

The Concept of *Māyā*

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Māyā is the pivotal concept in Vedanta metaphysics which declares the external world and the individual self to be illusory from an ultimate standpoint. A proper understanding of *Māyā* is indispensable for an intellectual conviction of the truth of Vedanta, which conviction (in this rationalistic age) is a necessary prelude to spiritual faith and culture. We have presented here a kind of psychological approach to the concept of *Māyā*.

Māyā generally means illusion and specifically it stands for the hypothetical illusion of the Supreme Being resulting in the world of change and multiplicity on the one hand and the individual self (ego) on the other for which this world is empirically real. We propose to understand the specific meaning of *Māyā* through its general meaning, that is to say, we will approach the cosmic concept of *Māyā* through its analogues in empirical psychology. We have experience of illusion in our daily perceptive errors, dreams, hallucinations, and aesthetic experiences. An analysis of these will reveal an underlying characteristic of our empirical consciousness. And then, on the hypothesis that the empirical consciousness is but a grade or moment in the absolute consciousness, we will posit the same characteristic in the latter, with the result that *Māyā* in its specific sense may be understandable on the analogy of its general and familiar sense. Only thus can any metaphysical concept be understood intellectually.

Whitehead and other modern philosophers have recognized (the former in a good sense while the latter in a disparaging one) the metaphorical character of all metaphysics. Vedanta has fully explicated this methodological paradox by asserting that the metaphysical is essentially indescribable for all that we predicate to it are taken from our empirical knowledge (experience). Rational philosophy can describe it only by negatives (*Neti, Neti*), but can suggest its character through such terms as 'Sachchidānanda' (Being, Consciousness, Bliss), 'Nitya', 'Shuddha', 'Buddha', 'Mukta', 'Ānanda-svarupa' (eternal, pure, conscious, free, bliss), these terms being, strictly speaking, concepts of restricted meaning, applying only to ordinary experience. As the modern physico-mathematicians have clearly shown, and the logical positivists have amply stressed, the concepts of infinity and eternity have clear and restricted empirical or operational meanings. Similarly each scientific concept, whether of physics, chemistry, or psychology, such as mass, energy, affinity, association, love, etc., has to be well defined in terms of observable data which each unifies and stands for so that no empirical concept can have a transcendental reference in sensible discourse. It can only suggest a transcendental meaning in poetry through analogy. The recognition of this is quite a healthy development in modern philosophy and Vedanta would welcome it. Only Vedanta will point out that these suggested

or transcendental meanings, though without clear sense in any rational discourse, are not pure nonsense for that reason. They signify the point of departure for a metapsychological experience which alone can vouch for the entities remotely hinted at by the empirical concepts and categories used in a metaphysical context. The possibility of such a metapsychological experience is, of course, an open question, but it is a fact that mystics of all lands and times have unequivocally proclaimed this possibility, realizing the transcendental experience as an actuality. So, in a rational discussion such as this, we have to accept a metapsychological concept (*viz. Māyā* as an illusion in the Supreme Being) *first* as a transcendental hypothesis to be understood on the analogy of a general empirical concept by extending its sense beyond the operational limits, and *secondly* as a possible entity relying, guided by reason itself, on the verdict of so many mystics. For the mystics have been very sensible and human; they were not irrational but super-rational, having developed a super-intellectual faculty over and above, and not at the cost of, the intellectual.

This much regarding our philosophical method which is rational and analytical though frankly speculative in the last analysis. Let us now start with a simple perceptive error such as a mirage. We apparently see a stretch of water before us and reflection of trees in it, yet we find there is no water. How is it?—we ask. We find that the illusion is due to our habit of locating an object in front of us from which rays of light normally come straight to our eyes. In the case of a mirage the rays of light get refracted and totally bent in the reverse direction while passing through the layers of air heated to different temperatures and so rarified in different degrees. Now

rays from the bare land at a distance are bent upwards and do not enter our eyes in the same direction as rays from the land at some distance normally do meet the eyes. Thus, instead of the land, we see—following the direction of the rays straight forward and not being conscious of any bending—the bluish horizon stretched before us. And this appears as water for two reasons. First, as blue water stretching horizontally on level with the land is a familiar sight while the sky spreading on land is unfamiliar, the mind operates through past learning. Secondly, the rays from distant trees (and other raised objects, if any) get so bent that by the same optical law they produce inverted images on the other side just as they would produce had there been water which reflects light. The eye is used to locating water when it sees objects with their inverted images. Thus the psychological reason of mirage is that the psychic apparatus works mechanically after its previously learned habits and tendencies. When the illusion is corrected, the perceiver is conscious of the illusory objectivity of the presentation, that is, of its subjectivity. His attention is turned from the object to the subject and he holds the presentation no longer seriously as something really given but holds it lightly with amused curiosity as a creation of his own psychic apparatus. The ordinary images we see in a plane mirror or water do not produce on us the same illusory effect as they do on children and animals, for we are conscious, through familiarity, of the illusory objectivity. Thus though the reflected object is seen to be out there, we no longer believe in it and ascribe it to our psychic apparatus. We note in passing that what is objectively given engages our serious attention and what is known as arising from our own mind does not trouble us so much.

Consider next the illusion of a snake in a rope. Here what is presented is a general and faint outline (or schema) of a rope which is the same as that of a snake. The details of the rope are not seen at the first glance, specially when there is insufficient light or defect in the eye. Now, why does one, seeing the bare outline of a rope, apparently see a snake and not merely the outline? The reason is plain. One who has seen snakes in the past and is afraid of them has the thought and (generic) image of a snake latent in his mind in a more vivid and ready form than he has the thought and image of a rope. So he *imposes* this thought and image of a snake on the bare outline and completes the picture. The illusory perception, when corrected, shows the perceiver how his psychic machinery with its previously learned habits of working contributes largely to the formation of a percept. A familiar percept at the first glance is, as a rule, an interpreted one. If the latter is confirmed by subsequent complete observation, it is a true percept, if not, it is an illusion. That the dominant tendencies and set habits of the mind are responsible for such illusions is further seen from such familiar illusions as reading a more desirable or familiar word into a combination of letters making a slightly different word. Thus one may read grape for gripe, pursue for peruse. The superimposition of past experience on the present is a characteristic function of our mind.

In hallucinations and dreams the mind is more active in creation. Here the mind projects its past experience (thoughts, emotions, and images) on apparently no present experience. The mind may start projecting from a slight stimulus, but it proceeds to call up, combine, and marshal thoughts, emotions and vivid images like a conjurer. In fantasy-thinking or day-dreaming, a similar process, though in a less

vivid form, occurs. Such phenomena have been largely explained in terms of the inner tendencies in a person's mind. These tendencies which have been more or less thwarted in actual life, repressed and somewhat distorted, are purged in dreams, hallucinations, and fantasies. These tendencies have their common root in love of pleasure and are, more specifically, either erotic (according to Freud) or self-assertive (Adler) or both (Jung). The affective part of the mind is held to be the prime mover in such psychic phenomena, the thoughts and images follow according to laws of association. Certain images are associated with certain emotions and so have emotional significance for the subject. Some emotions have been found to be almost universally associated with certain images (dream-symbols) while there are also many individual associations for individual persons. However, the psychoanalysts have amply revealed the inner mechanism of dreams and hallucinations. And they have also shown that by making a person conscious of his inner repressed tendencies (discovered through analysis of dreams etc. and childhood memories) he can be freed from certain neurotic symptoms which appear when these tendencies too much dominate his mental life. Thus we find, again, that our consciousness can project presentations, stored previously, which, so long as they appear as objective, engage our serious attention, but we dismiss them as soon as their objectivity is seen to be illusory, their subjective origin being exposed to us.

Next we consider aesthetic illusion. Here we relish even painful scenes because we are always conscious of the illusory objectivity of the presentation; we, so to say, enjoy our power to project emotions and enjoy them disinterestedly as generic ideal contents with no particular attachment

to anybody, me, the actor, or the character. The secret of aesthetic delight (*Rasa*) is that an emotion is here de-individuated and leads a floating and illusorily objective life. I suffer the emotion of sadness when I am really sad, but I enjoy the emotion when sadness is depicted in art and I am sad with the suffering character. In case of the illusion of a snake in a rope, our thought, fear, and image of a snake are superimposed upon an outline of a rope which is like that of a snake. In art our certain more or less permanent generic tendencies (*Sthāyibhāvas*) are superimposed upon certain situations, gestures, and words which are said to suggest these tendencies. The modern theory of empathy speaks of this process as constitutive of the aesthetic attitude. The difference between perceptive illusion and artistic one is that while in the former we are not conscious of the illusion as an illusion for a time, in the latter we are so conscious. From there arises the peculiar taste of aesthetic delight.

In the above psychical phenomena we find that the objectivity appears because some things have previously been really objective. Therefore the mind is used to work in a characteristic manner and to view an object as the 'other', so that though a particular object may be found to be subjective, objectivity itself remains a valid category. As Shankara has urged against the subjective idealists (who said that the external world only appears to be objective), there must be something objective in order that objects may *appear* as objective. Again, the objectivity of a snake in a rope, of a mirage etc. when retracted, do not cancel all objectivity; rather, the objectivity of the empirical space-time world is the common background (or matrix) of such illusory objects which are marked as illusory when compared to this background. The criterion

of objectivity is supplied by the empirical world that confronts and engages our spirit like a rock, the great 'other' that cannot be either derived from or appropriated by the subject. A short respite from it is got in dreamless sleep. In art we seem to dodge it, as the art-world is enjoyed consciously as a dream-world of our own making. Yet the dodge is not complete, only the objective world is not pressing enough, but remains as a mild background, helping the art-objects (by contrast) to appear as subjective (our making). Besides, the objective attitude is there in a make-believe form. In art there is a peculiar fusion of the subjective and objective attitudes. In other illusory phenomena, a particular illusion gives way only to the more pervasive sense of objectivity of the empirical world.

However, while granting that objectivity remains a valid category in our empirical psychic phenomena, we have to admit two characteristics of our mind: first, that it can project images (charged with emotive meanings) which appear as objective; secondly, that it regards these projected images with amused curiosity and delight when their objectivity is found to be but illusory. The illusory objectivity reveals to the mind its capacity for creation and retraction as fully illustrated by aesthetic experience.

Metaphysical speculation starts with the question whether it is possible, on the analogy of our empirical illusions, to consider the empirical world itself as a result of a projection by us, and whether, therefore, a realization of the objectivity of the world as illusory is attended by a kind of aesthetic delight. Such a question is not born of an idle desire to push an analogy to a higher level but of a real problem in psychology as well as in epistemology. We feel at times that the objective world, though full of beauty and variety, rather weighs

upon us because it always confronts our spirit as the ‘other’ and engages our attention. It holds us by a strong hand, so to say, and we seek to escape it in our sleep, art, and esoteric contemplation with but limited success. We seem to be bipolar in our attitude to the objective world: We want it as a companion to turn to and commune with, and we also want it to let us alone. Can this be due to some deeper metapsychological reasons? Epistemologically, again, the problem arises, how can we at all know anything that is independent of our mind? To solve these problems we have to assail the problem of objectivity of the empirical world, and to solve the latter, we may find its empirical analogue, the phenomenon of illusory objectivity helpful. So we consider the possibility of our regarding the objectivity of the empirical world as a projection of ours and so, retractable.

To imagine the objectivity of the world as projection, we have to imagine the projecting mind. In empirical illusions, the projecting mind is the individual one, but, in a transcendental illusion (*Māyā*) we are considering, the projecting mind must be some universal one, for the projected world is independent of the individual mind. Yet the individual mind perceives the world, and our original question is whether *we* (i.e. any one of us) can consider it as *our* creation. So the universal mind must be regarded as immanent in the individual mind, or as a mental continuum pervading the collective mind of man. The individual mind may attain or realize this universal mind by shaking off its individual peculiarities and egotistic limitations. Such must be the concept of our hypothetical universal mind projecting the empirical world.

The next point we have to consider is this: In empirical illusions, the material cause of projection is provided by certain

tendencies in the empirical mind while the teleological cause (or motive) is provided by a love of play or a display of the power of creation. (This is mostly seen in aesthetic illusion; in lower forms the motive seems to be simple purgation). This creation involves projection and retraction at once, for the objectivity of what is projected is also known as illusory. Now what would be the tendencies in the universal mind and what is its motive? Analogically we would answer that its motive may be considered to be aesthetic and its tendencies (i.e. sentiments) may be such as we vaguely experience when we adopt an aesthetic attitude to the world. In that attitude we take a disinterested view of things in the sense that we do not take any of these views, pragmatic, realistic, moral, or scientific. We only enjoy the particular aesthetic sentiments (*Rasas*) suggested by the things. These sentiments do not bind us to the objects, they are universal ideal contents and belong to no object or person in particular. In this aesthetic attitude we treat nature as an art-object and its objectivity appears illusory. Keats writes of a street-fight in this mood thus: ‘Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine: the commonest man shows a grace in his quarrel. By a superior being our reasonings may take the same tone—though erroneous they may be fine. This is the very thing in which consists poetry, ...’

Thus we see that we have no difficulty in conceiving (1) a higher universal mind as the subject projecting this empirical world, this mind being immanent in our individual mind, and (2) its tendencies and motives behind this projection. But with respect to the second, one thing has to be noted. The tendencies explaining our empirical illusions are ascribed to our past experience whereas no such ascription is possible in case of

transcendental illusion (*Māyā*), for it would lead to infinite regress. Again the objectivity of empirical illusions appears as illusory because of the objectivity of the empirical world. No such prior or basic objectivity can be found for the illusoriness of the empirical world. Thus the analogy between the empirical and transcendental illusions cannot be worked in every detail. But this is no defect in our speculative method, rather it is a merit. For, had our analogy worked in every detail, we would but end in duplicating the empirical illusion and its elements on a higher level with the consequence that we would have to explain that in terms of analogous principles of a third order. This would land us in an infinite regress. We escape that predicament by admitting that (1) the universal mind possesses originally certain aesthetic sentiments with their appropriate images to represent them, and (2) it can project these images to enjoy the sentiments and generally to enjoy the game of projection.

With the help of our analysis of empirical illusions and working up from it analogically till the analogy breaks at a few points (and we have to make certain assumptions), we find that we can have a conception of a universal mind projecting this empirical world which is thus illusory for this mind. And as this higher mind is but immanent in our individual one we can rise up to it, and identifying ourselves with it, view this world as illusory and enjoy it as a piece of art.

Since this conception is not self-contradictory, it is a logical possibility. Whether it is an actuality is a matter of transcendental experience and falls beyond speculative philosophy which ends with establishing hypothetical schemes with the

minimum of arbitrariness and maximum of suggestibility or empirical analogues.

Now our conception of this universal mind projecting the world is equivalent to that of *Ishvara* of Vedanta who is known as *Māyādhīsha*, the lord of *Māyā*. But we can go a step further in our speculative venture and conceive of a Being who, when the world is known as *Māyā*, dismisses it quietly and relapses into its primitive mood in which there are neither tendencies nor thought of projection. This is the Brahman who has no reference to *Māyā*, just as a poet or a dreamer may normally be regarded without reference to his poems or dreams which are accidents of his nature. So *Māyā* need not be held as an essential character of the ultimate Reality which is the One without a second and without any qualification as the Upanishads declare.

Māyā or Illusoriness of the world is thus reduced to a shadow with no independent status beside Reality. Reality is truth while *Māyā* is error. Truth is self-evident and does not require a contradiction (error) to be contradicted (overcome) in order to be established. But error, on the contrary, has no ultimate being, for it disappears as truth gleams, like darkness when light appears. So *Māyā*, though it is transcendental illusoriness and has a positive being from an empirical standpoint, is a non-entity from an ultimate standpoint. It can be called neither real nor unreal in an absolute sense and, therefore, the Vedanta calls it *indescribable* (*Anirvāchya*). This happens because Vedanta recognizes grades of reality and *Māyā* belongs to a grade lower than the uppermost. Brahman, our highest Self, has no reference to *Māyā* just as the truth about a rope has no reference to snakes. ■

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