

The Paradox of Illusion and Reality: A Philosophical Overview

VC. Okeke

Department of Philosophy,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.
+234 8030483359 vc.okeke@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

The nature of reality and how to identify it has remained an age-long philosophical problem. Metaphysicians and epistemologists have attempted to unravel this mystery for ages now. This has led to the rise of two schools of thought (the empiricists and the rationalists or idealists). In view of this, this work re-echoes some of the issues raised by these groups that continuously beg the question: what is reality?, what can be known, can reality in its ultimate nature be known?, can one be deceived in his perception of reality?, what are illusions?, are illusions real?, is everything which is knowable illusion?, is life an illusion?, are discourses on illusion an exclusive preserve of the empirical sciences?, can that which is said to be illusory be defined outside of the ultimate reality? These are some of the major issues this work seeks to address. This work, using the philosophical method of analysis, establishes that while scientific experiments (in its logical positivist variant) may establish the ontology of illusion, from a metaphysical point of view, it is hard to distinguish between when the real becomes illusion and when reality is so called- Reality. It also establishes that the “Real” is and can only be perceived from a point of view at each instance of knowledge. The work therefore concludes that, that which is seen at some point or to one person as illusory, may be real at another point or to another person.

Keywords: Empiricism, Illusion, Ontology, Rationalism, Reality

Introduction

The human mind struggles to grasp reality, but in practical terms, can only generate various concepts and theories that have their limitations. Identifying the limits of their applicability is essential. When these boundaries and limits are not well defined, “concepts and theories may turn into dogmas and one is left with illusions of understanding”.¹ Concepts and theories do not fully describe the ultimate reality due to the fact of inaccessibility to all the aspects of “emergent reality, and due to the inherent unknowability of all that remains to be discovered and understood”.² Based on this backdrop, some disconnection from reality is bound to occur and humans will be caught between illusions and reality. However, the fundamental problem of 'illusions' distorting the individual's awareness is the resulting reluctance to see things as they really are (multifarious) and can only be perceived each time from one point of view.

What are Illusion?

From a common place opinion, “illusion is something that looks or seems different from what it is”.³ It refers to “something that is false or not real but that seems to be true or real”.⁴ It is also “an incorrect idea: an idea that is based on something that is not true”.⁵

However, from a more philosophical conceptualization, it is extraordinarily difficult to give a satisfactory definition of an

^{1.} Richard E. Smith, *Concepts and the Philosophy of Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 116.

^{2.} Smith, *Concepts and the Philosophy of Science*, 116.

^{3.} Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Illusion,” Merriam-Webster, accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illusion>.

^{4.} Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Illusion,” Merriam-Webster, accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illusion>.

^{5.} Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “Illusion,” Merriam-Webster, accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illusion>.

'illusion'. It may be the departure from reality, or from truth; but the question of how to define these subjects makes the matter all the more complex. As science accounts of reality get ever more different from appearances, "to say that this separation is 'illusion' would have the absurd consequence of implying that almost all perceptions are illusory".⁶ It seems easier to limit the idea of 'illusion' to "systematic visual and other sensed discrepancies from simple measurements with rulers, photometers, clocks and so on",⁷ than a holistic look at reality.

Further, from the point of view of scientific experimentation and psychology, there are two clearly very different kinds of illusions: those with a physical cause and cognitive illusions due to misapplication of knowledge. Although they have extremely different kinds of causes, they can produce some surprisingly similar phenomena (such as distortions of length or curvature), so there are difficulties of classification that require experimental evidence.

Illusions that occur as a result of disturbance of light between objects and eyes are different from illusions due to the disturbance of sensory signals of eye, though both might be categorized as 'physical'. One that is different from these are cognitive illusions, "due to misapplied knowledge employed by the brain to interpret or read sensory signals".⁸ In discussing cognitive illusion, it is useful to distinguish specific knowledge of objects, from general knowledge embodied as rules. Either can be misled in unusual conditions, and so can be revealed by scientific observation and experiment.

According to Morris Lazerowitz, in his article, "Philosophy and Illusion," Sigmund Freud explained an illusion as a:

... belief which has its origin primarily in a wish and maintains

⁶ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Illusion," Merriam-Webster, accessed November 24, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/illusion>.

⁷ Morris Lazerowitz, *Philosophy and Illusion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 2-4.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Illusion and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 46.

its hold on the mind through the strength of the wish rather than by virtue of evidence. When a wish is very strong the belief that it is or will be satisfied by the world springs to life and takes the form of a conviction, and any reason, however transparent and feeble, will serve to protect the belief from intellectual scrutiny. The wish may not, of course, be conscious, and it could, and in many cases does introduce subjective distortions into reality by the mechanism of transference and projection. Fantasy and illusion are the mental equivalents of a sanctuary, a refuge from a reality we feel we cannot face and so must deny. In fantasy and illusion, we make the world accommodate itself to our wishes, but we do this at a price. We resort, in our waking life, to the mechanisms entering into the formation of dreams, and in doing this, we place ourselves under the domination of a condition which weakens our sense of reality, which blocks our intelligence and impoverishes our powers of reasoning.⁹

Freud's submission is that illusions are within the category of wishes and dreams. His conclusion is based on the backdrop of his scientific orientation and the fact of the non-verifiability of dreams and illusion and as such they are states that are not concrete in scientific terms. However, there still remains one step he needs to take to have a more valid conclusion concerning the issue of illusion. This borders on the issue of definition of reality. If 'reality' is understood to mean 'all that is', would it not be out of place to discard illusions as non-realities when they have the potential of becoming or manifesting in the concrete – to use a scientific term? Reality should be understood from an all-encompassing point of view. Freud should rather see illusion from the point of view of a reality (so properly called) which is and remains to manifest itself in the concrete. To reduce reality to only the verifiable concrete elements, is to reduce reality to only the observable and this commits the same error of the logical positivists.

⁹. Lazerowitz, *Philosophy and Illusion*, 2-4.

Scientific Classification of Illusion

Appearances of illusions fall into classes which may be named as emanating from errors of language: ambiguities, distortions, paradoxes, fictions. Although the below listed are not all there is to illusions and they are not intended as rules, the idea is “to develop 'litmus test' experimental criteria for assigning the phenomena to their proper classes of appearance and causes”.¹⁰ Among these classes of illusions are:

- **Mist** – Any loss of information may increase uncertainty and produce ambiguities.
- **Mirage** – Refractions of light between the object and the eyes displace objects or parts of objects, as for mirages, or a spoon bent in water. (Conceptual understanding does not correct these distortions, though motor performance may adapt, as for diving birds catching fish.)
- **Looking Glass** – One sees oneself double: through the glass as a kind of ghost; yet one knows one is in front of it. So, perception and conception separate. (This may be the origin of notions of mind separate from body, i.e., dualism).
- **Rainbow** – An illusion when it is seen as an object, with expectations as for a normal object. (Thus, unlike an arch of stone, when approached, it moves away and can never be touched. With this in mind, it is not illusory).
- **Rotating Spiral** – (After effect of movement) – The spiral expands yet, paradoxically, does not change size. The adapted motion channel gives conflicting evidence with unadapted position- signals.

Other forms of illusions include: Retinal rivalry, Café Wall, After-images, Figure-ground, Muller-Lyer, Penrose impossible triangle,

^{10.} Lazerowitz, *Philosophy and Illusion*, 2-4.

Kanza triangle, Hollow face, Size-Weight illusion, Magritte mirror, and Faces-in-the-fire, etc.

Illusion and Reality

Human beings are caught between illusion and reality, as the mind dwells in the subjective world of ideas and concepts, “but physically one exists in the world of objective reality that cannot be directly experienced or fully understood”.¹¹ This is all complicated by the use of reason and logic to guide the mind to truth, as they rely on language that is inadequate for describing reality and often leads to paradoxes.

There is no definite answer to the question of what reality is. In its broadest terms, it can be defined as all “that exists, irrespective of whether or not it can be observed or understood”.¹² One may distinguish between apparent reality and Ultimate reality, as well as between physical or human-independent reality and mental or human-constructed reality. To Yacobi, “physical reality is defined as extended in space, having physical properties such as mass, and existing independently of the observer. Mental reality has no extension in space and exists only in the minds of individuals, with its existence depending on the observer”.¹³ However, whether one thinks of trees, rocks, or light, their reality only appears to the observer as a partial representation of the ultimate reality. However, while it is essential to distinguish between different types of reality and between the representation of reality and reality itself, the concept of “reality” is something constantly reshaped by advances in knowledge.

Conclusion

Illusions and reality must be seen from a point of view, rather than being deemed as real or unreal by simplistic definitions. Therefore,

¹¹. David Yacobi, *Reality and the Human Mind* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 15-16.

¹². Yacobi, *Reality and the Human Mind*, 18.

¹³. Yacobi, *Reality and the Human Mind*, 18.

illusions are possible within the definition of reality. The search for the final definition of reality or the ultimate reality may be an eternal quest, one that remains elusive as humans progress in their understanding. The lesson remains that illusions, while often separated from reality, are part of the larger and more complex totality we call "reality."

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