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How to Deal with Reality when We're not Built To

T.J. ZAWADZKI, STEPHANIE J. ZAWADZKI, AND MACIEJ A. CISOWSKI

We do not have the ideal world, such as we would like, where morality is easy because cognition is easy. Where one can do right with no effort because he can detect the obvious.

—Baynes in *The Man in the High Castle*, p. 236

Philip K. Dick's writing can be infuriatingly confusing. It feeds readers many ambiguous signals that convey no real sense of closure—and *The Man in the High Castle* is no exception. Perhaps bewildering the audience is the intent, not a side-effect.

We crave closure for many of the questions we find in Dick's books, and he consistently denies us any real sense of arriving at definite answers. Lingering confusion and the gnawing feeling that the true nature of reality is just out of our grasp have been the dominant themes of both Dick's narratives and philosophical and psychological studies for decades. Together, they all attest to how important understanding and embracing confusion can be in the business of dealing with reality.

Detecting Disrupting the Obvious

Much of Dick's writing can be read as an internal dialogue, telling the story of a person who is venturing into the outer-most limits of his ability to understand reality. Through his ventures, Dick shows us just how universally limited human cognition actually is, and how he just can't seem to shake the feeling that his brain may not have his best interest at heart.

Dick and his characters are unusual, statistically speaking. A person stuck in an uncomfortable state of indecision and confusion is considered psychologically anomalous. Philosophy begins in wonder, claimed Socrates, but most of us effectively avoid wondering too much about the overwhelming world around us. We are great at building simplified models of the world that fit neatly within the bounds of our comprehension.

There's a mountain of evidence that the vast majority of people are excellent at both ignoring and misrepresenting reality. In *The Man in the High Castle*, characters' lives are shaken when those simplified models come into question. As the characters' coping strategies break down, they react differently to the signs that another, parallel reality might exist. What ties these various reactions together are the characters' efforts to rebuild reality into a single, predictable, and sensible whole.

Cognition Is Easy Hard

The world we live in is far more complex than any one person can comprehend. In the mid-twentieth century, psychologists (and, apparently, Dick) were simultaneously inspired by the boom in technology and horrified by the crimes of the recent two world wars. And so, they sought the limits of human understanding and moral decision making. They didn't have to look nearly as far as they had hoped.

Psychologists quickly discovered just how much information our brains are tasked with processing and how poorly they cope with funneling that information into our consciousness. Over the decades, thousands of psychological experiments have demonstrated the surprisingly constrained limits of human understanding. Our brains have incredibly short attention spans and an extremely tight bottleneck through which they ingest the world's information. It turns out that our brains are fundamentally lazy to a point where research psychologists started calling the human mind a *cognitive miser*. Nearly every study seemed to uncover a new way that our brains prevent themselves from spending energy to, you know, *think*.

People are not sponges that passively absorb all the information they're exposed to. To be able to process and react to our highly complex world in a meaningful way, we need social and cognitive programs—a kind of brain software that helps us organize and filter information. The conditioning we experience as children (in addition to some basic programming that we receive right out of the box) teaches us how to perceive and understand (and distort) the world, allowing us to become functioning members of society.

Patting ourselves on the heads and stroking our bellies at the same time is already a tall order for our brains—not to mention keeping us upright citizens who salute the proper flag and reasonably respond to infinitely complex moral dilemmas. To deal with the incessant demands of life, our cognitive misers have developed endless arrays of coping strategies which fundamentally change the way we view and interpret the world.

Our brains are incredibly selfish and insincere, hiding from us just how many cognitive blind spots they really have. The research is in: our brains are lazy and they're lying to us, especially when we're under pressure. Left alone, few of us would rationally and

Where One Can Do ~~Right~~ Wrong with No Effort

Situations like Tagomi's are where Dick's views on the discomfort of cognitive and moral confusion shine. Following the murders, a traumatized Tagomi swims in a muddled reality. He doesn't know what to do next. He doesn't know how or if he can ever go back to his old way of thinking. He wanders to a park bench. Uncomfortable and overwhelmed, he grips a small token of reality—a shapeless, formless piece of jewelry. He stares at it, seeking an answer, desperate to know why his life has led him to this point. What could possibly justify his actions? However, he does not seek any external justification, an outside excuse to explain away his shame and discomfort.

In the height of his confusion, drowning in dissonance, but refusing to be fooled to fall into a cognitively biased assessment of his actions, Tagomi becomes the only character in *The Man in the High Castle* to be transported to a parallel universe—one in which his murderous actions never occurred *because they never had to*. Pushing through this cognitive agony allows Tagomi to experience a side of reality only otherwise accessed by *The Man in the High Castle*'s characters indirectly through spiritual practice (via the Oracle known as the *I Ching*). His experience might be Dick's dramatic example of transcending the self to better understand our place in the world. This is the case even if that understanding means a farewell to his peace of mind and a warm welcome to cognitive and moral anguish.

While Tagomi is the character closest to experiencing a cognitive revolution and achieving any degree of true clarity, other characters tread through calamity into new modes of thinking as well. Juliana also goes through murderous and near-death experiences which propel her toward evidence revealing alternate realities.

Karl Jaspers, a German-Swiss philosopher and psychiatrist, called circumstances that elicit such illuminating responses *limit situations*. Like cognitive dissonance, *limit situations* are deeply confusing and bring extreme discomfort. These uncomfortable situations force us to go beyond our usual boundaries where we happily stew in cognitive limitations.

What happens when you see your sister gunned down by the Kempeitai or you fall in love with a woman you've pledged to kill? According to Jaspers, events like these are opportunities to mutiny against our cognitive misers and acquire a new mode of thinking—one that goes past simply changing our minds. Unfortunately, limit situations often push people beyond language, so their experiences can't easily be written down or relayed to someone else.

To show the unnamable is an artistic goal of many, including Philip K. Dick. He weaves elaborate narratives of confusion, ambiguity, and deprivation. Both his characters and readers are purposefully perplexed and overwhelmed by the worlds that Dick describes, to a point where they often succumb to radical skepticism themselves and question the very foundations of their realities.

Dick often provides only a single, relief-like product to his readers by guiding his characters through confusion to perceptual epiphany. In *The Man in the High Castle*, the Oracle guides some characters through crisis with no personal growth, while others are brought spiritual and cognitive revelations—and mortal danger. Radical skeptics likely wouldn't be surprised by the paradoxical nature of these outcomes. To them, it's only logical that paradoxical challenges are best explained by the absurd.

Morality Is ~~Easy~~ Hard

In Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, challenging our perceptions is the role of spirituality and its scripture. The *I Ching* is revered as a window to collective wisdom. But, it doesn't really give the characters the clarity they seek. At best, it offers a blurry glimpse of what might be happening behind the scenes.

Unlike in the TV show, readers of the novel, *The Man in the High Castle*, will find most major characters seeking the *I Ching*'s guidance to help cope with their confusion. Dick's Tagomi, Juliana, and Frank all use it to justify their decisions. In the book, Juliana is so familiar with the *I Ching* that she alone is able to uncover the secret of the Man in the High Castle. After numerous consultations with the *I Ching*, Frank is able to create art that inspires Tagomi's cognitive revolution. Even the book's characters who don't directly appeal to the *I Ching* are influenced by its direction. Robert Childan is finally able to make a non-conformist, deeply moral decision against his own material interest because he is given a lecture on the spiritual importance of *Wu* (and Frank's *I Ching*-inspired jewelry is chock full of *Wu*).

The *I Ching* is supposedly able to offer insight far greater than any single brain could manage to produce. Like his characters, Dick sought direction out of the fog of his confusion in spirituality that relies on collective wisdom. It feels natural that his characters glimpse realities beyond their personal biases after they delve into ancient philosophies written millennia ago by countless people—it's what their author did. As he was writing the novel, Dick consulted the *I Ching* to resolve major plotlines and conflicts in the story, making it an integral creative part of the work. In turn, the book's Man in the High Castle writes his book (*The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*) by consulting the *I Ching*, making it an integral part of the characters' story. In contrast, the only person using the *I Ching* in the show is Tagomi.

Such as We Would Like

Did Amazon's *The Man in the High Castle* deprive the rest of its characters of the paradoxical revelations that the *I Ching* delivers in the book? Not necessarily. The subversive magic of the *I Ching* is brought to life through a battery of scattered newsreels, forming a videographic version of *The Grasshopper Lies Heavy*. Through these films, the power to confuse characters and audiences remains firmly intact. Both versions of *The Man in the High Castle* drown everyone involved in limit situations and dissonance-inducing moral dilemmas, making both versions of *The Man in the High Castle* gloriously confusing alternate histories of each other.

The Man in the High Castle is full of signs that elicit meaningfulness—but rarely any immediate clarity. It's a challenging stream of consciousness that by design can't be bothered to be a standard cohesive whole with a satisfying conclusion. So the next time you sit down to read or watch *The Man in the High Castle*, let yourself confront your own perception of reality. And do what many of

peacefully come to terms with the existence of parallel realities, even if the evidence was clear as day on a screen right in front of our eyes.

Psychologists revel in such self-deprecating knowledge. They've spent decades cataloging and defining what they like to call *cognitive biases* that demonstrate just how stupid we are as proud members of our species. They've found hundreds of them. These biases affect every aspect of our thinking. You don't have to be Obergruppenführer Smith to be susceptible to the *just world bias*, which allows him to dismiss his war atrocities as "necessary evils" in the face of a people (his *own* people, by the way) whose "decadence" was adequate justification for their country's subsequent division and occupation. Because, in a just world, there are no unjust punishments.

These hundreds of cognitive biases suggest a fact which Dick was equally thrilled to revel in: *our perception of reality is a creative process*. Neither he nor psychologists were the first ones to toy with this idea. Philosophy's *radical skeptics* have a long-standing tradition of undercutting assumptions about what's considered obvious, real, and objective.

Why is this *skepticism* so radical (and possibly *far out*)? It questions the validity of our most fundamental experiences and thoughts. Here's a thought experiment: Bertrand Russell's "five-minute hypothesis" challenges readers to prove that the universe did not spring into existence five minutes ago and instill in them a complete set of false memories. Radical skeptics challenge the very foundations of reality with the same tools that other philosophers use to build apparently seamless rules of linear reasoning. Likewise, *The Man in the High Castle* skillfully builds a compelling and feasible alternate world, just so it can leave us confused about this new world's fundamental nature.

Philosophy's radical skepticism, mainstream psychology, and *The Man in the High Castle* share a common sentiment: our brains aren't able to handle much more than an unshakable sense that we are competent in dealing with reality. Instead of freezing our mental processes in an endless loop of trying to prove that the world exists, we move on. In order to function, we need closure and a feeling that the worldview we've created does not contain glaring holes and inconsistencies. So, our brains manufacture a view of the world that works around skeptical questions.

Creating an Ideal a Justified World

"But I thought my brain and I were close . . . Aren't we on the same side?"

Unfortunately, you're not. Your brain is limited, selfish, constantly under assault by your senses, and incessantly bothered for direction from your body. Your brain needs an easy way to protect itself from you and the world around you. It needs a blanket to hide under.

Consistency is a Snuggie for your brain. Consistency makes your brain feel good, like warm apple pie in your favorite Canon City diner. As soon as any new obstacle or decision crosses your path, your brain seeks its comfort zone in the familiar and the known. Feeling consistent lets your brain go into autopilot mode, content with its cognitive frugality. No extra thought wasted.

But, sadly for our little cerebral misers, we're sometimes forced to make choices in situations that are radically new, with no readymade answer, or to act in ways that we don't believe are morally right. These situations cause our brains to panic, creating what psychologist Leon Festinger called *cognitive dissonance*.

Presenting a brain with anything that challenges its usual functioning causes great discomfort to its owner. While Dick was writing *The Man in the High Castle*, Festinger was running experiments that showed just how easy it is to instill this deep psychological discomfort. Cognitive dissonance occurs every time we act inconsistently with our existing beliefs, feelings, or previous actions. It causes intense emotional and physical irritation, like needing to pee with no bathroom in sight. After having his worldview challenged in many ways and being forced to act against his fundamental values, Tagomi tries urgently and endlessly to restore his balance. No wonder! His brain was experiencing a dissonance overload.

A lengthy conversation with a radical skeptic might result in a similar response. The questions they have for us, not unlike the confusing events that *The Man in the High Castle*'s characters have to deal with, can burrow into our deepest sense of self and upset the unwavering certainty with which we assume the world to be a concrete, real, and stable object.

Usually when a new situation appears that requires we think or act inconsistently with our previous beliefs or behavior, our brains immediately want to know who's to blame. If there is something outside of us telling us how to act or think or feel, then there's no problem. We have an excuse, an *external justification*, for our inconsistency. Voilà! We were only following orders. Dissonance dissolved. Feeling consistent again brings the needed sense of a satisfying resolution.

In the show, Frank Frink, a previously upstanding citizen of the Pacific States of America, has an impressive battery of such external excuses for his newfound rebellious and dangerous behavior. Frank's cellmate talks him into opposing the Kempeitai and ultimately expediting his sister's death. The Kempeitai's murderous actions inspire his assassination plot of a peace-loving crown prince. Juliana Crain's recklessness leads Frank into absurd standoffs with the Yakuza, the Resistance, the Kempeitai, and the Nazis. And while his actions might be seriously inconsistent with his previously cautious character, he has plenty of external justifications.

Not everyone can be so fortunate. For Joe Blake and John Smith finding excuses will not be so easy. Joe, a Nazi double agent infatuated with a Resistance member, will have to figure out how to reconcile his allegiance to the Reich and his love for the woman he's been ordered to kill. John, on the other hand, will have to decide whether it will be easier to kill his own son or try to keep him alive in the Reich's America.

When there's no one else to blame, *internal justification* is the only cure for cognitive dissonance. We simply have to change our perception (of ourselves or the world) in order to stay consistent and eliminate any lingering confusion. Both Joe and John will have to either change their belief in the Nazi ideology, or change their beliefs about the people they hold dear. Only once they settle on an internal justification can their brains kick back and click the consistency autopilot back on.

In the book, Tagomi, an otherwise balanced and peaceful man, murders two Nazi assassins disguised as street hooligans. Baynes fears that Tagomi will never mentally recover from having committed the murders. The mental math is just too clear: two lives killed to save one cannot be justified. The evil Tagomi has committed does not fit with his understanding of a balanced, Taoist world.

Dick's characters do.

When confronted with confusion, force your brain out from its warm blanket of consistency and into the turbulent limits of cognitive dissonance and radical skepticism. Turn on *Radio Free Albemuth*. Tune in to the frequencies of the *Vast Active Living Intelligence System*. And drop out of the rut of your own reality with some *Chew-Z*.