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Supramental Consciousness and the Logic of the Infinite

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This article explores the intellectual foundations of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy: the overarching framework that he called "the logic of the Infinite," and the concept of supramental consciousness that he postulated as its executive agent. It follows the line of inquiry initiated earlier (Kvassay 2009) and draws chiefly on the online edition of *The Life Divine (LD)*, Sri Aurobindo's comprehensive and definitive philosophical statement. A brief overview of its structure may help elucidate the thrust of its argument:

The Life Divine is composed of two books. The first, titled "Omnipresent Reality and the Universe," comprises twenty-eight chapters in three distinct blocks: an extended introduction (chapters 1 to 7), an overview of Vedanta (chapters 8 to 12), and a portion dealing with Supermind (chapters 13 to 28). Through these run several threads of thought. The prominent ones belong to Materialism, Illusionism, and "the logic of the Infinite." These represent key philosophical positions competing to provide, among other things, an adequate explanation of our existence (or non-existence) in the universe. Since "the logic of the Infinite" stands for Sri Aurobindo's own position, we should not be surprised to find its traces in each chapter of the book. Explaining right at the start how the "direct contradiction of the unrealised ideals with the realised fact" could be "part of Nature's profoundest method," he writes:

All Nature seeks a harmony, life and matter in their own sphere as much as mind in the arrangement of its perceptions. The greater the apparent disorder of the materials offered ... the stronger is the spur, and it drives towards a more subtle and puissant order than can normally be the result of a less difficult endeavour. The accordance of active Life with a material of form in which the condition of activity itself seems to be inertia, is one problem of opposites that Nature has solved and seeks always to solve better with greater complexities ... The accordance of conscious mind and conscious will with a form and a life in themselves not overtly self-conscious ... is another problem of opposites in which she has produced astonishing results and aims always at higher marvels ... Not only, then, is the upward impulse of man towards the accordance of yet higher opposites rational in itself, but it is the only logical completion of a rule and an effort that seem to be a fundamental method of Nature and the very sense of her universal strivings. (LD, pp. 4-5)

Unlike in formal logic, where the opposites exclude each other, in Nature they seem to need and support each other. This complementarity of contraries is the corner-stone of Sri Aurobindo's approach. Regarding the Absolute, which the orthodox Materialism flatly denies and the orthodox Illusionism affirms as the sole Reality, Sri Aurobindo argues that its timeless, unconditioned way of being (verifiable, in principle, by direct spiritual experience) does not annul the validity of cosmic and individual existence. The concept of the Absolute is pivotal for him: it constrains and predetermines his approach to all the major philosophical problems like Being versus Becoming, the nature of individual existence, or the problem of evil.

To the materialist, the concept of the Absolute must appear impractical, to say the least. Not only does it lie beyond any objective verification but – even worse – it cannot be adequately captured in

intellectual terms. How, then, can it help in explaining the universe? No wonder he shies away from it. The initial exploration of the universe seems to justify his attitude:

We see here at the beginning of things, apparent as the base or the nature of the creative world-energy, an Inconscience, a total Nescience. This is the stock with which the material universe commences: consciousness and knowledge emerge at first in obscure infinitesimal movements, at points, in little quanta which associate themselves together; there is a tardy and difficult evolution, a slowly increasing organisation and ameliorated mechanism of the workings of consciousness, more and more gains are written on the blank slate of the Nescience. But still these have the appearance of gathered acquisitions and constructions of a seeking Ignorance which tries to know, to understand, to discover, to change slowly and strugglingly into knowledge. As Life here establishes and maintains its operations with difficulty on a foundation and in an environment of general Death, first in infinitesimal points of life, in quanta of life-form and life-energy, in increasing aggregates that create more and more complex organisms, an intricate life-machinery, Consciousness also establishes and maintains a growing but precarious light in the darkness of an original Nescience and a universal Ignorance. (LD, p. 310)

Deeper inquiry, however, reveals a puzzle to which there is no simple solution: wherever we hit on a possible foundation,

that foundation wears the appearance of a blank,—when it is not a void,—an original state which is featureless and a multitude of consequences which are not inherent in the origin and which nothing in it seems to justify or visibly to necessitate; there is a mass of superstructure which has no clear native relation to the fundamental existence. (LD, p. 310)

“The first aspect of cosmic existence,” Sri Aurobindo observes,

is an Infinite which is to our perception an indeterminate, if not indeterminable. In this Infinite the universe itself, whether in its aspect of Energy or its aspect of structure, appears as an indeterminate determination, a “boundless finite”,—paradoxical but necessary expressions which would seem to indicate that we are face to face with a suprarational mystery as the base of things; in that universe arise—from where?—a vast number and variety of general and particular determinates which do not appear to be warranted by anything perceptible in the nature of the Infinite. (LD, pp. 310-1)

“It is possible indeed,” he admits, “to question the need of positing an Infinite which contains our formed universe,”

but even if we refuse to recognise anything as real except the limitless expanding finite of the material universe and its teeming determinations, the enigma remains the same. Infinite existence, infinite non-being or boundless finite, all are to us original indeterminates or indeterminables; we can assign to them no distinct characters or features, nothing which would predetermine their determinations. To describe the fundamental character of the universe as Space or Time or Space-Time does not help us; for even if these are not abstractions of our intelligence which we impose by our mental view on the cosmos, the mind’s necessary perspective of its picture, these too are indeterminates and carry in themselves no clue to the origin of the determinations that take place in them. (LD, pp. 311-2)

“A first possible explanation,” he concedes,

points to a self-organising dynamic Chance that is at work,—a paradox necessitated by the appearance of inevitable order on one side, of unaccountable freak and fantasy on the other side of the cosmic phenomenon we call Nature. An inconscient and inconsequent Force, we may say, that acts at random and creates this or that by a general chance without any determining principle,—determinations coming in only as the result of a persistent repetition of the same rhythm of action

and succeeding because only this repetitive rhythm could succeed in keeping things in being,—this is the energy of Nature. But this implies that somewhere in the origin of things there is a boundless Possibility or a womb of innumerable possibilities that are manifested out of it by the original Energy,—an incalculable Inconscient which we find some embarrassment in calling either an Existence or a Non-Existence; for without some such origin and basis the appearance and the action of the Energy is unintelligible. (LD, pp. 314-5)

Moreover, Chance as the basis of existence can hardly explain the coherence of our sensory data (confirmed by measuring instruments) that gave birth to classical Physics, for instance. The regularity with which the random events of the quantum world coalesce into the familiar features of our “human” world points rather to “an inherent imperative Truth of things unseen by us,”

but a Truth capable of manifold manifestation, throwing out a multitude of possibilities and variants of itself which the creative Energy by its action turns into so many realised actualities. This brings us to a second explanation—a mechanical necessity in things, its workings recognisable by us as so many mechanical laws of Nature ... governing automatically the processes we observe in action in the universe. But a theory of mechanical Necessity by itself does not elucidate the free play of the endless unaccountable variations which are visible in the evolution: there must be behind the Necessity or in it a law of unity associated with a coexistent but dependent law of multiplicity, both insisting on manifestation; but the unity of what, the multiplicity of what? Mechanical Necessity can give no answer. (LD, p. 315)

Another problem is the emergence of consciousness, “for it is a phenomenon which can have no place in an all-pervading truth of inconscient mechanical Necessity.” We might perhaps evade it by supposing that there is no imperative order, “that determinism in Nature is imposed on it by our thought.”

But what then is this Mind, this Consciousness which differs so radically from the Energy that produced it that for its action it has to impose its idea and need of order on the world she has made and in which it is obliged to live? There would then be the double contradiction of consciousness emerging from a fundamental Inconscience and of a Mind of order and reason manifesting as the brilliant final consequence of a world created by inconscient Chance. These things may be possible, but they need a better explanation than any yet given before we can accord to them our acceptance. (LD, p. 316)

The radical insufficiency of these theories comes out the moment they touch culture:

We know that genes and chromosomes are the cause of hereditary transmissions, not only of physical but of psychological variations; but we do not discover how psychological characteristics can be contained and transmitted in this inconscient material vehicle. We do not see or know, but it is expounded to us as a cogent account of Nature-process, that a play of electrons, of atoms and their resultant molecules, of cells, glands, chemical secretions and physiological processes manages by their activity on the nerves and brain of a Shakespeare or a Plato to produce ... a Hamlet or a Symposium or a Republic; but we fail to discover or appreciate how such material movements could have composed or necessitated the composition of these highest points of thought and literature: the divergence here of the determinants and the determination becomes so wide that we are no longer able to follow the process, much less understand or utilise. (LD, p. 313)

Material explanations of more tangible phenomena actually suffer from the same flaw: scientific formulas “may be pragmatically correct and infallible, they may govern the practical how of Nature’s processes, but they do not disclose the intrinsic how or why,” since “the results do not present themselves as their necessary but only their pragmatic and actual consequence.”

This opens the way for other explanations which make Consciousness the creator of this world out of an apparent original Inconscience. A Mind, a Will seems to have imagined and organised the universe, but it has veiled itself behind its creation ... The fact that this Divinity is invisible to us, undiscoverable by our mind and senses, offers no difficulty, since self-evidence or direct sign of an extra-cosmic Creator could not be expected in a cosmos which is void of his presence: the patent signals everywhere of the works of an Intelligence, of law, design, formula, adaptation of means to end, constant and inexhaustible invention, fantasy even but restrained by an ordering Reason might be considered sufficient proof of this origin of things. (LD, pp. 316-7)

The emergence of consciousness is no longer a difficulty since “an omnipotent Mind could easily infuse something of itself into its creatures.” The stumbling-block is rather

the arbitrary nature of the creation, the incomprehensibility of its purpose, the crude meaninglessness of its law of unnecessary ignorance, strife and suffering, its ending without a denouement or issue. A play? But why this stamp of so many undivine elements and characters in the play of One whose nature must be supposed to be divine? To the suggestion that what we see worked out in the world is the thoughts of God, the retort can be made that God could well have had better thoughts and the best thought of all would have been to refrain from the creation of an unhappy and unintelligible universe. (LD, p. 317)

“All theistic explanations of existence starting from an extra-cosmic Deity,” Sri Aurobindo contends, “stumble over this difficulty and can only evade it.”

It would disappear only if the Creator were, even though exceeding the creation, yet immanent in it, himself in some sort both the player and the play, an Infinite casting infinite possibilities into the form of an evolutionary cosmic order. (LD, p. 317)

“On that hypothesis,” he argues, “there must be behind the action of the material Energy a secret involved Consciousness.” Moreover, if the universe is “such a creation by the Infinite out of itself,”

it must be the manifestation, in a material disguise, of truths or powers of its own being: the forms or vehicles of these truths or powers would be the basic general or fundamental determinates we see in Nature; the particular determinates, which otherwise are unaccountable variations ... would be the appropriate forms or vehicles of the possibilities that the truths or powers residing in these fundamentals bore within them. The principle of free variation of possibilities natural to an infinite Consciousness would be the explanation of the aspect of inconscient Chance ... The principle of truths, real powers of the Infinite imperatively fulfilling themselves would be the explanation of the opposite aspect of a mechanical Necessity which we see in Nature,—mechanical in appearance only ... [because of the] veil of Inconscience. It would then be perfectly intelligible why the Inconscient does its works with a constant principle of mathematical architecture, of design, of effective arrangement of numbers, of adaptation of means to ends, of inexhaustible device and invention, one might almost say, a constant experimental skill and an automatism of purpose. The appearance of consciousness out of an apparent Inconscience would also be no longer inexplicable. (LD, p. 318)

This compact version of Sri Aurobindo’s thesis comes from the summary of “Book One” that spans the first six chapters of “Book Two.” Four of them were added during the major revision in 1939-40 and reflect sweeping changes in intellectual *milieu* since the book first appeared in 1914-9. That summary is my primary source.

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Sri Aurobindo is well aware that “an approach from the material end of Existence cannot give us any certitude of validity for this hypothesis,”

or for that matter for any other explanation of Nature and her procedure: the veil cast by the original Inconscience is too thick for the Mind to pierce ... [O]ur mind can at first only observe facts and processes and for the rest it has to make deductions and inferences, to construct hypotheses, to reason, to speculate. In order to discover the secret of Consciousness it would have to know itself and determine the reality of its own being and process; but ... its very reasonings and speculations are determined in their tendency, trend, conditions by its own temperament, mental turn, past formation ... —we do not freely determine our thinking according to the truth of things, it is determined for us by our nature. (LD, pp. 321-2)

“We can indeed stand back with a certain detachment and observe the workings of the mental Energy in us,” he admits,

but it is still only its process that we see and not any original source of our mental determinations: we can build theories and hypotheses of the process of Mind, but a veil is still there over the inner secret of ourselves, our consciousness, our total nature. (LD, p. 322)

Deeper self-observation requires “the yogic process of quieting the mind itself.” If we employ it, we can see that mind is

a subtle substance, a general determinate—or generic indeterminate—which mental energy when it operates throws into forms or particular determinations of itself, thoughts, concepts, percepts, mental sentiments, activities of will and reactions of feeling, but which, when the energy is quiescent, can live either in an inert torpor or in an immobile silence and peace of self-existence. Next we see that the determinations of our mind do not all proceed from itself; for waves and currents of mental energy enter into it from outside: these take form in it or appear already formed from some universal Mind or from other minds and are accepted by us as our own thinking. We can perceive also an occult or subliminal mind in ourselves from which thoughts and perceptions and will-impulses and mental feelings arise; we can perceive too higher planes of consciousness from which a superior mind energy works through us or upon us. Finally we discover that that which observes all this is a mental being supporting the mind substance and mind energy; without this presence, their upholder and source of sanctions, they could not exist or operate. (LD, p. 322)

Here we begin to understand how – in Sri Aurobindo’s view – our psychological make-up determines (and potentially distorts) the intellectual base from which we are trying to explain ourselves and the universe. Since I plan to deal with the psychological side of his system separately, I shall restrict it to minimum now. But I have to stress that the two aspects – the psychological (experiential) and the philosophical (intellectual) – are in reality inseparable. The philosophical side is represented by “the logic of the Infinite”:

Taken by itself the existence of the Absolute, the Supreme Brahman, would be a contradiction of the relative universe and our own real existence would be incompatible with its sole incommunicable Reality. But the Brahman is at the same time omnipresent in all relativities; it is the Absolute independent of all relatives, the Absolute basing all relatives, the Absolute governing, pervading, constituting all relatives; there is nothing that is not the omnipresent Reality. (LD, p. 340)

To the logical intellect, such a description of the Absolute “offers an abundance of difficulties.” This is not surprising, since any attempt “to erect a logical system out of a perception of an illimitable Existence”

must either effect consistency by an arbitrary sectioning of the complex truth of things or else by its comprehensiveness become logically untenable. For we see that the Indeterminable determines itself as infinite and finite, the Immutable admits a constant mutability and endless differences, the One becomes an innumerable multitude, the Impersonal creates or supports personality, is itself a Person; the Self has a nature and is yet other than its nature; Being turns into becoming and yet it is always

itself and other than its becomings; the Universal individualises itself and the Individual universalises himself; Brahman is at once void of qualities and capable of infinite qualities. (LD, p. 340)

If we look closely at Nature and put aside “our unthinking acquiescence in the process of things as natural because so they always happen, we discover that all she does in whole or in parts is a miracle.”

There seems to us to be a reason in things because the processes of the physical finite are consistent to our view and their law determinable, but this reason in things, when closely examined, seems to stumble at every moment against the irrational or infrarational and the suprarational: the consistency, the determinability of process seems to lessen rather than increase as we pass from matter to life and from life to mentality; if the finite consents to some extent to look as if it were rational, the infinitesimal refuses to be bound by the same laws and the infinite is unseizable. (LD, p. 341)

In the end, both the process and the meaning of the universe seem to elude us:

If Self, God or Spirit there be, his dealings with the world and us are incomprehensible, offer no clue that we can follow.... The Spirit that manifests things or manifests itself in them so obscurely, looks to our reason like a Magician and his power or Maya a creative magic: but magic can create illusions or it can create astounding realities, and we find it difficult to decide which of these suprarational processes faces us in this universe. (LD, p. 341)

But “the cause of this impression,” Sri Aurobindo argues,

must necessarily be sought not in anything illusory or fantastic in the Supreme or the universal Self-existence, but in our own inability to seize the supreme clue to its manifold existence or discover the secret plan and pattern of its action. The Self-existent is the Infinite and its way of being and of action must be the way of the Infinite, but our consciousness is limited, our reason built upon things finite: it is irrational to suppose that a finite consciousness and reason can be a measure of the Infinite. (LD, pp. 341-2)

“Our reasoning,” he points out,

is based upon our experience of the finite operations of physical Nature, on an incomplete observation and uncertain understanding of something that acts within limits; it has organised on that basis certain conceptions which it seeks to make general and universal, and whatever contradicts or departs from these conceptions it regards as irrational, false or inexplicable. But there are different orders of the reality and the conceptions, measures, standards suitable to one need not be applicable to another order.... A law founded upon an observation of what is divided in Space and Time cannot be confidently applied to the being and action of the Indivisible; not only it cannot be applied to the spaceless and timeless Infinite, but it cannot be applied even to a Time Infinite or a Space Infinite. (LD, p. 342)

“It is imperative on us in a consideration of the Infinite,” Sri Aurobindo emphasizes,

to enforce on our reason an utmost plasticity and open it to an awareness of the larger states and possibilities of that which we are striving to consider. It will not do to apply our limited and limiting conclusions to That which is illimitable.... An experience of some one aspect of the Infinite is valid in itself; but we cannot generalise from it that the Infinite is that alone, nor would it be safe to view the rest of the Infinite in the terms of that aspect and exclude all other view-points of spiritual experience. The Infinite is at once an essentiality, a boundless totality and a multitude; all these have to be known in order to know truly the Infinite. (LD, pp. 345-6)

The supreme Reality may be “indefinable and inconceivable by finite and defining Mind,” and yet determine itself to our consciousness “by real and fundamental truths of its being”:

These truths present themselves to our conceptual cognition as the fundamental aspects in which we see and experience the omnipresent Reality. In themselves they are seized directly, not by intellectual understanding but by a spiritual intuition, a spiritual experience in the very substance of our consciousness; but they can also be caught at in conception by a large and plastic idea and can be expressed in some sort by a plastic speech which does not insist too much on rigid definition or limit the wideness and subtlety of the idea. (LD, p. 337)

The ideal language would have to be “at once intuitively metaphysical and revealingly poetic,” Sri Aurobindo notes, “such as we find ... in the Veda and the Upanishads.” In a more intellectual approach,

we have to be content with a distant indication, an approximation by abstractions, which may still be of some service to our intellect, for it is this kind of speech which suits our method of logical and rational understanding; but if it is to be of real service, the intellect must consent to pass out of the bounds of a finite logic and accustom itself to the logic of the Infinite. On this condition alone ... it ceases to be paradoxical or futile to speak of the Ineffable. (LD, p. 338)

Viewed from this angle, the difficulty turns out to be “verbal and conceptual and not real”:

Our intelligence looks at its concept of the Absolute and sees that it must be indeterminable and at the same time it sees a world of determinations which emanates from the Absolute and exists in it,—for it can emanate from nowhere else and can exist nowhere else; it is further baffled by the affirmation, also hardly disputable on the premisses, that all these determinates are nothing else than this very indeterminable Absolute. (LD, p. 347)

“The contradiction disappears,” Sri Aurobindo explains,

when we understand that the indeterminability is not in its true sense negative, not an imposition of incapacity on the Infinite, but positive, a freedom within itself from limitation by its own determinations and necessarily a freedom from all external determination by anything not itself, since there is no real possibility of such a not-self coming into existence. The Infinite is illimitably free, free to determine itself infinitely, free from all restraining effect of its own creations. (LD, pp. 347-8)

These two statements are in fact complementary – “the dual statement of a single inescapable fact by human reason in human language.” And “yet we have to emphasise its indeterminability,” Sri Aurobindo adds next,

in that special and positive sense, not as a negation but as an indispensable condition of its free infinite self-determination, because without that the Reality would be a fixed eternal determinate or else an indeterminate fixed and bound to a sum of possibilities of determination inherent within it. Its freedom from all limitation ... cannot be itself turned into a limitation. (LD, p. 348)

On this basis the other contradictions are resolved as well. Our finite mind might view the status and the dynamis as mutually exclusive, “but to the reason and the logic of the Infinite there can be no such opposition.” “An Infinite without an infinite power and dynamis,” Sri Aurobindo observes, “is inadmissible except as the perception of an aspect; a powerless Absolute, an impotent Spirit is unthinkable.” These and similar considerations reveal the quintessence of his philosophy:

The coexistence of the Infinite and the finite, which is the very nature of universal being, is not a juxtaposition or mutual inclusion of two opposites, but as natural and inevitable as the relation of the principle of Light and Fire with the suns. The finite is a frontal aspect and a self-determination of the Infinite; no finite can exist in itself and by itself, it exists by the Infinite and because it is of one essence

with the Infinite. For by the Infinite we do not mean solely an illimitable self-extension in Space and Time, but something that is also spaceless and timeless, a self-existent Indefinable and Illimitable which can express itself in the infinitesimal as well as in the vast, in a second of time, in a point of space, in a passing circumstance. (LD, pp. 352-3)

This, then, is the key difference between Sri Aurobindo's philosophical logic and the systems based on mathematical logic. For Sri Aurobindo, things do not exist by themselves: "the Identical is their root, their cause of form, the one power of their varying powers, their constituting substance."

Having considered the fundamental aspects of Being, Sri Aurobindo then turns to Nature. "The Identical to our notions is the Immutable," he writes, but Nature's characteristic principle is rather "an infinitely variable fundamental oneness":

The basic Force is one, but it manifests from itself innumerable forces; the basic substance is one, but it develops many different substances and millions of unlike objects; mind is one but differentiates itself into many mental states, mind-formations, thoughts, perceptions differing from each other and entering into harmony or into conflict; life is one, but the forms of life are unlike and innumerable; humanity is one in nature, but there are different race types and every individual man is himself and in some way unlike others; ... yet fundamentally all men are alike and there is no essential difference. Oneness or sameness is everywhere, differentiation is everywhere; the indwelling Reality has built the universe on the principle of the development of one seed into a million different fashions. (LD, pp. 354-5)

"But this again is the logic of the Infinite," he insists. "Because the Self and Spirit in things and beings is one everywhere,"

therefore Nature can afford this luxury of infinite differentiation: if there were not this secure basis which brings it about that nothing changes yet all changes, all her workings and creations would in this play collapse into disintegration and chaos; there would be nothing to hold her disparate movements and creations together. The immutability of the Identical does not consist in a monotone of changeless sameness incapable of variation; it consists in an unchangeableness of being which is capable of endless formation of being, but which no differentiation can destroy or impair or minimise. (LD, p. 355)

There are then two basic movements in the universe: "a diversification of the One, a unification of the many and diverse, and that must be because the One and the Many are fundamental aspects of the Infinite." This applies to "the being of Brahman" as well as to "its consciousness, Maya":

It is not bound to a finite restriction of itself or to one state or law of its action; it can be many things simultaneously, have many co-ordinated movements which to the finite reason may seem contradictory; it is one but innumerbly manifold, infinitely plastic, inexhaustibly adaptable. Maya is the supreme and universal consciousness and force of the Eternal and Infinite and, being by its very nature unbound and illimitable, it can put forth many states of consciousness at a time, many dispositions of its Force, without ceasing to be the same consciousness-force for ever. It is at once transcendental, universal and individual; it is the supreme supracosmic Being that is aware of itself as All-Being, as the Cosmic Self, as the Consciousness-force of cosmic Nature, and at the same time experiences itself as the individual being and consciousness in all existences. (LD, p. 356)

This means that the individual consciousness

can also put off its limitations and know itself as universal and again as transcendent of the universe; this is because there is in all these states or positions or underlying them the same triune consciousness in a triple status. There is then no difficulty in the One thus seeing or experiencing itself triply, whether from above in the Transcendent Existence or from between in the Cosmic Self or from below in the individual conscious being. All that is necessary for this to be accepted as natural and

logical is to admit that there can be different real statuses of consciousness of the One Being, and that cannot be impossible for an Existence which is free and infinite and cannot be tied to a single condition; a free power of self-variation must be natural to a consciousness that is infinite. (LD, p. 356)

In Sri Aurobindo's view, there is no limit to its variations of status, "provided the One is aware of itself simultaneously in all of them; for the One and Infinite must be thus universally conscious." The emergence of limited forms of consciousness requires additional postulates:

A second possibility of the Infinite Consciousness that must be admitted is its power of self-limitation or secondary self-formation into a subordinate movement within the integral illimitable consciousness and knowledge; for that is a necessary consequence of the power of self-determination of the Infinite. Each self-determination of the self-being must have its own awareness of its self-truth and its self-nature; or, if we prefer so to put it, the Being in that determination must be so self-aware. (LD, p. 357)

This becomes the basis of spiritual individuation:

Spiritual individuality means that each individual self or spirit is a centre of self-vision and all-vision; the circumference—the boundless circumference, as we may say,—of this vision may be the same for all, but the centre may be different,—not located as in a spatial point in a spatial circle, but a psychological centre related with others through a coexistence of the diversely conscious Many in the universal being. Each being in a world will see the same world, but see it from its own self-being according to its own way of self-nature ... —as we see all human beings conscious in the one human way of the same cosmic things, yet always with an individual difference. This self-limitation would be, not fundamental, but an individual specialisation of a common universality or totality; ... It would be consciousness limiting its action with full knowledge, not [yet] a movement of ignorance. (LD, p. 357)

The same postulate enables other types of determination as well:

Apart from this individualising self-limitation, there must also be in the consciousness of the Infinite a power of cosmic limitation; it must be able to limit its action so as to base a given world or universe and to keep it in its own order, harmony, self-building: for the creation of a universe necessitates a special determination of the Infinite Consciousness to preside over that world and a holding back of all that is not needed for that movement. In the same way the putting forth of an independent action of some power like Mind, Life or Matter must have as its support a similar principle of self-limitation. (LD, pp. 357-8)

"This much cosmic or individual conscious self-limitation," Sri Aurobindo maintains, "would evidently be possible to the Infinite." In order to explain the "ignorant separation" and "blinding limitation" characteristic of the normal human consciousness, a third power of the Infinite Consciousness has to be admitted,

its power of self-absorption, of plunging into itself, into a state in which self-awareness exists but not as knowledge and not as all-knowledge; the all would then be involved in pure self-awareness, and knowledge and the inner consciousness itself would be lost in pure being. This is, luminously, the state which we call the Superconscience in an absolute sense. (LD, p. 358)

"This trance of infinity is again," he continues,

no longer luminously but darkly, the state which we call the Inconscient; for the being of the Infinite is there though by its appearance of inconscience it seems to us rather to be an infinite non-being: a self-oblivious intrinsic consciousness and force are there in that apparent non-being, for by the energy of the Inconscient an ordered world is created; it is created in a trance of self-absorption, the force

acting automatically and with an apparent blindness as in a trance, but still with the inevitability and power of truth of the Infinite. (LD, p. 359)

“If we take a step further,” he argues, “and admit ... a restricted and partial action of self-absorption”

confined to a special status or to an individual or cosmic self-determination, we have then the explanation of the concentrated condition or status by which it becomes aware separately of one aspect of its being. There can then be a fundamental double status ... of consciousness aware of one field of being or one movement of it, while the awareness of all the rest would be held behind and veiled or, as it were, cut off by a waking trance of dynamic concentration from the specialised or limited awareness occupied only with its own field or movement. The totality of the infinite consciousness would be there, not abolished, recoverable, but not evidently active, active only by implication, by inherence or by the instrumentality of the limited awareness, not in its own manifest power and presence. (LD, p. 359)

It is through these powers of the Infinite that we begin to understand the operations of Maya. But our surface mind – “acquainted only with our normal status of limited ignorance” – is prone to regard all this with suspicion, or even rise up saying:

“I know very well what the Absolute is; it is that in which there are no relations. The Absolute and the relative are irreconcilable opposites; in the relative there is nowhere anything absolute, in the Absolute there can be nothing relative. Anything which contradicts these first data of my thought, is intellectually false and practically impossible. These other statements also contradict my law of contradictions which is that two opposing and conflicting affirmations cannot both be true. It is impossible that there should be oneness with God and yet a relation with Him such as this of the enjoyment of the Divine. In oneness there is no one to enjoy except the One and nothing to be enjoyed except the One. God, the individual and the cosmos must be three different actualities, otherwise there could be no relations between them.” (LD, pp. 389-90)

Many find this sort of argument – “clear, lucid, positive in its distinctions” – intuitively appealing. Yet it contains “a triple error.” The first consists in “making an unbridgeable gulf between the Absolute and the relative.” The second makes the law of contradictions “too simple and rigid” and extends it too far. The third conceives “in terms of Time the genesis of things which have their origin and first habitat in the Eternal”:

We mean by the Absolute something greater than ourselves, greater than the cosmos which we live in, the supreme reality of that transcendent Being which we call God, something without which all that we see or are conscious of as existing, could not have been, could not for a moment remain in existence. Indian thought calls it Brahman, European thought the Absolute because it is a self-existent which is absolved of all bondage to relativities. For all relatives can only exist by something which is the truth of them all and the source and continent of their powers and properties and yet exceeds them all; it is something of which not only each relativity itself, but also any sum we can make of all relatives that we know, can only be—in all that we know of them—a partial, inferior or practical expression. We see by reason that such an Absolute must exist; we become by spiritual experience aware of its existence: but even when we are most aware of it, we cannot describe it because our language and thought can deal only with the relative. The Absolute is for us the Ineffable. (LD, p. 391)

So far, so good: we may like or dislike the theory, but there is no confusion. The trouble starts when we begin to speak of the Absolute

as not only not bound by the limitations of the relative, but as if it were bound by its freedom from limitations, inexorably empty of all power for relations and in its nature incapable of them, something hostile in its whole being to relativity and its eternal contrary. By this false step of our logic we get

into an impasse. Our own existence and the existence of the universe become not only a mystery, but logically inconceivable.... We have then only one logical-illogical way of escape out of the impasse; we have to suppose the imposition of the world as a self-effective illusion or an unreal temporal reality, on the eternity of the formless relationless Absolute. (LD, pp. 391-2)

“By this explanation nothing is explained,” Sri Aurobindo observes. “The original contradiction stands where it was, unreconciled, and we have only stated it over again in other terms.” By our logical-illogical *faux pas* we have just transformed

our mental difficulty in understanding the world-manifestation into an original impossibility for the Absolute to manifest itself in world at all. But the Absolute, obviously, finds no difficulty in world-manifestation and no difficulty either in a simultaneous transcendence of world-manifestation; the difficulty exists only for our mental limitations which prevent us from grasping the supramental rationality of the coexistence of the infinite and the finite or seizing the nodus of the unconditioned with the conditioned. (LD, p. 392)

For our intellect these are pairs of opposites,

for the absolute reason they are interrelated and not essentially conflicting expressions of one and the same reality. The consciousness of infinite Existence is other than our mind-consciousness and sense-consciousness, greater and more capacious, for it includes them as minor terms of its workings, and the logic of infinite Existence is other than our intellectual logic. It reconciles in its great primal facts of being what to our mental view, concerned as it is with words and ideas derived from secondary facts, are irreconcilable contraries. (LD, pp. 392-3)

“We think we have succeeded,” Sri Aurobindo sums up,

when we have described by an all-exclusive negation this Absolute which we are yet compelled to conceive of as a supreme positive and the cause of all positives. It is not surprising that so many acute thinkers, with their eye on the facts of being and not on verbal distinctions, should be driven to infer that the Absolute is a fiction of the intelligence, an idea born of words and verbal dialectics, a zero, non-existent, and to conclude that an eternal Becoming is the only truth of our existence. (LD, p. 393)

“In the world as we see it,” he continues,

we find that to every positive there is a negative. But the negative is not a zero,—indeed whatever appears to us a zero is packed with force, teeming with power of existence, full of actual or potential contents. Neither does the existence of the negative make its corresponding positive non-existent or an unreality; it only makes the positive an incomplete statement of the truth of things and even, we may say, of the positive’s own truth. For the positive and the negative exist not only side by side, but in relation to each other and by each other ... Each by itself is not really known; we only begin to know it in its deeper truth when we can read into it the suggestions of its apparent opposite. (LD, p. 393)

In other words, the “law of contradictions” does not apply to the Absolute. We need it to “posit partial and practical truths ... for particular purposes in our divisions of Space, distinctions of form and property, moments of Time.” It represents

a formal and strongly dynamic truth of existence in its practical workings which is strongest in the most outward term of things, the material ... [There] we have to suppose them to be one thing at a time, to have one power at a time and to be limited by their ostensible and practically effective capacities and properties; otherwise we cannot deal with them. (LD, p. 395)

“But even there,” Sri Aurobindo insists, “the distinctions made by the intellect ... do not represent the whole or the real truth of things.” Isolating things for separate analysis is indeed a powerful tool; its effectiveness is sometimes taken for a proof of “the entire and sufficient truth of our isolating

and analysing knowledge.” Yet we have to surpass it in order to get at “a greater truth and a greater effectivity”:

A diamond is a diamond and a pearl a pearl, each thing of its own class, existing by its distinction from all others, each distinguished by its own form and properties. But each has also properties and elements which are common to both and others which are common to material things in general. And in reality each does not exist only by its distinctions, but much more essentially by that which is common to both; and we get back to the very basis and enduring truth of all material things only when we find that all are the same thing, one energy, one substance or, if you like, one universal motion which throws up, brings out, combines, realises these different forms ... If we stop short at the knowledge of distinctions, we can deal only with diamond and pearl as they are, fix their values, uses, varieties, make the best ordinary use and profit of them; but if we can get to the knowledge and control of their elements and the common properties of the class to which they belong, we may arrive at the power of making either a diamond or pearl at our pleasure. (LD, pp. 395-6)

This deeper unifying knowledge “does not deprive the other and more superficial of effectivity nor convict it of vanity”:

We cannot conclude from our ultimate material discovery that there is no original substance or Matter, only energy manifesting substance or manifesting as substance,—that diamond and pearl are non-existent, unreal, only true to the illusion of our senses of perception and action, that the one substance, energy or motion is the sole eternal truth and that therefore the best or only rational use of our science would be to dissolve diamond and pearl and everything else that we can dissolve into this one eternal and original reality and get done with their forms and properties for ever. There is an essentiality of things, a commonalty of things, an individuality of things; the commonalty and individuality are true and eternal powers of the essentiality: that transcends them both, but the three together and not one by itself are the eternal terms of existence. (LD, p. 396)

All this gets even more pronounced as we progress from Matter to Life and Mind:

For practical purposes plant, animal, man are different existences; yet when we look deeper we see that the plant is only an animal with an insufficient evolution of self-consciousness and dynamic force; the animal is man in the making; man himself is that animal and yet the something more of self-consciousness and dynamic power of consciousness that make him man; and yet again he is the something more which is contained and repressed in his being as the potentiality of the divine,—he is a god in the making. In each of these, plant, animal, man, god, the Eternal is there containing and repressing himself as it were in order to make a certain statement of his being. Each is the whole Eternal concealed. (LD, p. 397)

We cannot really understand man by looking “only at his present individuality,”

but we cannot understand him either if we look only at his commonalty, his general term of manhood, or go back by exclusion from both to an essentiality of his being in which his distinguishing manhood and his particularising individuality seem to disappear. Each thing is the Absolute, all are that One, but in these three terms always the Absolute makes its statement of its developed self-existence. We are not, because of the essential unity, compelled to say that all God’s various action and workings are vain, worthless, unreal, phenomenal, illusory, and that the best and only rational or super-rational use we can make of our knowledge is to get away from them, dissolve our cosmic and individual existence into the essential being and get rid of all becoming as a futility for ever. (LD, p. 397)

The same applies to “our practical dealings with life”:

For certain practical ends we have to say that a thing is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, just or unjust and act upon that statement; but ... [t]he law of contradictions here is only valid in so far as two

different and opposite statements cannot be true of the same thing at the same time, in the same field, in the same respect, from the same point of view and for the same practical purpose. A great war ... may present itself to us as an evil, a virulent and catastrophic disorder, and it is so in certain respects ... but from [other points of view] it may be a great good, since it rapidly clears the field for a new good or a more satisfying order. (LD, p. 398)

“No man is simply good or simply bad,” Sri Aurobindo adds. We are “a mixture of contraries” and often find them “inextricably mixed up in a single feeling, a single action”:

All kinds of conflicting qualities, powers, values meet together and run into each other to make up our action, life, nature. We can only understand entirely if we get to some sense of the Absolute and yet look at its workings in all the relativities which are being manifested,—look not only at each by itself, but each in relation to all and to that which exceeds and reconciles them all. (LD, p. 398)

Our “scientific divisions and metaphysical distinctions” do not properly reflect this kind of complexity. They are “the conveniences of our mental consciousness, our divisions of the indivisible.” We need them “in order to help our intelligence towards a truth which exceeds it,” but we should not stay bound to them forever lest they turn into chains.

* * *

In the opening chapters of “Book Two,” Sri Aurobindo occasionally refers to Supermind but does not go into details. Instead, he relies on the extensive treatment of Supermind in the second half of “Book One.” He actually uses the term right from the beginning, but there he simply means a kind of consciousness above and beyond the reach of normal mentality. For example, when he comments on the Non-Being or “the Nihil of certain Buddhist schools,” he writes:

Again we find that we are being misled by words, deceived by the trenchant oppositions of our limited mentality ... and its rendering of our supramental experiences in the sense of those intolerant distinctions. Non-Being is only a word. When we examine the fact it represents, we can no longer be sure that absolute non-existence has any better chance than the infinite Self of being more than an ideative formation of the mind. (LD, p. 32)

Sri Aurobindo is well aware that unrestricted connotations for such a crucial concept could lead to problems,

since it may be taken in the sense of mind itself supereminent and lifted above ordinary mentality but not radically changed, or on the contrary it may bear the sense of all that is beyond mind and therefore assume a too extensive comprehensiveness which would bring in even the Ineffable itself. A subsidiary description is required which will more accurately limit its significance. (LD, p. 132)

This subsidiary description has to reflect the role of Supermind in the process by which the universe issues from the Ineffable:

When we have found that all things are [the Infinite], all has not yet been explained. We know the Reality of the universe, we do not yet know the process by which that Reality has turned itself into this phenomenon.... For this [Infinite] does not work directly or with a sovereign irresponsibility like a magician building up worlds and universes by the mere fiat of its word. We perceive a process, we are aware of a Law. (LD, p. 122)

At first this Law seems “to resolve itself into an equilibrium of the play of forces” running along fixed lines determined “by the accident of development and the habit of past realised energy.” But this is only an “apparent and secondary truth”:

When we perceive that Force is a self-expression of Existence, we are bound to perceive also that this line which Force has taken, corresponds to some self-truth of that Existence which governs and determines its constant curve and destination. And since consciousness is the nature of the original Existence and the essence of its Force, this truth must be a self-perception in Conscious-Being and this determination of the line taken by Force must result from a power of self-directive knowledge inherent in Consciousness which enables it to guide its own Force inevitably along the logical line of the original self-perception. (LD, pp. 122-3)

The term Supermind is meant specifically for this “self-determining power in universal consciousness, a capacity in self-awareness of infinite existence to perceive a certain Truth in itself and direct its force of creation along the line of that Truth.” But why should this require a special self-determination of the Infinite, rather than being performed by the Infinite directly? Indeed, Sri Aurobindo himself poses the question in *The Life Divine*:

But why should we interpose any special power or faculty between the infinite Consciousness itself and the result of its workings? May not this Self-awareness of the Infinite range freely creating forms which afterwards remain in play so long as there is not the fiat that bids them cease,—even as the old Semitic Revelation tells us, “God said, Let there be Light, and there was Light”? (LD, p. 123)

Here is Sri Aurobindo’s answer:

When we say, “God said, Let there be Light”, we assume the act of a power of consciousness which determines light out of everything else that is not light; and when we say “and there was Light” we presume a directing faculty, an active power corresponding to the original perceptive power, which brings out the phenomenon and, working out Light according to the line of the original perception, prevents it from being overpowered by all the infinite possibilities that are other than itself. Infinite consciousness in its infinite action can produce only infinite results; to settle upon a fixed Truth or order of truths and build a world in conformity with that which is fixed, demands a selective faculty of knowledge commissioned to shape finite appearance out of the infinite Reality. (LD, p. 123)

“This power,” he continues, “was known to the Vedic seers by the name of Maya,” but not in its usual meaning:

Maya in its original sense meant a comprehending and containing consciousness capable of embracing, measuring and limiting and therefore formative ... Later the word came from its original sense of knowledge, skill, intelligence to acquire a pejorative sense of cunning, fraud or illusion, and it is in the figure of an enchantment or illusion that it is used by the philosophical systems. (LD, p. 109)

The pejorative sense applies to “the lower ... deluding mental Maya [that] has first to be embraced, then to be overcome”; but there is also “the supramental play or the truth of Maya” by which

static truth of essential being becomes ordered truth of active being—or, to put it in more metaphysical language, out of the supreme being in which all is all without barrier of separative consciousness emerges the phenomenal being in which all is in each and each is in all for the play of existence with existence, consciousness with consciousness, force with force, delight with delight. (LD, p. 124)

This higher Maya “has to be overpassed, then embraced,”

for it is God’s play of the infinities of existence, the splendours of knowledge, the glories of force mastered and the ecstasies of love illimitable where He emerges out of the hold of Force, holds her instead and fulfils in her illumined that for which she went out from Him at the first. (LD, p. 124)

“This distinction between the lower and the higher Maya,” Sri Aurobindo sums up, “is the link in thought and in cosmic Fact which the pessimistic and illusionist philosophies miss or neglect.” But

is it possible – given the enormous gulf between our mentality and this Supermind – “to give any account of this state to the human intellect or to utilise ... its divine workings for the elevation of our human knowledge and action”?

Certainly, if this consciousness had no relation at all to mind nor anywhere any identity with the mental being, it would be quite impossible to give any account of it to our human notions. Or, if it were in its nature only vision in knowledge and not at all dynamic power of knowledge, we could hope to attain by its contact a beatific state of mental illumination, but not a greater light and power for the works of the world. But since this consciousness is creatrix of the world, it must be not only state of knowledge, but power of knowledge, and not only a Will to light and vision, but a Will to power and works. And since Mind too is created out of it, Mind must be a development by limitation out of this primal faculty and this mediatory act of the supreme Consciousness and must therefore be capable of resolving itself back into it through a reverse development by expansion. For always Mind must be identical with Supermind in essence and conceal in itself the potentiality of Supermind, however different or even contrary it may have become in its actual forms and settled modes of operation. (LD, p. 131)

This is the corner-stone of Sri Aurobindo’s theory of spiritual evolution and of his dream of “divine life” upon earth. It is also the foundation of his system of psychological discipline by which the higher levels of consciousness are gradually activated in the individual. But all this more properly belongs to the psychological side of his synthesis, which I have tackled in a [separate piece \(Kvassay 2011\)](#).

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