

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

AN ADDRESS BY BISHOP GEORGE DE CHARMS *

What constitutes reality? People in general naively take for granted that the objects of their experience are real because they are material, fixed and permanent, and because, being independent of the human mind, they exhibit these characteristics whether or not they are being experienced. Yet it is well known that the same object appears quite differently to different people, and even to the same person at different times. Which of these appearances, then, is the real one?

It is commonly supposed that the crucial test of reality lies in the fact that many people have the same experience, and that this experience can be repeated indefinitely under similar conditions. On this fact all scientific certainty is based. Yet this is no proof that the object experienced is what it appears to be. Indeed, there is incontestible scientific evidence that it is not. More careful observation often reveals unsuspected qualities that greatly change our idea of the object. Two things that look alike to most people may be seen to be altogether different when examined by an expert. Even an expert may discover new and surprising qualities by a more minute analysis. Can we ever be sure that our idea of the object may not be still further changed? Certainly, when any object is examined under a microscope it becomes completely unrecognizable. Suppose we had microscopes a thousand times more powerful, what would we see? Being unable to predict this, have we any assurance that what we now know of the object is the final reality?

What, then, constitutes reality? The search for an answer to this question has given rise to two opposing philosophies, called, respectively, "Realism" and "Idealism." *Realism* is based on the contention that the objects of our experience actually exist as things fixed and permanent apart from any knowledge we may have concerning them, and that these objects are the ultimate reality. Our mental impressions, on the other hand, are not real, because they are unreliable and constantly subject to change. Extreme realists hold that everything we may perceive or think of exists

* Read before the Annual Meeting of the Swedenborg Scientific Association, May 20, 1959.

apart from our apprehension of it and in exactly the form in which it appears to us. Philosophical realists contend that the object, though real, is not identical with our perception of it, reality residing in something back of the appearance; something like protons, electrons, or fields of force, which have been proved to exist but which cannot be sensed. Casual realists merely hold that there are real objects independent of our minds which cause our sensations, but that these are not necessarily what we think they are. *Idealism* is founded on the opposite belief that mental experience itself is the final reality and, indeed, the only reality we can ever know, because we are never aware of objects outside of ourselves but only of the impressions they seem to make upon our minds. There is no actual proof, indeed, that these impressions come from without. They may just as well be produced within the mind itself. But even if they do come from without, the only thing that is real to us is the impression itself. We can know nothing else. Extreme idealists believe in "solipsism," that is, in the idea that the person doing the perceiving is the only reality. The logical conclusion is the absurdity that he alone exists. To avoid this, other idealists adopt the view that a society of "minds" or of spiritual beings, with God as supreme, constitutes reality. Their concept has been called "Spiritual Pluralism." Still others adopt what is called "Spiritual Monism," namely, the belief that a single, impersonal, spiritual force is the only reality. But whatever the particular theory, all realists look to the physical world for the ultimate reality, while all idealists believe that it is to be found only in the ideas and perceptions of the human mind. Those who belong to each school of thought have raised unanswerable objections to the theories of the opposing school, and, consequently, the question of ultimate reality remains unanswered.*

The Writings teach that each of these philosophies contains a partial truth, which, because it is mistaken for the whole truth, becomes a falsity. It is true that the material world consists of objects which are real, fixed, permanent and measurable, and that these objects are independent of any human sensation or experience (AE 1218). The Writings also teach that ideas, thoughts and perceptions in the minds of men, although they are not fixed or measurable, may be either real or not real, true or false. They

* See *Introduction to Living Philosophy*, by D. S. Robinson, and *Four Philosophies*, by James Donald Butler.

may be pure phantasies; but if they are true, they are more real than any material object. However, neither physical objects nor mental concepts can be regarded as the ultimate reality. They are only more or less perfect representative images of reality. The only essential reality is the Divine of the Lord.

“The Divine truth proceeding from the Lord,” we read, “is the veriest reality, and such a reality that all things have come forth from it, and all things subsist from it; for whatever proceeds from the Lord is the veriest reality in the universe; and such is the Divine truth, which is called the ‘Word’ through which all things were made” (AC 6880). Again: “Unless the infinite God were the all, substance itself, and wisdom itself, man would not be anything, thus would either be nothing, or merely an idea of being, according to the visionaries called idealists. . . . God created the universe and all things thereof from Himself and not from nothing. It follows from this that every created thing, and especially man, and the love and wisdom in him, are something, and not merely ideas of being; for unless God were infinite there would not be the finite; and unless the Infinite were all, there would not be anything; and unless God had created all things from Himself, there would be nothing. In a word, *we are because God is*” (DP 46).

In God, we are told, infinite things are distinctly one. This infinitely perfect one, uncreate and eternal, is the only reality. All the finite things in the universe are created to represent, picture forth, and thus reveal that inmost Divine reality. The human mind is an organ capable of sensing or perceiving what is thus revealed. Created things are said to be real, not because they are material, not because we can see and feel them, but because they mirror forth essential reality; and human ideas and perceptions, which are not material and not perceptible by the bodily senses, still are said to be real just so far as they also reflect essential reality. Thus we read: “Inasmuch as each and all things subsist, that is, continually come forth, from the Divine, and as each and all things thence derived must needs be representative of those things whereby they came into existence, it follows that the visible universe is nothing else than a theatre representative of the Lord’s kingdom, and that this kingdom is a theatre representative of the Lord Himself” (AC 3483).

By the Lord’s kingdom is meant the angelic heaven, where the

visible and tangible objects are more real than those of earth because they represent the Divine of the Lord more fully, more livingly, and more perfectly. Nevertheless, the objects of nature also are real, because, although to a less perfect degree, they also represent the Divine of the Lord. As far as men sense or perceive in the objects of nature something of the Divine love and wisdom, and picture this forth in their thoughts, their ideas are real. To perceive the Divine love and wisdom is to see the use of a thing, the purpose of its existence, the way in which it can be of service to man. In so far as he does this, man becomes intelligent and wise. If he does not do so, his ideas are not real but unsubstantial phantasies. If he does do so, his thoughts and perceptions are even more real than the objects of nature; and this is why, by means of these ideas, he can control the forces of nature and direct them into channels of great benefit to human society. This results from his ability to perceive natural uses. But he has the ability also to perceive the spiritual and eternal uses for the sake of which the objects of nature have been created. As far as he does this, his ideas are still more real, making the Divine of the Lord present in a more perfect and living way. From these ideas arise the real appearances of the spiritual world, and all the wonders and the beauties of heaven.

But to understand this we must have clearly in mind what the Writings teach concerning the process of creation. This teaching begins with the postulate that God alone *is*, and therefore He alone is *real*. Because of this, whatever proceeds from Him also is real, and it proceeds by means of finite creation. The first of creation is the spiritual sun, by means of which the Lord most perfectly presents Himself, as it were outside of Himself, as Divine love or spiritual heat, and Divine wisdom or spiritual light. From this sun were produced in succession three spiritual atmospheres whereby the love and wisdom of the sun were tempered and accommodated to various degrees of human reception. Furthermore, by these atmospheres the activity of the Divine love and wisdom was directed to the production of everything which the Lord foresaw would be needful for the achievement of His Divine end; namely, the establishment, and the eternal perfection, of a heaven from the human race. Whatever contributes to that end is called a use, and this is why, in the Writings, the spiritual atmospheres

are called the Divine of use, for they, from the very beginning, contained in potency all possible uses (DLW 296–298). Yet these uses were completely invisible and intangible. In these potential heavens there were no visible objects, and no angels to enjoy them, but only creative forces.

The heat and light of heaven, like the heat and light of the natural sun, can be perceived only as reflected from objects that possess differentiated shapes, colors and forms. Such objects can be produced only in the natural world, where the Divine proceeding comes to rest in substances apparently dead, fixed and measurable. To provide these, the Lord next created the natural sun, the source of natural heat, light, and all the mechanical forces of nature. He created natural atmospheres to convey and moderate this heat and light, and adapt them to all natural uses. And, finally, He created the earth composed of material substances at rest. There, on the surface of the earth, the living forces of the spiritual atmospheres, using as tools the heat and light of the natural sun and all the dead forces of nature, began to mold the substances of the earth into forms that could serve as a tangible clothing for the uses potentially present in those first formed atmospheres. Those uses were the primal cause, the vital creative soul, of all the objects that came into being in the three kingdoms of nature—all minerals, vegetables and animals, and finally, men. (See *Athanasian Creed* 101: “Use is the vegetative soul.”)

Man, the crown of creation, was endowed not only with sense organs responsive to the objects and forces of the material world, but also with a mind sensitive to the activities of the spiritual atmospheres, which activities could produce from his memory and imagination tangible forms capable of reflecting the light and heat of the spiritual sun. Note that these spiritual forms were all derived from the material objects of man’s environment as those objects were sensed, perceived, and thus reproduced in man’s memory and imagination. They cannot be created in any other way. That is why man must be born on earth before he can become an angel or live consciously in the spiritual world. Material objects were created before there were any human beings. They exist completely apart from human minds. But spiritual objects can be created only by means of human minds furnished with natural sensations and memories. But note also that these spiritual ob-

jects are just as truly Divine creations as are the objects of nature. Sensations and memories provide only the necessary materials. Just as the Divine of the Lord, present in the spiritual atmospheres as creative forces, produced from the dead substances of nature objects capable of reflecting the heat and the light of the natural sun, so those same creative forces used these natural forms, as sensed and perceived by men, to produce spiritual objects capable of reflecting the heat and the light of heaven's sun. Thus the Lord's love and wisdom were made visible and tangible to men, and the heavens could be filled with objects more real, more delightful, more wonderful by far than are the objects of nature. These spiritual objects are nothing but uses in form, the same spiritual uses that produced the objects of nature and that lay concealed within them. These uses are the real things from which and for the sake of which the objects of nature exist.

To perceive the uses, therefore, is to perceive the reality within these objects; and in this lies all truly human intelligence and wisdom. As long as we live on earth we can perceive these spiritual uses only abstractly, as thoughts and perceptions within ourselves; but when we enter the other life, these thoughts and perceptions are represented in objective forms similar to those of earth, only more perfect and capable of yielding a keener and more delightful sensation. Thus we read: "In the heavens all appearances that exist are real because they are correspondences. For the interiors belonging to the affections and thoughts therefrom of the angels, when they pass into the sight of their eyes, are clothed in such forms as are manifest in heaven. They are called appearances because they are visible, and they are said to be correspondences and real because they spring from creation" (AE 553).

Note that they are not hallucinations, phantasmic projections from the minds of the angels, but substantial Divine creations picturing forth in correspondential forms exactly how the minds of the angels are affected by the inflowing Divine of the Lord. Again we read: "The representations that come forth in the other life are appearances, but living ones, because they are from the light of life. The light of life is the Divine wisdom, which is from the Lord alone. Hence, all things that come forth from this light are real, and not like those that come forth from the light of the

world. Wherefore they who are in the other life have sometimes said that the things they see there are real things, and things which man sees are, in comparison, not real, because the former things live, and thus immediately affect their life, while the latter things do not live, thus do not immediately affect the life except in so far and in such manner as the things in their minds which are of this world's light conjoin themselves fitly and correspondingly with the things of the light of heaven" (AC 3485).

Ideas in the minds of men and spirits are the materials out of which all the appearances of the spiritual world are formed. As far as these ideas are true, that is, as far as they represent something eternally existent in the Divine of the Lord, the Lord creates from them objective appearances that are real; but as far as they are not true, man himself creates false appearances, hallucinations and phantasms. Thus we read: "Be it known that the life of sense with spirits is twofold, namely, real and not real. The one is distinguished from the other by the fact that everything is real which appears to those who are in heaven, whereas everything is unreal which appears to those who are in hell. For whatever comes from the Divine, that is, from the Lord, is real, because it comes from the very esse of things, and from life itself; but whatever comes from a spirit's proprium is not real, because it does not come from the esse of things, nor from life itself. They who are in the affection of good and truth are in the Lord's life, thus in real life, for the Lord is present in good and truth through the affection; but they who are in evil and falsity through the affection are in the life of their proprium, thus in a life not real, for the Lord is not present in evil and falsity. The real is distinguished from the not real in this: the real is actually such as it appears to be, and the not real is actually not such as it appears to be" (AC 4623).

We must realize that ideas, regarded as imaginative pictures, are never exact reproductions of the objects of nature. They are a gathering together and ordering of many sense impulses—impulses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. That which gathers these impulses together and arranges them in order is always a love, which is perceived as an interest or an affection. If this love be innocent, that is, if it is a willing response to the influx of the Lord's life, to the creative forces in the spiritual atmospheres, then the idea that is thus formed will be true, and will

represent something real. How perfectly true it is will depend upon the material available; that is, upon the experiences and knowledges that have been received from the world of nature. The ideas of a little child are certainly not scientifically accurate, because they are based on insufficient and superficial experience; but still they are true, and sometimes more true than the ideas of sophisticated adults, because they are formed by an innocent love, a love that inflows out of heaven.

On the other hand, a learned man who has acquired a vast store of scientific knowledge, but who is inspired, not by a love of truth, nor by a desire to perform a use, but instead by an ambition for wealth or power, will create from all his knowledge a false ideal, a purely imaginary picture of the end and purpose of life. He will live in a mental world of phantasy that has no basis or foundation in reality. Yet, in the mercy of the Lord, these hallucinations will seem real to him, while what is true and good will seem phantastic and unreal, for if this were not so he would have no life at all. "I have occasionally spoken with spirits," Swedenborg writes, "as to the phantasies which appear so much to the life among them. They think, for instance, that they have [beautiful] garments, and entertain various other conceits, some of which are ridiculous, and which it would require many pages to recite. The reason is that they themselves are but mere phantasies, and their life consists of nothing else. It is accordingly provided by the Lord that their phantasies should appear to them altogether as realities. With those who are in faith from the Lord the case is entirely different; to them there are no phantasies, but [real] appearances attended with all pleasantness and felicity" (SD 4360).

Ideas are formed as the interiors of man's mind are moved by some love inflowing from the spiritual world. The mind does not create ideas, but is sensitive to creative forces in the spiritual atmospheres. The interiors of the mind are moved by those forces, just as the exteriors of the mind are moved by sense impulses from the world of nature. These sense impulses are real because they come from really existent objects created by the Lord, outside the human mind and independent of it. Affections or loves are real because they arise from spiritual forces actually present in the spiritual world, produced and maintained there by the Lord, also outside of man's mind and independent of it.

Neither sense impulses nor affections, by themselves, can produce an idea; but when an affection from within, that is, from the spiritual world, meets a series of sense impulses received from without, that is, from the material world, it creates from these a tangible embodiment for itself, an embodiment that represents itself and pictures itself forth. This mental picture is what we perceive as an idea. It is a spiritual thing made visible in a natural form, and without such a form nothing spiritual can ever be seen.

Thus we read: "Things that are Divine, or that are infinite, are not apprehended except from finite things, of which man can form some idea. Without an idea derived from finite things, and especially an idea from things of space and time, man can comprehend nothing of Divine things, and still less of the Infinite. Without an idea of space and time, man cannot have any thought at all; for in respect to his body he is in space and time, and thus also in respect to his thoughts which are from the external senses" (AC 3938). This is why the Word, which is given to reveal Divine and spiritual truth, must nevertheless be written in external symbols of time and space. "In the world," we are told, "it must be supposed that heaven is on high, both because the visible heavens spread above us are so called, and because man is in time and place, and therefore thinks from ideas thence derived; and also because few know what that which is interior is, and still fewer that there is there neither space nor time. It is for this reason that the language of the Word is in agreement with the ideas of man's thought; and if, instead of being so, it had been in accordance with angelic ideas, the result would have been that men would have perceived nothing at all; but every one would have stood wondering what it was, and whether it was anything at all, and so would have rejected it as being destitute of anything fit for the understanding" (AC 4210).

As long as man lives on earth he cannot think apart from time and space, because as to his body he is in time and space; all his sensations are derived from spatial objects, and all his experiences are connected with fixed progressions of time—minutes, hours, days and years. But even while he is here the interiors of his mind are being touched, moved, and affected by spiritual forces that have nothing to do with space and time, but only with the qualities of things, that is, with their uses. When we come into

the spiritual world these qualities or uses can be perceived as they are in themselves, apart from any idea of space or time, and yet in forms apparently spatial, similar to the things of earth, and in progressions that simulate fixed times. Such are spiritual ideas that appear round about the angels, objectively, and in wonderful and beautiful forms. Such spiritual ideas, although we are unaware of them, are actually present within our natural ideas. This is true of all men except in so far as their ideas have been distorted by the loves of self and the world. This is why all who are in innocence, that is, all who willingly respond to the inflowing Divine of the Lord, come into spiritual ideas spontaneously after death. It is why they immediately speak the spiritual language without having to learn it; and it is the reason they feel perfectly at home in their spiritual environment, for it has been their unseen spiritual environment even in the life of the body.

Thus we read concerning the Word: "Equally with men, the angels also perceive the Word when it is read; but the angels perceive it spiritually, and men perceive it naturally. The man whose internal is opened also perceives the Word spiritually; but while he lives in the world he is unaware of this because his spiritual thought flows into the natural thought in the external man, and thereby presents itself to view. Nevertheless, it is this interior thought which enlightens, and by means of which the influx of the Lord is effected. By looking into their thoughts, and by reflections thereon, some of the learned have noticed that there is in man an interior thought which does not appear, and therefore they have called the ideas of this thought immaterial and intellectual, and they have made a distinction between these ideas and those of the exterior thought which appear; and they have called these latter natural and material. But they have not known that the ideas of the interior thought are spiritual, and that when these flow down they are turned into natural ideas, and appear under a different shape, and under a different condition" (AC 10551). So also, we are taught that "when angels speak with men they never express themselves in natural ideas proper to man, all of which are from time, space and matter, but in spiritual ideas, all of which are from states and their variations within the angels and outside of them. Nevertheless, when these angelic ideas which are spiritual flow into men, they are turned, in a moment and

of themselves, into natural ideas proper to man. Neither angels nor men know that this takes place; but such is all influx of heaven into man" (HH 168).

Reality, therefore, does not reside either in the objects of nature or in the ideas of the human mind, but solely in the Divine of the Lord. Material objects are real only because they represent the Divine of the Lord; and human ideas are real just as far as they also represent that Divine. The reality resides, not in the object, nor in the idea, but in the representation. The material embodiment of earthly objects does not increase their reality, but diminishes it (*Athanasian Creed* 105). When this embodiment is removed, the reality within becomes more fully and perfectly apparent. This is why the appearances of the spiritual world are more real than those that obtain in nature. When, however, man's ideas are formed in opposition to the Divine of the Lord—as is the case when they are formed by the loves of self and the world—the element of reality is removed and they become mere phantasies. If, during the life of the body, the existence of God is wilfully denied, if the truth of the Word is rejected, and man confirms himself in the imaginations of his own unaided intelligence, then these phantasies remain after death, and man surrounds himself with appearances that have no reality. He continues to live in an unreal world, which, however, appears to him just as if it were real. This is of the Lord's mercy, because if it were not so he would have no life at all.

But the remarkable thing is that if a man has not denied the Divine, but longs for truth and endeavors sincerely to live a life of use—although he may be imbued with many false ideas and mistaken notions, and although he is wholly ignorant of the Word—still, when he comes into the other world he can be taught the truth. He will receive it gladly, and his errors can be successively corrected: this, because there is still something real within his ideas that can be appealed to, an innocence that can excuse his faults, a willingness to learn by means of which he may at last be prepared for heaven. This means that the essence of all reality in the human mind is innocence, which enables the Lord to save every one in the whole world who is willing to be saved.