



SRI AUROBINDO'S INTEGRAL VIEW OF REALITY: INTEGRAL ADVAITISM

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ABSTRACT



Sri Aurobindo is a modern Vedantist who interprets the sacred texts of Hinduism. Realizing that the Vedanta contains a spirit of all-comprehensive synthesis, he tried to explore the original teaching of the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita, and blended together all the conflicting truths of the traditional interpretations of the Vedanta, presenting a new interpretation of the Vedanta, known as purnadaivatavada, or Integral Non-Dualism. According to purnadvaitavada, the ultimate reality is one all-comprehensive Spirit with an infinite richness of content. This spirit manifests itself in three modes of existence, namely, supra-cosmic transcendence, cosmic universality, and unique individuality. As supra-cosmic transcendence, the Spirit is ineffable and indeterminable Superconscience, and it is called saccidananda; in its aspect of cosmic universality, the Spirit is the all-originating, all-sustaining, and all-consummating principle of consciousness, and it is called Isvara; and in its aspect of individuality, the Spirit is the principle of infinitely diversified self-vision, self-enjoyment and self-manifestation, and it is called the jivatman. Realizing all these three characteristics in itself at the same time, the Spirit is a super-organic unity, an ineffable One-in-all or All-in-one. Still, Reality is indeterminate, and beyond words and symbols, and therefore, is best expressed in the concept of nirguna brahman.

Keywords: *Integral Advaitism or Integral Non-Dualism, Isvara; Supermind, Brahman, saccidananda, consciousness-force, Maya or illusion, lila, Prakriti, Purusha, God, superconscience, Spirit etc.*

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Aurobindo's Integral Advaitism establishes the oneness of the Absolute Brahman without denying the reality of the world. He disagrees with the teaching of Sankara's Advaita that denies the real existence of the reality of the world. Aurobindo could synthesize both the Absolute and the cosmos. According to his integral standpoint, the Absolute is both Being and Becoming, One and Many, Infinite and Finite, and at the same time transcending them all. The Absolute contains the truth of all aspects of existence—the individual, the universal and the transcendent. There is a unity among the three aspects, and the unifying principle is God Himself. Aurobindo has said that "The universe is a manifestation of an infinite and eternal All-Existence: the Divine Being dwells in all that is; we ourselves are that in our self, in our own deepest being; our soul, the secret indwelling psychic entity, is a portion of the Divine Consciousness and Essence."¹

The Vedanta system presents various viewpoints. Sankara affirms that Brahman is one without a second, but at the same time he accepts also the plurality of the phenomenal world. Ramanuja speaks of three things: God, self and matter; self and matter are only forms of God. Madhava too admitted three realities, God, selves and matter; selves and matter are eternally existent with God and are eternally dependent on Him. Sri Aurobindo accepts these traditional notions, but he goes beyond them. He emphasizes that the Many are in the very essence of the One, not as modes or attributes of Brahman, but as substantial entities in Brahman. They form the substantiality of Brahman; they are the essential co-principles of the integral Absolute Brahman. So Brahman is both Being, and Becoming. Aurobindo holds the view that Being or the One is the essentiality of all multiplicity or of Many; all evolution is the outward form of the Absolute One and its Becoming.

Such a synthetic approach requires a new methodology. An ordinary intellectual thought is unable to form a comprehensive knowledge of the Absolute. The understanding of the Absolute requires the transcendence of the formal logic. Formal logic measures only the a priori mental categories, and consequently the knowledge of God can not be achieved through discursive knowledge. It

is this knowledge that creates the tension between the Finite and the Infinite, the Being and the Becoming, the One and the Many, etc. When one assumes a higher consciousness there is the unveiling of the truth of the Divine. Though the Upanishads had already revealed such knowledge of the Divine, the vedantic systems failed to accept it. The reason for their failure was due to the approach they followed, i.e., the attempt to determine the nature of the Absolute through finite or abstract reason. It is this that made Sankara perceive contradictions between the Indeterminate and the Determinate, the One and the Many, the Being and the Becoming, the Subject and the Object, Knowledge and Ignorance, etc. For Sankara, the Absolute is beyond all contradictions, categories and relations. The logic of the Infinite instead enables one to integrate and assimilate the apparent contradictions into a single unity.

A. GOD

For Aurobindo, the beginning and the end of all developments is the one Absolute Spirit, and the various developments are the modes of divine manifestations. Following the basic Indian tradition that affirms the oneness of being and of thinking, Aurobindo too presents the Spirit as the ultimate and eternal reality with its three modes of saccidananda, i.e., Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss. Saccidananda is the infinite beyond all its manifestations, and it is through evolution-involution that the whole world-process has to be explained. All developments are the unfolding of the Absolute Spirit. The Spirit has othered itself in such a way as to take in the appearance "of a Void, an infinite of Non-Existence, an indeterminate Inconscient, an insensitive blissless Zero."² The beginning of the movement is from the Inconscient energy, and it is from such a primordial matter that life and mind later developed. Each activity in the lower sphere tends towards the emergence of the Spirit, i.e., the divinization of the material world.

When Aurobindo admits with Sankara that the Absolute is beyond all categories and relations, he does not consider the relations between the Absolute and other realities as unreal, rather sees them as expressing the nature of the Absolute though in an imperfect manner. The Absolute is both



relational as well as supra-relational, immanent as well as transcendent in nature. One can not place limits on the freedom of the Absolute to manifest. Brahman as indeterminate does not mean that it is incapable of determination, but it means that it is beyond all determinations. Its manifestation is as real as its transcendence as these are two poles of its being. Aurobindo considers that if we make the Absolute relationless and as such incapable of manifesting itself in relation, we will impose limitations upon the Absolute. Perfect freedom means freedom from all relations and at the same time enjoying the freedom to manifest relation. By presenting the Absolute in terms of negation, Advaitic thinkers considered it beyond all relations, and committed an error of denying the reality of determinations and relations. Aurobindo, instead, includes in Brahman its immanent nature along with the transcendental dimension. The Absolute can not be limited or determined by our affirmations or negations.

Though thinkers like Ramanuja, Vallabha and Nimbarka regard both the transcendent and the immanent aspects as real, they fail to offer a sound logical foundation for their system. Aurobindo reconciles the apparently opposed aspects. It is in fact this inability to grant a relation that made Sankara assert that the world is unreal. Aurobindo in fact sees the inability of the mind and its categories, and not the unreality of the world. The mistake lies not in the existence of the world, but in the epistemology. Though Sankara has been criticized by all the other Vedantic schools, none could challenge the very logic on which he has built his system. Aurobindo challenges the Advaita system, and proposes the measurements of the logic of the Infinite for a clear understanding of the relation between the Absolute and the world.

The logic of the Infinite teaches that the experience of the Absolute Reality is beyond knowledge. The Absolute Being is a transcendent Being, and the human mind is unable to penetrate into its nature. This is not because it is devoid of reality, but because the mind is incapable of grasping and describing its nature. It is through the Supermind or the Supramental consciousness that all knowledge of the different aspects of the Reality is revealed to

us. The Supermind is a concentration of the Being, Consciousness-Force and Delight of Existence of Saccidananda. It is through the Supermind that God manifests himself as individual self, as the soul in the world and as mind, life and body. There is nothing which is not Brahman though it must be admitted that everything is only a mode of its self-manifestation. The Supramental consciousness will enable us to see the Reality as One.

For both Sankara and Aurobindo, Saccidananda is the ultimate reality. The world owes its origin to the Absolute. Both of them felt the need of a link between Brahman and the world. Sankara calls this link Isvara, and Aurobindo, the Supermind. Both consider the universe as the play of joy, a spontaneous activity of God. The creation of the world is a creation out of bliss, by bliss and for bliss. Brahman is both immanent and transcendent. But there are also differences between Sankara and Aurobindo. The Brahman of Sankara is indeterminate, unknowable and static whole, while the saccidananda of Aurobindo is both static and dynamic, being and becoming, consciousness and force. The Absolute is "not a rigid indeterminable oneness, not an infinity vacant of all that is not a pure self-existence."³ It is an integral absolute. It is pure existence and at the same time movement, process and energy. For Sankara, the transcendental Brahman can not be thought to evolve in the world process and therefore becoming is an appearance and not a reality.

According to Sankara, Brahman is consciousness (cit) whereas for Sri Aurobindo, it is consciousness-force (cit-sakti); it is dynamic and creative. It is also force, the root principle of creation. Brahman as static and dynamic does not pose a contradiction to Sri Aurobindo. The changeless does not mean that it is incapable of change rather it means it is unaffected by change or becoming of the world. Brahman is "a boundless totality and a multitude."⁴ Both of them consider Brahman as bliss. But how can the evil of the world be justified with the bliss of Brahman? In order to safeguard his Advaitism, Sankara considers evil as unreal, whereas Aurobindo acknowledges and accepts its reality and shows how it can be transformed into good in the



course of the cosmic evolution. Evil is the garb of world's delight, it is not contradictory to good.

Sankara's Advaitism maintains the infinite at the cost of the finite. It maintains the one at the cost of many, unity at the cost of diversity. Aurobindo proposes Integral Advaitism which includes all things as one Brahman. There is then the complete synthesis between matter and spirit, between the impersonal and the personal. The one is maintained not at the cost of many, but in and through many. Reality includes all aspects of existence in it but it transcends them as well. The other Vedantins too admit the reality of the finite world. It is considered to be the product of maya which is to be cancelled at the time of liberation. Sri Aurobindo goes beyond such thinking. He envisions that the whole universe is to be supramentalized as it is a descent of the Divine. The involution is the result of the self-concealment of the Divine in the universe. It is only the one side of the truth. The spirit has to return to itself. There should be ascent from the lesser perfect to the more perfect. The dormant spirit in matter should feel an inner urge to rise above. Thus the universe is not to be cancelled at the time of liberation. While Sankara grants only an empirical status to the world, Aurobindo grants it an ontological status in the sense that objects are ultimately Brahman.

B. WORLD

Aurobindo says that "The world is a manifestation of the Real and therefore is itself real. The reality is the infinite and eternal Divine, infinite and eternal Being, Consciousness-Force and Bliss. The Divine by his power has created the world or rather manifested it in his own infinite Being."⁵ The material world hides the Absolute Reality, and there arise its opposites, namely, Non-Being and Inconscience. But from this apparent inconscient void emerges Matter, Life, Mind and finally the Spirit and the supramental Consciousness through which we become aware of the Reality, and enter into union with it. Evolution is then an evolution of Consciousness, an evolution of the Spirit in things, and only outwardly an evolution of species.

Aurobindo believes in the graded manifestation of the Divine from matter to spirit. He thus strongly opposed the Advaita tendencies to regard appearances as cosmic illusion. Aurobindo opines

that "individual salvation can have no real sense if existence in the cosmos is itself an illusion."⁶ The Advaitins consider Nature as a procession from the Absolute, the Uncaused Cause. The essence and existence of the Nature rests on Brahman. Since Brahman is the one without a second, it is both the efficient cause and the material cause. This could bring forth a pantheistic attitude, and the theory of maya is presented in order to find a solution to this problem. Instead of maya, Sri Aurobindo prefers to call the cosmic illusion lila (play). For him, the whole universe is a gradual unfolding of saccidananda, or the play of the Divine, and therefore there cannot be any multiplicity. Everything has to be understood as Brahman. He rejects the doctrine of maya as unreal and considers evolution as both material and spiritual. Aurobindo took a version of Upanishadic absolutism and set it in motion—that is he saw it in the light of an evolving universe.

The contribution of the Integral Advaitism is the recognition of the relation between the Absolute and world or Prakriti. Aurobindo considers Prakriti as the creative force or Cit-Sakti of the Absolute. Cit-Sakti is one of the basic elements of saccidananda, and it is through the creative force that the Absolute manifests itself as the world. Therefore there is no opposition between God and world in Sri Aurobindo. The Sankhya philosophy makes a complete opposition between Purusha and Prakriti. Purusha is conscious but inactive, whereas Prakriti is active but unconscious. Such a complete opposition makes it impossible to make any intimate relation between them. Ramanuja tries to establish a relation between Prakriti and Purusha, considering them as the modes of God. Prakriti is dependent on God for its existence, and forms an integral part of it. But it is unconscious and therefore it fails to reconcile the unconscious force with the consciousness Brahman. If the unconscious force forms an integral part of the Absolute, then it is sure to affect its absoluteness. Sankara too considers the creative force or maya as unconscious, and he calls it unreal in order to safeguard his Advaitism.

Aurobindo assumes a new outlook towards force. It is conscious by nature, and it assumes the garb of unconscious Prakriti by a process of self-concentration. Prakriti is merely the external aspect



of the Conscious-Force or Cit-Sakti. It enables him to consider matter as Brahman, since the former is nothing but the self-concentration of the latter. It is the Conscious-Force of Brahman that manifests itself in the forms of matter, life and mind through the process of self-concentration. The world is Brahman for Sri Aurobindo. Sankara gives only an epistemic, and not ontological status to the object, while Ramanuja treats the object or the world as unconscious. Sri Aurobindo goes beyond both Sankara and Ramanuja, and ascribes a high rank to the world, considering it as Brahman itself.

Aurobindo's consideration of the world as Brahman and the world events as the divine lila furnishes a new spirituality. He strongly criticizes any view which puts spirituality "at the end of life and its habitat in another world of our being, rather than here in life as a supreme status and formative power on the physical plane."⁷ Aurobindo rejects any such other-worldly view because it "rules out the idea of the kingdom of God on earth, the perfectibility of society and of man in society, the evolution of a new and diviner race."⁸ In contrast to the Christian notion of sin and guilt, and the Hindu and the Buddhist emphasis on liberation from the bonds of nature, he emphasizes the positive function of all the levels of existence. The positive conception of matter and spirit is one of the greatest contributions of Sri Aurobindo. Both are considered to be equally real. The physical universe is "the external body of the Divine Being."⁹

The reality of the world touches two problems, the problems regarding creation and the existence of evil. If the reality is ultimately one, how can one explain the notion of creation which is something different from the creator? Western philosophy, specially the Christian philosophy, presents creation out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. There is a clear-cut distinction between God as the creator, and world as the creation. But Aurobindo clearly rejects every distinction between creation and God. It is in fact an error "to make an unbridgeable gulf between God and man."¹⁰ According to him, God transcends the universe only if the latter is subordinated to him by way of distinction. At the root of this error lies the individual's separative consciousness: "The individual regards himself as a separate being included in the

universe and both as dependent upon that which transcends alike the universe and the individual. It is to this Transcendence that we give currently the name of God."¹¹ Aurobindo views the transcendent theism that separates God from the world as being closer to Vedantic illusionism that affirms the Absolute, to the detriment of the relative. He presents the integral view according to which the Transcendent embraces the universe and is one with it and does not exclude it. Aurobindo will affirm the strict identity of the Absolute and its world-manifestation.

The problem of evil does not bother Aurobindo. He considers good and evil as nothing but complementary facets of a single reality, and are mere moments in the passing scene of life, and consequently does not deserve much importance and value. But can we sideline the problem of sin and evil as unimportant, and then define God and human life so easily? Or how can we explain cruelty, murder, misery, injustice, wars, and violence of human dignity so passively, considering them as passing scenes of life? Such an attitude may conduce one towards embracing the theory of fate, and inaction in the world.

It is the evolution that harmonizes both God and the world. Since everything is the manifestation of God, there is nothing unreal; the world is as real as the Absolute Reality. Aurobindo liberates theology from the danger of falling into strict monism. His conception of God as becoming is similar to certain current Christian theology. The process of theology that is developed in relation to philosophical thought of Whitehead and Hartshorne, rejects the notion of a "supra-cosmic" presiding deity. Leslie Dewart opts for a Christian doctrine of God in relation to the human experience of historicity. He regards Christian theology as being basically a procession of God, and not as strict monotheism. The doctrine of God of the New Testament does not begin with the oneness of God, to which the concept of the three-persons-in-one –nature is added; it begins with the procession of God.

C. MAN

Aurobindo's conception of the world as the manifestation and expression of God gives a divine dimension to man who is the apex of creation.



Human being is the centre of Aurobindo's philosophy. Man has a very significant role in the cosmos. It is he who transforms and re-creates the universe. His appearance in the universe is to actualize the divine potentialities within him and to transform the material world into a spiritual one. The goal of human existence is not simply to actualize the divine potentialities existing within humanity, but to facilitate the transformation of the material world into a spiritual world. In this he functions as the instrument and representative of the Divine. It is through individual transformation that man effects the first signs of cosmic transformation. Individual transformation begins with the knowledge of one's own self. He has a superior existence since "each individual is Himself the Eternal who has assumed name and form and supports through him the experiences of life."¹² Aurobindo sees man as the "Divine extended in multiplicity," and the self is the power of consciousness, a "self-aware force."¹³ He also announces the advent of "Superman," a humanity in perfect harmony with the depths of its own being and also with all reality.

According to the Indian perspective, man as a spiritual being is distinct from an animal or a thing. He is not to be viewed or understood by the same categories as one would regard a material reality. Indian thought affirms a non-Darwinian view of man. He is basically a spiritual being. The present state of man is not the final state. The destiny of man is to be a divine existence. The Upanishads present man as being identical with Brahman or dependent on God. Sankara affirms that the individual soul, *jiva*, is identical with Brahman. But this identity, for him, is to be fully realized in the state of liberation. Ramanuja and other Visistadvaita thinkers object to such an identification; instead they postulate that the self attains only the nature of God, and not His identity. Individual self is a mode of God. In liberation selves enjoy divine communion with God.

In Sankara's view the self enjoys only identity and not the fellowship with Him. Sankara believes in the total unity of soul Brahman; the individuality is completely lost in the divine. But the theistic Vedantins maintain the individuality of the self in order to enable it to enjoy the fruits of his liberation. For them it is only the ego, and not the

individuality which is lost in mukti. They fail to furnish an identity of the self with the Absolute. In Aurobindo's philosophy, both the identity and the individuality are maintained. The self is one in fact but is capable of cosmic differentiation and multiple individuality. It expresses itself in the individual, the universal and the transcendental. The individual and cosmos are the expressions of the transcendent self. Individuality is not denied in liberation. The individual must be there to enjoy the bliss. A true individual for Sri Aurobindo is nothing "but a conscious power of being of the Eternal, always existing by unity, always capable of mutuality. It is that being which by self-knowledge enjoys liberation and immortality."¹⁴

Sankara views that the world is to be negated as it is a product of *avidya*. But for Sri Aurobindo a divinized man can emerge only in a divinized universe. The body is not a cage for the soul from where it is to be set free for higher realization rather it is the divination and the integration of the lower nature and is an essential part of liberation. It does not mean freedom from the transmigration of soul as other Vedantists think, but a transformation of humanity and cosmos. Liberation means transmutation into a higher being, a 'gnostic being'. Sankara calls the liberated soul *jivanmukta*, and Sri Aurobindo calls it 'gnostic being'. In *jivanmukti* only the spirit enjoys complete freedom but Aurobindo stresses not only the liberation of the spirit but also of the psycho-physical organism. Even the physical organism transcends every sort of limitation. All his actions and thoughts are guided by the Divine will. The body of the *jivanmukta* is governed by *prarabdha karma*, or the accumulated actions, while that of the gnostic being or superman is ever free from the fetters of all kinds of karma. Besides, the *jivanmukta* concentrates on his individual liberation, whereas the gnostic being is concerned about the total transformation of the cosmos. The liberated gnostic being carries along with him the divine essence. His destiny consists in realizing the divine in the core of his heart, and in manifesting such a divine life in the cosmos. In other words, the cosmic expansion of self is the *summum bonum* of human existence, and it is the greatest value of human life. Aurobindo goes beyond the idea of spiritual individual, and concentrates on the spiritual oneness of the race.



True perfection means “the sovereignty and self-effectuation of the spiritual Reality in all the elements of our nature.”¹⁵

Aurobindo has a teleological presentation of man. Man is a transitional being, and beyond him there lies a divine supermanhood. There are various stages in the process of self-realisation, namely physical, vital, subliminal, mental, and finally supramental. It is the supramental consciousness that effects the birth of the gnostic beings. Such a life witnesses “solidarity, unity, mutuality of all beings in the Spirit.”¹⁶ Aurobindo advocates linear interpretation of history. It is not only the self which is to be redeemed from the clutches of ignorance but the whole universe. He believes in the salvation of the whole personality as well as of the human race in general. History is heading towards fulfilment. Sankara does not envisage the salvation of the whole universe which is subject to the law of emergence or evolution and dissolution. He has in mind the cyclic view of history that assumes the world to be sequentially coming into existence and then passing away. He does not believe that history is heading towards its perfection. Sri Aurobindo goes further. The world is as real as the Divine; it is “a self-finding and self-unfolding of the Spirit, a self-revelation of the Divinity in things.”¹⁷ He visualizes the supramental descent upon the cosmos. After the supramental descent, the evolutionary process rises to the level of total victory of spirit over matter and total divinisation of life.

Purnadvaitavada conveys a positive message to the humanity regarding evolution and the consequent unfolding of the divine consciousness in human beings. It establishes an intrinsic relation between Humanity and Divinity: Aurobindo says that “Humanity is not the highest godhead; God is more than humanity; but in humanity too we have to find and to serve him.”¹⁸ *Purnadvaitavada* takes everyone to the conception of a new humanity. The new vision of humanity presents “an increasing kindness, tolerance, charity, helpfulness, solidarity, universality, unity, fullness of individual and collective growth, and towards these things we are advancing much more rapidly than was possible in any previous age, if still with sadly stumbling footsteps and some fierce relapses.”¹⁹ Sri Aurobindo

is a prophet of the divine life in collective humanity. It is not merely an anthropocentric collective society, but a gnostic and spiritual collectivity. The slogan of this new humanity is the motive of selfless service.

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