

THE HINDU THEORIES OF ILLUSION

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AMONG the many contributions of the Hindus to Logic and Epistemology, their discussions on the problem of illusion have got an importance of their own. They are likely to be of particular interest at the present time when epistemological problems connected with sense perception are receiving great attention from many contemporary thinkers. We propose therefore to give in this paper a critical survey of the principal theories of illusion that are met with in the standard philosophical writings of the Hindus. We shall also incidentally point out at the end the inexplicable character of the phenomenon of illusion.

Before any theory is propounded about illusion, the fact of illusion must be taken for granted. But what is an illusion? An illusion is a case of perception in which the object perceived is not found to be there. The illusory character of a perception is not realised at the time of perception. It is only when one act of perception is sublated by another perception, directed towards the same object, that we realise the first perception to have been wrong, and designate it as an illusion. So long as it was there, it was taken in all seriousness to be a case of valid perception. The claim to validity is an essential aspect of illusion. So long as we are not deceived by an appearance, we have really no illusion. Anyway the important thing about an illusion is that the object as perceived should not be there. Some other object may indeed be in its place. But that is not what we take it to be. Merely in perceiving there is no illusion. It is only by an objective reference that a perception is determined as an illusion. As a psychological fact an act of perception, whether right or wrong, is as real as any other fact of the same order. A perception is known as an illusion when the per-

ceived content fails to justify its mistaken identity with the object before the perceiver.

Now in illusion there is certainly some object before the percipient subject, and it must be in some form of contact with the appropriate sense organ of the perceiver. So the object, which is there, may be said, in a sense, to be perceived. What can be or is ever perceived is always the object before the perceiver. But the mental content in the case of illusion is not of the same form and nature as the object. They are really distinct, and illusion consists in not taking note of this distinction. This is the non-apprehension theory (*akhyativada*) of illusion advocated by the *Mimamsakas*.

In order to understand the full significance of this theory, we must refer here to the *Mimamsaka* doctrine of the self-validity (*svatahpramanyavada*) of all knowledge. According to the *Mimamsakas*, the validity of an act of knowledge is not derived from anything outside the knowledge but is inherent in it. Whenever there is any knowledge, the validity of the knowledge is given along with the knowledge. If knowledge as such were not valid, it would be very difficult to determine its validity by any other means. It may be supposed that the validity of an act of knowledge can be determined by another act of knowledge. But an act of knowledge can really determine the validity of another only when the determining knowledge is itself valid, and how shall we be assured of the validity of this knowledge? If for its validity we are to be referred to a third act of knowledge, we do not know how the resulting regressus ad infinitum can ever be stopped.

One may suppose that the validity of a knowledge is due to the absence of defect in the instrument of knowledge or to the possession by the object of the exact form that is ascribed to it by knowledge; because we find that our knowledge is not valid when there is some defect in the instrument of knowledge and the object does not possess the form that is ascribed to it by knowledge. But it is easy to see that the true form of the object and the absence of defect in the instrument of knowledge must be known in order that they may be used as criteria of valid knowledge. It is only when we know that there is no defect in the instrument of knowledge that we can pronounce a particular knowledge to be valid. But how are we to know that our knowledge of the absence of defect in the instrument of knowledge is itself valid? Unless this is valid, it

cannot validate another knowledge. So we have to suppose either that our knowledge of the absence of defect in the instrument of knowledge is valid by itself or that we have to go beyond this knowledge in order to secure its validity. If we accept the latter alternative, it is again easy to see that we shall be led on to a regressus ad infinitum. So we have to accept the former alternative and admit that knowledge does not owe its validity to anything else. If we do not accept this position, the Mimamsakas say, all our knowledge will be infected with doubt, and universal scepticism will be the inevitable consequence.

But if all knowledge as such is valid, what then is an illusion? It is evident that if we are to explain illusion in the light of this theory, we must give it a character different from what is generally associated with it. We should recognise that if illusion were a case of knowledge, it could not but be valid. So if it is not a case of valid knowledge, it is no knowledge at all. An illusion, then, is a case of no-knowledge (*akhyati*). But this negation of knowledge, which characterises illusion, should not be taken absolutely. It is not a fact that we get illusion where there is absolutely no knowledge. If it were so, our dreamless sleep would have been the best instance of illusion. But this is not so. In illusion something is surely known, and in so far as there is knowledge, it is all valid. But there is also some fact which is not taken note of and this non-cognisance constitutes the real essence of illusion. When a piece of white shell is mistaken for a piece of silver, what happens is that although the object before the perceiver, merely as presented something, is perceived to be there, its specific character is not grasped on account of some defect in the conditions of perception, either insufficiency of light or some defect in the eye or something else. The shining appearance of the piece of shell, which is very similar to the appearance of silver, revives in our mind certain impressions which are associated with silver, and in consequence we come to have a remembrance of silver. The content silver can scarcely be called a perceived content, since there is no silver in the field of perception. So silver is not the object of perception but a mental content revived in the mind by means of memory. The real object of perception is the piece of white shell present before the percipient subject. But in illusion we fail to take note of the distinction between what is presented and what is only revived in the mind by

memory. The non-apprehension of this distinction defines the character of illusion.

But how does the shining appearance of a piece of shell produce in us the memory of silver rather than that of other pieces of shell which we have seen before, seeing that the appearance of a piece of shell is similar not only to that of silver but also to the appearance of other pieces of shell as well? In order to understand why we remember silver and not any piece of shell, which we may have seen before, we must realise that our interest plays a great part in all facts of our conscious life. We are more interested in silver, because of its superior value for us, than in pieces of shell and this interest accounts for our ready remembrance of silver.

Still there is some difficulty in this position. In all acts of memory there is a reference to past experience which is signified by our speaking of the remembered object as "that" and not as "this." In illusion, however, we say "this is silver"; and we do not speak or think of the silver as *that* silver, which should have been the case if the silver in question were an object of memory.

This difficulty can be solved by supposing that the reference to past or "thatness" in the remembered silver is overlooked by us because of some mental defect, i.e. our greed for wealth. Moreover thatness is not an essential aspect of an object of memory. When for instance we remember the meaning of a word, we do not recognise it as "that" meaning.

But when in illusion we say "this is silver," we use "this" as the subject and "silver" as the predicate of one and the same proposition. We imply thereby that "thisness" and "silverhood" occupy the same locus (*samanadhikarana*). And thinking in all seriousness "this" to be silver, we go forward to pick it up. This seems to go against the implications of this theory which supposes that the silver is only remembered. The silver that is remembered occupies a different place in time and space and in order to obtain it we should not move towards a place where it is not.

To meet this objection we have to remember that in illusion we have two distinct acts of knowledge and that they differ in their character as well as in their object. The one is perception and the other is memory. The object of the one is "this" and that of the other "silver." But as the difference between these two distinct acts of knowledge does not appear to us for the time being, we treat

them both as identical (in illusion) and refer their objects to the same locus.

When we have an illusion of silver, silver is no doubt known in some form. The important question to decide is about the character of this knowledge. When we can find out what the real object of this knowledge is, we can find out what its real character is. The Mimamsakas believe, with their notion of the self-validity of knowledge, that the object of any act of knowledge can only be that which appears in it. If the object of knowledge could be different from what appears in it, we would not have faith in any knowledge, and would thus involve ourselves in utter scepticism. So the real object of a knowledge of silver, even in illusion, can only be real silver. But if this is so, then what is the nature of that knowledge? It may be either perception or inference or memory. There is no fourth alternative. As there is no silver before the perceiver, we cannot suppose that there is any perception of silver. A perception of a thing is possible only when the thing in question is in direct contact (*sannikarsha*) with our sense organs. The object being not present in the case of illusion, we cannot suppose that it is really perceived. It may be supposed that our knowledge of silver in illusion is really perception, the real object of the perception being the piece of shell which is present before the perceiver and which somehow appears as silver, owing to some defects in the conditions of perception. But this supposition implies that the object of a perception can be different from what appears in it and is therefore open to the objection that it will lead to universal scepticism as pointed out above. It would be strange if the content of a perception were to be referred to an object which is utterly different from it. We conclude therefore that our knowledge of silver in illusion is not perception.

It is also not inference. An inference is always mediated by the knowledge of a middle term (*linga*) and in illusion we do not find any knowledge of a middle term.

Therefore we seem forced to the conclusion that our knowledge of silver in illusion is of the nature of remembrance. The object of this knowledge, which is real silver and is not present before us, is brought to our consciousness by an act of memory.

The Mimamsakas maintain that it is on this theory that we can satisfactorily explain the subsequent knowledge (on the cessation

of illusion) that it is not silver. On any other theory we have to suppose that our knowledge, that the thing before us is not silver, is a contradiction of the previous knowledge that it was silver. But all knowledge being equally valid, there cannot be any real contradiction between one knowledge and another. On the Mimamsaka theory there is no contradiction between the two acts of knowledge. In the former knowledge we failed to take note of the difference between the perceived "this" and the remembered "silver," whereas in the latter we only come to recognise this difference.

The above will give us some idea of the Mimamsaka theory of illusion as non-apprehension of distinction. But a little reflection will show that it is open to several criticisms. It is maintained by this theory that both the presented object (this) and the remembered content (silver) are known and only their difference is not known. But we fail to understand how two things can appear in knowledge without making at the same time their distinction from one another apprehended. When two things are cognised, we naturally expect that the difference between them will also be cognised.

It has been said that if our knowledge fails to reach its object, if, that is, the real object is not given in our knowledge, we shall lose all faith in knowledge. This difficulty can hardly be met even by this theory. For when we get a knowledge of the form "this is a table," we cannot be sure whether the table in this act of knowledge is only a remembered table or a perceived one, whether, that is, the table is or is not present before us.

Moreover when we judge "this is silver," what is given in our knowledge is not "this" and "silver" but "this-silver," a complex unity which is analysed in our judgment as "this" and "silver." It is grasped by a single act of mind and it does not seem to be a correct reading of facts to suppose that in this one act of knowledge we have a mixture of both perception and memory.

Mere non-apprehension of distinction cannot explain our specific conduct in any case of illusion. Non-apprehension is absence of knowledge. It is absurd to suppose that we can be moved to any activity (e.g. running away from an illusory snake) from mere lack of knowledge. It is rather in the false identification of one thing with another that we must look for the essence of illusion.

So the Naiyayikas hold that when in illusion we say "this is

silver" there is an attribution of silverhood to the presented object. There is no doubt about the fact that in an illusion of silver there is an appearance of silver. The only question is whether there is real silver or something else or nothing at all behind the appearance. We cannot suppose that there is nothing at all behind the appearance, because a mere nothing can never put up an appearance. We cannot also suppose that there is real silver before us which appears as silver in illusion, because in that case the appearance would not disappear with the cessation of illusion. We have therefore to suppose that there is something else, namely a piece of white shell, which appears as silver, because our subsequent perception is that it is not silver but a piece of white shell. We must therefore believe, so the Naiyayikas say, that in illusion a thing appears different from what it actually is. This theory is known as anyathakhyativada, the theory of different appearance. The Naiyayikas do not believe in the validity of all knowledge. In their opinion a knowledge is valid only when the object of knowledge possesses the form that is ascribed to it. In illusion the object of knowledge (a piece of white shell) has not the form (silverhood) that is ascribed to it. Therefore it is not valid. If knowledge as such were always valid, there would be no room, they say, of any doubt. Since we have real doubts about the validity of some cognitions, we cannot think that knowledge as such is always valid. The Naiyayikas will admit with the Mimamsakas that whenever there is illusion, there is some defect in the conditions of perception and we fail to perceive the thing before us clearly. But the illusory character of a knowledge consists not in our failure to perceive clearly, but in the actual appearance (khyati) of one thing as another or different (anyatha) from what it actually is.

Although it is generally true that a thing appears as it is, we are forced, by the subsequent cancellation of our illusory knowledge to admit that in illusion a thing can and does appear different from what it actually is. This theory maintains that there is some real basis of an illusory appearance, and that an illusory object also has real existence, although not at the place where it is seen in illusion. Unless there were real silver, which we had seen before, it would not be possible for us to have an illusion of silver.

There are thus three points to be specially noted in this theory of illusion: first, the appearance of something other than the object

before the perceiver; secondly, the existence of a real basis of the appearance, and thirdly, the existence of the illusory object. Let us consider these points one by one.

According to this theory, an illusion is the appearance of an other. But wherein lies the otherness? Does the thing behind the appearance become itself an other and put up the appearance? or is there otherness only in the appearance? A thing cannot of course have the attribute of otherness to itself. It can become an other only in the sense of being transformed into a different thing by an actual process of change. If it does so and then presents itself, we shall no longer call the appearance an illusion, and it will not be cancelled by any subsequent knowledge. We have therefore to suppose that the otherness in question lies merely in the appearance. But what constitutes the otherness of the appearance? The otherness of the appearance can be constituted only by the fact that the form of the appearance is that of silver whereas its basis is something different, that is, a piece of white shell. By the term "appearance of silver" in this connexion we mean the knowledge of silver that we get in an illusion of silver; and when we speak of its otherness we can only mean that our knowledge of silver has for its basis something which is different from silver. But we can refer to a thing as the basis of some knowledge only when the form of the thing appears in that knowledge. When a piece of shell does not appear in a knowledge, in what sense can it be the basis of that knowledge? This leads us to the second point.

Our knowledge of silver in illusion has a real basis or an unreal one. If it had a real basis, it should not be contradicted at all. But the fact that it is contradicted shows that it has no real basis. So it can have only an unreal basis. But an unreal basis is no basis at all. To say that our knowledge of silver in illusion has no basis at all is to say that there can be an appearance which need not have any basis.

It may be said that there is real silver in the world, and hence our knowledge of silver, even in illusion, is not absolutely baseless. But although silver as silver may exist somewhere else, e.g. in the shop of a silver-smith, silver as appearing in illusion, i.e. in the form of a presented object at a particular point of space, has no real existence. When in illusion our knowledge is of the form "this is silver," the basis of this knowledge can be either "this as identi-

fied as one with silver" or merely "this" or merely "silver." "This" (the object before the perceiver) as silver does not exist, for the object before the perceiver is only a piece of shell and not silver. So only "this" or only "silver" can be the basis. But in either case our knowledge would not be of the form "this is silver," but would be either of the form "this" or of the form "silver." It is difficult to maintain therefore that there is any real basis for an illusory appearance.

Let us now consider whether an illusion anyway implies the existence of the illusory object. When our illusion of silver is corrected, we certainly say "this is not silver" and thus deny the existence of the silver that appeared in illusion. Real silver might have been experienced before, from which we got the idea of silver, but whether it exists somewhere else even now, we cannot say either from the occurrence of illusion or from its correction. It is contended that in the correcting cognition silver itself is not denied, (we do not say "there is no silver"), but only its identity with the object before the perceiver. But if merely the negation of the identity of two things were the meaning of the correcting cognition, both the things would be given in it. That, however, is not the case.

These difficulties have persuaded the idealist Buddhists to hold that it is needless to assume the existence of external things. In illusion, as everybody admits, we have direct knowledge of a thing which is not there before us. The silver, seen in illusion, can therefore be only a form of knowledge. This theory is known as *atmakhyativada*,—the theory of the self-presentation of a knowledge or an idea. What is in reality a mere idea comes to present itself as an external object and therein lies the illusory character of an appearance. What is really there is only a flow of knowledge which sometimes comes to us in the form of silver and sometimes in that of a piece of shell.

This view does not seem to be quite plausible. If the silver in the illusory cognition were a mere idea, it would not come to us as a presented object. Moreover this view does not supply us with any criterion of truth and error. If the flow of knowledge alone were responsible for everything we see or hear, then there would be no ground for making any distinction between valid and invalid knowledge.

Some Buddhists formulate their theory of illusion in a different way. What is self-presentation (*atmakhyati*), from the point of view of knowledge, is, from the objective point of view, the presentation of the unreal (*asatkhyati*). When on the correction of illusion we say "this is not silver," we mean that the object before us was never silver. So in illusion we have the appearance of a thing which is not there. This theory is therefore called *asat-khyativada* or the theory of the presentation of the unreal. If it is objected that what is unreal cannot have an appearance, the Buddhists will readily reply that the appearance and the non-appearance of things are not dependent upon the nature of objects but they are regulated by *avidya* or elemental ignorance.

But the problem is not solved how an unreal entity can ever become the object of our perception. The silver that we see in illusion cannot be absolutely unreal. Because if it were absolutely unreal, we would not have seen it at all. Nor can it be real, for in that case it would not be negated in the correcting cognition. So the silver of illusion belongs to a category of being which is neither real nor unreal. This is *anirvachaniya-khyativada* of the Vedantins (of the Sankara school), the theory of the presentation of the indescribable.

This theory seems to be necessitated by the insufficiency of *asat-khyativada* which supposes the illusory object to be absolutely unreal. But it is doubtful whether this theory itself makes the matter any the clearer by its peculiar notion of the indescribable. What is indescribable in the sense of being neither real nor unreal is really unthinkable. Real and unreal are generally taken to be mutually exclusive; we cannot think of a middle region which is neither real nor unreal. We do not understand how the indescribable appears and disappears and are not provided with any means of finding out whether the object of any of our perceptions is or is not of the nature of the indescribable, so long as it does not disappear from the field of perception, yielding its place to a new object.

According to the Vedantins of this school, the propositions "this is silver" (in illusion) and "this is not silver" (on the cessation of illusion) have got predicates of different significance. In the first proposition silver stands for indescribable silver, and in the second it stands for ordinary silver such as can be had in the market. Such being the case, there is no real contradiction between these two

propositions and so the truth of one proposition cannot be taken as the ground on which the falsity of the other can be asserted. In fact if we accept this theory, we cannot say that the proposition "this is silver" based on illusion is really false, because some sort of silver, even though it may be of the indescribable kind, is granted to be there at the place of illusion, and what sort of silver is expected by the perceiver is not specified in the proposition itself.

While we are passing these theories in a critical review, it is well to recognise that every one of them has got something relevant to say regarding some aspect or other of the phenomenon of illusion. We know that our judgments of perception are not wholly determined by what actually comes from without. Our past experience, present interests and other accompanying circumstances are responsible for much that we seem to see or hear. And it is true that in illusion we are not able to distinguish between what is given outside and what is simply mental. These points are emphasised by the theory of non-apprehension (*akhyati*). The theory of different appearance (*anyatha-khyati*) gives us exactly the ordinary view of illusion that it is the appearance of one thing as another. But ontologically the thing seen in illusion is not certainly there in reality. So it is an appearance of the unreal (*asat-khyati*). Hence it is plausible also to suppose that what we see to be there in illusion is really an idea of the mind (*atma-khyati*). But if it is an idea of the mind, how is it seen as an external object? And if the illusory object is wholly unreal, how is it seen at all? These difficulties have been brought out by the theory of indescribable appearance (*anirvachaniya-khyati*). But if these constitute a real difficulty, it is such as can admit of no further explanation. When it is said that a particular phenomenon is an illusion, we must admit either that we have understood all that requires to be understood in the case or that we have something which from the nature of the case is inexplicable. An illusion may be supposed to be explained completely when the nature of the illusory object is explained. There is nothing to be explained in mere seeing. It is a self-explained psychological event. But it is the nature of the illusory object that raises the whole crop of difficulties. The illusory object is either a mere nothing or something. If it is something, it is either real or unreal. If it is real then it is either psychical or physical. These alternatives appear to be exhaustive and we find that none

of them is explicable in the case of the illusory object. The illusory object is not a mere nothing which by itself is not a possible object of thought or perception. It is surely something, but a something which cannot be said to be either real or unreal. If it were unreal, it would be a mere nothing and would not be seen at all. If it were real, it would be either psychical or physical. But if it were psychical, it would not have an external appearance, and if it were physical it would not disappear. So it is neither psychical nor physical, and we cannot conceive of a third variety. Hence we cannot say that it is real at all. When we realise that it is nothing in the world of reality, we can easily understand that there is nothing in reality which can serve as its ground and supply its explanation. We have to take it simply as a fact of experience that in illusion we have the appearance of a thing which is not there. When a knowledge is recognised to be an illusion, we must acknowledge that epistemologically it has received a final characterisation beyond which nothing further can be said about it to make its nature more intelligible to us.