

# The Grand Illusion

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Schoolboy magic is not what it was. At one time Maskelyne and Levant's rivalled the pantomime as the crowning event of the Christmas holiday. You can still buy beginner's conjuring sets at toy shops, or hire a 'magician' for a children's party. But the Magic Circle nowadays flirts with the Society for Psychical Research, speculating on the elusive hinterland between illusionism and magic. Some of them are a long way from 'nothing up my sleeve' and 'the quickness of the hand deceives the eye'.

So many wonders have accumulated since Steiner wrote *The Philosophy of Freedom* that the very Naive Realism whose sinister partnership with Critical Idealism that book overthrew has shifted its ground. To appreciate conjuring you need a solid world of tables and chairs as a safe normality to be restored at the end of the performance, a world where top-hats no longer pour forth rabbits. But nowadays the cabinet in which Ae lady is sawn in half is no more of a marvel than the television cabinet where you might well be observing the phenomenon, indeed much less so. When people are naive, it is more likely to be in their ability to absorb the wonderful without astonishment. What are a few unexplained mice and rabbits in a world of lasers and Venus-probes? Modern man, face to face with a healing at Lourdes or the Indian rope-trick, drily observes that a Hollywood version would be better presented. When the entire experienceable universe is manifestly

some sort of trick, it is invidious to single out one illusory phenomenon from others as the flaw which gives us a clue to the underlying reality. 'The world is my mental picture', says Schopenhauer. 'So I must be crazy', concludes modern man.

Nevertheless, at a crucial point of history *The Philosophy of Freedom* was written, and is very much with us today. If anthroposophy possessed its own version of the Screwtape Letters, the fiend might have observed that the book gave him some very nasty moments.

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*"Those of us", he might have said, "who had concerned ourselves from the beginning with diverting mankind through his insatiable curiosity have been obliged to keep a constant eye on his unfortunate tendency to drift from mere inquisitiveness into open-mouthed astonishment, than which nothing draws him so swiftly towards the treacherous realm of heavenly wonder which threatens us all.*

*"The scientific revolution appeared to be solidly based on the righteous scepticism of Kant. You younger fiends would do well to remember that, while it is excellent to find occasion for pride in a human being, it can be even better to find a spurious reason for humility. Kant convinced scientists that it was impossible to reach a real world of 'things-in-themselves'. 'Metaphysics', their ludicrous name for this ingenious half-truth, has proved as effective a sword as Gabriel's for keeping man unaware of his imminent reprieve from the Dark Ages. It made an irresistible appeal to the puritan self-lacerating spirit of the West. Since Calvinism and witch-burning were now denied them, they embraced pragmatic science with avidity. Darwinism, Freudianism, and all manner of later psychological hairshirts followed thick and fast.*

*"Wonderful stuff for us, you would have thought; every wonder accounted for in terms of something ingenious but banal, every flicker of revelation neatly doused by some clever but monumentally boring explanation. But unlike Kant, trotting dutifully about Konigsberg, these dedicated metaphysical pragmatists had to stick their inquisitive noses into the real world of natural phenomena, where their humble, mortified minds revealed a whole new world of wonders. Sure enough their silly mouths dropped open, and wonder and astonishment filled their naive little souls, and even turned to reverence in some of them (Darwin was a most reverent man).*

*"Before we knew where we were, half of them would have reached wisdom-filled identification with the laws of the universe, and even submission to the course of karmic evolution, and anthroposophy would have been upon us.*

*"It was in this sensitive period of history that Rudolf Steiner appeared with his Philosophy of Freedom. Surely science in its youthful upsurge would have the acuity, filled as it was with a Rowing wonder at the natural world, to perceive that human thinking was the crowning wonder among all wonders, and that in the*

*astonished, wonder-filled and reverent observation of their own thinking as phenomenon among phenomena, that very naivete rightly distrusted by Kant in connection with other observations would here find its justification and sanction.*

*"As you know, however, to our vast relief, metaphysics proved a strong enough barrier to prevent so cataclysmic an advance in human awareness. The fire was neatly doused in oceans of brain physiology, and the direct observation — seelische Beobachtung [soul observation] — that Steiner had made possible was for the time being diverted. Nobody of importance took any notice of Steiner, and we soon had plenty of opportunities to see that his enemies, and sometimes his supporters, sufficiently misrepresented him.*

*"In case you are inclined to be complacent, however, I would remind you that our victory was by no means final. The moment passed, but it could have been a very near thing. Steiner failed to shift the barrier established in the midstream of human cognitive advance. Nothing could stop the current of human evolution. But metaphysics has at least ensured for the time being that knowledge remains a closed system rather than an open-ended one. You may object that this operation in the human mind was rather like damming a raging torrent, and that however far in the future we have postponed its reemergence, the time must come when it bursts its bonds. This is no doubt so, but there will certainly be further pickings for us in that very fact, and the longer it is delayed the more we shall retrieve. If the advances of the enemy are inevitable, always ensure that they are cataclysmic rather than organic. Hell thrives on crises.*

*"What, Wormwood? Speak up! Yes, there are certainly still anthroposophists. Their numbers are small. They are like holes in the dam. So long as that is all they are, they can even help in a minor way to postpone the crisis we rely on, which is to our advantage. But I have already pointed out many times that an illusion, to be effective, must be complete. A very small flaw can in some circumstances collapse the entire structure. Meanwhile, as you know, we have succeeded in creating on the basis of metaphysics and materialism the biggest diversionary circus of all time.*

*"You could do worse, Wormwood, than study a well-established fighting technique among men, called Judo, based on the principle, 'if you can't beat it, join it'. After all, if each of the myriad wonders man is now uncovering in the natural world and beneath it has resulted from experiments based on a sense perception whose ability to reach a real world is denied, and on a thinking chiefly devised to eliminate its presumably subjective bias, we can rely on a growing bias in thinking itself against observation as a principle. Observation then tends to be undertaken by scientists *faute de mieux* [for lack of something better or more desirable]. And we are fairly safe from the, to us, dangerous results of scientists observing the thinking itself, so long as productive results continue to be possible without doing*

*so. This has already established itself as a psychological block throughout western mankind, which provides us with a sort of built-in Judo. 'From now on, the more wonders in this field the better. We can rely upon the simple power of association to ensure that the more insistent and overwhelming and space-wide the sensation of a science-fiction universe 'there' outside him becomes for man, the deeper will grow his scepticism to match it.*

*"If it's corny, it's phoney, and the cornier the phonier."*

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So much for Screwtape, designed brilliantly by C. S. Lewis as an entertaining companion on the path of self-debunking. We have used the method to show how modern consciousness has advanced along a path of debunking a naive view of the world, and built up scepticism as an instrument not of knowledge of the world (which in the naive sense is unknowable) but of knowledge of some kind of thinkable reality whose results can be applied to that unknowable world with practical effect.

What Steiner has done in his earliest work is to demonstrate that this truly heroic process of disillusionment with the world leaves virtually untouched a further layer of misapprehensions so close to the most intimate processes of observation and thinking as to escape notice altogether in the sheer vigour of our cognitive activity. He unseats not the theories of the world but the very axioms upon which the theories are based, things not previously thought to be open to question, or even susceptible to treatment by thinking at all. He points out that the unknowable world of things-in-themselves which the heroic disciplined sceptic tilts at with his metaphysical thinking is thought of and also pictured with precisely the same innocent naivete as the simple man's world which has been discarded for it. But this is to fall victim to a deeper illusion. What if reality is after all not something in relation to which I stand on the receiving end?

The scientist stands before the fact of an illusory world, and counters it with sceptical thinking cast into the unknowable world like the line of a fly-fisherman. He judges scientific correctness by its actual ability to pull out a technical fish. The sense world meanwhile makes its incessant and formidable claim to be real, in defiance of all our intelligence and understanding. But, points out Steiner, the association between our intuition that there is such a thing as reality and the fairly limited range of perceptions available to our senses, to which we do stand in a passive relation, is a fortuitous one. We generalise from what is increasingly seen to be a special instance as we advance beyond purely sense-observation into the much wider fields of perception which take in thinking itself. It then becomes apparent that in an expanded consciousness of which sense-perception forms only a particular and rather atypical part, perception is something you do and not something done to you. At a later stage active perception can be carried even into the realm accessible to the senses. The element in that realm which gives us

our normal conviction that the sense-world is outside us, acting upon us, then separates out from the knowable senserealities as a non-human conscious agency, actually alien and irrelevant to those realities. It is this agency which Steiner refers to as Ahriman.

Increasing familiarity with these thoughts has the effect of gradually weaning our attention from the aggressive claim of the sense world to be the whole reality our intuition seeks, and focussing it upon the fact that this claim is made in defiance of our understanding that it is illusory. The scientist replies that this is precisely what his metaphysical constructs do. But this loses its force once we have so activated our thinking and perception that passively received 'convictions' no longer take us aback. Reality is then no longer that which, in spite of myself, has succeeded in overcoming my scepticism, nor are facts described as things 'you cannot get away from'. I no longer seek to be 'convinced' or conquered by reality, but so to alter my being by active entry into perception and thinking that I become gradually identical with the realities I seek. At this point Steiner shows how more fundamental grounds for one's own being also reveal themselves.

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Provided we do not relax the eternal vigilance which is the price of becoming aware of Ahriman, we may leave Screwtape and his minions to their plotting. We sometimes hear it said among churchmen that God does not allow man to be tempted beyond his capacity. This is no arbitrary limit set upon devilish activities. Like all his pupils, the greatest of all conjurors depends entirely upon a compliant audience to maintain his illusions. Ahriman too has nothing up his sleeve. The raw material of his bag of tricks is the world itself. Every confidence trickster knows that at each moment of genuine self-realisation on the part of his victim the very facts upon which he relied to deceive are those which reveal the truth. No lies are necessary beyond those that the victim has already told himself.

By the mere fact of entering it, Ahriman causes the real glory of the earth to appear in such a way that the nature of its reality is entirely misapprehended, but this false emphasis only works as a deception if man is in a certain soul condition. We may describe this condition as one of isolation, but the soul elements which effect this isolation are themselves as real in the soul world as are the sense-perceived elements in the realm susceptible to Ahriman. Pride, courage, *amour-propre* [self-esteem], duty, nobility, righteousness, knowing what is best for the young and the weak, serious-minded sense of purpose, character, the whole tapestry of soul characteristics which are quintessential for a human being if he is to come into existence as a willed spiritual entity - all this is the raw material for the activity of Lucifer within the human soul. Each of these characteristics isolates a man, distinguishes him from everything else in life which in their absence results in his being a nothing, blown away like thistle down on the wind of impermanence.

In this necessary isolation the ego receives a false emphasis. It becomes the only yardstick for reality-sense. For the soul in this condition, truth is synonymous with the understanding I have attained, love is only possible for what can be drawn into my own

sphere of aesthetic sympathies, right and wrong clearly distinguish themselves in the world in the light of my own moral judgments. No other elements are necessary for this monstrous inward lie told by Lucifer in the depths of the soul than the real elements which the spirit uses to engage itself as will upon the real human tasks. The isolation is inevitable and necessary if I am to be I, indeed, if I am to be anything other than a mere series of results, reactions, end-products of non-human activity. But for all that it is a lie. It is not true that I am alone and separate. If I exist at all, I am 'of the cosmos', a spiritual phenomenon (or *noumenon* as the Greeks called it), a fact of spiritual existence among other spiritual facts. So I am driven into a corner. I feel I have the choice only of false existence or non existence. The false Luciferic existence is thus the one I choose. It is the only one I know. And it is this soul condition which is the necessary precondition for Ahriman's sleight of hand. Believing with Lucifer that I am alone, I am ripe to be convinced by Ahriman that the world is as it appears to be.

In the first instance, this exposition is no more than a tissue of intellectually understood thoughts derived from reading anthroposophy. But it leads directly to what is the normal situation of daily waking consciousness. Here am I, alone; there is the world, real. It is all I normally know. Into this situation enter the thoughts derived from anthroposophy, which are at first abstract, intellectual, mere suggestions derived from Rudolf Steiner. But in the light of this description of the activities of two kinds of alien beings, operating in the respective spheres of the processes which lead to our self-realisation and to our knowledge of the world, the thoughts can begin to make some kind of sense. We are in the midst of convincing experiences and at the same time can know we are being effectively deceived by them. A solemn excitement can take hold of us. We are confronted by a vast awe-inspiring illusion in front of our very eyes and in the intimacy of well-known inward experiences. We begin to sense that in coming to grips with this and in penetrating to the reality which it contains we shall find the real meaning of our existence.

This grand illusion unrolls before our inward eye like some vast jigsaw puzzle or problem in detection. Something in us insists 'you are in possession of all the necessary facts'. Beyond and behind the surface challenge we sense that if we roused ourselves sufficiently a deeper confrontation would await, challenging us with the terrible thunder of the mystery drama: 'O man, know thou thyself.' Lacking the gathered strength of this final confrontation, we can still clearly perceive that we are in sight of, and at times in the actual process of, a cognitive revolution, even an actual conversion or series of minor conversions in the sphere of the knowing process.

Many anthroposophists find it hard to approach spiritual science 'from this end'. 'If one is not a philosophical type . . .' they explain, and go on to proclaim the virtues of *Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*, *Theosophy*, or *Occult Science* leaving *Truth and Science* and *The Philosophy of Freedom* to those whose particular path they seem to be. All one-sided approaches to spiritual science have characteristic dangers, which Steiner himself pointed out. Not least are the dietary deficiencies and actual toxicities which paralyse the will striving to engage itself in the metamorphosis of thinking and inner visualisation. The

danger of not entering the field of epistemology — the study of the nature of the knowing process — is that one inevitably achieves an experience of 'understanding' some of the factual content of the vast field of Rudolf Steiner's books and lectures without knowing what 'understanding' itself actually is. Undoubtedly the prolonged study of the later anthroposophy and the meditative life associated with it leads to a slow transformation of the quality of our understanding, and so gradually it becomes less dualistic and less subject to the kind of illusion we have been describing. But it is astonishing how far we can go in factual knowledge and sympathy for spiritual science and yet describe it in a language which demonstrates that we still visualise the spiritual world in naive-real pictures which stand by themselves 'over against' the observer, like the knockabout hard-edged conjuring-trick objects of our daily 'old curiosity shop' world.

Without specific hard uncomfortable training our most fondly held cognitive prejudices are viciously resistant to the kind of metamorphosis that the whole of anthroposophy gently and wonderfully indicates. Each flight of imagination at an evening meeting finds us in the cold light of dawn flat on our backs with the same old materialist heresies. We are cognitive recidivists, revisionists fit to be liquidated in our own purge. This reversion to type after each effort we make to cultivate ourselves and produce a new strain in mankind plays havoc with the general position of anthroposophy in the world, no less than with our common experience of it within the movement. We tend to fall back on a common experience of anthroposophy which tends to become as popular in its own way as the popular view of the world held by mankind in general.

The truth is that each several anthroposophist, indeed each several human being, has to hold up his own purged and purified and hardly-won knowledge of himself and the world on his own shoulders, each man his own Atlas, consciously bearing his own known world and responsible for it. Falling back on a common world view, especially one enlivened by anthroposophical ideas, leads to the increasingly weak condoning of the increasingly weak. Responsibility for one's own knowledge of the spiritual leads to the strong loving the strong. These astringent thoughts are not meant to frighten away the weak, since it is we ourselves who are also the weak. Only out of strength and responsibility in knowledge can we love that which in weak people is strong — the seed which can grow to independence. An anthroposophy that is not subjected to the purgative and purifying fire of its own earliest epistemological origins is especially vulnerable to the weakening effect of a kind of popularisation.

However, we can follow the path of knowledge, teasing out the threads which have been crossed and confused, ridding ourselves of the fears and confusions of materialistic philosophy — the bogey of the 'subjective' experience, the fear of the so-called 'limits of knowledge', the illusory spectre of metaphysics, the will-o-the-wisp called 'the thing-in-itself', the loss of the real in the objective — and restoring confidence in the naive together with an equal confidence in the moral creativity of clear critical thinking. We can become more and more sure footed in all these realms until we start to be able to put our weight on them. This action itself is what produces our first real confidence in the reality

of thinking. And then gradually we find that all those qualities by which Lucifer enables us to become serious and responsible spiritual aristocrats are the very ones we need to master the spiritual activity of freedom. It is this experience to which Steiner refers in his whole doctrine of Michael.

C.S. Lewis, in his original *Screwtape*, made a considerable start on describing some of the more pungent ways in which spiritual growth can perpetuate evil. The essence of Michael is that he retreats before all attempts to absorb him. But seriousness and responsibility are formidable anywhere, and there is only a hair's breadth between these qualities in Lucifer's hands and in Michael's. It is sometimes said that the presiding winged head above the representative of mankind in Steiner's sculpture reveals the essence of humour. There is certainly no defence better than a sense of humour against the persistence of the spiritual mandarin, who always appears to be someone else but usually turns out to have been provoked by something in ourselves. In fact there are very few who are not tempted by some insecurity to weaken someone else by being more or less consciously intimidating. It is no good quoting even Michael to the damnation of people who really still need power. We can at most deal with the aristocrat in ourselves. The Luciferic illusion needs different methods from the Ahrimanic one. Here humour, the art of pointing contrasts with love, could show how the Luciferic stance in the soul Establishment differs — so slightly but with what consequence — from the stance of Michael in the battle with illusion.

Only Michael can replace Lucifer, and so reach Ahriman with knowledge; just as only Christ can replace Ahriman and so confront Lucifer with love.

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