

# *Âtmâ-Mâyâ*

by

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*Editor's note: The following is from an updated translation of the essay,  
approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon.*

The substance of knowledge is Knowledge of the Substance: that is, the substance of human intelligence, or its most profoundly real function, is the perception of the Divine Substance. The fundamental nature of our intelligence, quite evidently, is discernment between what is substantial and what is accidental, and not the exclusive perception of the accidental; when intelligence perceives the accident it does so, as it were, in relation to the substance that corresponds to it—he who sees the drop sees also the water—and, with all the more reason, intelligence must do this in relation to Substance as such.<sup>1</sup>

To speak of the Divine Substance is necessarily to speak of its ontological prolongation, since we, who speak, derive from this prolongation which is Existence—Relativity in its manifested mode, the cosmic *Mâyâ*. Absolute Substance extends Itself, through relativization, under the aspects of Radiance and Reverberation; that is to say, It is accompanied—at a lesser degree of reality—by two forms of emanation, one that is dynamic, continuous, and radiating, and the other static, discontinuous, and formative. If there were not, apart from Substance, the Radiance and Reverberation to extend It by means of relativization, the world would not be.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms substance and essence, which—rightly or wrongly—are taken in practice to be more or less synonymous, differ in that substance refers to the underlying, immanent, permanent nature of a basic reality, whereas essence refers to reality as such, that is as “being” and, in a secondary sense, as the absolutely fundamental nature of a thing. The notion of essence denotes an excellence which is, so to say, discontinuous with respect to accidents, whereas the notion of substance implies on the contrary a kind of continuity, and this is why we employ it when speaking of *Âtmâ* in connection with *Mâyâ*.

But this projection of God—if one may put it thus—requires an element that makes it possible, an element that helps to explain why the Substance does not remain an exclusively “hidden treasure”. This diversifying, exteriorizing, or relativizing element is none other than *Mâyâ*: its nature could be defined with the help of various terms, such as Relativity, Contingency, Separativity, Objectification, Differentiation, Exteriorization, and others still; even the term Revelation could be appropriately applied here in an altogether fundamental and general sense.

In everything that exists, there is the Substance, without which what has come into existence would be pure nothingness; now the fact that things “exist” means that they are actualized by virtue of “Existence” in the highest sense this term may convey;<sup>2</sup> and this “Existence” or this Relativity ensues from the Substance by virtue of Its Infinitude; that is to say, Divine Reality would not be what It is if It did not comprise the paradoxical dimension of a kind of tendency towards a nothingness which obviously is never attained, for nothingness has no other reality than that of providing, wholly indirectly, a point of reference which in itself can never be grasped or realized.

There is a primary duality, which is the Substance, and—principally within It but in fact outside its absolute Reality—there is Relativity or *Mâyâ*; now *Mâyâ* comprises the two aspects just mentioned, Radiance and Reverberation: the “Holy Spirit” and the “Son”<sup>3</sup> are actualized in and through *Mâyâ*. Expressed in geometric terms, the Substance is the center, Radiance is the

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<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that one can speak of the “Existence of God”. In this question of terminology, what matters is to know with respect to what a reality “exists”: if it is with respect to the Absolute, this reality is relative; if it is with respect to nothingness, it is merely real, and can be principal as well as manifested. In the subconscious of current language, “existence” stands out more directly from the negative or abstract void that inexistence represents than it does from this positive or concrete Void that is God.

<sup>3</sup> The opinion that the trinitarian relationships—or the hypostatic Persons—“constitute” the Absolute is not inherent in Christianity; this opinion has come down to us from an Orthodox not a Catholic source, but it may be a “sublimation” rather than a strict definition. According to the Scholastics, Divine Reality is neither purely absolute nor purely relative, but it contains *formaliter eminenter* both absoluteness and relativity; nonetheless, theologians seem disinclined to grasp the full import of the two terms, since they scarcely draw the conclusions entailed. We shall seize this opportunity to make the following remark: the fact that the hypostases possess a personal character—or are “Persons”—since Substance imparts to them its own Personality, in no wise prevents them from being, from another point of view or relationship, Modes of the One Substance, as Sabellius maintained.

cluster of the radii, and Reverberation, or the Image, is the circle; Existence, or the “Virgin”, is the surface which enables this unfolding.

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Divine *Mâyâ*, which is both metacosmic and cosmic, comprises essentially the following powers or functions: first, the function of separation or partibility—beginning with the scission into subject and object—the aim of which is the production of a plane of manifestation for the two consecutive functions, Radiance and Reverberation, to which motion and form correspond. Just as, in God, Relativity constitutes—though outside of absolute Substance—a plane for the actualization of Radiance and Reverberation as principles, so too it projects forth from this divine order—by projecting itself—another plane that is distinctly more relative, namely the entire Cosmos. The same process of segmentation is then repeated within this Cosmos, down to that terminal point marked by the material world; and on each one of the planes thus projected in its descent—the angelic world, the animistic world, the material world—it will manifest an appropriate mode of Radiance and Reverberation; there is no order of Relativity that does not comprise these two functions or dimensions. The element Substance is represented at each ontological or cosmic level according to an appropriate mode; and with all the more reason, pure Substance, or Substance as such, underlies each one of its secondary manifestations.

In the material world, *Mâyâ* will be the plane of space and time; Substance will be ether; Reverberation or the Image will be matter; and Radiance will be the energy. But needless to say, there are still far more restricted applications of the same symbolism; and inevitably so, given that all matter, all form, and all motion or change refer respectively to the three principles involved. The complementarity of “space-time”—or, in concrete terms, “extension-duration”—indicates moreover that there are, in Relativity or Ex-sistence as such,<sup>4</sup> two dimensions, the one expansive and conserving and the other transforming and destructive; whence the complementarities between the worlds and cycles at all levels of the Universe. Within God

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<sup>4</sup> We allow ourselves this orthographic neologism in order to indicate clearly that what is at issue here is not existence in the current sense of the term, which belongs to cosmic manifestation.

Himself, the element “Space” is *Mâyâ* inasmuch as it contains or conserves the possibilities, and the element “Time” is *Mâyâ* inasmuch as it transmits these to the world; the first aspect is intrinsic and contemplative, and the second aspect is extrinsic and creative; in other words, the first aspect of *Mâyâ* contemplates the undifferentiated groundedness of the possibilities in the Substance, whereas the second aspect enables the realization of these possibilities in view of their cosmic manifestation.

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The role of Relativity is essentially to produce a succession of planes, hence the hierarchy of the universal orders; now it is important to understand that these planes or degrees are incommensurable, and the more so as they are closer to the Substance. There is no common measure, or almost none, between the material world and the animistic world, which envelops and penetrates it in some fashion, the possibilities of which vastly exceed those of space and matter; and this disproportion becomes nearly absolute when creation is compared to the Creator; we say “nearly” because metaphysically, but not theologically, these two planes can be equated by virtue of their common Relativity, that is to say, by being both determined by *Mâyâ*. Now *Mâyâ*, in its turn, becomes extinct before the absolute Substance, namely, before the Absolute as such; but this way of seeing things necessarily falls outside the perspective of theology,<sup>5</sup> which by definition must consider the Divine Principle in relation to the world and, even more specifically, in relation to man. It is this very perspective, and the reality to which it refers, that has led us to have recourse, more than once, to the paradoxical notion of a “relative absolute”—an unavoidably ill-sounding but metaphysically useful expression.

The error—which appeared in a monotheistic climate—of a Divine Freedom capable, by virtue of Its absoluteness, of not creating the world or of creating it free from any inner necessity, is repeated—on a lesser scale and in a more excessive way—in the Asharite error of a Divine Power capable, also by virtue of Its absolute character, of punishing the righteous and of

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<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, a Meister Eckhart is perfectly aware of this mystery, and he is doubtless not alone in this in a scholastic and mystical setting.

rewarding evil-doers, “if God so willed”. What is forgotten in the first case is that Necessity—not constraint—is a complementary quality of Freedom;<sup>6</sup> and what is forgotten in the second case is that Goodness, hence Justice too—not impotence, nor subordination—is a complementary quality of All-Mightiness.<sup>7</sup> The necessity, for the virtuous man, to practice virtues is not a constraint; with all the more reason, if God “must” do what His Perfection entails and “cannot” do what is contrary to it—namely, abstain from creating or from punishing the innocent—it is neither from lack of freedom nor from lack of power. The Goodness of God implies that He can be above His Justice, but not beneath it; His Freedom implies that He can create everything, but not that He cannot create at all. His transcendence with respect to creation is to be found in His undifferentiated Substance, with respect to which there is no creation nor any qualities belonging to it.

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In the celestial world, there is no place for those privative manifestations—or those “existentiations of the naught”—which one is entitled to call “evil”. Evil as such originates only at the level of the animistic world and extends all the way to the material world;<sup>8</sup> thus evil belongs to the domain of form and change. As we have had occasion to say several times, evil occurs as a result of the distance separating the formal world from the formless Principle: in other words, form contains by its very nature the danger of separation and of opposition with respect to the Principle or the Substance; when this danger is actualized—and it is prefigured in the separation and opposition entailed by existence—the element Radiance, having become illusorily autonomous, draws away from God, and the element Image, by making itself divine, becomes idol. Form is nothing other than individuation: now, the individual tends to seek his end

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<sup>6</sup> Freedom refers to the Infinite, and Necessity to the Absolute.

<sup>7</sup> God is just, not because He *a priori* owes man some justifications, but because, being good, He could never be unjust.

<sup>8</sup> According to the Koran, Satan is a jinn, not an angel; he is made of “fire”, not of “light”.

in himself, in his own accidental nature and not in his principle, not in his Self.<sup>9</sup> The counter-shock is the presence among normal or perfect forms, or forms that are good in some capacity, of privative, false, and hence ugly or vicious forms, both on the psychic plane as well as on the physical plane; ugliness is the ransom so to speak of the ontological revolt. The tendency towards evil is Radiance deviated and inverted; the form of evil is the Image falsified and inverted in its turn; it is Satan, and consequently it is vice or sin on all planes, not just on the moral plane.

Formal *Mâyâ*—which is not angelic and much less divine—exerts a coagulating, separative, and individualizing magic that, as a result, can be subversive in due course; the cause for this is that it has become too remote from the Principle or the Substance, that it has advanced too far in encountering nothingness, even though nothingness is no more than a signpost or a direction and not a concrete reality. In a certain fashion, nothingness is the only metaphysical enigma, precisely because it is nothing and yet can be the object of thought and even something towards which one can tend; nothingness is like the “sin of *Mâyâ*”, and this sin confers upon *Mâyâ* an ambiguity that evokes the mystery of “Eve and Mary”, or the “Eternal Feminine” which is at once seducing and saving.

This ambiguity, which is quite relative and far from symmetrical, in no wise tarnishes *Mâyâ*; “I am black, but beautiful,” says the Song of Songs, and also: “Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee”; the glory of Mary wholly effaces the sin of Eve, which is to say that with regard to the total breadth of Existence and, above all, with regard to its Divine Summit, there is no more ambiguity, and evil does not exist. Universal Existence, whose function is a play of innumerable veilings and unveilings, is eternally virgin and pure, while being the mother of all the reverberations issuing from the one Substance.

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<sup>9</sup> The devil was the first to say “I”, according to some Sufis.

In the Catholic sign of the cross a ternary is superimposed on a quaternary: while the content of this sign is indeed the Trinity, the sign itself comprises four stations—the fourth station coinciding with the word *Amen*. One could propose that this asymmetry or this inconsistency is compensated by the fact that the word *Amen* represents the prayer of the Church, and thus the mystical body of Christ considered as a prolongation of God; but one can also maintain that this fourth station of the sign belongs to the Blessed Virgin as Bride of the Holy Spirit and Co-Redemptress, that is, ultimately, as *Mâyâ* both human and Divine. This is in fact the meaning of the *Amen* itself, given that it expresses the *Fiat* of Mary.

The color black of the beloved in the Song of Songs, and found in many images of the Blessed Virgin, represents less the ambiguity of Existence, which is altogether very relative, than its “self-effacement”:<sup>10</sup> in the Trinity, Relativity cannot be personified since it is the space, as it were, in which personification takes place; and likewise, in the Universe, *Mâyâ* is neither the Radiance nor the Image: it is the principle of projection or the container. On earth, we perceive things and changes; we do not perceive space and time directly. Even so, were Mary not a kind of hypostasis,<sup>11</sup> she could be neither the “Spouse” of the God-Radiance nor the “Mother” of the God-Image.<sup>12</sup>

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen”; this final word becomes a hypostasis by the very symmetry of the formula and the gesture indicating it. Cosmic *Mâyâ* is identified metaphysically with the Word of creation “Be!”, and thus with the creative Act, of which it is the effectuation and thereby the hypostatic prolongation. Now “God is Love”,

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<sup>10</sup> In the famous tale of Laylah and Majnun—he who sublimized the beloved inwardly to the point of forgetting the earthly Laylah—it is said that people reproached Majnun for loving a woman of so black a complexion; this is certainly not without meaning in the doctrinal context that holds our attention here.

<sup>11</sup> Theology is scarcely suited to take account of this mystery of Mary, for it can operate only with simple notions, clearly defined and concretely useful; in its philosophical dimension, it can refine but not surpass this structuring, though it can happen that, in spite of everything, it will incidentally step outside of this framework.

<sup>12</sup> According to the revelations of Sister Mechthild of Magdeburg (13th century), the Blessed Virgin attests to her quality as Logos in these terms: “There I was the single betrothed of the Holy Trinity and mother of the sages, and I carried them before the eyes of God lest they fall, as so many others did. And as I was thus mother to many noble children, my breasts filled with the pure and unmingled milk of true, sweet Mercy in such wise that I nurtured the Prophets, and they prophesied before God (Christ) was born” (*Das fliessende Licht der Gottheit*, 1: 22).

and He “has created the world out of Love”: He is Love in Its bipolarization as Radiance and Image—by virtue of *Mâyâ*—and He has created the world out of Love, thus through *Mâyâ*—which is Love projecting Itself into the night-tide of the naught, or projecting Itself illusorily “outside God” so that even the naught might somehow be enfolded within Divine Reality.

Love, whether within God or the Universe, comprises the poles of Goodness and Beauty: Beauty pertains to Form, Image, and Reverberation, and Goodness to Energy, Act, and Radiance; all cosmic phenomena are derived from this polarity, whether directly or indirectly, positively or negatively, whether imparting or depriving. It is not the Divine *Mâyâ* that produces privative phenomena directly, for She bewails these from behind Her veil; She bewails these fissures which the diverse modes of evil or the absurd represent while being unable to avoid them since creative radiance implies finally, at its outermost limits, the possibility of subversive and corrupting remoteness. Evil is the ransom of Relativity or Existence; however, Existence compensates in advance for evil by its victorious Divinity; Eve is infinitely forgiven and made victorious in Mary.

According to a Muslim tradition, Eve lost her beauty after the expulsion from Paradise, whereas Mary is the very personification of beauty itself: “And her Lord...vouchsafed to her a beauteous growth”, says the Koran. But even if we do not have recourse to the Eve-Mary complementarity, by applying to Eve alone the symbolism of the ambiguity of *Mâyâ*, we can discern in Eve on the one hand two defects, which are sin and loss of beauty, and on the other two glories, which are reintegration into Perfection and the incorruptible beauty this glory confers on the elect.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> As Dante said: “The wound which Mary closed and anointed, she who is so beauteous (*quella ch'è tanto bella* = Eve) at her feet opened and thrust” (*Paradiso* 32:4-6); Eve recovered in Eternity her primordial beauty. One might mention, too, that if Mary is *Mâyâ* in its immutable and inviolable reality, Eve then represents *Mâyâ* not only under its aspect of ambiguity but also of final victory, hence of fundamental goodness.

The whole cosmological problem unfolds according to the following sequence: the infinitude of the Divine Substance requires and produces Relativity or Existence; and Existence requires or produces—or by definition implies—Cosmic Manifestation; in so doing, however, it implies or carries in its wake the mystery of remoteness from God and thereby, incidentally, evil, for God alone is the Absolute Good. In other words, the apparent negation of this Good is bound to take place on a certain plane given that Divine Possibility has no limits. Evil, if it is real within limits that are nonetheless metaphysically illusory, is no more than a fragment of a greater good which, so to speak, compensates and absorbs it; in the very center of its existential possibility, a center that surpasses its accidentality, evil ceases to be; it is reabsorbed into an ever pure substance: within it, evil has never been.

God is the Absolute Good who wants the relative Good, that is, the relativity that is the concomitant possibility of His own Good; however, the price of this relative Good is evil. The argument that the “good” is simply a moral notion and a mere matter of human appreciation fails to take into account two factors: first, that the Good is a universal reality of which moral good is but one application among others and, second, that to say something is a matter of human evaluation makes sense only on condition of not overlooking that man as such is by definition predisposed for making an adequate evaluation of things. Notions inherent in man’s substance are necessarily real; it is only the individual who, by applying them wrongly, can be mistaken. The fact that sentiment derives satisfaction from the notion of the good in no wise proves the inadequacy of this notion or that it is meaningless, or that it is the product of desire alone; the Good is not a value because man loves It; rather man loves the Good because It is a value. Or again: a value is not considered “good” because it is loved by man, but it is considered “good” inasmuch as it is objectively lovable by virtue of its qualities, whether direct or indirect, of truth and happiness. Now neither Truth nor Beatitude has been invented by man: the fact that man tends towards them intellectually, volitively, or sentimentally does nothing to lessen their objective reality.

The price of the relative Good, as we have said, is evil. Now it is absurd for man to accept or to desire the relative Good without by the same token accepting, not evil in such and such a form, but the inevitability of evil; every man, by definition, accepts and desires the relative Good in some form, and he must therefore accept the phenomenon of evil as the basis for finally rising

above it. To be fully human is, on the one hand, to note and accept the ineluctability of the absurd and, on the other, to free oneself from the absurd by distinguishing between the accident and the Substance—a victorious discernment which is precisely the whole vocation of the human being. The earthly *Mâyâ* frees itself through man, for each separate liberation is something absolute which, from a certain point of view, achieves Liberation as such.

The Substance is not only the Supreme Reality, but as such It is also the Supreme Good, as we have said; now “it is in the nature of the Good to communicate Itself”,<sup>14</sup> and this ontological tendency provides an explanation, not only for Relativity—or “Ex-sistence”—as a *hypostasis*, which is therefore radiant and reverberant in God Himself, but also for cosmic existence, which by definition is also radiant and reverberant, though “outside of God”. Thus *Mâyâ* is not only “illusion” as the Advaitins propose, but also the necessary concomitance of the Goodness inherent in the Absolute Real; in other words, if the Substance is good, It must project *Mâyâ*; and if God is good, He must create the world. What follows from this causality is that *Mâyâ* is good; were it not so, it would have no place in God and could not proceed from Him. And if *Mâyâ* is good it is because, in a mysterious though not inconceivable fashion, it is “not other than God”.

*Mâyâ* is the breath of *Âtmâ*: *Âtmâ* “breathes” through *Mâyâ*.<sup>15</sup> This respiration—aside from its inward or substantial prefigurations—is outward, in the manner of our earthly breathing where the connection is made between the inside, the living body, and the outside, the surrounding air. The Universe proceeds from God and returns to Him: these are the cosmic cycles belonging to the microcosm as well as to the macrocosm. *Mâyâ* is the air *Âtmâ* breathes, and this air is a quality of *Âtmâ*’s own Infinitude.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Bonum est essentialiter diffusivum sui*, according to the Augustinian principle, which proves moreover that creation is not an “absolutely gratuitous act” and that Platonic emanationism is in no way opposed to the intrinsic Freedom of God. And likewise, this *hadîth qudsî*: “I was a hidden treasure and wished to be known; thus I created the world.”

<sup>15</sup> In medieval German, *âtem* still meant “spirit”, whereas modern German retains only the meaning of “respiration”. In old German, the “Holy Spirit” was called: *der heilige âtem*.

<sup>16</sup> In the language of Sufism, the world proceeds from Goodness-Beauty, or from Beauty-Love, *Rahmah*; this is what is called the “Breathing out of the infinitely Good” (*nafas Ar-Rahmân*) or the “Compassionate Breathing out” (*nafas rahmânî*). Allah “breathes”, and this breathing is Goodness, Beauty, Love, Mercy; *Rahmah* is almost synonymous with *Mâyâ*.