The nature and meaning of the totalist

In the closing pages of Castaneda’s book, *The Fire From Within*, don Juan contends that the mold of man can be seen from two different perspectives, that it can be seen as the shape of a man and also as a light. This shift in perspectives is merely a matter of moving the assemblage point to another position on the cocoon (another image of man). This signifies for the totalist, don Juan, that human perception and the perception of reality is never final. One can be a person in the shape of a man or be a ‘luminous being’ in a ‘luminous world.’ Standing midway between two worlds don Juan is saying that finite limitations are not real, in fact they may be illusory to some altered consciousness. This also means that man has the radical freedom to operate beyond his functions, not just beyond the limitations of the shape or mold of man.

Is don Juan a mature person? From our perspective in the ordinary world we see the mature person as being able to balance fantasy and reality. There is no line drawn by don Juan between fantasy and reality. In fact from his point of view, reality is in the same predicament as perception whose barrier must be broken. There is a blurring of the line between fantasy and reality by the totalist. In fact there is no such line for don Juan. There is this blurring of the line by each totalist when he moves from the finite search for wholeness to some given totality.

In this chapter we hope to develop further the nature and meaning of the totalist. He keeps slipping through our fingers like the transcendence by which he operates. So far we have given one definition of the totalist, namely, that he derives his directives from another directive agency than from finite beings. We have also tried to account for this change, a reversal of directionalities, by placing the problem in the area of human projection. The suggestion was that it was either a careless human mistake, or
perhaps an unconscious one, or it was the result of real human limitations in the area of projection. The problem resides either in man’s creative abilities or just in his limitations. To recapitulate, then, the definition of the totalist given so far is that he makes non-human claims to power, to perfection, and to directionality. This definition will be elaborated upon and additional meanings of the totalist will be given in terms of the activities he performs. We are well aware by now that the drive for totalism(s) is part of the great heritage of intellectuals in our Western tradition. I call it the fallacy of the elite. Great thinkers have lured us out of the den of human finitude to follow them beyond the context of human directionality with the promise that only their respective totalities will give us the needed balance between ‘the terror of man’ and ‘the wonder of man,’ which will send us on the way with that wonderful alchemy or blend of power and perfection we can not attain to on our own. That man is ‘haunted’ by totality(s), which his impoverished human condition requires is the same theme song of every totalist who would link man’s self-directional search for wholeness with some externally given totality. Every totalist promises what Isaiah’s God promised him and his people: ‘For I the Eternal your God hold you by the hand, whispering, ‘Fear not, I will help you’ (41:13).’ Without exception secular totalities offer similar promises and deliverances if only man would leave the den of finitude! In one way or another every totalist promises deliverance by more than human means to power, perfection and directionality from the anxieties of existence, which don Juan so aptly described for Castaneda at the conclusion of his book, Tales of Power:

Men for whom an entire life was like one Sunday afternoon, an afternoon which was not altogether miserable, but rather hot and dull and uncomfortable. They sweated and fussed a great deal. They didn’t know where to go, or what to do. That afternoon left them only with the memory of petty annoyances and tedium and then suddenly it was over; it was already night.

Totalists speak to this anxious condition of man, especially to those who do ‘not know where to go, or what to do.’ They would rescue man from Sunday afternoons.

But such all-embracing totalities are mutually exclusive of each