

Is the World an Illusion?

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We have all heard people say that the world is an illusion. But why would anyone say that? (Imagine the sound of bare knuckles knocking on a solid table: knock, knock, knock.) It sure seems real to me! But wait a minute. Does the apparent solidness of the world prove that it is not an illusion? No, it doesn't, and we will look into that point a little bit later.

But for right now, let's clarify the definition of an illusion. *An illusion is something that exists in a deceptive way.* Yet it seems to me that many people mistakenly think that an illusion is something that does not exist at all.

This misunderstanding is fairly common. For example, one minute someone will say that time is an illusion, and then the next minute, they'll say that time does not exist. But it has to exist in order for it to be an illusion. It has to exist in some way in order for us to experience it. Whatever time is, it is experientially real to us.

When someone says, "The world is an illusion," what do they mean? Are they trying to say that the world does not exist? Perhaps. And if they are, well, I would not agree with them. But if they are saying that the world exists in a deceptive way, then I would agree with them. So two people could actually disagree and yet think that they do agree, all because of a misunderstanding of the definition.

Now let's consider a rainbow. It looks like an object made of light floating in the sky but that is a misleading image. Certain circumstances are required to create the perception of this colorful visual image and these circumstances are real. The experience of seeing this image in the sky is also real. Yet this image, this rainbow, is not really an object made of light floating in the sky. That is a false idea. Of course this false idea will be thrown away when its falseness is discovered but the situation that led to the false idea does indeed exist so it would be silly to dismiss all of this illusion as "unreal."

With the illusion of the rainbow in mind, perhaps you will prefer to modify the definition of an illusion to something like this: *a set of circumstances that can lead to a misunderstanding.*

Next, let's consider an illusion that shows how having only part of the picture can confuse us. Consider the magic trick where a magician puts his assistant in a big box and cuts her in half with a saw. What we see is real. We see her head, her arms and some feet sticking out of the box. Yet we all know that we are not seeing the whole picture and that there is another person hiding in the box who makes up the other half of the assistant. This is what creates the illusion of one person being cut into two pieces.

Even though our physical senses are doing their jobs perfectly, our incomplete picture seems to show that a false idea is true. Our incorrect assumption that the feet that we see are the feet of the assistant leads to the false conclusion that the assistant was cut in half. Once we see the bigger picture, we understand the true nature of the situation and we no longer believe the false idea pointed to by the illusion.

But notice that there is something interesting about all good magic tricks. Even when we know the secret to the trick, if it is performed well, it still gives us the impression that something impossible just happened. So the illusion is persistent. Even though we are not tricked by the illusion in the deepest way, the false idea still appears as if it is true and this is why we enjoy the magic show.

Now let's consider the illusion of the movies. Even though the art form is called "the movies," you have never seen a single moving picture. Instead of true motion, many still pictures are displayed one at a time so rapidly that we perceive what seems to be moving images. And again, even when we know the truth, the illusion still persists. You always perceive what appears to be smooth motion even though this motion *does not exist objectively in the world*, it only exists subjectively. *It only exists in your experience.*

And notice the difference between the movies and the magic trick. With the magician, we knew we could not see into the box. That was an obvious limitation and it led to our investigation of what was being hidden from us. But with the movies, there is no obvious deficiency in our ability to perceive what is going on. So we don't question our experience or doubt the existence of the moving images. We might never wake up to the true reality of the situation unless someone tells us about it. (Hmm, food for thought.)

Now let's talk about the apparent motion of the sun traveling across the sky. This is an excellent example of a natural illusion and these are the most important ones for us to understand. In this example, if you did not know any better, you might insist that the sun moves across the sky while the Earth remains perfectly still. That's what it seems like. You might even have precise measurements of the position of the sun at various times throughout the day and your records might go back for thousands of years.

If I showed up and told you that the sun does not move across the sky, you might reject my statement out of hand. After all, you have plenty of data that seems to prove otherwise. If I further explained that the earth is spinning on its axis, you might be cautiously intrigued. You might admit that if the earth were truly spinning, this would indeed create the *apparent* motion of the sun traveling across the sky, but you would also point out that that doesn't prove anything, it only presents a hypothetical possibility. And you might finally state that you should feel the earth spinning but you don't.

(By the way, the sun does indeed move through space. The sun, along with the rest of the solar system, is orbiting around the center of the galaxy and one orbit takes about 250 million years. But the apparent motion of the sun traveling across the sky is due almost entirely to the spinning of the earth, not the motion of the sun traveling through space.)

Now, let's suppose that I take you out in a spaceship to a vantage point where you can clearly see the sun and the spinning earth. You would learn the true nature of the situation from personal experience. And yet, when you got back to earth, the illusion would persist. You would still see the sun *apparently* traveling across the sky! At noon, it would be high in the sky and about six hours later, it would be setting low in the west. And no matter how hard you tried, you would not be able to feel the spinning of the earth. Even though there really is something happening to you, you cannot feel it directly with your body.

When the subject of a spinning earth was first suggested to western culture in about 200 B.C. by Aristarchus of Samos (near Turkey), scholars presented several arguments against it. They claimed that people would be flung off the surface of the earth, and that birds would have to fly hundreds of miles per hour just to stay above one spot. It seemed like an impossible scenario and “common sense” prevailed in a way that defeated the truth of the matter.

If you wanted to be accepted by society, you could not endorse this new idea. If people thought you were a “nut,” you would be passed over when it came to good jobs that carried a lot of responsibility or social status. And you certainly would not have been hired as an astronomer! But holding this false belief did not hinder anyone’s daily activities and since people’s fundamental desire to fit into society is so strong, the correct idea virtually disappeared from western culture.

In 1543, Copernicus reintroduced the idea that the earth spins on its axis as it orbits the sun, and again the idea got little support. Many people today believe that Copernicus waited until the end of his life to publish his ideas because he did not want the condemnation of the Church and the ridicule of his peers. During his time, those were the two most powerful forces motivating him (and everyone else) to just fit in.

Obviously these days, the Church does not play a dominant role in matters of science and astronomy; that role is now handled by the scientific academy. Yet getting on the “wrong” side of any body of authority will still present difficulties for “new” viewpoints that are worthy of proper consideration and more investigation. The power of ridicule continues to be very strong even though it is virtually overlooked as a force that shapes the beliefs of a society and therefore the beliefs of most individuals in that society.

But let's get back to our story.

Over 100 years later, Galileo provided conclusive evidence that Venus orbited the sun with his telescopic observations of the phases of Venus, which look similar to the phases of our moon. It was subsequently shown that all the planets orbit the sun, and that the earth spins on its axis. So finally, about eighteen hundred and fifty years after the idea was first presented to them, the western mainstream scientific community adopted the correct understanding. And notice that it did not just become socially acceptable to believe that the sun was the center of the solar system, it became a social requirement. Otherwise, you were pushed aside as a “nut,” but this time for the opposite reason!

Incidentally, one way to prove that the earth is spinning is to construct a very large pendulum, say 200 feet tall, and set it in motion. As the day progresses and the earth spins, the section of the ground that the pendulum swings over will change significantly and this can easily be observed (except at the earth’s equator). This was publicly demonstrated by the French physicist Leon Foucault in 1851 in Paris but it is fairly low-tech so it might have been done even earlier. But the main reason why western culture resisted investigating this subject for so long was because you cannot feel the spinning of the earth directly with your body.

*The spinning of the earth provides an excellent example of how difficult it is for us to break free from incorrect beliefs **when these false beliefs are based on misleading personal experiences that are shared by everyone.** Add to that the dynamics of peer pressure and the fundamental desire to be accepted by society and you see how easy it is to fall into the trap of an illusion.*

This point is especially important when it comes to understanding your true, fundamental self. Your fundamental self is pure Source-Awareness. Your body might be called a “self” but it is not really a self since it is not really an autonomous entity. It is not even the source of what appears to be its own power of sentience, just like the moon is not the source of what appears to be its own light. Yet from the point of view of our common “ordinary” world, you will experience the world through your body in a way that makes it seem as if your body is what you are fundamentally. This is what leads you to believe that you are both separate and mortal. But this is simply not true. Since your body is something that exists in a deceptive way, we can say that it is an illusion.

Before we get back to the apparent solidness of the world, let’s consider one more illusion. Imagine you are standing inside your home and looking out a sliding glass door. Your cat is sitting just to your right and a bit behind you, facing the same direction as you. It is not in your direct line of sight so you don’t know it is there. As you look through the glass door and into the yard outside, you see an image of your cat. It appears to you that your cat is sitting outside in the yard and looking towards you as if it wants to come inside.

You see the image of the cat on the glass door and this image exists in a deceptive way. The light coming to your eyes is indeed coming from a real cat but the source of that light is behind you, not in front of you. This is the false idea that you will soon let go of when you realize that the light is bouncing off the invisible glass. Since you are initially thinking that the cat is outside, you open the door to let the cat in. Yet when the door is opened, the image of the cat disappears and you realize that you were looking at a reflection. Now you understand the big picture.

I really like this example since it is a lot like our experience of looking out into the world. The image of the cat appears to be an object that exists all on its own in the world outside. But it is actually just a reflection of what is inside the room. The outer is a reflection of the inner.

Now, let’s get back to the question of the apparent solidness of the world.

Years ago I had a lucid dream where I was touching something that seemed to be solid metal. I was very aware that my experience of touching that metal in the dream was indistinguishable from my experience of touching solid metal in our ordinary world.

This fascinated me and I started to wonder, “If things in a dream can feel solid, could it also be true that our solid ordinary world is also a type of dream?” Obviously it’s not exactly like a nighttime dream since it has continuity from one day to the next and it has other qualities that are much different from a nighttime dream. But could our ordinary world still be a dream-like construction, an ever-changing fabricated story? And, like a dream, could our ordinary world also be an illusion? Could it exist in a deceptive way? Is there something important that we do not understand?

We seem to be only a material body living in a material world yet our spiritual nature is revealed by out-of-body experiences (OOBEs), conscious memory of past lives and spirit communication. Just OOBEs by themselves are enough to reveal that there is more to us than what we initially thought. We are not just a physical body that is alive for a while and then gone forever. That is just a misunderstanding that arises from seeing only part of the picture. That is just an illusion.

By the way, when we wake up to the big picture of who we really are, we become liberated in a joyful and loving way. We do not become uncaring, heartless or uninvolved, as some people seem to think. I talk about this more in other essays and in my book.

The secret to understanding all illusions is understanding the bigger picture that holds the little picture, the illusion. It is important to note that the bigger picture does not invalidate the little picture. In other words, the little picture still offers a real and valid *experience*. Yet when we wake up to the bigger picture, we quickly give up the false idea that the illusion points to and we correct our understanding of the situation. But we don't ignore the experience of the little picture.

While our magicians use ordinary means to create the illusion of a supernatural event, is God doing the opposite? Is God using supernatural means to create the illusion of the ordinary world? Yes! It looks like creation stands alone without any Creator at all since the Creator is completely invisible. And yet, the Creator arises as all of creation! This makes all of creation an illusion! And I think most of us would probably not wake up to the truth of this matter unless someone inspires us to look into this subject very carefully.

Perhaps I have inspired you to really spend some time thinking about these illusions. When you look up at the sun traveling across the sky, it will remind you that everything we experience is an illusion. When we build our core beliefs on only what we see with our eyes, we will not have the proper perspective to create our lives in the most beneficial way possible.

You exist fundamentally as Source-Awareness, a transcendent, formless Reality that witnesses (experiences) all of created reality. I develop a much deeper understanding of this in my book and other essays, so if you are inspired, you can check those out.

The End – This essay is an edited chapter of my book. It was written in 2005, expanded in 2008 and slightly edited in December 2025.