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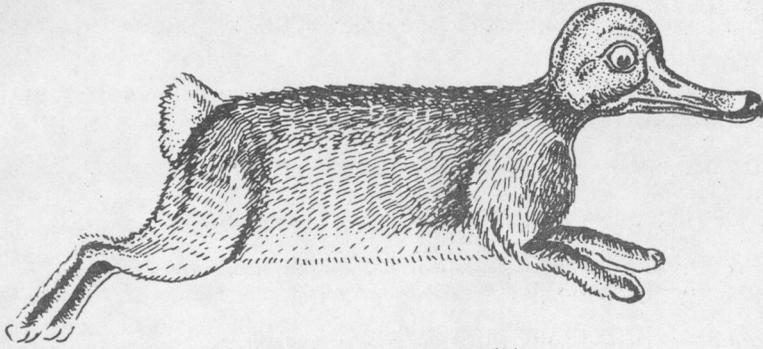
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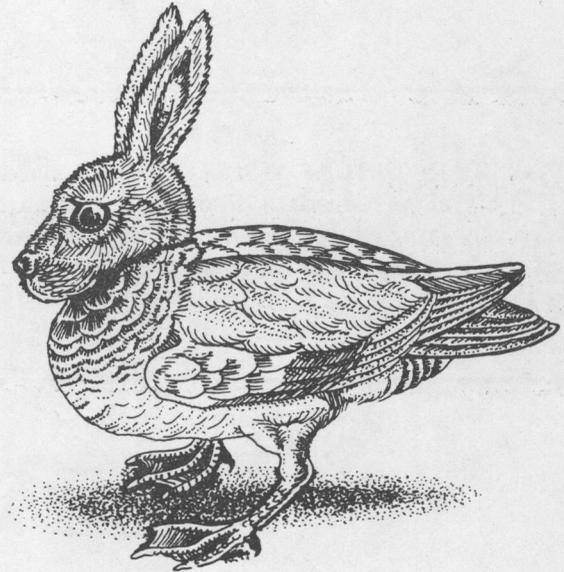


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Carlos Castaneda and the
Phenomenology of Sorcery

by Donald Palmer

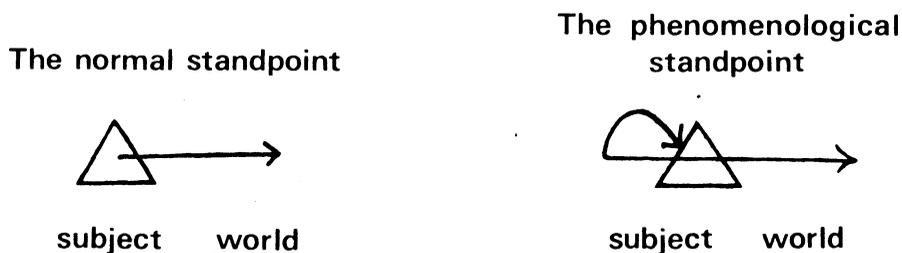


Carlos Castaneda claims to have used the “phenomenological method” in writing his four volumes on Yaqui sorcery, but he dedicates only a few words to a description of that method. The present essay provides a context for Castaneda’s claim by examining the phenomenological method in general and showing how Castaneda’s work is an exemplification of that method. The paper also contains a brief discussion of the ways in which Castaneda’s conclusions may be influenced by his commitment to phenomenology.

IN *A Separate Reality*, and again in an interview published in *Psychology Today* magazine, Carlos Castaneda announced his allegiance to “the phenomenological method” (Castaneda, 1971: 25, Keen, 1972: 90-102). Oddly enough, the object of Castaneda’s phenomenological analysis, an old Yaqui sorcerer named Juan Matus, emerges from that analysis appearing to be a man who in many respects is himself a phenomenologist. This seems roughly equivalent to performing a Marxian analysis of Thomism and concluding that St. Thomas Aquinas himself was a Marxist. It certainly raises the question of the degree to which the actual outcome of Castaneda’s account is determined by the method he uses (a question which, of course, is always pertinent in approaching the work of any social scientist or philosopher). In this paper I wish to say a few words in answer to that question. Along the way, I will characterize the phenomenological method and relate it to Castaneda’s work, especially because Castaneda nowhere attempts a systematic clarification of the method, and because the term “phenomenology” is so abused these days.

The name “phenomenology” is used abundantly by both Kant and Hegel, but phenomenology as we now know it was the creation of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). As Husserl conceived it, phenomenology was a methodology, a psychology, an epistemology, and, finally, an ontology. The methodology is simple enough. It involves a metaphorical stepping back from our normal engagement in reality in order to observe the actual objective structure of that engagement. One of the ironies of phenomenology is that this objectivity is achieved only by falling back into utter subjectivity (as in Descartes, who also finds the foundations of objectivity in absolute subjectivity). Husserl’s explanation of the difference between phenomenology and our normal relation to the world can be diagrammed in the following manner:

FIGURE 1



Normally the subject gazes upon the world. In phenomenology the subject steps back and gazes upon his own subjectivity. The method, then, seems to smack of introspection. Now, psychology had long before thrown out introspection as a legitimate scientific method, and for very good reasons. One needs only to study the contradictory and sometimes ridiculous results produced in the laboratories of the early

introspectionist schools in order to feel the weight of those reasons. But Husserl believed that in rejecting introspection the psychologists had abandoned their own field of study. Psychology was, after all, supposed to be the study of the *psyche*. Husserl's reinstatement of an introspective method was justified on the grounds that *subjectivity itself had an objective and universal character*. The phenomenological method would expose that objectivity and universality in such a way that any trained phenomenological experimenter could repeat, corroborate, or correct the discoveries of his predecessors. The method required an "*epoché*," or a "phenomenological reduction," and a "bracketing" of the world, which means a systematic suspension of judgment and assumptions normally associated with the activity to be phenomenologically analyzed (Husserl, 1972: 99-100). If I suspend my normal assumptions about the make-up of bricks and walls, I can perform an *epoché* on something as unexciting as a brick wall. As I walk slowly toward the wall, I discover that at a certain distance the visual texture of the bricks is indistinguishable, but as I approach the wall, suddenly the texture "comes alive." As my face approaches within a few inches of the wall, the texture dances before my eyes in a nearly dizzying clarity, then suddenly, an inch further, the texture collapses into a blurry chaos. Meanwhile, the whole of my visual field has been surrounded by a periphery of infinity. No matter where I gaze, my visual world is circled by a suggestive haze hinting at an infinite visual horizon beginning just to the left and right of the field which I presently see.

These discoveries are neither practical nor very dramatic, but they are described by statements which are all true, and they are not statements about brick walls, nor statements about the laws of optics; rather, they are statements about the structure of visual consciousness. More thorough phenomenological experiments reveal more about the structure of consciousness *and* about the structure of the world as experienced (*Phainomenon*, Gk., that which is appearing). Sartre, Husserl's wayward disciple, is often at his best describing things like the phenomenology of allowing oneself to be seduced, or the phenomenology of shame as one gets caught talking to oneself when one thought that one was alone in the room (Sartre, 1971: 96-97, 301).

Phenomenology, then, purports to give us a psychology insofar as it gives us an analysis of the structure of consciousness, possible and actual. But it also gives us a theory of knowledge in that it purports to provide an assumption-free picture of the states of consciousness out of which all our conceptions of reality derive. The critics of phenomenology, of course, are prone to deny that such a presuppositionless posture is possible. (Can there really be "neutral data"?) Most contemporary phenomenologists do not share Husserl's expectation of a totally assumption-free theory, but believe that the method nevertheless produces what it sets out to produce. Among other discoveries, the phenomenologists claim to have located the experiential foundation of the Ego, that entity whose elusiveness has brought so many philosophies and psychologies to grief. When I "bracket" the external world, I find that the one constant remainder is what the phenomenologists call the "Here/Now experience" of "lived space and time" as opposed to mapped space and clocked time. The Ego is grounded in this experience. In the phenomenological reduction it is discovered that I am always the center of the universe as I experience it, both spatially and temporally. As Maurice Natanson, recently of the University of California at Santa Cruz, puts it, "No dial shows 'Now' as part of its face, yet at any time of its being read, the time is always Now" (Natanson, 1970: 11). All systems of measuring time are abstractions based on the universal phenomenological fact of lived time. Similarly, all forms of geographical measurement are abstractions from the universal phenomenological experience of lived space. An experience which may have occurred in Vietnam five years ago (clocked time), 8,000 miles away (mapped space), may have been so important in the case of a given individual that in fact in terms

of "lived space" that experience is closer than the attic over one's head (whose existence is phenomenologically indifferent) and closer in terms of "lived time" than yesterday's breakfast. In applying the notion of "lived space" to myself, I discover that I am always Here and you are always There. Some phenomenologists, such as Sartre, have concluded that the implication of this kind of discovery is that the "humanistic us" is an illusion (Sartre, 1971: 547), that we are each condemned to an "absolute isolation," as Kierkegaard suggested 125 years ago (Kierkegaard, 1954: 89). This is one of the obvious and natural bridges between phenomenology and its frequent bedfellow, existentialism.

By performing the *epoché* on one's experienced world, by "bracketing" it, one can draw a map of the phenomenological landscape that lies exposed. Just as Carlos Castaneda and Juan Matus, standing on a desert knoll, find themselves viewing a landscape bordered in one direction by a great, barren plain leading to the horizon, and bordered in another direction by a distant, purple mountain range upon which are piling up great storm clouds, and behind them find their exit blocked by high and dangerous cliffs, so each one of us stands in a phenomenological landscape of relevancies, priorities, concerns, fears, anxieties, hopes, and expectations. For some of us an abyss yawns before us blocking serious progress; it may be the chasm between a non-Caucasian individual and the Caucasian community he resides in, or one opened by a neurotic phobia, or by the shock of a physician's diagnosis which discovers a terminal disease. To the left of one may spread unending prairies of drudgery and dry lakes of evaporated enthusiasm and hope. Or there may be an exciting and unexplored landscape of love or political commitment. In any case, the storm clouds over the distant mountains may indicate the awareness of one's eventual annihilation --another connection with existentialism and Kierkegaard. The phenomenological experiment, then, allows us to discover both the universal and the private components of subjectivity and causes us to articulate and consider our priorities, just as Juan Matus forces the Los Angeles anthropologist to articulate and critically examine his priorities.

Ironically, phenomenology has had much less impact on American philosophy than on American social science. Until very recently, the hegemony of "analytic philosophy" in U. S. universities resulted in the relegation of the phenomenologists to outlawry or, at best, to token positions in the departments. The resounding success as teachers and scholars of such phenomenologists as Hubert Dreyfus at Berkeley, Richard Zaner at Southern Methodist, and Natanson at Santa Cruz, along with the immense popularity of phenomenology courses across the country, has resulted in its being taken more seriously in the philosophy departments. Phenomenology has made its impact on American sociology and anthropology basically through the influence of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, whose work is based on that of Alfred Schutz, a disciple of Husserl's whose specialty was the philosophy of social science. The influence of phenomenology on psychology is less easy to trace. During the late sixties and early seventies humanistic psychologists emerged from places like Esalen calling themselves "phenomenologists" partly, no doubt, because Fritz Perls himself, who usually despised labels, did not seem to mind being called a phenomenologist. At some of the California State Universities, whole psychology departments have been taken over by the phenomenologists. Their students spend hours massaging and being massaged, gazing deeply into candlelight in dark rooms, feeling flowers, walls, trees, and other people while walking around the campus blindfolded. All of this must seem a far cry from the technical intricacies of the *epoché* as performed by that staid old conservative, Edmund Husserl. But, actually, there is a connection. These psychologists have discovered that Husserl's philosophy has therapeutic implications. In his attempt to arrive at the pure data of consciousness, Husserl implied that in the process of maturation and socialization there is a loss of innocence. The true grounding of phenomenological experience is lost in the reification of abstractions, resulting in a form of alienated

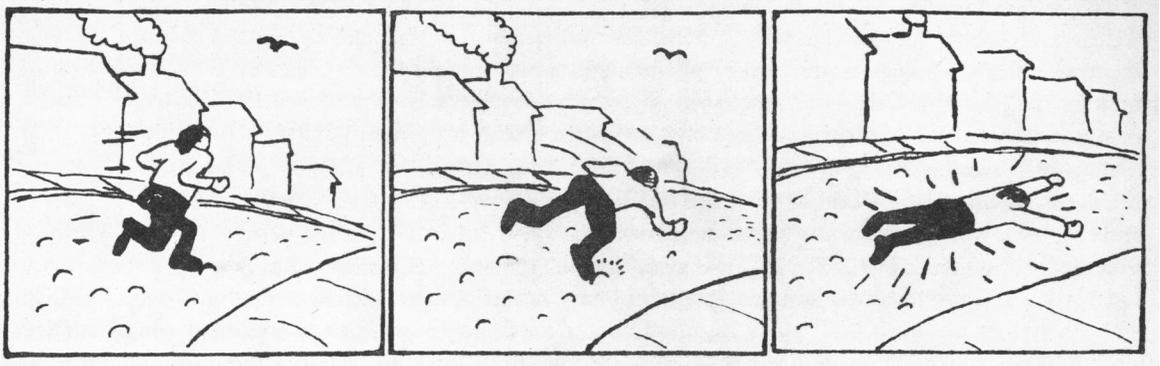
consciousness. The phenomenological psychologists have as their goal the recovery of that lost innocence and an overcoming of the alienated consciousness by rediscovering the natural relationship between consciousness and the sensuous surface of reality. Here we will not try to establish whether in fact they achieve that goal.

Apparently, Carlos Castaneda has a deep interest in Husserl's work, so his relation to the phenomenological school is more direct than that of many Americans who would accept the label of phenomenologist. In fact, according to the *Psychology Today* interview, Castaneda read and discussed selections from Husserl's *Ideas* with don Juan and the old Yaqui now has placed among his "power objects" a piece of ebony which once graced Husserl's desk. Castaneda's introduction to phenomenology may have been through his teacher Harold Garfinkel, a member of a small group of sociologists who answer to the unwieldy name of "ethnomethodologists," which school has definite connections with the work of the phenomenologist Schutz. The closest Castaneda comes to an explicit statement of his method is in the Introduction to *A Separate Reality*, where he says, "The system I recorded was incomprehensible to me, thus the pretense to anything other than reporting about it would be misleading and impertinent. In this respect I have adopted the phenomenological method and have striven to deal with sorcery solely as phenomena that were presented to me. I, as the perceiver, recorded what I perceived, and at the moment of recording I endeavored to suspend judgment" (Castaneda, 1971: 25). Now, it is true that in his books Castaneda does try simply to report the phenomena as presented, but there is more to the procedure than that. He also tries to achieve a point of view from which he can perceive the phenomena in terms of the same categories used by the members of the community of sorcerers. In other words, he first describes the phenomena as they appeared to him as a typical Western observer, then, in Socratic fashion, don Juan tries to subvert Castaneda's normal reading of the phenomena and to provide him with an alternative reading of them. By withholding judgment about the phenomena, Castaneda allows them to dictate a world to him in their own terms. The redescription of the transformed data is Castaneda's phenomenological triumph. In traditional structural-functionalism the anthropologist lives among the natives just as the phenomenologist does, and describes the cultural phenomena presented to him, but he does this in order to get *behind* the phenomena and explain their "true" structure and function. Hence, his understanding of the culture is very different (more "sophisticated" and "objective") from its understanding by the members of that same culture. This method and its goal are rejected by the phenomenologist, though only a radical would deny that there is some value in this traditional form of anthropology. The phenomenologist claims that the sophistication and objectivity of the structural-functional tradition prevents it from delivering the article it promised—*the culture itself*. This, somehow, gets lost in the analysis. The culture can be delivered intact only through the achievement of membership in it. Carlos Castaneda's apprenticeship is an attempt to achieve this *membership*. He says, "The termination of the apprenticeship meant that I had learned a new description of the world in a convincing and authentic manner and thus I had become capable of eliciting a new perception of the world, which matched its new description. In other words, I had gained membership" (Castaneda, 1972: 14). When Castaneda speaks of "a new perception of the world," he is talking about a perception of the world free of the assumptions and abstractions which we usually bring to our world. This is Husserl's *epoché*, the attempt to get as close to the "pure data" of consciousness as possible. Juan Matus and Edmund Husserl may agree on the first stage of the process, but not on the specifics of the technique. Where the philosopher employs a rigorously technical format, the sorcerer employs terror. Through a barrage of frightening experiences induced by drugs and trickery, don Juan forces the anthropologist to abandon his assumptions and normal categories. (Matus' friend don Genaro

has a role not unlike that of Descartes' "Evil Genius" in bringing about the rejection of traditional belief, and Husserl's philosophy is decidedly Cartesian.) As Castaneda finds out, the abandonment of traditional beliefs and assumptions does not achieve "pure data," rather it produces a frightening kind of Chaos. ("The world is a mysterious place," says don Juan over and over as Castaneda describes to him the newly discovered chaos.) Some contemporary phenomenologists, finding the criticism of Husserl's notion of the possibility of "pure data of consciousness" to be irrefutable, have abandoned this notion, but in this respect don Juan and don Genaro are closer to Husserl than are some of Husserl's own disciples. Their attempt to show Castaneda how to "stop the world" is an attempt to provoke the anthropologist into seeing (or "seeing") the world utterly without interpretation. Don Juan says to Castaneda, ". . . *seeing* happens only when one sneaks between the worlds, the world of ordinary people and the world of sorcerers" (Castaneda, 1972: 300). This is a striking passage, because it shows that don Juan understands that neither the ordinary world nor the extraordinary world of the sorcerer is the "real" world of pure being, rather each is itself built up on assumptions and social consensus. Carlos asks, "Do you mean, don Juan, that neither the world of ordinary men nor the world of sorcerers is real?" The old Yaqui answers, "They are real worlds. They could act upon you" (Castaneda, 1972: 300). When, in Chapter 19 of *Journey to Ixtlan*, Castaneda finally does *stop the world*, which is the next step before *seeing*, his powerful description of the event ranks as one of the finest accounts of the mystical experience ever recorded. Yet don Juan is not satisfied with having taught Castaneda to "stop the world," nor with the mystical achievement it brought about. He wants him to "see," and to achieve the natural consequences of "seeing," as apparently finally occurs in the last passages of *Tales of Power* (Castaneda, 1974: 287). But more interestingly from the point of view of social science and phenomenology, don Juan wants to "re-gloss" the anthropologist in terms of the categories of sorcery. He wants to teach him to be a "man of knowledge" and to use power. What this amounts to is teaching him a new system of causality.

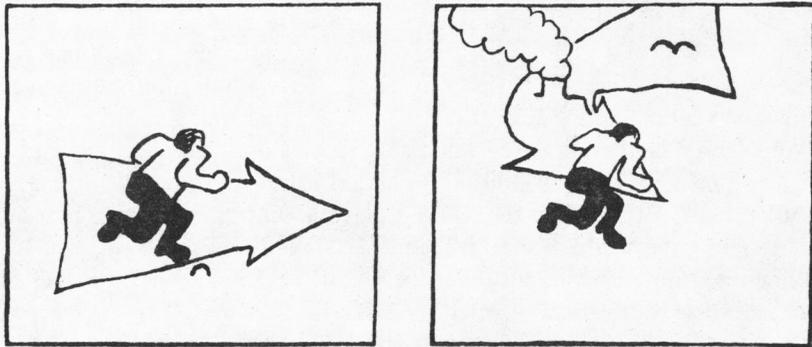
David Hume's devastating critique of our ordinary conception of causality could well serve don Juan's "argument." Hume had shown that there are no necessary connections between any two things in the universe, rather, the cause/effect relations we claim to perceive in the world are really the result of certain psychological assumptions and animal needs which we humans bring to reality (Hume, 1963: 66-83). The problem that Hume discovered was supposed to have found its resolution in Kant's synthesis of rationalism and empiricism. Kant agreed that there is no such thing as necessary causal relations between things "out there," and even agreed that causality was imposed upon the world by the human mind, but he claimed that a necessary condition for understanding the world *at all* was understanding it in terms of causality (Kant, 1961: 574). He believed that the universality of the human mind was this necessity of understanding the world as a causal sequence. Like Hume and Kant, don Juan teaches that the human consciousness imposes relations upon the world, but unlike Kant, he does not believe that there can be only one system of causality which we bring to the world. The sorcerer, without denying the effectiveness of our ordinary system of causality, claims to have discovered an even more effective one. This one can best be described in terms of "omens," "power spots," "agreements and disagreements with the world," "rings of power," and "lines of the world." To participate in this new system of causality is to have achieved the "new description" Castaneda talks about. It is to inhabit a "separate reality." Perhaps an oversimplified but helpful illustration would be the following comparative analysis of the "cause" of a man's falling in the street:

FIGURE 2



Normally, the “lines of power” that we would perceive here would be linear. The man was careless and tripped on a cobblestone, causing him to fall. The “new description” might describe very different lines of power. The significant relationship would be the direction of the wind, the presence of the crow, and the man’s posture. (A man would have to be a fool to run carelessly without a gait of power with the wind against him and a crow on his left!)

FIGURE 3



Normal causality

Causality of sorcery

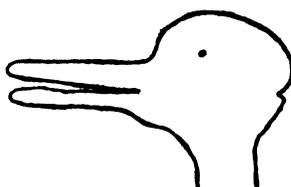
A splendid example of don Juan’s attempt to make Carlos attend to the new causality is the episode in Chapter 10 of *Journey to Ixtlan* in which Matus points out something in the dusky desert which

Castaneda takes to be a dying animal. As they approach it cautiously, it takes on the appearance of a monster with a mammalian body and a bird's head. In its death agony it lunges at Carlos and he runs away in horror. After several minutes of anxious attempts to determine what the monster is, Carlos suddenly "understands." He says, "something in me arranged the world," and he realizes that the "monster" is only a large branch of a burnt shrub blowing in the wind. Relieved, he explains to don Juan how such an error is possible in the twilight and wind. Don Juan, rather than being pleased with the explanation, angrily hushes up Castaneda, saying, "What you've done is no triumph. You've wasted a beautiful power, a power that blew life into that dry twig." The Yaqui adds that the real triumph would have been for Carlos to "let go and follow the power until the world had ceased to exist" (Castaneda, 1972: 132).

A similar example occurs in Chapter 15 of the same book when Castaneda, staring at a distant mountain range, suddenly spies a section of the mountains which seems to be pulsating and moving toward him. Castaneda leaps up and discovers that what he had been seeing is "really" a piece of cloth hanging from a cactus in his line of vision. Again, he laughingly explains to don Juan how the twilight had created the optical illusion. Don Juan carefully removes the cloth from the cactus and puts it in his pouch, saying, "... this piece of cloth has power. For a moment you were doing fine with it and there is no way of knowing what may have happened if you had remained seated" (Castaneda, 1972: 224).

In each of these cases don Juan was calling Carlos' attention to a certain aspect of reality and stressing its absolute significance in such a way as to transform it and the rest of reality along with it. What he was doing is not so different from the activity of a good art critic who points out certain aspects of a work of art causing us to redescribe and re-evaluate the whole work. Just as in the case of Jastrow's duck-rabbit (made famous by Wittgenstein, who used it as a central example in his philosophy (Wittgenstein, 1953:

FIGURE 4



194)), which can be read either as a duck or as a rabbit, but not as both in the same moment, so the world can be read either as "lines of causes and effects," or as "rings of power," but not as both in the same moment. Don Juan and Wittgenstein raise the question as to whether it makes sense to talk about one interpretation as absolutely more *correct* than the other. Only the context determines which is more correct, and don Juan provides a new context. We have a natural inclination to say that surely a minimal amount of empirical research would establish once and for all which system of causality is more true to reality. But, of course, by "empirical research" we mean research which makes all of the assumptions of the ordinary system of causality, hence the conclusions of such research already are contained in the

very assumptions we wish to question. More dramatically, if some of the events that Castaneda reports are accurate, then there can be hardly any question of whether the sorcerer's system of causality "works." (It has always been an embarrassment to us Westerners that voodoo is at least as effective as psychoanalysis.) And in deciding whether Yaqui sorcery works, we do not have to appeal only to the more bizarre episodes, such as those in which Carlos flies, or talks to a coyote, or travels magically from one end of Mexico City to another in seconds, or finds his car transformed by don Genaro; rather, all we have to attend to is don Juan's "impeccability," which trait has been sought after for millenia by would-be saints, philosophers, and therapists.

One final point of convergence between phenomenology and sorcery will be critically commented upon here. It concerns the topic of what Kierkegaard called "absolute isolation." All philosophies in the Cartesian tradition have had as a main problem the avoidance of the epistemological solipsism upon whose rocks Descartes' bark foundered. Phenomenology is no exception. Sartre's phenomenological analysis of human interaction overcomes solipsism by claiming that I *know* of the Other's existence by discovering my own loss of selfhood and shame in his presence. But this solution overcomes epistemological solipsism only to capitulate to moral solipsism. (As was mentioned earlier, the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* says that the "humanistic us" is an illusion.) Not all philosophers have been satisfied that phenomenology can ever totally resolve this problem which it has created for itself, and even the later Sartre, in his turn toward Marxism, is clearly dissatisfied with his earlier phenomenological formulation. A similar problem of moral solipsism emerges in don Juan's sorcery. Although Castaneda can talk about membership in a community of sorcerers, the community is very small, and although there exists a special relationship between don Juan and his fellow sorcerer don Genaro, the latter's poignant account of his own "journey to Ixtlan" at the end of the book of the same title leaves one indeed with a feeling of "absolute isolation." Genaro tells the story of being lost in the mountains on his journey to Ixtlan and being tempted by phantoms, people who were not real. Genaro could discern that they were phantoms by their friendly gestures, by the companionship and food they offered him. Therefore they were dangerous! When Castaneda queries don Genaro about the phantoms, the latter says they were, after all, really *people*, but were nevertheless unreal beings. Genaro tells Carlos that after his encounter with sorcery, nothing can be real anymore (Castaneda, 1972: 311). What's more, Genaro admits that he will never reach Ixtlan, that he is doomed to wander in a world peopled by phantoms. And so, just as the sorcerer's apprenticeship began in the solitude and loneliness of the North American desert, so it ends in the solitude of the mind.

Finally, concerning the question of whether Castaneda's phenomenological method dictated the conclusions he reached, at least one point is clear. A phenomenological method predisposes a social scientist to give a sympathetic rendition of the culture he is studying. The only assumption it begins with is that the culture the anthropologist is studying is worth taking seriously. Unlike, say, a Marxian or a Freudian analysis, fewer critical assumptions are hidden in the method. Precisely in its conscious attempt to approach the culture with as few assumptions as possible, it manages to give a more objective (though, in another sense, thoroughly subjective) account of the culture. Still, the honest phenomenologist would have to admit that there is a logic even to his "assumption-free" method and that this logic would tend to arrange the data according to its own formula. A very different anthropological method might have delivered us a very different don Juan-- one, perhaps, less thoroughly in agreement with the precepts of phenomenological philosophy. But we are glad for the don Juan who was delivered to us. He and his anthropologist apprentice have enriched our world view. Lord knows our world view needed enriching. It was getting a bit stale.

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