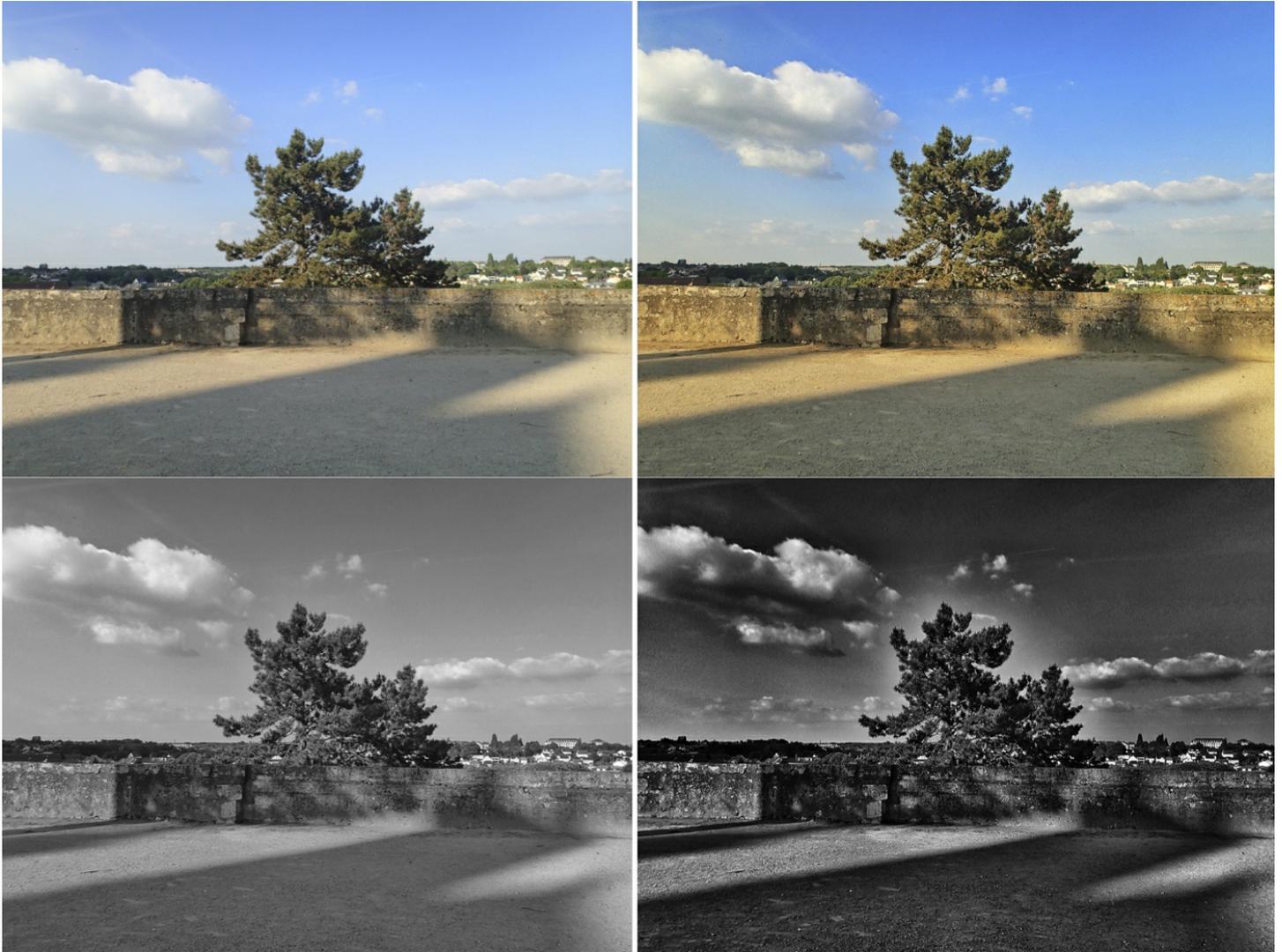


Pedro de Alcantara

The Quaternity



We're all familiar with a *trinity*: three entities, objects, or people that belong together. The most famous trinity is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

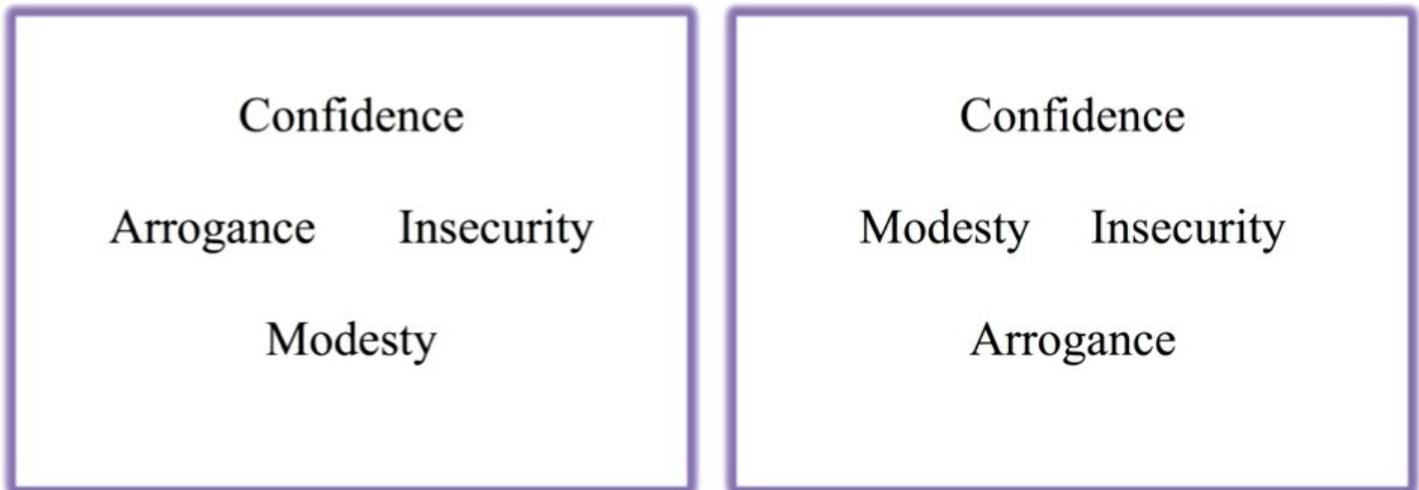
A *quaternity* is four entities, objects, or people that belong together. Strong examples abound: the four cardinal points, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the four seasons, the four temperaments.

There are down-to-earth versions as well, which you can readily employ. For instance, you can present four arguments when trying to help a client. Or you can lay down four objects on your desk when setting up a writing session: laptop, cell phone, notepad, pencil. It's possible that the four-ness of the arrangement will be helpful to your creativity, or to your arguing, or to your client. That's the theory, anyway.

I've been employing the term *quaternity* to mean something very specific: four strong words in related, oppositional dynamics, arrayed in a cross-like arrangement. North and south together form an intimately related couple, and east west and form another intimately related couple. And the two couples themselves have some sort of relationship. Perhaps they're antonyms, perhaps they are paradoxically "the same and different," perhaps they're twins but one in light and the other in shade.

The example I've often used to start the work on quaternities is "confidence, modesty, arrogance, insecurity." You

can pair “confidence and arrogance” as opposites, and “modesty and insecurity” as opposites; and consider that the two pairs have a close, familial relationship. Or you can pair “confidence and modesty” and “arrogance and insecurity,” thereby establishing a whole other set of relationships among the words.



There are 26 ways of setting these words in a cross-like arrangement. Each way has its power to make us think about the subject matter at hand. If you start practicing the art of quaternity, you’ll soon use intuition to settle on what is for you the most powerful of the 26 arrangements, and you won’t have to go through all of them before “knowing.” But a little mathematical training has never hurt somebody’s intuitive powers! Lay out the four words on paper. If you’d like to be really thorough, write down all 26 arrangements, using the actual words rather than abbreviations. Then choose the arrangement that speaks the loudest to you, and ponder it.

Ponder the meaning of each word as you understand it today; perhaps look at the word’s etymology in a dictionary; catch yourself having visceral reactions to a word or to the meaning you assign to the word. Maybe “arrogance” gives you the creeps, or “modesty” sets you off on a head trip. Do you see yourself as “confident” or “modest”? How about people in your circle? Make a list of a few friends and family members, and see where they live in the territory delineated by the four words.

Generally speaking, words are changeable; they mean different things to different people. And, generally speaking, many people assume—wrongly and dangerously—that the way they use their words is, in fact, not individual to them but universally shared. “Everybody knows the meaning of ‘arrogance,’” you might say. In truth, people are more likely to disagree than to agree about definitions and meanings. We all define our concepts according to a mixture of objective and subjective elements that include socio-cultural and national habits, individual biases, and so on. In short, we look at the world with our own filters. Quaternities can trigger an awareness of these mental filters, particularly when you share a quaternity with someone else or with a group. One of the exercise’s benefits comes from your clarifying words, concepts, and the emotions behind them—and, most important, from your understanding that there exists no shared, universal, objective definitions of words. If you come from a family that prized self-restraint, you might see arrogance in anyone who displays confidence—although the two terms are, in fact, different. If you come from a family of high-achieving extroverts, you might see every instance of modesty as a form of insecurity. “Acknowledge the filter,” as Pat Morita, Yogi Berra, or Obi Wan-Kenobi might say.

The territory delineated by confidence, modesty, insecurity, and arrogance is charged. To enter the territory is to face strong emotions and to confront some pertinent identity questions. In truth, a well-chosen quaternity will always be charged—both because the words in it are important, and because the arrangement itself (of related and opposing pairs) has a multiplying effect on the words. In a quaternity, the whole is much bigger than the sum of its parts.

Quaternities have been the primary working tool for some of my lessons, and on several occasions they were very effective. When you listen to a friend, student, or client talking about a problem or situation, you can sometimes catch a word or two that seem particularly revealing or urgent to you. Catch the one or two words, and devise a quaternity based on them. Then see if the student or client might use the quaternity to zero in on his or her issues—and, through a sudden, enhanced, and transformed sense of the issues, arrive at a solution for the problem at hand. The quaternity offers you a mirror or a self-portrait of sorts: the way you respond to its four charged words reveals a lot about how you think and feel.



Some of the quaternities that have cropped up in my coaching sessions:

- **Confidence arrogance modesty insecurity**
- **Containment dispersion freedom rigidity**
- **Love fear pain joy**
- **Intoxicated sober private public**
- **Process result conscious unconscious**
- **True false fiction nonfiction**
- **Trust faith self other**
- **Positive reality projection negative**

My ever-evolving understanding of quaternities is inspired by the work of Carl Jung. The Internet has plenty of materials about quaternities and Jung. Here's a suggested entry point:

<http://www.redicecreations.com/article.php?id=1722>

