

Illusion

by F.K., F.T.S.

Reprinted from "Theosophical Siftings" Volume 4

The Theosophical Publishing Society, England

WE all know the meaning of the word illusion. It means a false show, a fallacious appearance, fascination, a something which is not what it seems to be. We speak of illusions and illusive imaginations, etc., meaning something wrongly perceived by the senses or ill-discriminated by the judgment.

An illusion may have so much the appearance of truth as to seem perfectly genuine and impossible to distinguish from reality during the time it lasts. For example: in moments of strong perturbation of mind it is impossible to form a clear conception conformable to the real state of things. The angry man becomes unjust, the timid sees dangers everywhere, both are in a state of illusion, causing them to act otherwise than they would have done in a calm and normal condition.

The same thing takes place in some of our dreams. What a show of actuality and verisimilitude they possess for the person who dreams! Yet to the waking consciousness they clearly show themselves to be simply the results of outer accidental causes. From all this it is evident that illusion very often, so to speak, occupies the place of reality in our experiences, and that which possesses the most vivid semblance of actuality may be nothing more than an illusion.

Let us, however, admit that even the illusive may be said to have a kind of reality for us as long as we continue on that plane on which we conceive of it as real. The hallucinations of dream are realities for the consciousness of the dreamer, but only for so long as his dream lasts.

If now, from the ordinary conception of the word illusion we proceed to the Theosophical meaning of it, we shall find that here the term signifies much more. As we have learnt from the Secret Doctrine: "The unmanifested Logos is the first ray from the Absolute, emanating from it at the beginning of the Manvantara and afterwards differentiating through numberless gradations of spiritual and corporeal existences, down to the material world which, for us, constitutes the outer reality. This Absolute, the causeless Cause, from which, the first Cause (Logos) of the whole universe has emanated, is now, properly speaking, the only Real, whereas the Manifested — Logos included — is an illusion. The whole Manvantara, with its spiritual, as well as its material, contents, is thus a period of illusion seen from the standpoint of the Absolute, and this is the so-called Maha-maya, or the great illusion. But, besides this most general and comprehensive conception, the word illusion has also in Theosophy a more limited meaning. It connotes the commonly so-called exterior, objective [Page 12] reality, which we may perceive with our external senses, and it is on the subject of this illusion that I wish to say a few words.

To deal first with the expression "the exterior objective reality". This is, properly speaking, only a loose

and inaccurate mode of saying *the image our senses represent to us of reality*. What we actually experience is, in fact neither anything external, nor objective, nor any reality at all. The image, for example, which the sense of sight presents to us of any object seems something wholly exterior and objective, but cannot be identical with the reality of that object — does not exhaust the properties of the "thing in itself". Nevertheless, we are so accustomed always to confound those images, created by ourselves, with the true reality, that we seldom recognise the possibility that what we perceive with our senses can be anything other than the most imperturbable, external reality independent of ourselves. If we touch an object with our hands we never think that its firmness or softness, its form or other qualities, which our touch perceives, can be, and really are, essentially dependent upon the quality of our own nerves. On the contrary, we regard these properties as something belonging to the object itself, and thus assume it to be a reality independent of and outside ourselves. But if our hand had the firmness of iron, and if the nerves, which branch in every direction within it, were less sensible to tactile impressions, the same object which now seems firm and hard would appear to be soft and pliant.

Let us, then, accustom ourselves to regard all the experiences of our senses, on what we call the plane of the external reality, as *images*, essentially dependent on the nature of our own organs of sense, and we shall thus make it possible for us to acquire a truer knowledge of the nature of existence.

Now the question which arises is the following: — if the reality we think we perceive with our senses is thus a representation built up of *images*, how are they constructed? Are they true or false, trustworthy or not? The answer is rendered easy if we note the following considerations. It is acknowledged that each human being differs in some respects and in various degrees from all others, and this difference necessarily influencing not only the five senses, but also the manner in which they are used, it follows that the images and experiences which those impressions of the senses give to a particular individual must always be to a certain extent different from the images and experiences of other people.

The greater the differences between people in general, the more widely those images must differ from each other, and if we think of a case in point, once quoted by Annie Besant, that of four persons of whom *one* has only the sense of sight developed, another only the sense of hearing, the third that of taste, and the last only the sense of smell, these differences obviously [Page 13] become so pronounced that none of those four persons would recognise anything of what the other three described concerning their experiences. One may now begin to understand how an ordinary human being, endowed with the usual five senses, would find great difficulty in recognizing all the impressions of a perfectly clairvoyant person, which he, with the help of his sixth sense, experiences and relates. Thus, as all human beings experience in some degree, and many human beings in a high degree, differences in the images of the same reality, it must appear evident that those images, differing so much among themselves, cannot all be perfectly true, nor any of them fully reliable and exhaustive, but, on the contrary, they must all be more or less illusive.

The certainty of this fact becomes indisputable if we consider that man is a being in the course of development. As long as this is the case he will continually be acquiring new powers, which will enable him to embrace with his consciousness larger and truer views or images of reality, and, this being so, it is evident that the images he now, in his comparatively undeveloped state, receives, cannot possibly be absolutely true or perfect.

We have thus seen that our ideas concerning what we are accustomed to call objective realities may often be false and must always be incomplete — that they are, in fact illusive. The, so-called, objective reality, as conceived by ourselves, is no reality, but only a combination of those illusive images received or put forth, as the case may be, by the senses. But in whatever degree our consciousness during its development assimilates truth and perfection, to that extent this so-called reality will approximate towards the true Reality which is the basis of the former .

The veil which conceals the true reality will be worn thinner and more thin, and the illusion will become more transparent. Now what is this true Reality underlying the veil of illusion? Theosophy teaches, and our innermost feelings tell us, that it is the Absolute, the all-pervading Unity, the causeless Cause, the Parabrahm of the sages of the Orient, which Logos itself — the highest form of existence — is not able to conceive of as it is in *itself*, but only as clothed in the concealing veil of Mulaprakriti.

We must now consider the practical side of this question, because it has a practical side, and one of the greatest importance. It is as follows: We must learn to distinguish between perception and reality, if we do not mean to exclude ourselves from every possibility of a true conception of the all-pervading Unity — the only basis on which true brotherhood can be founded. We must learn to see the difference between that illusion which the senses represent to us as reality, and the true reality lying behind it; for if we, in spite of every reasonable objection, maintain our right to consider the external objects, as they appear to the senses to be true reality and not transitory images, we run the risk of becoming so much infatuated [Page 14] with objects alone, as they appear to us, that we may retard, or render really impossible, the development of those new senses and capabilities which might show things to us in a truer light.

If man, climbing up the steep mountains of evolutionary progress, stops to admire the views which present themselves from the standpoint he has already reached, he will become indifferent to the still wider expanses which beckon him on, and he will forget to strive ever onwards and upwards and, perhaps, at last miss his goal.

The *Bhagavat Gita* says, "The turbulent senses and organs violently snatch away the heart, even of the wise man striving after perfection. He, having controlled the senses and organs, remains at rest on me, his true Self." This true Self is the Higher Self, the Inner Voice. As it is said in *The Voice of the Silence*, "When he (the Lanoo) has ceased to hear the many he may discern the One — the inner sound which kills the outer".