regardless, don Juan frightens him out of it with unpredictable actions such as loudly whistling, spinning, and wailing.³² He explains that Castaneda perpetually acted on routine, programmed to worry about lunch at noon while satiated, and sleeping at night even while not tired. Castaneda's routines weaken his hunting, as a result of trying to use a routine to predict the rodent's routine.³³ In doing so, Castaneda himself also acted as prey by adopting the routine of the rodents in order to predict where they would go.³⁴ Not unlike the rodents, a person loses power in the social-intentional world when they gain predictability, as they unknowingly telegraph their actions to others.

Later on in the book, returning to the other half of the chapter "Becoming Accessible to Power," don Juan and Castaneda walk through the desert in search of "the spirit of the water hole."³⁵ Suddenly, the shaman stops Carlos and insists that he look at a distant object, which Castaneda identifies as a dog. Don Juan responds that it appeared "too large for a dog," and rejected Carlos's guesses of a wolf and cow as well. However, the shaman agrees when Carlos says that he sees a dying animal, still unsure what kind of animal.³⁶ Don Juan then warns Castaneda that a dying animal would likely leap on them in its death throes. Soon, Castaneda heard a shriek, a growl, and don Juan shouted to run. Shortly after, the two decided the animal likely died. When Castaneda and don Juan returned to investigate, Carlos realised what they thought looked like a dying animal turned out to be just a burned, windblown twig.³⁷

³² Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 64.

³³ Castaneda, 64-65.

³⁴ Castaneda, 65.

³⁵ Castaneda, 85.

³⁶ Castaneda, 86.

³⁷ Castaneda, 87.

After he explained this realisation to the shaman, don Juan silenced him, telling him he wasted “a beautiful power,” and triumph in that situation would come from following the power until the world ceased.³⁸ Recalling the earlier portion of the chapter, don Juan said that Castaneda's manipulation of power would punctuate the start of the process of graduating to the status of warrior in his apprenticeship. In misinterpreting the twig as an animal, Carlos exercised power by allowing it to exist as something incoherent in his reality. He arrived at the conclusion of its incoherence from the ‘un-negotiation’ with don Juan, who thwarted each of his attempts to rationalise the object, which allows the reader to understand what gaining power could look like. The reader may even reasonably assume that don Juan shrieked and growled, given that his earlier ‘un-negotiation’ seemed to direct Castaneda in the way that optical illusions allow a person to swap between seeing two arrangements. As a result, Carlos gained the power or freedom to interpret his situation as something fantastic, and the situation also enabled him to view and judge his own subjectivity of interpretation.

The disconnect of misperceiving the animal compared to actually viewing it up close phenomenologically engaged Castaneda in allowing him to evaluate his own perception of the world. Phenomenologists and Castaneda scholars also propose that this form of introspection only exists as utter subjectivity, attained through the understandings of subjectivity as a universal character and an epochē.³⁹ Epochē, a philosophical term referring to the suspension of judgement on elements typically associated with the thing under analysis, allows for the observer to make observations *on the nature of observation*.⁴⁰ Comparisons between don Juan's beliefs

³⁸ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 88.

³⁹ Palmer, Donald D, “Carlos Castaneda and the Phenomenology of Sorcery.” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 4, no. 2 (1977): 36–45.

⁴⁰ Donald D Palmer, “Phenomenology of Sorcery.”: 38.

and these sensory-reflection converge upon similar points. Don Juan's related teachings discussed the 'tonal' and 'nagual,' the material and immaterial worlds, respectively. The self interfaces with the tonal world through sensory organs, but the nagual requires different sorts of perception.⁴¹ The nagual mirrors the 'objective' substance in that it exists underneath layers of perception, noumenal in that the typical means of sensory perception act to obscure it.⁴² Scholars of music, such as Heidi von Gunden, assert that don Juan also subtly influenced Castaneda aurally, in instructing him to divide his attention when listening to many sounds. Gunden's description of these sensory changes state that Castaneda hears "sound without direction," the result of introspection on the subjective nature of his hearing.⁴³ The repeated uncanny difficulty that don Juan has in describing "stopping the world" also implicitly supports meta-observation, as people use language to describe what they perceive and think. If don Juan could perfectly characterise "stopping the world", it would come as a surprise, because language fails to even describe basic emotions or flavours.⁴⁴

In the same chapter, Don Juan clarifies his description of "stopping the world," which fits within the form of phenomenological analysis. According to the shaman, "stopping the world" entailed seeking power and collapsing reality.⁴⁵ This technique has much in common with phenomenological introspection, both dismantling structures from the action of considering the

⁴¹ Anton F Koote, "A Critical Look at Castaneda's Critics." *The Journal of Mind and Behaviour* 5, no. 1 (1984): 100-101.

⁴² Donald L Williams, "Border Crossings: a Psychological Perspective on Carlos Castaneda's Path of Knowledge." Toronto: Inner City Books, 1981.

⁴³ Heidi von Gunden, "Carlos Castaneda and Don Juan—Lessons in Sonic Awareness." *College Music Symposium* 20, no. 2 (1980): 123.

⁴⁴ Jerry H Gill, "The World of Don Juan: Some Reflections." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 57, no. 4 (1974): 393-394.

⁴⁵ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 88.

properties of one's experience. The reader witnesses this technique applied through Castaneda near the end, when he ventured to the mountains on his own and observed a beetle:

The sun was already low. My eyes were tired. I looked down at the ground and caught sight of a large black beetle. It came out from behind a small rock, pushing a ball of dung twice its size. I followed its movements for a long time. The insect seemed unconcerned with my presence and kept on pushing its load over rocks, roots, depressions, and protuberances on the ground. For all I knew, the beetle was not aware that I was there. The thought occurred to me that I could not possibly be sure that the insect was not aware of me; that thought triggered a series of rational evaluations about the nature of the insect's world as opposed to mine. The beetle and I were in the same world and obviously the world was not the same for both of us. I became immersed in watching it and marvelled at the gigantic strength it needed to carry its load over rocks and down crevices.

I observed the insect for a long time and then I became aware of the silence around me. (Castaneda, 1972, 190).

Here, Castaneda inadvertently begins to reflect on his perceptions on the beetle as well as its own perceptions, once again reminiscent of gazing upon one's own subjectivity. On the fifth line, Carlos remarks that for all he knew, the beetle did not know of his presence. That remark signifies the initial step into "stopping the world," with the stripping of interpretation, relegating it to "for all he knew," which brings his world and the beetle's world closer. The next sentence further delineates where Castaneda and the beetle's worlds diverge, with Castaneda realising that he could never know with certainty about the insect's consciousness and perceptions, but he understood that they inhabited the same world that they both observed differently. Slightly later,

he finds the same beetle, and noted that it seemed aware of his presence, akin to his awareness of his death. Castaneda's sensation of relatability to the awareness of a looming presence indicates that he has finally succeeded in "stopping the world," in gaining awareness of a universal and objective characteristic of subjectivity.⁴⁶

Carlos Castaneda's *Journey to Ixtlan* presents a system for the understanding of reality, when read under the lens of phenomenology and humanistic-psychology. This system's novel focus on "stopping the world" corroborates with theories of social construction and intentional worlds by illustrating them through events in the book. A person who does "stop the world" can thus reclaim and manipulate power. *Journey to Ixtlan* investigates the latent power dispersed in ordinary schematics of reality. Don Juan's concept of power relies on the negotiation of meaning. This power holds nuance. Participants of intentional worlds or socially constructed ones can easily fall victim to power imbalances, prejudiced negotiations. Castaneda's work provides a path to dismantle constructed realities, as well as exposing dynamics of power and agency in these theories.

⁴⁶ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Teachings of Don Juan* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 190.

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