Reasons, Rules and the Ring of Experience: Reading Our World into Carlos Castaneda's Works*

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Don Juan said that my body was disappearing and only my head was going to remain, and in such a condition the only way to stay awake and move around was by becoming a crow... He ordered me to straighten up my head and put it on my chin. He said that in the chin were the crow's legs. He commanded me to feel the legs and observe that they were coming out slowly. He then said... that the tail would come out of my neck. He ordered me to extend the tail like a fan, and to feel how it swept the floor...

I had no difficulty whatsoever eliciting the corresponding sensations to each one of his commands. I had the perception of growing bird's legs, which were weak and wobbly at first. I felt the tail coming out of the back of my neck and wings out of my cheekbones....

When don Juan directed me to grow a beak, I had an annoying sensation of lack of air. The something bulged out and created a block in front of me. But it was not until don Juan directed me to see laterally that my eyes actually were capable of having a full view to the side... (Castaneda, 1968, pp. 172-174)

Later Castaneda, (1968) asked don Juan:

"Did I really become a crow? I mean would anyone seeing me have thought I was an ordinary crow?"

"No. You can't think that way... Such questions make no sense... It takes a very long time to learn to be a proper crow," he said. "But you did not change, nor did you stop being a man. There is something else." (pp. 183–184)

Carlos Castaneda has published four books (Castaneda, 1968, 1971, 1972, and 1974) in which he describes the bizarre events he experienced during his apprenticeship to don Juan, an Old Yaqui sorcerer. They are bizarre because, according to our criteria of what is real, the things Castaneda sees and does are impossible. In addition to becoming a crow, he sees don Genaro, another sorcerer, standing on a mountaintop ten miles away. He watches a leaf falling from a tree over and over again, hitting the same branches each time it

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descends. He talks with a coyote. He leaps off the edge of a ravine and examines the bushes in the bottom of it without descending into the ravine bodily.

Did Castaneda really become a crow?

Can we believe that he things he describes are really possible? What criteria could we use as a basis for that belief?

Certainly we could read Castaneda's book as straightforward works of fiction told from the point of view of a skeptical narrator, as Melville did in *Moby Dick*. But if Castaneda had intended his works to be read as fiction, then whether or not he really did become a crow could not be a pressing question for us. However, it *is* a serious question and there is currently a controversy over whether or not don Juan is a hoax.¹ Some reviewers have found don Juan's teachings similar to the ideas expressed in Oriental, mystical, Jungian and nonrationalistic traditions. They argue that this similarity supports the position that Castaneda's works are authentic. We may believe in them because things like a sorcerer's description of the world are known to exist. Others have argued that this similarity is evidence for the position that don Juan is a hoax, since Castaneda could have relied on those traditions in constructing the character of don Juan. This disagreement presupposes that Castaneda's works are intended to be read as descriptions of real-worldly events. Those who accuse him of perpetrating a hoax do not accuse him of writing fiction, but of writing books which unjustifiably claim to be nonfiction.

But why should we read his works as accounts of actual experiences in the first place? Why does that seem to be the way they want to be read and why does it matter?

Perhaps the most obvious answer to this is that we find Castaneda's books on the nonfiction shelves of the library. We know that his work with don Juan was done under the auspices of a graduate program in anthropology and that he was awarded a degree on the basis of it. We could say that the believability of Castaneda's works is an issue because we expect his descriptions to be correct on the basis of our familiarity with anthropology as a science and the impossibility of the things he describes contradicts our expectations. However, this explanation assumes exactly what it sets out to explain. The fact that Castaneda's works have been accepted by some members of the anthropological community only tells us that some anthropologists have read them as reliable accounts. It fails to explain why they considered that an appropriate way to read his works, and fails to explain what they or we must do in order to arrive at that reading.

¹This controversy is summed up in D. Noel (1976). Also see L. Foss (1973).