Should philosophy associate itself with Carlos Castaneda?

**Abstract**

In the late 1960’s a postgraduate anthropology student at the University of California Los Angeles published a PhD thesis titled *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge.* Today the thesis is regarded as the greatest case of academic fraud in American history. Despite the University of California eventually revoking the PhD five years after it was awarded, there was never an actual admission of its inauthenticity by the author himself, *Mr.* Carlos Castaneda, who insisted on its validity until his death in 1997. Despite Castaneda’s insistence it is generally held that his works are mere fiction and that “Castaneda’s only sorcery consisted in turning the University of California into an ass”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Whilst I agree with both these statements, I argue within these ingeniously[[2]](#footnote-2) crafted, fictional stories, exists a successful method of philosophical enquiry that has been largely ignored, or simply not yet recognized as legitimate in the academic arena: *the* *displacement of reason, as a methodology for obtaining reason.* In this paper I am going to explore Castaneda’s implementation of this technique and explain why it is as valid a method of philosophical enquiry.

**1.0 A Shaman Philosopher?**

In Castaneda’s first four works he documented the beliefs and practices of the ancient Yaqui Indian sorcerers through the description of a series of events which supposedly took place under his apprenticeship with the Yaqui *‘burjo’* (sorcerer) Don Juan Matus. Don Juan’s teachings appear to the reader to be a complete system of understandings about reality and the human role in it, which is not only theoretical but also practical, indeed to truly understand the theory one must ‘learn’ through a series of abstract mental *and physical* exercises, of which Castaneda documents his subjection. “Don Juan teaches what is, how to know what is, and how to live so as to know what is,- ontology, epistemology, ethics.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This process ultimately leads one to a conscious understanding of reality very different from a western perspective of reality, so different that their mental perspective of what reality is, actually alters. In Don Juan’s way of knowledge “Space does not conform to Euclidean geometry, time does not form a continuous unidirectional flow, causation does not conform to Aristotelian logic and man is not differentiated from non-man or life from death as in our world.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Indeed David Silverman, the leading academic critic of Castenda’s works, has classed Castaneda as the perfect introductory work for the study of the social sciences.[[5]](#footnote-5) Through a critical analyse of Castaneda’s first four works this paper will identify the methodology by which Castaneda is able to convince the reader to question their assurance of what reality is; their perspective and interpretation of it, and their place and actions within in it. In much the same way we examine how Socrates did so. This paper finds that the technique used by Castaneda is a calculated and methodical assault that challenges the readers ‘description of reality’ (as Don Juan refers to it), through *displacing reason*. Essential to this ‘description of reality’ is the methodology for interpretation of reality, and the subsequent reasoning of what constitutes truth according to that methodology. Both of these processes that govern our human understanding of the world around us are deeply challenged by the author’s philosophical questioning which, not coincidently, is enwrapped in an emotionally touching fictional story of master and pupil. These are some of the elements of the displacement of reason. After critical analyse of this technique used by Castaneda it will be clear that the impact of Castaneda’s works are not in any of its actual philosophies, necessarily, but rather in its ability to convince the reader that the world before them is only a description to their conscious mind and that if they are willing to ‘learn’, or in Castaneda’s case ‘relearn’, they can alter that ‘description of the world’ and thus take a different understanding from reality; very much philosophical result. Indeed for novels that attract readers on their mystical appeal, their real magic is to awaken the reader to the power of an aspect of philosophy itself. Thus this paper will show that the technique adopted in these works is really an exercise that engages one in the wisdom of philosophy itself by questioning what is really is reason, and thus its ability to displace reason is a valid philosophical method, which to some extent is as Bertrand Russell states “To keep alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect.”[[6]](#footnote-6) To be perfectly clear Castaneda’s novels are not work’s of philosophy, there is no defined academic doctrine for directly assessing truth in their dialogue, and yet the questions raised in that dialogue lead to the same result, one of reaslisation that such academic means reach. Castaneda’s fiction is a scrupulous attack on the assurance of western logic, reason and reliance on the scientific method, by way of perspective, that puts the reader face to face with the unknown factors of our existence, the very factors that philosophy itself seeks to probe. Indeed what better way to challenge familiar thinking than to illustrate its pitfalls and highlight the infinite possibilities that are shut out by it’s complacency? And that the solution, which awakes a naivety born from familiarity, lies in the comprehension of “an ancient way of knowledge of an ancient people now scattered across the remote Sonora desert” speaks volumes of Castaneda’s comprehension of what is required to release the hold of the western ‘description of reality’, to displace reason and lead the reader to realize the fragility of definition itself.

**2.0 Displacing Method**

“Human beings are perceivers, but the world that they perceive is an illusion: an illusion created by the description that was told to them from the moment they were born. So in essence, the world that their reason wants to sustain is the world created by a description and its dogmatic and inviolable rules, which their reason learns to accept and defend.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

For Don Juan the way that the vast majority of human beings interpret reality is defined by the description that is taught to them about it, and a person’s description constitutes the sum of all labels and meanings used to define the reality around them. Don Juan believes that we come to rely on the integrity such labels without the questioning of their authority and in doing so form concrete meanings as to what reality is, and also what it is telling us. Our reason then attaches itself to these meanings and in time, from youth to adulthood, becomes limited by them. It is this limit that Don Juan seeks to release the apprentice Castaneda from. Thus behind the acts of mysticism documented in the novels, and the carefully misleading emotional exposition of Castaneda as he under goes the apprenticeship, is a calculated and ironically methodical assault on the reader’s reason, reason that becomes limited by a familiar methodology. This assault seeks to manipulate ones reason by firstly detaching it from its western methodologies and then after this challengingly it to reconsider what constitutes truth.

Reason is the mental faculty that is able to generate conclusions from assumptions or premises.[[8]](#footnote-8) A method is a way of doing something in accordance with a definite plan.[[9]](#footnote-9) Although all human beings posses the ability to reason, what a person takes as meaning is often an entwinement of the ability to reason and the method that reason knows, thus if one has no method applied for their reason to grasp to, then they must give their own meaning to what is before them, and depending on the circumstances create their own method. Of course human reasoning may either adopt a methodology in any given situation or not, but it takes great awareness by an individual to notice, when taking a certain view point of reality, the role of a certain methodology has played in the justification of that view point, especially if it is socially accepted methodology of which a person has been born into. By its nature a method has assumed meaning to certain features of reality which can be relied upon to understand new features presented using reason. When method is removed from ones analysis of reality the labels we give to aspects of reality lose their meaning because the system that supplied that meaning is no longer present and at this point the truth is no longer bolstered by confirmation of method, demonstrating a pattern or deduced understanding, and thus becomes subjective.

As David Silverman points out in his work ‘Reading *Castaneda, An Introduction to the Social Sciences’[[10]](#footnote-10)* Castaneda is faced with predicaments in which even the problem presented by Don Juan itself is not clear, despite Don Juan’s insistence that a certain action must be performed to solve it. Such an exercise demands that Castaneda’s method be forgotten by his reason, and that he should achieve this by using his ‘intent’. In the uncertainty created by Don Juan, Castaneda has to develop his own ability to achieve the set task, but at this he fails. He appeals to Don Juan for guidance but faces a stringent reluctance by Don Juan to meet Castaneda’s western way of knowledge/thinking on its own terms; which is to give information that might be able to be deduced in order to adopt a previously known method that thus can thus lead to some form of truth or perceived understanding. The very first exercise that Don Juan gets Castaneda to perform is to find a particular spot on the porch floorboards outside of Don Juan’s residence where Castaneda ‘could sit without fatigue, where a man would be at his best.’[[11]](#footnote-11) To Castaneda such a task seemed irrational; how could one spot on a flat porch be any different from any other spot in terms of how it feels? So he insists to Don Juan that he doesn’t understand the task that he has been set. Don Juan replies by threatening to terminate the apprenticeship before it even begins if he can’t find the spot. It would appear this is done in order to infect Castaneda with the fear necessary to release Castaneda’s method from his reasoning which he has turned to in order to solve the riddle. Now *intent* on solving the problem Castaneda considers numerous questions in order to try and determine where it is located but only becomes more agitated and unsure when his reasoning fails him. After searching for an entire evening he starts to see different colours and feel different temperatures in different spots but since he is alone he is not sure this is really happening and after a terrifying ordeal in which he feels tremendous fear at one particular spot he eventually finds a spot where he feels better and falls asleep. He awakes later that morning and is rewarded with congratulations on having been successful, although Castaneda is not quite sure why he achieved success and starts to try and deduce why he was successful and of course Don Juan won’t aid him in this process, but will rather provide further confusions.

Clearly Castaneda insists on applying a method to answer the riddle; “I argued that although the porch was not too large (twelve by eight feet), the number of possible spots was overwhelming, and it would take me a very long time to check all of them, and that since he had not specified the size of the spot, the possibilities might be infinite.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Castaneda’s initial complaints are demonstration that an inadequate method is being used to solve the puzzle, he needs information from Don Juan that is familiar to the method being used, information that has meaning that can help his method deduce the answer or at least narrow its location, but Don Juan gives no hints towards any particular meanings, other than the end goal that he needs to use his intent to reach. The inadequate method adopted by Castaneda is the logical deductive reasoning used in modern science to determine the workings of a natural system as to understand individual components of it. It takes several hours before Castaneda releases himself from this methodology and instead begins to stare at the flood board thus adopting his own method to finding the solution. This I believe was the actual point of the exercise, and that to find a spot that makes one feel better was the absurdity required to induce the behaviour and thinking required to achieve it. The physical tasks that Castaneda undertakes are more like the learning undertaken by a child in the first few years of life rather than the learning a person might undertake at a school or college. In almost all the tasks he sets Don Juan asks Castaneda to use “unknown means to achieve unknown ends”[[13]](#footnote-13)

Perhaps an appropriate metaphor for Castaneda’s experience is teaching a child to swim. Don Juan has not told Castaneda what water is, what swimming is, or how to do it, and nevertheless has thrown him in the deep-end and warned him if he doesn’t swim he will die. Indeed the threat of death is constant in all of Don Juan’s teachings. As a result of course Castaneda is absolutely terrified for the better part of his experiences with Don Juan, feverishly trying to keep above water through rational analysis of the riddles that Don Juan speaks in, always trying to cling to scientific methodology so that he may find the answer, or in most cases understand the question, and thus survive. But this is the wrong method, Don Juan is is the philosophical protagonist intent on demonstrating the flaws of any one method. As his experiences multiply the need for rational explanation increases, but so do the occasions in which he does learn to adapt, although afterwards Castaneda nearly goes insane in analysis of what really occurred during these few successes. After these vents he reverts to the safety of the description he has relied upon his whole life, but it can’t explain how he reached the task set.

Don Juan’s teachings illustrate that if human reasoning becomes a definitive method, then essentially that is all we become, and truth, ideals, questions and answers and the passage of both our community and our own individual livelihood meld into one irrefutable defined end; dead and imprisoned, in constant denial of the eloquent beauty and power that is the unknown element that lies at the foundation of our very existence. In using method, analytical thinking/’the western description’, we become as David Silverman puts it, “Masters of Technique, who are mere operatives, faceless men that interchange with other faceless men, applying technique without bias, without fear or favour.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Of course the question or value of objectivity arises with such an opinion. Don Juan’s teachings take aim at the Castaneda’s requirement of objective analysis, a requirement held by scientific pursuit. “Scientific analysis rests on the systematic application of technique rather than on mere impressions.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Don Juan’s teachings illustrate the fallacy of only thinking in one particular manner, *even if that manner is objectively confirmed by others*. In academic philosophy there is most definitely an argument that objective confirmation, scientific reasoning, isn’t deserving of such authority as it has. This is a view that is, and arguably always should be, kept open by philosophical analysis: “If science, the vehicle for reason, cannot assume the special authority it claims to have, then we must reassess the credentials of magic, mythology and traditional beliefs and practices. In particular, this reassessment must begin with out current Western attitudes towards indigenous ways of life.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed much of Castaneda’s concern with the experiences he has under Don Juan arises because of the lack of objectivity; “Did I really become a crow? I mean would anyone seeing me have thought I was an ordinary crow?”[[17]](#footnote-17) Don Juan’s response to this line of thinking is to answer a middle ground; “Such analysis is a ploy designed for those who suffer from the need for a methodical truth.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Not coincidently Castaneda remains stuck on the methodology of western man; in the questions he asks and answers he expects to hear. It is probably because of this constant reversion to the method of objective fact that his thesis was awarded a PhD and initially held to be a legitimate anthropological work, as the reader’s own concerns regarding the ‘magical’ are *seemingly* addressed. There is little doubt that this back and forth technique has some degrading affect and achieves the displacement of the reader’s traditional reasoning.

**3.0 Displacing Truth**

Having carefully manipulated the reader towards the possibility that their method of worldly enquiry is limited, Castaneda then challenges the meaning’s which that methodology gives rise to, espically with regards to why they should be *true*. Playing on idealism and drug use Castaneda is able to lead the reader to the conclusion of idealism itself; that they can’t say for sure whether their mind creates the world around them or not. “You think everything in the world is simple to understand because everything you do is a routine that is simple to understand, at the waterfall when you looked at Genaro moving across the water fall, you believed that he was a master of somersaults because a somersault was all you could think about. And that is all you will ever believe he did, yet Don Juan did not somersault across the waterfall”[[19]](#footnote-19) Don Juan insinuates that Castaneda was limited to only seeing the event which Genaro performed in the form of somersaults, because that was all his ‘routine’ mind could fathom in explanation. Castaneda of course insists on objective fact, that we would all see the same event because the event itself (what happens in reality) is objective. Don Juan replies that the event did happen in one factual manner but that Castaneda had not made himself *available* to being able to see it, instead his mind had given him only what it could fathom: ‘somersaults’. Similarly in another example Castaneda wants the confirmation of a neutral observer that he actually turned into a crow and flew.[[20]](#footnote-20) This objective confirmation is denied by Don Juan who insists nevertheless that he did turn into a crow and did fly. Castaneda’s argument is that events taking place in the world do so factually, objectively, so somebody should be able to see him fly like a crow if he did turn into one. Don Juan’s reply is that yes the world is factual but as perceivers/interpreters of that fact what we see differs on the construct of our own perception. Don Juan knew Castaneda was flying, but a common man may have seen Castaneda passed out on the floor. In order to create uncertainty about truth Castaneda uses the philosophical paradox of idealism, a problem expressed in numerous forms throughout the book. What Castaneda says has an element of truth, this reality may be maintained by our minds words, or image, of how it is, and so thus if we can alter those words we can alter the reality before us because as Don Juan sees it; “We maintain our world with our internal talk”[[21]](#footnote-21) And “In characterising the world, we constitute the world.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Later under the use of drugs Castaneda does ‘see’ the world in a way that was structurally different from ordinary vision, confirming to him, momentarily that Don Juan is correct. The readers of course cannot confirm this themselves but they are left with the thought in their mind that logically it could be possible for a group of people, i.e. an ancient tribe of Indian people, to perceive the world in a different manner because there is no proof the world is not of our minds formation.

The apparent condoning of illicit drug use by Don Juan is the most controversial aspect of Castaneda’s work. In the first two books the use of the natural hallucinogenic Peyote and various species of mushrooms is frequently insisted upon by Don Juan. Don Juan states later in the apprenticeship when the period of drug use is over that the drugs were required because Castaneda was especially dumb. What he means by this is that it was difficult for him to let go of the western methodology that defined his description of reality. Don Juan’s use of these substances is very specific to the lessons he has to teach Castaneda. He challenges Castaneda’s description of the world by challenging what constitutes truth; in particular he asks the question does an event have be objective to make it true? When Adlous Huxley famously swallowed one tenth of gramme of Mescaline, the illicit drug found in the peyote plant that Don Juan insists Castaneda consume for the first three years of his apprenticeship, Huxley wrote “the great change was in the world of objective fact”[[23]](#footnote-23) He claimed to see what was before him, a flower, in an entirely more revealing and intimate manner than he could have possibly imagined without taking the Mescaline. He also claimed that the effect was such that it revealed in more detail the reality before him. It is this very same claim the Don Juan makes, and from this point Don Juan asks Castaneda, which is truer; the world we see now or the world we evolve to see when we ourselves change? In such experiences Castaneda cannot rely on his routine explanations of the world, his normal methodology for interpretation of truth, because the circumstances in which he finds himself go so far beyond ordinary circumstance. It is the careful manipulation around such philosophical dilemmas that Don Juan is able to appear so convincing and wise. As illustrated below, when Castaneda experiments with the Honguitos mushroom, or ‘little smoke’[[24]](#footnote-24), as Don Juan refers to it.

“Castaneda: ‘I really felt I lost my body, Don Juan.’ Don Juan: ‘You did’  Castaneda: ‘You mean I really didn’t have a body?’ Don Juan: ‘What do you think yourself?’ Castaneda ‘Well I don’t know. All I can tell you is what I felt.’ Don Juan: ‘That is all there is in reality - what you felt’”[[25]](#footnote-25)

The philosopher Wittgenstein said “If we try to draw a tree we are only drawing what we see, the tree is not necessarily a tree, nor is the picture an adequate representation of it, for it is something else entirely.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Thus we see a carefully crafted manipulation by the author appear, firstly by creating doubt in the readers mind about the ability of their methodology to assess the world around them, and then secondly, after having exposing a hole in their assurance, by challenging their conception of truth. The end result is a confused reader, whose reason is sufficiently displaced as to question what reason itself is, and take notice of a broader worldview.

**4.0 Displacing Reason: A Philosophical Method?**

“At the time of the platonic dialogues Socrates was called *atopos,* that is, “unclassifiable” What makes him *atopos* is precisely the fact that he is a “philo-sopher” in the etymological sense of the word; that is he is in love with wisdom...It is the love of this wisdom, which is foreign to the world, that makes the philosopher a stranger in it”[[27]](#footnote-27)

In the Greek tradition it is the proposition of questions, the magnificent gift of Socrates, which has had the most impact in making people consider the reality around them. So some, (albeit mainly on cult websites), have gone as far as to compare Don Juan to Socrates, the similarity being in the approach each took in making those around them question reality and their place in it. But it is foolish to take these novels so far; Socrates had solid philosophical analysis behind his questioning and was, as far as we can be aware, a real person. But what of Castaneda’s own actual philosophies? Not surprisingly Castaneda’s actual philosophy consists of no more than a series of unrelated metaphysical speculations cleverly brought to life through the *actual* old rituals of the Yaqui Indian people, and a play on age old philosophical dilemmas. However the displacement of reason, ultimately leads the reader to use reason against their traditional form of reason – and this result is exactly the same an academic paper’s intended result. Castaneda achieves this by actually using reason, idealism is a legitimate argument, the fragility of truth a legimate cause, the method of displacing reason might not be forthcoming but it works.

Richard De Mille wrote of Castaneda’s philosophy: “Perhaps the most interesting metaphysical question is: Why is there something and not nothing? Don Juan’s *naugal* idea is a way of asking that question. It is a gratifying way because it sounds a lot like an answer, but when you say the world comes out of an unspeakable void filled with potentiality you have not exactly told anybody how to get to the men’s room.”[[28]](#footnote-28) De Mille is of course correct; the metaphysical system presented lacks clarity and detail, yet this is intended, the displacement of reason leads to confusion and this challenges the reader to question their own reality. That Castaneda was found to be a fake is of course disappointing for all those who followed him on the premise of his authenticity alone. Upon the collapse of authenticity many would undoubtedly have felt rather foolish in believing, thus hastily turning back to the routine reasoning that carries one comfortably enough through everyday life. So perhaps it can be argued that Castaneda did more damage for philosophy, and perhaps Yaqui Indians, than good. UCLA and TIME Magazine would also have some regrets. Yet I would argue that for the majority of readers the realisation of Castaneda’s fraudulence will be of little consequence in comparison to the questions his method were able to raise for them about the reality they have assumed to be definite.

At the conclusion of his second work Don Juan says to Castaneda: “Your problem is that you want to understand everything, and that is not possible. If you insist on understanding you’re not considering your entire lot as a human being. Your stumbling block is intact. Therefore you have done almost nothing in all these years.” [[29]](#footnote-29) What does it mean? What does it achieve? An unsubstantiated set of semi truths through a series of statements about the human condition that don’t seem to connect, presented in a prose attaining a presumed innocence of being well thought through, enwrapped in an emotionally touching comment drawing the readers mind far from their traditional reason. The result of course is that the reader relates, becomes confused and then because of this confusion is quasi enlightened at the same time. Indeed the statement ‘you want to understand everything and that is not possible’ is ironically acute. Why is there something rather than nothing? Why can’t I understand everything? Unfortunately none of the answers are provided by Castaneda, but as some philosophers know, *all we really have is questions*, so for making the readers ask them Castaneda’s method, *the displacement of reason to achieve reason*, should be recognised.

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2. Numerous critical analysts of Castaneda work have concluded that he was a genius, albeit a fraudulent one. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Richard De Mille, *Castaneda’ s Journey: The Power and the Allegory,* (Authors Guild, 1976), 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carlos Castaneda, The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge, (Penguin Books, 1983), 6   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David Silverman, *Reading Castaneda: A Prologue to the Social Sciences* (London Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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8. Macquarie Dictionary, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Silverman, *Reading Castaneda: A Prologue to the Social Sciences,* 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge,* 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge,* 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Silverman, *Reading Castaneda: A Prologue to the Social Sciences,* 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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15. Ibid. 60  [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ian Kid, *Philosophy No,* 74  [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
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27. Paul Hadot, *Philosophy as a way of life,* (Blackwell Cambridge 1995), 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. 118  [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Carlos Castaneda, *A Separate Reality,* 258 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)