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Psychological Foundations of Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy and His Approach to the Problem of Evil

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This is the third in a series of articles reviewing Sri Aurobindo's major philosophical work, *The Life Divine*. The first contrasted Sri Aurobindo's "universal Realism" with Buddhism and the Mayavada of Shankara [1]; the second sketched out his philosophical logic, which he had termed "the logic of the Infinite" [2]. The purpose of the present article is to review the psychological aspects of his system, particularly those that entered into his treatment of the problem of evil. All the extracts presented here are from *The Life Divine*; the page numbers refer to the official online edition [3].

Psychological perspective is crucial to Sri Aurobindo's philosophical thesis. Just as "the logic of the Infinite" provided him with the method, psychology provided most of his material. The closest that he gets to academic psychology is in the first part of "Book Two," while dealing with surface psychological functions, such as memory, self-consciousness, ego and self-experience:

There is a line of thought in which great stress is laid upon the action of memory: it has even been said that Memory is the man,—it is memory that constitutes our personality and holds cemented the foundation of our psychological being; for it links together our experiences and relates them to one and the same individual entity. This is an idea which takes its stand on our existence in the succession of Time and accepts process as the key to essential Truth, even when it does not regard the whole of existence as process or as cause and effect in the development of some kind of self-regulating Energy, as Karma. (pp. 519-20)

For Sri Aurobindo, "process is merely a utility." "The real truth of things," he contends, "lies not in their process, but behind it, in whatever determines, effects or governs the process":

Memory is only a process of consciousness, a utility; it cannot be the substance of being or the whole of our personality: it is simply one of the workings of consciousness as radiation is one of the workings of Light. It is Self that is the man: or, if we regard only our normal surface existence, Mind is the man,—for man is the mental being. Memory is only one of the many powers and processes of the Mind. (p. 520)

Nevertheless, Sri Aurobindo accepts memory as his starting point, since "it may give the key to certain important aspects of our conscious existence":

By memory Mind can only know of itself in the past, by direct self-awareness only in the moment of the present, and it is only by extension of and inference from this self-awareness and from the memory ... that mind can conceive of itself in the future. The extent of the past and the future it cannot fix; it can only ... infer from the evidence of others and the facts of life it observes around it that the conscious being already was in times which it can no longer remember.... Of the future it knows nothing at all; of its existing in the next moment it can only have a moral certainty which some happening of that moment can prove to be an error because what it saw was no more than a dominant probability. (p. 521)

Mind “makes up for its deficiency”

by memory, imagination, thought, idea-symbols of various kinds. Its senses are devices by which it lays hold on the appearances of things in the present moment and in the immediate space; memory, imagination, thought are devices by which it represents to itself, still less directly, the appearances of things beyond the present moment and the immediate space. The one thing which is not a device is its direct self-consciousness in the present moment. (pp. 525-6)

If we look attentively at our surface mental consciousness,

we see it first as a purely subjective phenomenon. There is a constant rapid shifting of Time-point which it is impossible to arrest for a moment. There is a constant changing, even when there is no shifting of Space-circumstance, a change both in the body or form of itself which the consciousness directly inhabits and the enviroing body or form of things in which it less directly lives. It is equally affected by both, though more vividly, because directly ... by its own body than by the body of the world, because only of the changes in its own body is it directly conscious. (p. 531)

This “more or less indirect mutable self-experience” is of two kinds: the “subjective experience of the ever-modified mental states of [our] personality,” and the “objective experience” of the ever-changing world around us. “But all this experience is at bottom subjective,” Sri Aurobindo reminds us, “for even the objective and external is only known to mind in the form of subjective impressions.”

Here the part played by Memory increases greatly in importance; for while all that it can do for the mind with regard to its direct self-consciousness is to remind it that it existed and was the same in the past as in the present, it becomes in our differentiated or surface self-experience an important power linking together past and present experiences, past and present personality, preventing chaos and dissociation and assuring the continuity of the stream in the surface mind. (p. 532)

Yet even here we should not

exaggerate the function of memory or ascribe to it that part of the operations of consciousness which really belongs to the activity of other power-aspects of the mental being. It is not the memory alone which constitutes the ego-sense; memory is only a mediator between the sense-mind and the co-ordinating intelligence: it offers to the intelligence the past data of experience which the mind holds somewhere within but cannot carry with it in its running from moment to moment on the surface. (p. 532)

The ego-sense is a separate device by which

the mental being becomes aware of himself,—not only of the objects, occasions and acts of his activity, but of that which experiences them. At first it might seem as if the ego-sense were actually constituted by memory, as if it were memory that told us, “It is the same I who was angry some time ago and am again or still angry now.” But, in reality, all that the memory can tell us by its own power is that it is the same limited field of conscious activity in which the same phenomenon has occurred. What happens is that there is a repetition of the mental phenomenon, of that wave of becoming in the mind-substance of which the mind-sense is immediately aware; memory comes in to link these repetitions together and enables the mind-sense to realise that it is the same mind-substance which is taking the same dynamic form and the same mind-sense which is experiencing it. The ego-sense is not a result of memory or built by memory, but already and always there as a point of reference or as something in which the mind-sense concentrates itself so as to have a coordinant centre instead of sprawling incoherently all over the field of experience; ego-memory reinforces this concentration and helps to maintain it, but does not constitute it. (pp. 537-8)

The difference between the function of Memory and that of ego-sense can be demonstrated on the

well-observed phenomenon of double personality or dissociation of personality in which the same man has two successive or alternating states of his mind and in each remembers and coordinates perfectly only what he was or did in that state of mind and not what he was or did in the other. This can be associated with an organised idea of different personality, for he thinks in one state that he is one person and in the other that he is quite another with a different name, life and feelings. Here it would seem that memory is the whole substance of personality. But, on the other side, we must see that dissociation of memory occurs also without dissociation of personality, as when a man in the state of hypnosis takes up a range of memories and experiences to which his waking mind is a stranger but does not therefore think himself another person, or as when one who has forgotten the past events of his life and perhaps even his name, still does not change his ego-sense and personality.... Mind-sense is the basis, memory the thread on which experiences are strung by the self-experiencing mind: but it is the co-ordinating faculty of mind which, relating together all the material that memory provides ... relates them also to an "I" who is the same in all the moments of Time and in spite of all the changes of experience and personality. (p. 539)

Our ego-sense actually starts with “a sensational imprecise or less precise realisation of continuity and identity and separateness from others in the moments of Time,” which we may have inherited from animals. This intuitive action is augmented by a

co-ordinating mind of knowledge which, basing itself on the united action of the mind-sense and the memory, arrives at the distinct idea—while it retains also the first constant intuitive perception—of an ego which senses, feels, remembers, thinks, and which is the same whether it remembers or does not remember. This conscious mind-substance, it says, is always that of one and the same conscious person...; he is the same before the organisation of memory and after it, in the infant and in the dotard, in sleep and in waking, in apparent consciousness and apparent unconsciousness; he and no other did the acts which he forgets as well as the acts which he remembers; he is persistently the same behind all changes of his becoming or his personality. (p. 538)

“This coordinating intelligence,” Sri Aurobindo notes, “is higher than the memory-ego and sense-ego of the animal,” yet is far from perfect. In order to analyze its limitations, he distinguishes four elements in its operations: “the object of mental consciousness, the act of mental consciousness, the occasion and the subject.”

In the self-experience of the self-observing inner being, the object is always some state or movement or wave of the conscious being, anger, grief or other emotion... The act is some kind of mental observation and conceptual valuation of this movement ... or else a mental sensation of it in which observation and valuation may be involved and even lost ... [The mental person] may either simply become a movement, let us put it, of angry consciousness, not at all standing back from that activity, not reflecting or observing himself, not controlling the feeling or the accompanying action, or he may observe what he becomes and reflect on it, with this seeing or perception in his mind “I am angry”. (pp. 532-3)

“In the former case,” Sri Aurobindo elaborates,

the subject or mental person, the act of conscious self-experience and the substantial angry becoming of the mind which is the object of the self-experience, are all rolled up into one wave of consciousness in movement; but in the latter there is a certain rapid analysis of its constituents and the act of self-experience partly detaches itself from the object. Thus by this act of partial detachment we are able not only to experience ourselves dynamically in the becoming ... but to stand back, perceive and observe ourselves and, if the detachment is sufficient, to control our feeling and action, control to some extent our becoming. (p. 533)

“There is usually a defect even in this act of self-observation,” he points out,

for there is indeed a partial detachment of the act from the object, but not of the mental person from the mental act: the mental person and the mental action are involved or rolled up in each other ... I am aware of myself in an angry becoming of my conscious stuff of being and in a thought-perception of this becoming: but all thought-perception also is a becoming and not myself, and this I do not yet sufficiently realise... It is when I entirely detach the mental person from his act of self-experience that I become fully aware first, of the sheer ego and, in the end, of the witness self or the thinking mental Person, the something or someone who becomes angry and observes it but is not limited or determined in his being by the anger or the perception. He is, on the contrary, a constant factor aware of an unlimited succession of conscious movements and conscious experiences of movements and aware of his own being in that succession; but he can be aware of it also behind that succession, supporting it, containing it, always the same in fact of being and force of being beyond the changing forms or arrangements of his conscious force. (pp. 533-4)

In this way, the progressive separation of the mental Person first from its objects, then from its perceptive acts, and, finally, also from the remaining substratum of the “sheer ego” can trigger a shift from the mental surface towards deeper and more potent layers of consciousness. Such a direct transition from the waking state is not easy, however, and it may be more productive to start with an exploration of natural points of contact in sleep and dreams:

What happens in sleep is that our consciousness withdraws from the field of its waking experiences; it is supposed to be resting, suspended or in abeyance, but that is a superficial view of the matter. What is in abeyance is the waking activities, what is at rest is the surface mind and the normal conscious action of the bodily part of us; but the inner consciousness is not suspended, it enters into new inner activities, only a part of which, a part happening or recorded in something of us that is near to the surface, we remember. There is maintained in sleep, thus near the surface, an obscure subconscious element which is a receptacle or passage for our dream experiences and itself also a dream-builder; but behind it is the depth and mass of the subliminal, the totality of our concealed inner being and consciousness which is of quite another order. (p. 438)

Most of our ordinary dreams are of subconscious character,

marked by an apparent inconsequence and incoherence. Many of these are fugitive structures built upon circumstances of our present life selected apparently at random and surrounded with a phantasy of variation; others call back the past, or rather selected circumstances and persons of the past, as a starting-point for similar fleeting edifices. There are other dreams of the subconscious which seem to be pure phantasy without any such initiation or basis; but the new method of psycho-analysis, trying to look for the first time into our dreams with some kind of scientific understanding, has established in them a system of meanings, a key to things in us which need to be known and handled by the waking consciousness. (pp. 438-9)

“But the subconscious is not our sole dream-builder,” Sri Aurobindo claims. There are other, rarer kinds of dreams – “series of thoughts, often strangely or vividly figured,” in which “warnings, premonitions, indications of the future, veridical dreams replace the normal subconscious incoherence” and which sometimes bring us solutions to problems we could not solve in our waking state. These dreams are the activity of our inner, subliminal intelligence. If we learn to live “more inwardly than most men do,” we can reverse the balance and gradually impart to our dreams subliminal rather than subconscious character.

It is even possible to become wholly conscious in sleep and follow throughout from beginning to end ... our dream experience; it is found that then we are aware of ourselves passing from state after state of consciousness to a brief period of luminous and peaceful dreamless rest, which is the true restorer of the energies of the waking nature, and then returning by the same way to the waking consciousness. It is normal, as we thus pass from state to state, to let the previous experiences slip away from us; in the return only the more vivid or those nearest to the waking surface are

remembered: but this can be remedied,—a greater retention is possible or the power can be developed of going back in memory from dream to dream, from state to state, till the whole is once more before us. A coherent knowledge of sleep life, though difficult to achieve or to keep established, is possible. (pp. 441-2)

In our waking state, we are normally unaware of our connection with (and dependence on) our subliminal being. Yet it is all the time there and active, for even a superficial observation

of our waking consciousness shows us that of a great part of our individual being and becoming we are quite ignorant; it is to us the Inconscient, just as much as the life of the plant, the metal, the earth, the elements. But if we carry our knowledge farther, pushing psychological experiment and observation beyond their normal bounds, we find how vast is the sphere of this supposed Inconscient or this subconscious in our total existence,—the subconscious, so seeming and so called by us because it is a concealed consciousness,—and what a small and fragmentary portion of our being is covered by our waking self-awareness. We arrive at the knowledge that our waking mind and ego are only a superimposition upon a submerged, a subliminal self,—for so that self appears to us,—or, more accurately, an inner being, with a much vaster capacity of experience; our mind and ego are like the crown and dome of a temple jutting out from the waves while the great body of the building is submerged under the surface of the waters. (p. 576)

“This concealed self and consciousness,” Sri Aurobindo continues,

is our real or whole being, of which the outer is a part and a phenomenon, a selective formation for a surface use. We perceive only a small number of the contacts of things which impinge upon us; the inner being perceives all that enters or touches us and our environment. We perceive only a part of the workings of our life and being; the inner being perceives so much that we might almost suppose that nothing escapes its view.... We can form into co-ordinated understanding and knowledge only so much of our perceptions and memories as our trained intelligence and mental capacity can grasp in their sense and appreciate in their relations: the intelligence of the inner being needs no training, but preserves the accurate form and relations of all its perceptions and memories and,—though this is a proposition which may be considered doubtful or difficult to concede in its fullness,—can grasp immediately, when it does not possess already, their significance. And its perceptions are not confined, as are ordinarily those of the waking mind, to the scanty gleanings of the physical senses, but extend far beyond and use, as telepathic phenomena of many kinds bear witness, a subtle sense the limits of which are too wide to be easily fixed. (pp. 576-7)

These extraordinary capacities belong to our inner being in a restricted sense of the term, different from the customary notion of subconscious self:

Ordinarily, we speak of a subconscious existence and include in this term all that is not on the waking surface. But the whole or the greater part of the inner or subliminal self can hardly be characterised by that epithet; for when we say subconscious, we think readily of an obscure unconsciousness ... or else a submerged consciousness below and in a way inferior to ... our organised waking awareness ... But we find, when we go within, that somewhere in our subliminal part,—though not co-extensive with it since it has also obscure and ignorant regions,—there is a consciousness much wider, more luminous, more in possession of itself and things than that which wakes upon our surface and is the percipient of our daily hours; that is our inner being, and it is this which we must regard as our subliminal self and set apart the subconscious as an inferior, a lowest occult province of our nature. (pp. 577-8)

Even in this “lowest occult province of our nature” it is important to differentiate between merely “submental” and truly “subconscious”:

We are aware of a vitality working in [our] bodily form and structure as in the plant or lower animal, a vital existence which is ... for the most part subconscious to us, for we only observe some of its movements and reactions. We are partly aware of its operations, but not by any means of all or most of them, and rather of those which are abnormal than those which are normal; its wants impress themselves more forcibly upon us than its satisfactions, its diseases and disorders than its health and its regular rhythm ... [W]e know as much of it as we can consciously observe and use or as much as forces itself upon us by pain and pleasure and other sensations ... Accordingly, we suppose that this vital-physical part of us also is not conscious of its own operations or has only a suppressed consciousness ... like the plant or an inchoate consciousness like the incipient animal; it becomes conscious only so far as it is enlightened by mind and observable by intelligence. (pp. 578-9)

“This is an exaggeration and a confusion,” Sri Aurobindo contends,

due to our identification of consciousness with mentality and mental awareness. Mind identifies itself to a certain extent with the movements proper to physical life and body and annexes them to its mentality, so that all consciousness seems to us to be mental. But if we draw back, if we separate the mind as witness from these parts of us, we can discover that life and body—even the most physical parts of life—have a consciousness of their own ... [though] it has not, in its independent motion, the mental awareness which we enjoy ... [T]here is no organised self-consciousness, but only a sense of action and reaction, movement, impulse and desire, need, necessary activities imposed by Nature, hunger, instinct, pain, insensibility and pleasure. Although thus inferior, it has this awareness obscure, limited and automatic; but since it is less in possession of itself, void of what to us is the stamp of mentality, we may justly call it the submental, but not so justly the subconscious part of our being. For when we stand back from it, when we can separate our mind from its sensations, we perceive that this is ... a gradation of awareness different from the mind: it has its own separate reactions to contacts and is sensitive to them in its own power of feeling; it does not depend for that on the mind’s perception and response. (p. 579)

“The true subconscious,” Sri Aurobindo explains,

is other than this vital or physical substratum; it is the Inconscient vibrating on the borders of consciousness, sending up its motions to be changed into conscious stuff, swallowing into its depths impressions of past experience as seeds of unconscious habit and returning them constantly but often chaotically to the surface consciousness, missioning upwards much futile or perilous stuff of which the origin is obscure to us, in dream, in mechanical repetitions of all kinds, in untraceable impulsions and motives, in mental, vital, physical perturbations and upheavals, in dumb automatic necessities of our obscurest parts of nature. (pp. 579-80)

“We might say then,” he concludes,

that there are three elements in the totality of our being: there is the submental and the subconscious which appears to us as if it were inconscient, comprising the material basis and a good part of our life and body; there is the subliminal, which comprises the inner being, taken in its entirety of inner mind, inner life, inner physical with the soul or psychic entity supporting them; there is this waking consciousness which the subliminal and the subconscious throw up on the surface, a wave of their secret surge. (p. 581)

“But even this is not an adequate account of what we are,” he insists, “for there is not only something deep within behind our normal self-awareness, but something also high above it: that too is ourselves.”

We become aware, in a certain experience, of a range of being superconscient to all these three, aware too of something, a supreme highest Reality sustaining and exceeding them all, which humanity speaks of vaguely as Spirit, God, the Oversoul: from these superconscient ranges we have

visitations and in our highest being we tend towards them and to that supreme Spirit. There is then in our total range of existence a superconscience as well as a subconscious and inconscience, overarching and perhaps enveloping our subliminal and our waking selves, but unknown to us, seemingly unattainable and incommunicable. (p. 581)

Here we get a glimpse of the overwhelming complexity of human nature as it gradually emerges in the course of spiritual practice. Different spiritual systems deal with this complexity differently. Sri Aurobindo's system – since its goal is the perfection and transformation of the whole human nature – takes up each part in turn so as to purify, perfect and transform it. I will not go into details here, but rather focus on a few selected aspects that throw light on the problem of evil.

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Before delving into the problem, it is necessary to indicate Sri Aurobindo's philosophical position. Although his acute psychological observations are also relevant for those who do not share his world-view, it is not possible to avoid his philosophy and focus exclusively on his psychology. First of all, in his system the two are inseparable. Second, the problem of evil requires both for a sound solution. The solution depends on how we perceive moral and ethical values and how we project them on to things and happenings around us. It is then the problem of consciousness that lies at the heart of the problem of evil, and needs to be confronted first:

In its first appearance consciousness has the semblance of a miracle, a power alien to Matter that manifests unaccountably in a world of inconscient Nature and grows slowly and with difficulty. Knowledge is acquired, created out of nothing as it were, learned, increased, accumulated by an ephemeral ignorant creature in whom at birth it is entirely absent or present only, not as knowledge, but in the form of an inherited capacity proper to the stage of development of this slowly learning ignorance. It might be conjectured that consciousness is only the original Inconscience mechanically recording the facts of existence on the brain-cells with a reflex or response in the cells automatically reading the record and dictating their answer; the record, reflex, response together constitute what appears to be consciousness. (p. 634)

“But this is evidently not the whole truth,” he argues,

for it might account for observation and mechanical action,—although it is not clear how an unconscious record and response can turn into a conscious observation, a conscious sense of things and sense of self,—but does not credibly account for ideation, imagination, speculation, the free play of intellect with its observed material. The evolution of consciousness and knowledge cannot be accounted for unless there is already a concealed consciousness in things with its inherent and native powers emerging little by little. Further, the facts of animal life and the operations of the emergent mind in life impose on us the conclusion that there is in this concealed consciousness an underlying Knowledge or power of knowledge which by the necessity of the life-contacts with the environment comes to the surface. (pp. 634-5)

Sri Aurobindo mentions several examples and corroborating facts in a chapter dedicated to the principle of Life (pp. 185-199). I have chosen a passage from another chapter, mainly for its association with his preliminary analysis of the problem of evil:

We see, for instance, in the animal, operations of a perfect purposefulness and an exact, indeed a scientifically minute knowledge which are quite beyond the capacities of the animal mentality and which man himself can only acquire by long culture and education and even then uses with a much less sure rapidity. We are entitled to see in this general fact the proof of a conscious Force at work in the animal and the insect which is more intelligent, more purposeful, more aware of its intention, its ends, its means, its conditions than the highest mentality yet manifested in any individual form on

earth. And in the operations of inanimate Nature we find the same pervading characteristic of a supreme hidden intelligence, "hidden in the modes of its own workings". (p. 96)

“The only argument against a conscious and intelligent source for this purposeful work,” Sri Aurobindo claims,

is that large element in Nature's operations to which we give the name of waste. But obviously this is an objection based on the limitations of our human intellect which seeks to impose its own particular rationality, good enough for limited human ends, on the general operations of the World-Force. We see only part of Nature's purpose and all that does not subserve that part we call waste. Yet even our own human action is full of an apparent waste, so appearing from the individual point of view, which yet, we may be sure, subserves well enough the large and universal purpose of things. That part of her intention which we can detect, Nature gets done surely enough in spite of, perhaps really by virtue of her apparent waste. We may well trust to her in the rest which we do not yet detect. (pp. 96-7)

“It is impossible to ignore,” Sri Aurobindo contends,

the drive of set purpose, the guidance of apparent blind tendency, the sure eventual or immediate coming to the target sought, which characterise the operations of World-Force in the animal, in the plant, in inanimate things. So long as Matter was Alpha and Omega to the scientific mind, the reluctance to admit intelligence as the mother of intelligence was an honest scruple. But now it is no more than an outworn paradox to affirm the emergence of human consciousness, intelligence and mastery out of an unintelligent, blindly driving unconsciousness in which no form or substance of them previously existed. Man's consciousness can be nothing else than a form of Nature's consciousness. It is there in other involved forms below Mind, it emerges in Mind, it shall ascend into yet superior forms beyond Mind. (p. 97)

Based on his spiritual experiences, and in line with the Indian tradition, Sri Aurobindo attributes consciousness to “the Force that builds the worlds.” “Necessarily,” he clarifies,

in such a view, the word consciousness changes its meaning. It is no longer synonymous with mentality but indicates a self-aware force of existence of which mentality is a middle term; below mentality it sinks into vital and material movements which are for us subconscious; above, it rises into the supramental which is for us the superconscious. But in all it is one and the same thing organising itself differently. This is, once more, the Indian conception of Chit which, as energy, creates the worlds. Essentially, we arrive at that unity which materialistic Science perceives from the other end when it asserts that Mind cannot be another force than Matter, but must be merely development and outcome of material energy. Indian thought at its deepest affirms on the other hand that Mind and Matter are rather different grades of the same energy, different organisations of one conscious Force of Existence. (pp. 95-6)

This ancient Vedantic conception of cosmic and individual existence as proceeding from the Absolute (or Pure Existent, *Sat*) by its conscious Force of Existence (*Chit*) raises several questions and problems. One of them is,

“Why should Brahman, perfect, absolute, infinite, needing nothing, desiring nothing, at all throw out force of consciousness to create in itself these worlds of forms?” For we have put aside the solution that it is compelled by its own nature of Force to create, obliged by its own potentiality of movement and formation to move into forms. It is true that it has this potentiality, but it is not limited, bound or compelled by it; it is free. If, then, being free to move or remain eternally still, to throw itself into forms or retain the potentiality of form in itself, it indulges its power of movement and formation, it can be only for one reason, for delight. (p. 98)

“This primary, ultimate and eternal Existence,” Sri Aurobindo explains,

is not merely bare existence, or a conscious existence whose consciousness is crude force or power; it is a conscious existence the very term of whose being, the very term of whose consciousness is bliss. As in absolute existence there can be no nothingness, no night of inconscience, no deficiency, that is to say, no failure of Force,—for if there were any of these things, it would not be absolute,—so also there can be no suffering, no negation of delight. Absoluteness of conscious existence is illimitable bliss of conscious existence; the two are only different phrases for the same thing. All illimitableness, all infinity, all absoluteness is pure delight. (pp. 98-9)

“Even our relative humanity has this experience,” he elaborates,

that all dissatisfaction means a limit, an obstacle,—satisfaction comes by realisation of something withheld, by the surpassing of the limit, the overcoming of the obstacle. This is because our original being is the absolute in full possession of its infinite and illimitable self-consciousness and self-power; a self-possession whose other name is self-delight. And in proportion as the relative touches upon that self-possession, it moves towards satisfaction, touches delight. (p. 99)

“The self-delight of Brahman is not limited,” he argues,

by the still and motionless possession of its absolute self-being. Just as its force of consciousness is capable of throwing itself into forms infinitely and with an endless variation, so also its self-delight is capable of movement, of variation, of revelling in that infinite flux and mutability of itself represented by numberless teeming universes. To loose forth and enjoy this infinite movement and variation of its self-delight is the object of its extensive or creative play of Force.

In other words, that which has thrown itself out into forms is a triune Existence-Consciousness-Bliss, Sachchidananda, whose consciousness is in its nature a creative or rather a self-expressive Force capable of infinite variation in phenomenon and form of its self-conscious being and endlessly enjoying the delight of that variation.... Just as we find all things to be mutable forms of one immutable being, finite results of one infinite force, so we shall find that all things are variable self-expression of one invariable and all-embracing delight of self-existence. (p. 99)

“This ancient Vedantic theory of cosmic origin,” Sri Aurobindo concedes, “is immediately confronted in the human mind by two powerful contradictions, the emotional and sensational consciousness of pain and the ethical problem of evil.”

For if the world be an expression of Sachchidananda, not only of existence that is conscious-force, — for that can easily be admitted,—but of existence that is also infinite self-delight, how are we to account for the universal presence of grief, of suffering, of pain? For this world appears to us rather as a world of suffering than as a world of the delight of existence. Certainly, that view of the world is an exaggeration, an error of perspective. If we regard it dispassionately and with a sole view to accurate and unemotional appreciation, we shall find that the sum of the pleasure of existence far exceeds the sum of the pain of existence,—appearances and individual cases to the contrary notwithstanding,—and that the active or passive, surface or underlying pleasure of existence is the normal state of nature, pain a contrary occurrence temporarily suspending or overlaying that normal state. (p. 100)

“Nevertheless,” Sri Aurobindo admits, “the abnormality of pain or its greater or lesser sum does not affect the philosophical issue; greater or less, its mere presence constitutes the whole problem. All being Sachchidananda, how can pain and suffering at all exist?” This is the real problem, he insists, but it is “often farther confused by a false issue starting from the idea of a personal extra-cosmic God and a partial issue, the ethical difficulty”:

Sachchidananda, it may be reasoned, is God, is a conscious Being who is the author of existence; how then can God have created a world in which He inflicts suffering on His creatures, sanctions pain, permits evil? God being All-Good, who created pain and evil? If we say that pain is a trial and an ordeal, we do not solve the moral problem, we arrive at an immoral or non-moral God,—an excellent world-mechanist perhaps, a cunning psychologist, but not a God of Good and of Love whom we can worship, only a God of Might to whose law we must submit or whose caprice we may hope to propitiate. For one who invents torture as a means of test or ordeal, stands convicted either of deliberate cruelty or of moral insensibility and, if a moral being at all, is inferior to the highest instinct of his own creatures. (p. 101)

But this difficulty arises, Sri Aurobindo claims, only if we assume “an extra-cosmic personal God”

who has created good and evil, pain and suffering for His creatures, but Himself stands above and unaffected by them, watching, ruling, doing His will with a suffering and struggling world or, if not doing His will, if allowing the world to be driven by an inexorable law, ... then not God, not omnipotent, not all-good and all-loving. On no theory of an extra-cosmic moral God, can evil and suffering be explained,—the creation of evil and suffering,—except by an unsatisfactory subterfuge which avoids the question at issue instead of answering it or a plain or implied Manicheanism which practically annuls the Godhead in attempting to justify its ways or excuse its works. (p. 102)

“But such a God is not the Vedantic Sachchidananda,” Sri Aurobindo maintains.

Sachchidananda of the Vedanta is one existence without a second; all that is, is He. If then evil and suffering exist, it is He that bears the evil and suffering in the creature in whom He has embodied Himself. The problem then changes entirely. The question is no longer how came God to create for His creatures a suffering and evil of which He is Himself incapable and therefore immune, but how came the sole and infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss to admit into itself that which is not bliss, that which seems to be its positive negation. (p. 102)

“Still the ethical difficulty may be brought back in a modified form,” Sri Aurobindo admits:

All-Delight being necessarily all-good and all-love, how can evil and suffering exist in Sachchidananda, since he is not mechanical existence, but free and conscious being, free to condemn and reject evil and suffering? We have to recognise that the issue so stated is also a false issue because it applies the terms of a partial statement as if they were applicable to the whole. For the ideas of good and of love which we thus bring into the concept of the All-Delight spring from a dualistic and divisional conception of things; they are based entirely on the relations between creature and creature, yet we persist in applying them to a problem which starts, on the contrary, from the assumption of One who is all. We have to see first how the problem appears or how it can be solved in its original purity, on the basis of unity in difference; only then can we safely deal with its parts and its developments, such as the relations between creature and creature on the basis of division and duality. (pp. 102-3)

“If we thus view the whole,” and do not limit ourselves “to the human difficulty and the human standpoint,” we shall quickly realise “that we do not live in an ethical world.”

The attempt of human thought to force an ethical meaning into the whole of Nature is one of those acts of wilful and obstinate self-confusion, one of those pathetic attempts of the human being to read himself, his limited habitual human self into all things and judge them from the standpoint he has personally evolved, which most effectively prevent him from arriving at real knowledge and complete sight. (p. 103)

The law governing material Nature is “a co-ordination of fixed habits which take no cognisance of good and evil,”

but only of force that creates, force that arranges and preserves, force that disturbs and destroys impartially, non-ethically, according to the secret Will in it, according to the mute satisfaction of that Will in its own self-formations and self-dissolutions. Animal or vital Nature is also non-ethical, although as it progresses it manifests the crude material out of which the higher animal evolves the ethical impulse. We do not blame the tiger because it slays and devours its prey any more than we blame the storm because it destroys or the fire because it tortures and kills; neither does the conscious-force in the storm, the fire or the tiger blame or condemn itself. (p. 103)

It is actually “blame and condemnation, or rather self-blame and self-condemnation,” Sri Aurobindo observes, that marks “the beginning of true ethics.” If we “blame others without applying the same law to ourselves, we are not speaking with a true ethical judgment.” We are only applying the language of ethics “to an emotional impulse of recoil from ... that which displeases or hurts us.”

This recoil or dislike is the primary origin of ethics, but is not itself ethical. The fear of the deer for the tiger, the rage of the strong creature against its assailant is a vital recoil of the individual delight of existence from that which threatens it. In the progress of the mentality it refines itself into repugnance, dislike, disapproval. Disapproval of that which threatens and hurts us, approval of that which flatters and satisfies refine into the conception of good and evil to oneself, to the community, to others than ourselves, to other communities than ours, and finally into the general approval of good, the general disapproval of evil. But, throughout, the fundamental nature of the thing remains the same. Man desires self-expression, self-development, in other words, the progressing play in himself of the conscious-force of existence; that is his fundamental delight. Whatever hurts that self-expression, self-development, satisfaction of his progressing self, is for him evil; whatever helps, confirms, raises, aggrandises, ennobles it is his good. Only, his conception of the self-development changes, becomes higher and wider, begins to exceed his limited personality, to embrace others, to embrace all in its scope. (pp. 103-4)

“In other words,” Sri Aurobindo sums up, “ethics is a stage in evolution.”

That which is common to all stages is the urge of Sachchidananda towards self-expression. This urge is at first non-ethical, then infra-ethical in the animal, then in the intelligent animal even anti-ethical for it permits us to approve hurt done to others which we disapprove when done to ourselves. In this respect man even now is only half-ethical. And just as all below us is infra-ethical, so there may be that above us whither we shall eventually arrive, which is supra-ethical, has no need of ethics. The ethical impulse and attitude, so all-important to humanity, is a means by which it struggles out of the lower harmony and universality based upon inconscience and broken up by Life into individual discords towards a higher harmony and universality based upon conscient oneness with all existences. Arriving at that goal, this means will no longer be necessary or even possible, since the qualities and oppositions on which it depends will naturally dissolve and disappear in the final reconciliation. (p. 104)

Sri Aurobindo terms the level of consciousness capable of this final reconciliation “Supermind” or “Truth-Consciousness,” and devotes to it a substantial portion of “Book One.” In “Book Two” he returns to the problem of evil again, but does so at a new level and from a different perspective, which I review in the next section.

* * *

“Book Two” of *The Life Divine* consists of two parts. The first deals primarily with “the dual phenomenon of Knowledge-Ignorance,” which is Sri Aurobindo’s summary term for the levels of consciousness below Supermind. It includes the analysis of the surface mentality and its dependence on the subliminal self from which I quoted in the opening section, but extends to other aspects as well. Regarding the problem of evil, Sri Aurobindo first summarises and amplifies his

early results in the chapter titled “The Divine and the Undivine.” Then, drawing on his meticulous analysis of the processes of Knowledge-Ignorance, he approaches the problem again, definitively, in the closing chapter of the first part titled “The Origin and Remedy of Falsehood, Error, Wrong and Evil.” This chapter sketches out the evolutionary emergence of the individual from a psychological perspective, and is particularly relevant:

The individual animal being in its first conscious self-affirmation has to rely on two sources of knowledge. As it is nescient and helpless, a small modicum of uninformed surface consciousness in a world unknown to it, the secret Conscious-Force sends up to this surface the minimum of intuition necessary for it to maintain its existence and go through the operations indispensable to life and survival. This intuition is not possessed by the animal, but possesses and moves it; it is something that manifests of itself in the grain of the vital and physical substance of consciousness under pressure of a need and for the needed occasion: but at the same time a surface result of this intuition accumulates and takes the form of an automatic instinct which works whenever the occasion for it recurs; this instinct belongs to the race and is imparted at birth to its individual members. The intuition, when it occurs or recurs, is unerring; the instinct is automatically correct as a rule, but can err, for it fails or blunders when the surface consciousness or an ill-developed intelligence interferes or if the instinct continues to act mechanically when, owing to changed circumstances, the need or the necessary circumstances are no longer there. (p. 635)

The second source of knowledge for the incipient individual is surface contact with the outside world:

It is this contact which is the cause first of a conscious sensation and sense-perception and then of intelligence. If there were not an underlying consciousness, the contact would not create any perception or reaction; it is because the contact stimulates into a feeling and a surface response the subliminal of a being already vitalised by the subconscious life-principle and its first needs and seekings that a surface awareness begins to form and develop. Intrinsically the emergence of a surface consciousness by force of life contacts is due to the fact that in both subject and object of the contact consciousness-force is already existent in a subliminal latency: when the life-principle is ready, sufficiently sensitive in the subject, the recipient of the contact, this subliminal consciousness emerges in a response to the stimulus which begins to constitute a vital or life mind, the mind of the animal, and then, in the course of the evolution, a thinking intelligence. The secret consciousness is rendered into surface sensation and perception, the secret force into surface impulse. (pp. 635-6)

This implies that the growth of surface intelligence

takes place in an already prepared indeterminate conscious structure which is the earliest formation on the surface. At first this structure is only a minimum formation of consciousness with a vague sensational perception and a response-impulse; but, as more organised forms of life appear, this grows into a life-mind and vital intelligence largely mechanical and automatic in the beginning and concerned only with practical needs, desires and impulses. All this activity is in its initiation intuitive and instinctive; the underlying consciousness is translated in the surface substratum into automatic movements of the conscious stuff of life and body: the mind movements, when they appear, are involved in these automatisms, they occur as a subordinate mental notation within the predominant vital sense-notation. (pp. 636-7)

At a certain point “mind starts its task of disengaging itself.”

It still works for the life-instinct, life-need and life-desire, but its own special characters emerge, observation, invention, device, intention, execution of purpose, while sensation and impulse add to themselves emotion and bring a subtler and finer affective urge and value into the crude vital reaction. Mind is still much involved in life and its highest purely mental operations are not in evidence; it accepts a large background of instinct and vital intuition as its support, and the

intelligence developed, though always growing as the animal life-scale rises, is an added superstructure. (p. 637)

“When human intelligence adds itself to the animal basis,” Sri Aurobindo proceeds,

this basis still remains present and active, but it is largely changed, subtilised and uplifted by conscious will and intention; the automatic life of instinct and vital intuition diminishes and cannot keep its original predominant proportion to the self-aware mental intelligence. Intuition becomes less purely intuitive: even when there is still a strong vital intuition, its vital character is concealed by mentalisation, and mental intuition is most often a mixture, not the pure article, for an alloy is added to make it mentally current and serviceable. In the animal also the surface consciousness can obstruct or alter the intuition but, because its capacity is less, it interferes less with the automatic, mechanical or instinctive action of Nature: in mental man when the intuition rises towards the surface, it is caught at once before it reaches and is translated into terms of mind-intelligence. (p. 637)

It is true that “the emergence of mind in life brings an immense increase of the range and capacity of the evolving consciousness-force,” Sri Aurobindo writes, “but it also brings an immense increase in the range and capacity of error.” In these conditions,

Error is a necessary accompaniment, almost a necessary condition and instrumentation ... in the slow evolution towards knowledge in a consciousness that begins from nescience and works in the stuff of a general nescience. The evolving consciousness has to acquire knowledge by an indirect means which does not give even a fragmentary certitude; for there is at first only a figure or a sign, an image or a vibration physical in character created by contact with the object and a resulting vital sensation which have to be interpreted by mind and sense and turned into a corresponding mental idea or figure. Things thus experienced and mentally known have to be related together; things unknown have to be observed, discovered, fitted into the already acquired sum of experience and knowledge. At each step different possibilities of fact, significance, judgment, interpretation, relation present themselves; some have to be tested and rejected, others accepted and confirmed: to shut out error is impossible without limiting the chances of acquisition of knowledge. (pp. 639-40)

But “error by itself ... would not amount to falsehood,” Sri Aurobindo maintains.

It would only be an imperfection of truth, a trying, an essay of possibilities: for when we do not know, untried and uncertain possibilities have to be admitted and, even if as a result an imperfect or inapt structure of thought is built, yet it may justify itself by opening to fresh knowledge in unexpected directions ... In spite of the mixture created the growth of consciousness, intelligence and reason could arrive through this mixed truth to a clearer and truer figure of self-knowledge and world-knowledge. The obstruction of the original and enveloping inconscience would diminish, and an increasing mental consciousness would reach a clarity and wholeness which would enable the concealed powers of direct knowledge and intuitive process to emerge, utilise the prepared and enlightened instruments and make mind-intelligence their true agent and truth-builder on the evolutionary surface. (p. 641)

The emergence of evil and falsehood in the evolution, however, renders any such harmonious progression impossible. But from where and how do these “contrary phenomena” emerge? Sri Aurobindo views both as “natural products of the Inconscience, automatic results of the evolution of life and mind from it in the process of the Ignorance.” Their primary cause is the fact that the emergence of surface consciousness takes place

in a separated form of life which has to affirm itself against a principle of inanimate material inertia and a constant pull of that material inertia towards disintegration ... This separated life-form has also to affirm itself, supported only by a limited principle of association, against an outside world which is, if not hostile to its existence, yet full of dangers and on which it has to impose itself, conquer life-room, arrive at expression and propagation, if it wishes to survive. The result of an emergence of

consciousness in these conditions is the growth of a self-affirming vital and physical individual, a construction of Nature of life and matter with a concealed psychic or spiritual true individual behind it for which Nature is creating this outward means of expression. As mentality increases, this vital and material individual takes the more developed form of a constantly self-affirming mental, vital and physical ego. (p. 634)

This has a profound impact on our psychological constitution. Our seeking for knowledge is not

an impersonal mental process hampered only by the general limitations of mind-intelligence: the ego is there, the physical ego, the life ego bent, not on self-knowledge and the discovery of the truth of things and the truth of life, but on vital self-affirmation; a mental ego is there also bent on its own personal self-affirmation and largely directed and used by the vital urge for its life-desire and life-purpose. For as mind develops, there develops also a mental individuality with a personal drive of mind-tendency, a mental temperament, a mind formation of its own. This surface mental individuality is ego-centric; it looks at the world and things and happenings from its own standpoint and sees them not as they are but as they affect itself: in observing things it gives them the turn suitable to its own tendency and temperament, selects or rejects, arranges truth according to its own mental preference and convenience; observation, judgment, reason are all determined or affected by this mind-personality and assimilated to the needs of the individuality and the ego. (pp. 641-2)

“This limitation by personality . . . and refusal to receive what is unassimilable,” Sri Aurobindo concedes,

is necessary for the individual being because in its evolution, at the stage reached, it has a certain self-expression, a certain type of experience and use of experience which must, for the mind and life at least, govern nature; that for the moment is its law of being, its dharma. This limitation of mind-consciousness by personality and of truth by mental temperament and preference must be the rule of our nature so long as the individual has not reached universality, is not yet preparing for mind-transcendence. But it is evident that this condition is inevitably a source of error and can at any moment be the cause of a falsification of knowledge, an unconscious or half-wilful self-deception, a refusal to admit true knowledge, a readiness to assert acceptable wrong knowledge as true knowledge. (p. 643)

“The same law applies to will and action,” he observes:

Out of ignorance a wrong consciousness is created which gives a wrong dynamic reaction to the contact of persons, things, happenings: the surface consciousness develops the habit of ignoring, misunderstanding or rejecting the suggestions to action or against action that come from the secret inmost consciousness, the psychic entity; it answers instead to unenlightened mental and vital suggestions, or acts in accordance with the demands and impulses of the vital ego.... The natural vital element in us, in so far as it is unchecked or untrained or retains its primitive character, is not concerned with truth or right consciousness or right action; it is concerned with self-affirmation, with life-growth, with possession, with satisfaction of impulse, with all satisfactions of desire. (p. 644)

“This main need and demand of the life-self,” Sri Aurobindo notes, “seems all-important to it.”

It would readily carry it out without any regard to truth or right or good or any other consideration: but because mind is there and has these conceptions, because the soul is there and has these soul-perceptions, it tries to dominate mind and get from it by dictation a sanction and order of execution for its own will of self-affirmation, a verdict of truth and right and good for its own vital assertions, impulses, desires; it is concerned with self-justification in order that it may have room for full self-affirmation. But if it can get the assent of mind, it is quite ready to ignore all these standards and set up only one standard, the satisfaction, growth, strength, greatness of the vital ego. (p. 644)

The vital element in us is after dominance and control:

It needs life-room, a space in the sun, self-assertion, survival. It needs these things for itself and for those with whom it associates itself, for its own ego and for the collective ego; it needs them for its ideas, creeds, ideals, interests, imaginations: for it has to assert these forms of I-ness and my-ness and impose them on the world around it or ... at least to defend and maintain them against others to the best of its power and contrivance. It may try to do it by methods it thinks or chooses to think or represent as right; it may try to do it by the naked use of violence, ruse, falsehood, destructive aggression, crushing of other life-formations: the principle is the same whatever the means or the moral attitude. (pp. 644-5)

“It is not only in the realm of interests,” Sri Aurobindo reminds us, but also “in the realm of ideas and the realm of religion that the vital being of man has introduced this spirit.” Consequently, they too have witnessed “the use of violence, oppression and suppression, intolerance, aggression.”

Into its self-affirmation the self-asserting life brings in hatred and dislike towards all that stands in the way of its expansion or hurts its ego; it develops as a means or as a passion or reaction of the life-nature cruelty, treachery and all kinds of evil: its satisfaction of desire and impulse takes no account of right and wrong, but only of the fulfilment of desire and impulse. For this satisfaction it is ready to face the risk of destruction and the actuality of suffering; for what it is pushed by Nature to aim at is not self-preservation alone, but life-affirmation and life-satisfaction, formulation of life-force and life-being. (p. 645)

It does not follow, however, that our vital personality is inherently evil. “It is not primarily concerned with truth and good,” Sri Aurobindo writes,

but it can have the passion for truth and good as it has, more spontaneously, the passion for joy and beauty.... This character of vital being and its trend of existence in which what we term good and evil are items but not the mainspring, is evident in subhuman life; in the human being, since there a mental, moral and psychic discernment has developed, it is subjected to control or to camouflage, but it does not change its character. (pp. 645-6)

For all its deficiencies, the vital being plays a crucial role:

For the emergence of the life-ego is, as we have seen, a machinery of cosmic Nature for the affirmation of the individual, for his self-disengagement from the indeterminate mass substance of the subconscious, for the appearance of a conscious being on a ground prepared by the Inconscience; the principle of life-affirmation of the ego is the necessary consequence. The individual ego is a pragmatic and effective fiction, a translation of the secret self into the terms of surface consciousness, or a subjective substitute for the true self in our surface experience: it is separated by ignorance from other-self and from the inner Divinity, but it is still pushed secretly towards an evolutionary unification in diversity; it has behind itself, though finite, the impulse to the infinite. But this in the terms of an ignorant consciousness translates itself into the will to expand, to be a boundless finite, to take everything it can into itself, to enter into everything and possess it, even to be possessed if by that it can feel itself satisfied and growing. (pp. 646-7)

“But because it does these things as a separate ego for its separate advantage,” Sri Aurobindo explains, “life-discord, conflict, disharmony arise.”

It is the products of this life-discord and disharmony that we call wrong and evil. Nature accepts them because they are necessary circumstances of the evolution, necessary for the growth of the divided being; they are products of ignorance, supported by an ignorant consciousness that finds itself on division, by an ignorant will that works through division, by an ignorant delight of existence that takes the joy of division. The evolutionary intention acts through the evil as through the good; it has to utilise all because confinement to a limited good would imprison and check the intended evolution; it uses any available material and does what it can with it: this is the reason why we see evil coming out

of what we call good and good coming out of what we call evil; and, if we see even what was thought to be evil coming to be accepted as good, what was thought to be good accepted as evil, it is because our standards of both are evolutionary, limited and mutable. (p. 647)

“Evolutionary Nature,” Sri Aurobindo concludes,

seems then at first to have no preference for either of these opposites, it uses both alike for its purpose. And yet it is the same Nature, the same Force that has burdened man with the sense of good and evil and insists on its importance: evidently, therefore, this sense also has an evolutionary purpose; it too must be necessary, it must be there so that man may leave certain things behind him, move towards others, until out of good and evil he can emerge into some Good that is eternal and infinite. (pp. 647-8)

“But how is this evolutionary intention in Nature to fulfil itself?” Sri Aurobindo asks next.

The method adopted by the mind of man through the ages has been always a principle of selection and rejection, and this has taken the forms of a religious sanction, a social or moral rule of life or an ethical ideal. But this is an empirical means which does not touch the root of the problem because it has no vision of the cause and origin of the malady it attempts to cure; it deals with the symptoms, but deals with them perfunctorily, not knowing what function they serve in the purpose of Nature and what it is in the mind and life that supports them and keeps them in being. (p. 648)

“Moreover,” he adds,

human good and evil are relative and the standards erected by ethics are uncertain as well as relative: what is forbidden by one religion or another, what is regarded as good or bad by social opinion, what is thought useful to society or noxious to it, what some temporary law of man allows or disallows, ...—an amalgam of all these view-points is the determining heterogeneous idea, constitutes the complex substance, of morality; in all of them there is the constant mixture of truth and half-truth and error which pursues all the activities of our limiting mental Knowledge-Ignorance. (p. 648)

We need “mental control over our vital and physical desires and instincts,” Sri Aurobindo admits, but that control is always imperfect: we remain “a mixture of good and evil, sin and virtue, a mental ego with an imperfect command over [our] mental, vital and physical nature.”

At a higher stage we employ a kind of ethical discipline in an attempt “to reconstitute and shape ourselves into the image of an ideal.” This kind of endeavour

comes nearer to the true issue; it rests on the sound idea that our life is a becoming and that there is something which we have to become and be. But the ideals constructed by the human mind are selective and relative; to shape our nature rigidly according to them is to limit ourselves and make a construction where there should be growth into larger being. The true call upon us is the call of the Infinite and the Supreme; the self-affirmation and self-abnegation imposed on us by Nature are both movements towards that, and it is the right way of self-affirmation and self-negation taken together in place of the wrong, because ignorant, way of the ego ... that we have to discover. (pp. 648-9)

“If we do not discover that,” he sounds a note of warning,

either the push of life will be too strong for our narrow ideal of perfection, its instrumentation will break and it will fail to consummate and perpetuate itself, or at best a half result will be all that we shall obtain, or else the push away from life will present itself as the only remedy, the one way out of the otherwise invincible grasp of the Ignorance. This indeed is the way out usually indicated by religion; a divinely enjoined morality, a pursuit of piety, righteousness and virtue as laid down in a religious code of conduct, a law of God determined by some human inspiration, is put forward as a part of the means, the direction, by which we can tread the way that leads to the exit, the issue. But

this exit leaves the problem where it was; it is only a way of escape for the personal being out of the unsolved perplexity of the cosmic existence. (p. 649)

“In ancient Indian spiritual thought there was a clearer perception of the difficulty,” Sri Aurobindo claims.

The practice of truth, virtue, right will and right doing was regarded as a necessity of the approach to spiritual realisation, but in the realisation itself the being arises to the greater consciousness of the Infinite and Eternal and shakes away from itself the burden of sin and virtue, for that belongs to the relativity and the Ignorance. Behind this larger truer perception lay the intuition that a relative good is a training imposed by World-Nature upon us so that we may pass through it towards the true Good which is absolute. These problems are of the mind and the ignorant life, they do not accompany us beyond mind; as there is a cessation of the duality of truth and error in an infinite Truth-Consciousness, so there is a liberation from the duality of good and evil in an infinite Good, there is transcendence. (pp. 649-50)

“There can be no artificial escape from this problem,” Sri Aurobindo insists: we have to turn “our inconscience into the greater consciousness” and make “the truth of self and spirit our life-basis.”

All other expedients will only be makeshifts or blind issues; a complete and radical transformation of our nature is the only true solution. It is because the Inconscience imposes its original obscurity on our awareness of self and things and because the Ignorance bases it on an imperfect and divided consciousness and because we live in that obscurity and division that wrong knowledge and wrong will are possible: without wrong knowledge there could be no error or falsehood, without error or falsehood in our dynamic parts there could be no wrong will in our members; without wrong will there could be no wrong-doing or evil: while these causes endure, the effects also will persist in our action and in our nature. A mental control can only be a control, not a cure; a mental teaching, rule, standard can only impose an artificial groove in which our action revolves mechanically or with difficulty and which imposes a curbed and limited formation on the course of our nature. A total change of consciousness, a radical change of nature is the one remedy and the sole issue. (pp. 650-1)

“But since the root of the difficulty is a split, limited and separative existence,” Sri Aurobindo argues,

this change must consist in an integration, a healing of the divided consciousness of our being, and since that division is complex and many-sided, no partial change on one side of the being can be passed off as a sufficient substitute for the integral transformation. Our first division is that created by our ego and mainly, most forcefully, most vividly by our life-ego, which divides us from all other beings as not-self and ties us to our ego-centricity and the law of an egoistic self-affirmation. It is in the errors of this self-affirmation that wrong and evil first arise: wrong consciousness engenders wrong will in the members, in the thinking mind, in the heart, in the life-mind and the sensational being, in the very body-consciousness; wrong will engenders wrong action of all these instruments, a multiple error and many-branching crookedness of thought and will and sense and feeling. (p. 651)

“Nor can we deal rightly with others so long as they are to us others,” Sri Aurobindo contends. “By the very nature of our ego and ignorance we affirm ourselves egoistically even when we most pride ourselves on selflessness and ignorantly even when we most pride ourselves on understanding and knowledge.”

Altruism taken as a rule of life does not deliver us; it is a potent instrument for self-enlargement and for correction of the narrower ego, but it does not abolish it nor transform it into the true self one with all; the ego of the altruist is as powerful and absorbing as the ego of the selfish and it is often more powerful and insistent because it is a self-righteous and magnified ego. It helps still less if we do wrong to our soul, to our mind, life or body with the idea of subordinating our self to the self of

others. To affirm our being rightly so that it may become one with all is the true principle, not to mutilate or immolate it. Self-immolation may be necessary at times, exceptionally, for a cause, in answer to some demand of the heart or for some right or high purpose but cannot be made the rule or nature of life; so exaggerated, it would only feed and exaggerate the ego of others or magnify some collective ego, not lead us or mankind to the discovery and affirmation of our or its true being. (pp. 651-2)

“Sacrifice and self-giving are indeed a true principle and a spiritual necessity,” he hastens to add,

for we cannot affirm our being rightly without sacrifice or without self-giving to something larger than our ego; but that too must be done with a right consciousness and will founded on a true knowledge. To develop the sattwic part of our nature, a nature of light, understanding, balance, harmony, sympathy, good-will, kindness, fellow-feeling, self-control, rightly ordered and harmonised action, is the best we can do in the limits of the mental formation, but it is a stage and not the goal of our growth of being. These are solutions by the way, palliatives, necessary means for a partial dealing with this root difficulty, provisional standards and devices given us as a temporary help and guidance because the true and total solution is beyond our present capacity and can only come when we have sufficiently evolved to see it and make it our main endeavour. (p. 652)

“The true solution can intervene,” he maintains, “only when by our spiritual growth we can become one self with all beings”:

Then the division is healed, the law of separate self-affirmation leading by itself to affirmation against or at the expense of others is enlarged and liberated by adding to it the law of our self-affirmation for others and our self-finding in their self-finding and self-realisation. It has been made a rule of religious ethics to act in a spirit of universal compassion, to love one’s neighbour as oneself, to do to others as one would have them do to us, to feel the joy and grief of others as one’s own; but no man living in his ego is able truly and perfectly to do these things, he can only accept them as a demand of his mind, an aspiration of his heart, an effort of his will to live by a high standard and modify by a sincere endeavour his crude ego-nature. It is when others are known and felt intimately as oneself that this ideal can become a natural and spontaneous rule of our living and be realised in practice as in principle. (pp. 652-3)

“But even oneness with others is not enough by itself,” he asserts, if we are simply one with them in their ignorance. The law of ignorance will then continue to work “and error of action and wrong action will survive even if diminished in degree.”

Our oneness with others must be fundamental, not a oneness with their minds, hearts, vital selves, egos,—even though these come to be included in our universalised consciousness,—but a oneness in the soul and spirit, and that can only come by our liberation into soul-awareness and self-knowledge. To be ourselves liberated from ego and realise our true selves is the first necessity; all else can be achieved as a luminous result, a necessary consequence. That is one reason why a spiritual call must be accepted as imperative and take precedence over all other claims, intellectual, ethical, social, that belong to the domain of the Ignorance. For the mental law of good abides in that domain and can only modify and palliate; nothing can be a sufficient substitute for the spiritual change that can realise the true and integral good because through the spirit we come to the root of action and existence. (p. 653)

“In the spiritual knowledge of self,” Sri Aurobindo concludes, “there are three steps of its self-achievement which are at the same time three parts of the one knowledge.”

The first is the discovery of the soul, not the outer soul of thought and emotion and desire, but the secret psychic entity, the divine element within us. When that becomes dominant over the nature, when we are consciously the soul and when mind, life and body take their true place as its

instruments, we are aware of a guide within that knows the truth, the good, the true delight and beauty of existence, controls heart and intellect by its luminous law and leads our life and being towards spiritual completeness. Even within the obscure workings of the Ignorance we have then a witness who discerns, a living light that illumines, a will that refuses to be misled and separates the mind's truth from its error, the heart's intimate response from its vibrations to a wrong call and wrong demand upon it, the life's true ardour and plenitude of movement from vital passion and the turbid falsehoods of our vital nature and its dark self-seeking. This is the first step of self-realisation, to enthrone the soul, the divine psychic individual in the place of the ego. (pp. 653-4)

The next step

is to become aware of the eternal self in us unborn and one with the self of all beings. This self-realisation liberates and universalises; even if our action still proceeds in the dynamics of the Ignorance, it no longer binds or misleads because our inner being is seated in the light of self-knowledge. (p. 654)

The third and final step

is to know the Divine Being who is at once our supreme transcendent Self, the Cosmic Being, foundation of our universality, and the Divinity within of which our psychic being, the true evolving individual in our nature, is a portion, a spark, a flame ... Aware of the Divine as the Master of our being and action, we can learn to become channels of his Shakti, the Divine Puissance, and act according to her dictates or her rule of light and power within us. Our action will not then be mastered by our vital impulse or governed by a mental standard, for she acts according to the permanent yet plastic truth of things,—not that which the mind constructs, but the higher, deeper and subtler truth of each movement and circumstance as it is known to the supreme knowledge and demanded by the supreme will in the universe. (p. 654)

In these closing passages we already see Sri Aurobindo's analysis of the problem of evil melt into the crowning element of his synthesis, his theory of spiritual evolution culminating in supramental transformation. This theory occupies the rest of the book.

Inspired primarily by the Isha Upanishad and starting from the ancient Vedantic notion of the Absolute as the trinity of Sachchidananda, Sri Aurobindo arrives at a conception that makes our individual and cosmic existence meaningful. In contradistinction to traditional eastern spirituality espousing the extinction of both in the Absolute, he proposes a more daring and more comprehensive response to the challenge of the Infinite, the response that he tried to signal by the very title of his philosophical *magnum opus*: *The Life Divine*.

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