

Journey to Irony I: The Lands of Alpha and Beta

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I wish to bring this set of essays to a close by describing a hypothetical journey. This is not a journey like that undertaken by Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz. There is no Emerald City at the termination. Rather there is a very realistic world – one that is filled with contradiction and dissonance. The destination is a world of irony. The journey I will be taken is more like that taken by Gulliver. As a 21st Century Gulliver, I will be passing through three lands on the way to a land of irony.

The Road Map

To assist us in our Gulliverian travels, I will provide a road map for this journey and will then travel to the four lands. This road map will be drawn around two coordinates. One concerns the amount of contradiction to be found in a specific land. The second coordinate concerns the extent of interdependence among the people living in each land.

Consonance and Dissonance

This entire set of essays has been devoted to the exploration of contradiction. I wish to expand a bit on this notion of contradiction by suggesting that an organization (or society) filled with contradiction might be called a *World of Dissonance* (borrowing the word introduced by Kurt Lewin and expanded on by his student Leon Festinger and subsequent social-cognitive researchers).

Dissonance reigns when there are many contradictions that are deeply embedded in the minds and hearts of everyone who lives in the world. This is a world of Hard Irony. By contrast, we can look to a world in which there is very little contradiction. This can be

labeled a *World of Consonance*. There is not much disagreement in this world. Everything seems (at least on the surface) to be in alignment.

In referencing analyses from my previous essay, I would propose that a consonant world is one in which there is a high percentage of pattern and a low percentage of variation. Conversely, in a world of dissonance, variations will be found in abundance, while there is very little pattern to hold everything together.

We are also likely to find that there are only a few images of self – maybe only one – in a world of consonance. The analysis provided by Ken Gergen (2001) wouldn't make much sense in this world. By contrast, Gergen's description of the saturated self would ring true in a world of dissonance. Those dwelling in this world are likely to be saturated with many different images of self.

Disengagement and Enmeshment

I borrow the second coordinate from the world of family systems theory (and by extension, social anthropology). Some families are disengaged. Each member of the family essentially goes their own way and there isn't much "there" there regarding extensive interaction or interdependence among family members. At the level of an organization, community or entire culture, we can similarly identify "disengagement" regarding levels of interdependence.

This is a "low context" system. Each word and action can be understood independent of the interpersonal context in which the word is spoken and action is taken. This is a loosely bound system in which each element operates with considerable independence; it is hard to predict the behavior of any one element knowing the behavior of one or more other elements in the system. We can apply this analysis in labeling one end of our coordinate a *World of Disengagement*.

Residents of this world rely heavily on the insights and wisdom offered by individual members and are suspicious of any insights or words of wisdom to be offered by any collective. Often, the residents look only to themselves for insights and wisdom. They

“go it alone.” Put simply, this is a world of individualism and independence. Individual rights are celebrated and reinforced.

At the other end is a *World of Enmeshment*. In family systems theory, enmeshment describes a family in which activities of every member of the family are deeply interwoven with the activities of every other member. Everyone must stay in contact all the time with everyone else. There is heavy dependency and interdependency. A lot of interaction is taking place: there is a whole lot of “there” there.

At the level of organization, society and culture, we can describe an enmeshed system as one with “high context”. Every word and action can only be accurately understood within the specific interpersonal context in which the word is spoken or action is taken. This is a tightly bound system in which each element operates with considerable interdependence. We can readily predict the behavior of any one element knowing the behavior of one or more of the other elements in the system.

In a world of enmeshment, there are strongly shared and reinforced commitments to specific values and visions of what a “good society” should be. Collective responsibility reigns supreme. With enmeshment comes a profound sense of shared obligation to other residents. Collective intelligence is of great importance.

Residents of this world rely heavily on the insights and wisdom offered by the group and by leadership. Typically, residents don’t trust the insights and wisdom they arrive at independently. They go through their world “hand in hand “with one another. Put simply, this is a world filled with collectivism and interdependence.

A Four Quadrant Map

We can now put the two coordinates together to form a four-fold box that will serve as our map. I assign simple labels to each of the four quadrants (alpha, beta, gamma, delta)—but will offer must more vivid labels to each of these four quadrants as they are transformed into the four lands through which I will be traveling.

The Four Quadrant Map of Irony

	World of Consonance	World of Dissonance
World of Disengagement	Alpha Irony-Free	Gamma Irony of Darkness
World of Enmeshment	Beta Irony-Averse	Delta Irony of Reality

With this four-fold map in hand, we are ready to leave home and journey through the four lands.

Alpha: Land of the Lotus-Eaters [Irony-Free]

I begin my journey by traveling to a land where all is well and everyone lives a life of personal bliss. When first arriving, I am immediately drawn to a picnic (the first of four “Ps” I will encounter on my journey). It is being held in a park located in the middle of a city saddled with very little crime, but also not much civic planning.

Surrounding the park are a wide variety of enterprises. A gambling casino (which is very popular) is located next door to a lot selling high priced new cars (no old cars are to be found in this land). A pharmacy sits next to the car lot. This drug store is popular. It specializes in a wide variety of mind-bending and mood-altering drugs. This is the land of the lotus-eaters.

Exploring Alpha

I wonder over to the picnic. No one invites me to join. On the other hand, no one asks me to leave. It seems to be unimportant to anyone if I stay or leave. Perhaps, it is because everyone seems to be a bit “high” on life or some ingested ingredient. Music

floats through the air. Flutes, lyres, banjos and small drums seem to be favorites and are being played everywhere. Though there doesn't seem to be much coordination regarding the music, the disparate sounds, melodies and rhythms somehow interweave in an interesting and often pleasing manner – a bit ethereal (perhaps even heavenly).

After nibbling on some lovely snacks (there didn't seem to be any main dishes--only a wide variety of small, very tasty treats), I wandered over to a far corner of the park, where I saw a very large movie theater (almost as large as the casino located at the other end of the park). The theater was designed very much in a mashup of gothic and art deco, with a wide variety of themes being pasted together to not totally unpleasant effect.

Being trumpeted all over the theater building were advertisements for a major movie festival that is about to be launched. The festival features the early movies of Walt Disney (not the later movies which are too "complicated" and multi-layered). The first movie to be presented is "Sleeping Beauty". Mickey and Minnie Mouse are featured in many of these movies, as are Snow White and Cinderella. Nothing but happy endings and movies that always end with a Gothic-scripted message: "and they lived happily ever after . . ."

When I turned to the right, I saw a quite diverse set of other buildings on the edge of the park: a dress, coat and jewelry "emporium" (with many different fashions displayed in the window), another pharmacy (called "Euphoria"), and a craft shop (featuring strangely shaped ceramic bowls that seem to have been shaped on the wheel by a potter who was a bit high).

Next to the craft shop is a music store that is beaming music out to the park (adding to the cacophony of sounds). I soon recognize that the music beaming from the store comes from a rock opera called *Hair*. The song being played is "The Age of Aquarius". Several folks in ancient "hippy" attire wander by and start singing along with the

recording: “Golden living dreams of visions/Mystic crystal revelation/And the mind's true liberation “

I find that I have had all that I want of this land of the lotus-eaters. I don't want to return to the 1960s in the United States. I know there was the wonderful “summer of love” in San Francisco, and that we were all invited to come to a yearlong picnic and love-in with flowers in our hair. But I also know that many of the youth who came to San Francisco didn't leave when the party was over. They were addicted to drugs and often sold themselves (and their souls) as drug-dealers or prostitutes. At the very least, they were wandering about on the streets by Height and Asbury without a sense of purpose or direction.

Learning about Alpha

What did I learn about this land and my brief visit to Alpha? Everyone seems to be living blissfully alone with minimal interest in or contact with other people. There is a strong internal locus of control: everyone is following their own personal guide. As Timothy Leary so eloquently and compellingly put it: “Turn on, tune in, drop out.”

When I put on my hat as a system analyst, I identify the Land of Alpha as a quiet pool in the white-water world. Alpha seems to be a sanctuary – but I'm not sure what it is from which everyone is escaping or about which they are reflecting (other than their own dropped-out exploration of some internal self). I don't find much “glue” in this land. There is not much concern about a collective good (though there does seem to be “peace in the valley.”).

I did find while dwelling briefly in this land that I was a bit more relaxed and I wanted to sing along with the folks wandering by the record store. I would love to see an age of Aquarius arrive as at least a partial antidote to the stress I am likely to experience in my journey to the other three lands. But time is short, and I do need to travel on toward Irony.

I pause for a moment before moving on. I'm not sure why I have begun this journey. Couldn't I remain unreflective and enjoy the moment of bliss--as apparently is the case with most of the lotus-eaters in Alpha? But what happens when, like the flower children of the 1960s, the Alphians have to return home to one of the other lands? Or do they stay on the streets of San Francisco?

Beta: Land of the True-Believers [Irony-Aversive]

As I enter the Land of Beta, I am drawn to the sounds of a big brass band. It is hard to avoid these sounds, for they are being piped through loudspeakers located on each street corner in this carefully laid out city. I find that the actual sounds of the band are coming from a large boulevard located a couple of blocks from where I have landed.

Exploring Beta

I walk to this boulevard and find many people assembled on the sidewalks, watching a very large marching band that fills the boulevard, accompanied by many people who are marching alongside or behind the band. There is a parade!! (the second 'P') The band is playing "76 Trombones" from Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*. There actually seems to be 76 trombone players marching beside an equal number of trumpeters, along with a half dozen tuba players, and a host of drummers and other brass and woodwind instrumentalists. A host of baton twirlers and many, many flags accompany the band.

As I look down the boulevard, I see a majestic palace at its terminus. The band and crowd are moving toward the palace and banners are waving in the breeze on each side of the street, declaring that we are all "safe and prosperous!" and that "victory is at hand!" I can see from a distance that grandstands have been set up in front of and to the side of palace. Apparently, some speeches are to be delivered and perhaps some more playing of the band once it arrives at the palace. I suspect that the many loudspeakers now conveying the music of the band music will soon be deployed for broadcasting the speeches to be delivered in front of the palace.

I walk down the boulevard – in the opposite direction from where everyone else is moving or marching. I am pushing through the crowd and creating a bit of a disturbance. Am I counter-dependent (as the psychotherapists might say) or at least non-patriotic in moving against the flow of the crowd? I walk under an arch that spans the boulevard. It is commemorating the war dead from an ancient conflict.

When I look up to the other end of the boulevard, I see a very large, all-white movie “palladium” where a movie festival is announced on large banners (what is it about movie festivals when I am on my journey!!). The festival, which will begin in one week, is featuring the movies of John Wayne and Sylvester Stallion. Right now, the palladium is playing *Patton* and there are pictures everywhere of George C. Scott in uniform as the great General Patton.

In reflecting on my “swimming upstream” against the movement of the crowd and band, I decide to talk briefly with some of the folks who are walking (or marching) to the palace. I ask several of them what is being celebrated. They look aghast and asked (with considerable emotion in their voice) why I am even asking the question. One of the folks with whom I connected, simply moved away from me and pointed me out to several of his colleagues. I was clearly an “outsider” and apparently was assumed to be a “non-believer.” I felt uncomfortable and clearly, I am “a stranger in a strange land.”

I wanted to leave immediately, but decided to look around a bit more, before journeying to the third land. When I wandered away from the festivities and the parade, I discovered a well-ordered world. Each street was anointed with trees and flower beds that were carefully and thoughtfully landscaped and maintained. I walked by a record store, where once again I heard music playing. It was not band music nor was it music from an American Broadway hit. Rather, it was the stirring music from Richard Wagner’s *Das Reingold*. Specifically, it was the “Entry of the Gods into Valhalla”

show piece. I knew this “barn-burner” from my brief (and quite ambivalent) study of Wagnerian opera.

This land of Beta brought back memories of other lands (in the real world) that I have visited during my youth. There were the magical theme parks in California. First, there was *Knott's Berry Farm* (with its Old West Village – that has expanded in recent years to include many other features). There was then the opening of Disneyland in the same community (Walter Knott and Walt Disney were apparently good friends, and both were politically conservative). I remember the parades and fireworks held every evening at Disneyland and the many rides operating in a diverse set of lands –with “Main Street” being the core meeting place for all of the lands.

Other, more recent, theme parks come to mind. Most of them seem to be in the business of creating a specific (often utopian) vision of a future world in which technology has solved most (if not all) of our problems. Or (like *Knott's Berry Farm*) they draw us back to a time when law-and-order was in place (supposedly) or soon would be established by an honest and brave sheriff. These were the good old days (that never really existed) or the great new days that are just around the corner (and probably will never arrive). Most importantly, these are days of a unified, clear and coherent message. One can readily become and remain a true believer in such a world.

Learning About Beta

As I leave the land of Beta, I reflect on the nature of utopian thought and the allure of true and sustained belief in one set of “truths”. There are two (and only two) alternatives (truth and fiction), and it is my responsibility to make the right choice. Fortunately, as a resident of Beta, I would be assisted by other people and institutions in this dualistic world. Everyone and everything around me are crying out the truth.

Beta is a land in which an external locus of control is the coin of the psychological realm. I don't have to look for internal sources of truth and verification. This difficult work is done for me by the people in authority and by the powerful rituals and related

symbols of power and veracity that saturate my daily life. There is order, stability and continuity. Patterns are prevalent and reinforced by virtually everything that exists in the land of Beta

My more detached analysis suggests that the land of Beta operates like a smooth flowing stream – one of the subsections in the white-water environment. There is a powerful flow of water that is not easily modified or terminated – as we all know when reading about attempts to control floods in the real world. Is it any wonder that I felt like someone swimming upstream when seeking to move away from the palace and crowd? I felt alone and alienated as the outsider and non-believer. To borrow from David Riesman (1950), I was lonely in a crowd and alienated from those people with whom I was interacting. I was not marching to the same drum as everyone else. I felt threatened in (and by) this environment of true belief.

There is one other piece of white-water analysis to offer. The Beta environment is to be found not just in the rapidly flowing stream. It is also to be found in the whirlpools – especially when those living in this land face some opposition. Things begin to swirl around and drive deeper. The utopian vision suddenly becomes a dystopia. I am reminded of the Nazi era of the 1930s and 1940s in Germany and the McCarthy Era (and Loyalty Oaths) of the 1950s in the United States.

Heroes of Beta – such as McCarthy, Hitler and Mao – become despots and their minions becomes accusers, torturers and mass murderers. Even the creators of wonderful children stories and fantasy lands (such as Walt Disney) have their very dark sides and are noted not just for their cultural gifts, but also the horrible way in which they often treated their employees.

Something more was operating in Beta. I must be honest about what really happened when I was dwelling in this land. While lingering briefly, I found that there was a stirring of my soul. I felt passionately about my own values and found resolve in my own beliefs. I was righteous in my critique of Beta – thinking about Eugene McCarthy,

Adolph Hitler, and Mao Se Tung. There is a right and a wrong. There are good guys and bad guys. There are the evil people who are dualists and the good people who are not dualists. I was dualistic in my critique of dualism. Hard Irony reigns supreme!

In the real world, we do find appropriate causes worth fighting for and perhaps even worth dying for. Heroism does exist and there is something more than expedience and agility. But I worry about how seductive this land of Beta can be and how easy it is for me to be drawn into the banner waving and labeling of other people with whom I agree and with whom I disagree (on some points).

Richard Rorty's (1989) emphasis on engaging those thought and people who are "unfamiliar" doesn't seem to hold much traction in Beta. I appreciate the courage to be found in this land, but hate the stupidity (see, there I am being judgmental again!!). I hope to take the courage with me to the next two lands, but not the judgment and attendant stupidity to be found in Beta.

References

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