

## COMMENTARY

*Dear Editor:*

As a contributor to Richard de Mille's volumes, which with overwhelming validity have exposed Castaneda as a hoaxer, I felt more amused than criticized by Anton F. Kootte's article, "A Critical Look at Castaneda's Critics," in the Winter 1984 issue of *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*.

Kootte begins his defense of Castaneda with an impressive ovation for scientific objectivity and open-mindedness. But almost immediately the non sequitur of his scientific prelude becomes glaring: his occult aspirations are more than transparent. He finds occult happenings to be true until proven wrong—an approach to gathering knowledge that collides head-on with the scientific canon that accepts an assertion as truth only to the extent it can be proven.

Hence Kootte's defense of Castaneda moves on a plane essentially different from the scientific one. If he admits that, I have no quarrel with him. If, however, he insists on a scientific, empirical, and objective basis of his defensive pursuits, I fault him of gross confusion between the scientific approach and the speculative-occult-supernatural approach. His article clearly demonstrates that he is a proponent of the latter. How else am I to understand his apologia for Castaneda's withholding correct and detailed information about his "brujo" and the alleged desert environs? Kootte: ". . . there is undoubtedly some knowledge which he [Castaneda] would withhold from the reading public. This is done to . . . preserve the dignity of the spirits" (p. 103). Spirits? Kootte suddenly lets fly his true colors. Undoubtedly he is a true believer and his forum might more aptly consist of receptive Pentecostal ecstasies than reasoning academics. His defense of Castaneda is clearly based on a priori and other-worldly prejudices and

premises. Again: I have no objection to his belief as long as he refrains from claiming it to be scientific or endowed with a spark of objectivity. As far as I am concerned he is free to observe his spirits as they join St. Aquina's infinite numbers dancing celestial minuets on the head of a pin—or on the point of Castaneda's agave needle. But that, certainly, is theology and not science.

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# INTERFACES

LINGUISTICS, PSYCHOLOGY and HEALTH THERAPEUTICS

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### A Father's Advice

This dialogue was taken from a newly discovered diary of Charles Darwin.  
 Edited by Thomas J. Scheff, Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara

- Father Well, son, have you decided to accept the appointment as naturalist on HMS Beagle that your uncle arranged for you?
- Son On the contrary, father, I feel more and more that it wouldn't be the right thing for me to do.
- Father Why is that?
- Son Can you imagine me going across that immense ocean to get data that couldn't be published in any respectable journal?
- Father I can't imagine what you are talking about.
- Son Nobody these days will publish naturalistic observations. I must conduct experiments that test hypotheses, to be published.
- Father What kind of hypotheses?
- Son It doesn't matter. The journals seem to think that any hypothesis will do, as long as you use the right methods.
- Father But isn't that a waste of time and effort? The only hypothesis worth the effort of testing is a critical hypothesis. That is, a hypothesis which meets two stringent criteria: First, all competing hypotheses have been eliminated, and second, some important general principle will rise or fall depending on the outcome. Why test a descriptive hypothesis, when the outcome will make no difference to anyone?
- [Editor's note: A modern example of the testing of a critical hypothesis was the Michelson-Morley experiment. The hypothesis of ether drift met the two criteria of criticality: If light is propagated through an ether medium, it should move faster travelling toward the source than it moves transversely to the source. Their experiment eliminated all competing hypotheses, and their negative findings overthrew classical mechanics.]
- Son But why does the hypothesis have to be critical? What's the harm in rigorously testing an unimportant hypothesis? At least at the end you will know something new, that is, whether the hypothesis is likely to be true or false.
- Father That's just the point. By using an experiment, or any other standardized technique, such as a sample survey, you will have managed to learn the absolutely minimum amount of new information. In the case of an experiment, a single yes or no. [Editor: one bit of information.] Since human intuition is capable of handling an astronomical amount of information [Editor: von Neumann estimated that the brain can process 140 million bits per second.], using standardized techniques in the beginning or middle phases of an investigation is like preparing to run a marathon by shooting yourself in the foot. If you want to learn something new, use naturalistic observation. As long as you use standardized instruments like the experiment or the survey, you are unlikely to know any more than the layperson: we are only more precise and better organized. But by using naturalistic observation and their intuitive mind, researchers obtain more information, and are freer to interpret it in a sensible way. Using only standardized techniques and the analytical mind is a way of never getting ahead of commonsense.

- Son So you are saying that the only situation in which you can afford to shut out all ambient information is where you are dealing with a critical hypothesis. You know so much about the causal process that you can ignore the possibility of alternative explanation.
- Father Right. This is also one of the few situations in which sampling and measurement error are important. Since you have eliminated all substantive alternative explanations, then you must eliminate sources of error in methodology.
- Son I hope you are not telling me that tests of statistical significance and measurement reliability are inappropriate except in the testing of critical hypotheses.
- Father That's the very thing I am telling you.
- Son But critical hypotheses are extraordinarily rare. If you eliminate statistical tests, what would the criteria of publishability be?
- Father In the rare situation of a study in which the causal process has been observed, standardized systematic techniques may be used, showing that virtually all of the variance has been accounted for. Failing that, naturalistic observation should be used, reporting extremely detailed new data.
- Son But this step would kill the entire research industry.
- Father No, it would only improve it by starting over at ground zero.
- Son But what about all the research instruments I have learned to use?
- Father There are only five mandatory research instruments. The rest are optional. These are the nose, the eyes, the mind, the heart, and the mouth. You stick your nose right in the middle of the phenomenon you want to study, and keep it there until you know more than anyone else about it. You observe with your eyes, think with your mind, and feel with your heart. After you have done these things, you report with your mouth, without fear or favor. That is research.
- Son Give me your blessing, father, I am off on a long journey.