

Is the World an Illusion?

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Many of us have heard people say “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? What does it really mean to say that the world is an illusion?

The dictionary says that an illusion is a misleading image. So an illusion is something that has a particular reality to it, it’s just that this reality is a *deceptive reality*. Yet it seems to me that many people mistakenly think of an illusion as something that does not exist at all. You hear this kind of thing all the time. For example, one minute someone says that time is an illusion, and then the next minute, they say that time does not exist. But it must exist in a deceptive way in order for it to be an illusion.

Let’s dig a little deeper into this subject by considering a stage magician. He’s a master illusionist. Many people have seen the magic trick where he puts his assistant in a big box and cuts her in half with a saw. What we see is real. We see her head, arms and feet sticking out of the box. But we are not seeing the whole picture. Of course we all know that we don’t see another person hiding in the box who makes up the other half of the assistant and this creates the illusion of one person cut into two pieces.

Even though our physical senses are doing their jobs perfectly, our incomplete picture tricks us into believing a false idea. 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 are no longer tricked by the illusion and we let go of our false conclusion.

But 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 supernatural just happened. So it 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.

Next, let’s consider the moving images that you see on the big screen at the movies. Surprise! There aren’t any moving images! Not one! Even though the art form is called “the movies,” you have never seen a single moving picture. The same is true for TV. Instead of true motion, there are many still pictures presented one at a time so rapidly that we perceive all those images as a moving image. And again, even when we know the truth, the illusion still persists. The false idea pointed to by the illusion still appears as if it is true. 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 this illusion and the first one. 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 in the second illusion, 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.

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 really does move across the sky while the Earth remains perfectly still. That's what it seems like. You might even have precise scientific 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 a mountain of data that seems to prove otherwise. If I further explained that the earth spins on its axis, you might be cautiously intrigued. You might admit that if the earth were truly spinning on its axis, 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 would finally note that you should feel the earth spinning and 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.

So now you ponder the paradox of knowing that the sun does not move across the sky while watching its *apparent* motion. But remember, a paradox only seems like a contradiction, it is not an actual contradiction. In other words, there is a resolution and of course you already see it. Within one framework, something can be moving while at the same time, within another framework, it can be still. The key is that you perceive the motion with respect to only one framework at a time. From within the moving framework of the spinning earth, the motionless sun will appear to move.

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 spinning 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 two 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 of these forces can still present challenges, even if one’s viewpoint is 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 could have been done much earlier. But even still, you cannot feel the spinning directly with your body, which is why western culture resisted investigating the subject for so long.

*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.*

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 what 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 it still be a dream-like construction, an ever-changing fabricated story? If so, this would make our ordinary world an illusion since its true reality would be a *deceptive reality*?

Some of this deceptiveness is revealed by out-of-body experiences (OOBEs). There are other helpful experiences, too, like the conscious memory of past lives and the communication with spirits who have passed away, but OOBEs by themselves are enough to reveal that there is more to our world than what we initially thought.

And most importantly, OOBEs dramatically show us that there is also much more to who or what we really are than what it normally seems like. Are we really only a body that is alive for a while and then gone forever? No, not at all! And is God hidden from us like the magician's secret assistant in a way that invigorates the play we are all living in and fills it with emotion? Yes!

Our magicians use ordinary means to create the illusion of a supernatural event but God is doing the opposite. God is using supernatural means to create the illusion of the ordinary world! And could this be like the illusion of the moving images of the movies? You know, an illusion where most of us would probably not wake up to the truth of the matter unless someone told us about it? I think so.

The secret to understanding all illusions is understanding the bigger picture, the greater reality, 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 live with the understanding of the greater reality. But we don't ignore the experience of the little picture.

So now everyday when you look up at the illusion of the sun traveling across the sky, you can remind yourself that everything you experience is an illusion. Yes, all of creation is presented

to you as a deceptive experience. But what you truly are is not an illusion because what you truly are cannot be experienced. What you truly are is Source-Awareness, the only “thing” that is not a thing, the only “thing” that experiences all of creation. 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 – Thanks for reading my essay!

Written in 2005 and expanded in 2008. Extensively edited in January 2017.

This essay is a slightly edited excerpt from the second chapter of my book.