



Inquiry of an illusion

People think that what they think is evident; otherwise they would not think so. And that is why they are so attached to what they think. Philosophy, on the contrary, is the passionate pursuit of the underlying reasons why we think what we think. This pursuit may lead to rewarding and enriching insights, but disappointments are not excluded. A thought that is so common or dear to us may turn out to be an illusion.

The word 'illusion' stems from the Latin 'illudere', which means: 'to play', 'to fool around', 'to betray'. We are good at pointing at other people's illusion: parents who think that their children are happy, teachers who think that their pupils get a proper education, lovers who think that the other one loves them dearly. When we find out that something that we were convinced of turns out to be an illusion, we feel betrayed and miserable. So usually it just happens to us, we do not go on an expedition into ourselves to find out deliberately about our own illusions. But if we would, how would that work? And couldn't it be so that, once we have found out that X is an illusion, it still remains dear to us?

Approach

1. Preparation: try to think of some illusions you have had in the course of your life. Phrase them in a sentence like, 'Earlier I thought that X was the case, but now I know that that is not true'. Try to remember what caused your change, your discovery of the illusion? Was it a particular experience, or did you acquire new knowledge? What kind of feeling did it evoke in you? And how does it feel now? Are you happy that X has proved to be an illusion? Exchange your experiences.
2. Turn now to some of your thoughts and beliefs that are dear to you at this very moment. Are there one or two that, although they are very dear to you, might possibly be an illusion, although you do not think so, but you have never really found out. Choose one and phrase it in a sentence like: 'I think that X is the case, but I am not absolutely sure', or 'I assume that Y is the case, but now and then I have my doubts'. An example could be, 'I think that one should always respect other people, but after the vile attack on me during the last board meeting I doubt whether I can maintain this belief'.
3. Exchange the beliefs that are dear to you and add a short clarification. Choose one for the common inquiry by the whole group: the strongest one, the one that startles you or makes you curious.
4. Look at the wording of the belief. Make it as sharp as possible, so that everybody feels challenged to inquire into it, to take it apart or to defend it. Phrase it in a sentence like, 'I think that X is the case and not Y'. As an example, say, 'I think that one should always respect other people, no matter what the circumstances are and what their behaviour is towards one'.
5. How would it be if this belief were a universal rule of life which everybody obeyed?





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6. Challenge this belief by asking the following questions:
 - a. What is at stake? What will change when I give up this belief? What will get lost?
 - b. From which perspective does this belief start? What kind of prejudice is / could be there in the choice of this perspective?
 - c. Can you think of any kind of practical 'experiment' which could prove whether your belief is an illusion or not?
 - d. What is it that resists the doubting? Which 'truth' is it that is protected here, shielded off from questioning? Which old values are so essential for maintaining our lives that they should be maintained? Which dis-illusionment would be life threatening?

7. So what is your conclusion? Did this inquiry increase your confidence? Or have some parts proven to be an illusion? And do you want to hold on to them? And finally, what is your feeling? Are you happy, or is there something you are going to worry about?

