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please contact the author at: matthijs@ipi.org.in

Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary ontology of consciousness

Matthijs Cornelissen

Abstract

Sri Aurobindo sees evolution primarily as an ongoing evolution of consciousness. He holds that the human mind is much too imperfect a type of consciousness to be the final resting point of nature, and that just as life developed out of matter, and mind out of life, a still higher form of consciousness is bound to develop out of the mind. For his evolutionary ontology of consciousness, Sri Aurobindo bases himself on the Vedāntic view of consciousness, which says that consciousness is pervasive throughout reality and that it manifests as a range of ever-higher gradations of consciousness and being. In matter, consciousness is fully engrossed in its own existence and shows itself only as matter's habit of form and its tendency to obey fixed laws. In plant and animal life, consciousness begins to emancipate a little, there are the first signs of exchange, of giving and taking, of feelings, drives and emotions. In the human mind we see a further emancipation of consciousness in the first appearance of an ability to "play with ideas in one's mind" and to rise above the immediate situation. The mind is characteristically the plane of objective, generalized statements, ideas, thoughts, intelligence, etc. But the mind is also an inveterate divider, making distinctions between subject and object, I and thou, things and other things.

Within the Vedic tradition, the ordinary human mentality is considered to be only the most primitive form of mental consciousness, most ego-bound, most dependent on the physical senses. Above it there is the unitary Higher Mind of self-revealed wisdom, the Illumined Mind where truths are seen rather than thought, the plane of the Intuitive Mind where truth is inevitable and perfect, and finally the

cosmic Overmind, the mind of the Gods, comprehensive, all-encompassing. But in all these mental planes, however far beyond our ordinary mentality, there is still a trace of division, the possibility of discord and disharmony. One has to rise beyond all of them to find a truly Gnostic consciousness, intrinsically harmonious, perfect, one with the divine consciousness that upholds the universe.

Many spiritual traditions have claimed that it is possible to connect or even merge with an absolute consciousness beyond mind, but, according to Sri Aurobindo, it is at this moment for the first time becoming possible to let a supramental consciousness enter into one's being and transform it in every respect. The comprehensive, supramental transformation of all aspects of human nature is the central theme of Sri Aurobindo's work. While at present this can be done only to a limited extent, and at the cost of a tremendous individual effort, he predicts that eventually the supramental consciousness will become as much an intrinsic, "natural" part of earthly life as our ordinary mentality is now.

In this chapter a comparison is drawn between Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary conceptualization of consciousness and the concepts of consciousness more commonly encountered in contemporary consciousness studies. A number of ontological and epistemological questions arising out of this comparison are discussed. A short indication is given of the "inner gestures" that can help to put an individual on the path toward the ultimate transformation of consciousness and being, which Sri Aurobindo proposes.

Introduction

A growing number of authors suggest that for an effective study of consciousness a new, non-reductionistic understanding of the basic nature of reality might be essential (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991; Baruss and Moore, 1998; Griffin, 1998; Velmans, 2000). Some of these recently suggested approaches have their roots in traditional methodologies of scientific inquiry, while others have been envisioned in contemplative traditions and spiritual practice. This chapter will address relevant aspects of consciousness research in Indian philosophy with special emphasis on the work of Sri Aurobindo.

The term "Indian philosophy" evokes images of the hoary past, Vedas compiled centuries before the birth of Homer, the lofty *ślokas* of the Upanishads and spiritual teachings given in the midst of the romantic battle scenes of the Bhagavad Gītā. Those who are more familiar with the subject may have different associations; they may think of the six great schools of philosophy that flourished during the early centuries of the Common Era, Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya, Yoga,¹ Nyāya, and Vaiśeṣika. Few are aware that some of the most interesting work in Indian philosophy was done in much more recent times. At the end of the nineteenth century, Ramakrishna Paramhansa united in his own life the major realizations of all the spiritual traditions known in the India of his time. In the first half of the twentieth century Sri Aurobindo built a still wider synthesis, encompassing not only what he

felt as the essence of the Indian tradition but also what he considered the best that the Western civilization was in the process of bringing forth.

Sri Aurobindo's main philosophical work, *The Life Divine*, opens with a chapter entitled "The Human Aspiration." It addresses the urge for progress, the yearning for freedom, light, and perfection, which is so consistently contradicted by our immediate experience, but which still seems to be one of our most typical and most persistent human traits. Sri Aurobindo sees this urge for progress as an expression in the individual of a much vaster movement in nature, a movement that shows itself most clearly in the, at first sight rather improbable, evolution of life and mind out of matter.

While it is part of the current understanding of "evolution" that life evolved out of matter and that mind evolved out of life, Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of these phenomena is quite different from that of reductionist science. In keeping with the Vedic and Vedāntic traditions, Sri Aurobindo takes matter, life, and mind, all three as limited forms of consciousness.² He then argues that as life is a less limited form of consciousness than matter, and mind is a less limited form of consciousness than life, the next step in evolution could be a still less limited form of consciousness. The general difficulty in appreciating this model might be that one equates consciousness (in line with the Western tradition) with our ordinary human mentality, while Sri Aurobindo (in line with the Vedic tradition) envisions it primarily as an absolute, divine consciousness, of which matter, life, and mind are lower and limited manifestations.

The oldest Indian texts, the Vedas, hold that a divine Truth-Consciousness is the hidden essence of all that exists.³ In this view there are many different worlds. In each world the divine Truth-Consciousness is manifested in a different manner. Together they form a vast hierarchy of different levels of consciousness, a hierarchy that ranges right from seemingly unconscious matter to the superconscious absolute spirit. The world of our ordinary human experience is a mixed world somewhere in the middle. Its basis is physical, but it is permeated and transformed by life and mind.⁴ It is moreover, as Sri Aurobindo observed, not only a mixed world, but also an evolutionary world. There appears to have taken place a gradual unfolding of these higher (that is, less concealed) forms of consciousness.

Within this vast hierarchical framework, the human individual is seen as one specific centre of consciousness that typically experiences itself, at least when awake, as a mental being in a living body. But this is not its only possibility: its centre of self-awareness can be located at different levels. I can not only have my centre of awareness in my mind and say "I think", but I can also be centred in the body and then say "I am tired", or in the emotions - which are considered to be primarily⁵ part of the life world - and say, "I am happy." As we have seen, the ordinary human mind is considered as not more than a middle term and authors throughout the history of Indian thought confirm that with sufficient training it is possible to free oneself from one's experience of embeddedness in the physical body, its sensations, emotions, and thoughts. Freed from these limitations one can explore what appear as worlds

of a higher consciousness than the ordinary mind. Sri Aurobindo brought this ancient knowledge together with what we now know about the biological evolution, and concluded that just as there has been a time when life and mind were not yet embodied on earth, the higher planes of consciousness may also be awaiting their time to become part of the ordinary, embodied reality. He felt that the ordinary human mind is far too imperfect a type of consciousness to be the ultimate achievement of evolution and saw the persistent human drive toward absolute freedom, power, knowledge, and immortality as the signs that this is what nature is striving for in us.

These, then, are three of the main elements that characterize Sri Aurobindo's writings: the urge for progress toward ever greater freedom and perfection, the idea that the forces at work in the individual are concentrated reflections of similar forces at work in the large and leisurely movements of Nature, and the notion of consciousness as the fundamental reality. These three ideas come together in Sri Aurobindo's concept of an ongoing evolution of consciousness,⁶ which runs as a central theme through all his work. It may be clear that Sri Aurobindo's idea of an ongoing evolution of consciousness can only be understood correctly in the context of his, essentially Vedic, conceptualization of consciousness. As we have seen, he takes consciousness not only as awareness, but also as supportive of individuation and as the dynamic determination of form and movement on different levels of emancipation. I will work these characteristics out further in the rest of this paper and hope to show that they not only provide for a logically coherent ontology, but also return meaning and enchantment to the human enterprise. But before we take this up, it may be good to have a short look, from an Indian perspective, at the more common ways in which consciousness is presently understood in mainstream science, which is as yet dominated by positivist influences arising from European history.

Consciousness in contemporary philosophy

Consciousness is notoriously difficult to define⁷ and the predominantly materialistic outlook of modern times has not made it any easier. Nagel's famous indicator of the presence of consciousness in an organism, that "there is something it is like to be that organism" (*cf.*, Nagel 1979, p. 176) is attractive, if only for its charming simplicity, but it does not really help to delineate what consciousness is and what it is not. It strengthens moreover the existing tendency, especially among psychologists, to equate consciousness with awareness, which is useful for many practical purposes but leads to serious problems when dealing with states other than our ordinary waking consciousness.

To illustrate this point, one might consider that it is only natural to hold that we are conscious during daydreams or during those dreams that we remember on waking. But if during the day something happens that makes us suddenly remember a dream that we were not aware of on waking up, we cannot in retrospect assign consciousness to such a dream on the basis of something that happened long after

the dream ended (and that could very well not have happened). So we have to presume that we are conscious in all dreams, independent of the question whether we remember them in our waking condition or not. From here it is only one further step to admit the possibility of the presence of consciousness even during deep sleep, ⁸ a state of coma, or in meditation.²

Once the simple identification of consciousness with our ordinary waking awareness of our surrounding is broken, the road opens to a wider concept of consciousness. The main objection against panpsychism, ¹⁰ the notion that consciousness is pervasive throughout the manifestation, is that it is hard to imagine that plants and rocks have sensorial awareness because they lack the complicated architecture of our brain and sense-organs. But once it is admitted that even we humans have at different times essentially different types of consciousness, of which only some are directly related to our senses, then the main argument against awarding animals, plants, or even rocks with consciousness breaks down. They may simply have their own type of consciousness, different from our ordinary mental, sense-based awareness. To paraphrase Nagel, it might even be something like, to be a rock. This is important because there is something deeply counterintuitive to the idea that something so specific and non-material as our awareness of ourselves and the world would suddenly arise out of insensitive matter at a certain level of complexity. As Griffin(1998, p. 10) points out, the question of how experience could arise out of non-experiencing things is, in principle, insoluble.

Of course, not everyone accepts the pervasiveness of consciousness. McGinn, for example, agrees that the genesis of non-spatial consciousness out of an unconscious physical brain is not understandable, but leaves the unsolved riddle right there. About our inability to grasp the nature of non-spatial consciousness, he says apologetically, "It must not be forgotten that knowledge is the product of a biological organ whose architecture is fashioned by evolution for brutally pragmatic purposes" and in a footnote: "we too are Flatlanders of a sort: we tend to take the space of our experience as the only space there is or could be" (McGinn, 1995, p. 230). In harmony with his pessimistic view of our human possibilities for understanding reality, McGinn does not accept panpsychism. In the quoted article he still agrees that some form of panpsychism is the only way out of the conundrum of Chalmers' "hard problem," but in his later *The Mysterious Flame*, he denies that it could do even that (McGinn, 1999, pp. 95-104).

Chalmers (*cf.*, 1998) is one of the most outspoken supporters of panpsychism and has argued extensively against materialism. His writings are an interesting example of how deeply the physicalist view of reality is engrained in contemporary Western philosophy: the materialist bias shows even in those authors who are apparently opposing it. Chalmers (1995, p. 210) formulates his "hard problem" as the question of "how experience depends on physical features of the world." His main argument in this oft-quoted article is that we can only find a solution to his question if we "take experience itself as a fundamental feature of the world, alongside mass, charge and space-time" (*ibid.*), but the very wording he has used to formulate the question shows that for Chalmers experience is still not as fundamental as matter: he simply

takes it for granted that consciousness “depends” on the physical substrate. A little later in the same passage he even asserts as self-evident that “physical processes give rise to experience.” It is not fully clear what these phrases mean. They seem to indicate that it is not only the form or content of experience but the very existence of experience that depends on and arises from the physical features of the world. But this can hardly be what Chalmers intends to express, as this would contradict his statement about experience being a fundamental feature of the world. One can argue that a certain functioning of the brain or a specific interaction between the brain and an external stimulus is needed to give consciousness a certain perceptible form or intensity, but that does not entail that the brain can create (or “give rise to”) consciousness where there was no consciousness before. As Sri Aurobindo (1990, p. 86) points out:

Our physical organism no more causes or explains thought and consciousness than the construction of an engine causes or explains the motive-power of steam or electricity. The force is anterior, not the physical instrument.

It may be noted that the hard question could have been formulated quite easily in a neutral way as “how experience co-varies with physical features of the world” and it is worth pondering why this was not done. The materialistic tilt in Chalmers’ version does not seem to have been a question of an incidental oversight or imprecise wording. In a later article Chalmers (1999, section 4) defines a neural correlate of consciousness as,

. . . a minimal neural system N such that there is a mapping from states of N to states of consciousness, where a given state of N is sufficient, under conditions C, for the corresponding state of consciousness.

Here again, the correlation is defined as an asymmetrical relationship, a one-way determination from matter to consciousness. It is quite remarkable that the opposite idea, that it might be consciousness that gives rise to material reality, is not even considered as a theoretical possibility though this is the predominant view in the philosophical systems of Hinduism and Buddhism. The most interesting point is, however, that Chalmers seems to be unaware of the materialist tilt in his writings: at the end of the article he incorrectly calls his approach “theoretically neutral.”

Chalmers’ formulation of the hard problem and of the correlation between the brain and consciousness are typical examples of our unwarranted, and often unconscious collective tendency to think that even if consciousness is irreducible, it is somehow still “less fundamental” than matter. The recent philosophical debate on the nature of consciousness is to a considerable degree dominated by such materialist presuppositions. Though there are actually not that many authors who defend a strong materialist standpoint, ¹¹ even other authors present their arguments generally, as if some form of materialist realism is the given view of reality from which they have to start by defining their own system. The dualist Beloff, ¹² for example, takes the existence of the physical half of reality for granted, dismisses idealism in a footnote, and gives extensive argumentation for the inclusion of

consciousness as if consciousness is some kind of afterthought. ¹³ Those who advocate some form of panpsychism tend to formulate their heretic position with still more caution. ¹⁴

This unquestioned assumption of the reality of the physical world is rather remarkable in that it is not as self-evident as contemporary Western philosophers may like to believe. For almost every statement that arises out of an exclusively materialist world-view, in the Indian philosophical tradition one can find a similar but opposite statement claiming the exclusive existence of consciousness. Two examples will illustrate how closely the two exclusive world-views mirror each other.

The denial of reality to the other side of the coin.

Scientific materialism regards spirit and consciousness as insubstantial chimera, or at best as epiphenomena of material processes. In a perfect mirror image of this denial of spirit and consciousness by the materialists, the influential *māyāvādin* schools of Indian philosophy regard matter and sense-impressions as illusions imposed on the absolute silence of the spirit.

The persistence of "hard problems".

A central focus in current philosophical debates is the dilemma of how first-person awareness could arise out of the multitude of objective, material processes in the brain. In India, there have been centuries of debate on the equally tough question of how the seeming multiplicity of material appearances could arise out of the silent immobility of pure Consciousness.

There is thus a remarkable symmetry in these two extreme positions and their one-track simplicity gives them a certain strength, which dualistic philosophies cannot easily achieve. Sri Aurobindo (1990, p. 9) acknowledges that both exclusive forms of monism can be defended philosophically, but he does not accept either as the final solution, because both are, in opposite ways, incomplete, and thus lead to a social or psychological imbalance if embraced on large scale:

In Europe and in India, respectively, the negation of the materialist and the refusal of the ascetic have sought to assert themselves as the sole truth and to dominate the conception of Life. In India, if the result has been a great heaping up of the treasures of the Spirit, - or of some of them, - it has also been a great bankruptcy of Life; in Europe, the fullness of riches and the triumphant mastery of this world's powers and possessions have progressed towards an equal bankruptcy in the things of the Spirit.

Sri Aurobindo did recognize the value of rational materialism, but he saw its importance more in its historical utility for cleaning up the excesses and encrustations of established religion, than in its independent ability to assess the truth. He acknowledged that rational materialism helps to train and purify the intellect and even conceded that "the wider we extend and the surer we make our knowledge of the physical world, the wider and surer becomes our foundation for

the higher knowledge" (*op. cit.*, p. 11). But he also felt that materialism excluded too much of what really matters: "if pushed to its extreme, it would give to a stone or a plum-pudding a greater reality [than] to thought, love, courage, genius, greatness, the human soul and mind facing an obscure and dangerous world" (*op. cit.*, p. 647). He considered restricting reality to what is directly or indirectly accessible through the physical senses too arbitrary a constraint to form a sound basis for any serious philosophical system, and he predicted that as a "theory of everything" materialism would be too limited in scope to satisfy humanity for long.

The opposite extreme, the *māyāvaadin* idea that the world in which we live is an illusion out of which we should escape by the shortest possible route, seems to be losing ground and is perhaps no longer a major force in the world of thought. But in the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth century during which Sri Aurobindo produced his major writings, it still had a considerable influence, especially in India, and he wrote extensively about its strengths and deficiencies. For our present exploration the details of these arguments may not be so relevant and I will refer to them only as far as they are essential to the understanding of Sri Aurobindo's own ontology. The main point is that Sri Aurobindo sees a spiritual transformation of material existence on earth as the meaning of life and that he considers the world-negating spirituality espoused, for example, by Theravāda Buddhism and *māyāvaadin* Vedānta, as a deformation of the more integral vision of the earlier Indian texts. For his own world-view he bases himself on what he calls the "original Vedānta," the psychological and philosophical system of the Vedas and older Upanishads to which he gives a strong, world-affirming interpretation. ¹⁵

The Indian concept of consciousness

In the Vedic ontology, from which Sri Aurobindo derived his concept of consciousness, consciousness is not only seen as individualized awareness. It is the very essence of everything in existence and as such not only the source of individuation and the sense of self, but also a formative energy:

Consciousness is not only power of awareness of self and things, it is or has also a dynamic and creative energy. It can determine its own reactions or abstain from reactions; it can not only answer to forces, but create or put out from itself forces. Consciousness is Chit but also Chit Shakti, awareness but also conscious force.

– Sri Aurobindo 1991, p. 234

Consciousness is moreover not considered as a simple yes/no phenomenon that is either there or not, but as manifesting in a hierarchy ranging from the seeming obliviousness of matter below, to the seemingly superconscious Spirit above. All three aspects of consciousness – its cosmic nature, its energy aspect, and its ability to differentiate itself into varying forms and degrees – combine to produce the processes of involution and evolution of consciousness that have given to our world its particular character:

Consciousness is a fundamental thing, the fundamental thing in existence – it is the energy, the motion, the movement of consciousness that creates the universe and all that is in it – not only the macrocosm but the microcosm is nothing but consciousness arranging itself. For instance, when consciousness ... forgets itself in the action it becomes an apparently “unconscious” energy; when it forgets itself in the form it becomes the electron, the atom, the material object. In reality, it is still consciousness that works in the energy and determines the form and the evolution of form. When it wants to liberate itself, slowly, evolutionarily, out of Matter, but still in the form, it emerges as life, as animal, as man and it can go on evolving itself still farther out of its involution and become something more than mere man.

– *op. cit.*, pp. 236-7

This passage contains, in a very simple form, the essence of Sri Aurobindo’s concept of consciousness and evolution. The main point of it is that consciousness is not seen as something produced by the brain, or limited to humans, but rather as a fundamental aspect of reality, if not the very essence of it. As one of the oldest Upanishads, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, says about the Ultimate Reality: “This great being, infinite, without bounds, is just a mass of consciousness” (translated by Phillips 1997, p. 9 fn.).

In the Vedāntic system the fundamental reality is described as a unity (*Saccidānanda*) consisting of existence (*Sat*), consciousness (*Cit*) and delight (*Ānanda*). Because the indivisible unity of *Saccidānanda* is considered the essential nature of everything in existence, it follows that in this ontology nothing can exist that is not conscious or that misses delight in its own existence. Neither is consciousness possible without delight in its own existence, nor can there be delight that is not conscious.

This does not seem to tally with the ordinary human experience. It looks to us as if life is not always joyful and that many things are unconscious, but this is attributed to a, typically human, egocentric assessment of reality. We consider everything that happens outside the narrow range of our ordinary waking (or dreaming) state as “unconscious,” and experience any input that is for us too little, too much, or of the wrong kind as “suffering,” but that doesn’t mean that consciousness and delight are completely absent in those events. *Cit* and *Ānanda* are postulated as the very essence of everything in existence, and their presence or absence can thus not be dependent on the ability or inability of our biological instrumentation to detect them.

We may make a comparison with the commonly used measurement of temperature in Fahrenheit or Celsius. These two scales have negative values below some in itself quite arbitrary threshold that happens to be convenient to us. But the scientific scale to measure temperature is Kelvin, which has an absolute zero and only positive values. It seems reasonable to suggest that when we try to develop a scientifically useful concept of consciousness and delight, we should also use scales that can, in the very nature of things, have no negative values, and this is exactly what the Indian system has done. Interestingly, this is not only a conceptual convenience, but

matches with (and is in all likelihood derived from) an experiential reality. Through contemplative practices or otherwise one can experience consciousness in situations that formerly appeared sub- or super-conscious, and experience delight even in situations that used to feel painful or indifferent.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the Indian authors are blind to the limitations of individual centres of consciousness and delight that are part of ordinary life. In the ancient texts it is stressed again and again that normal human life is a state of ignorance and suffering. But ignorance and suffering are seen as characteristic of our limited view of the world, not of the world as it is in itself (that is, as it is seen by the original creative consciousness). They claim that we can learn how to participate in the perfection of consciousness and delight as long as we fulfill the psychological conditions.

The intimate relation between existence and consciousness, which at the summit amounts to an absolute identity, explains a number of things that remain very problematic in philosophies that are dualistic or exclusively physicalist. In pure physicalist philosophies there is no intrinsic reason why we should be conscious at all, why "the light should ever be on," as it has been said. In dualist philosophies there always remains the "hard," if not insoluble, problem of how the subjective and the objective communicate. In a theory that presumes a deep identity between existence and consciousness the nature of the problem shifts and becomes easier to tackle. If we presume an absolute consciousness as the original reality, the difficult question then becomes how different centres of consciousness can arise and how in these centres "the light can be dimmed." According to Sri Aurobindo, individuality and agency can be understood as having come into existence by an ability of the universal consciousness to form different centres of itself, each having a limited ability of self-awareness and formative energy. Sri Aurobindo describes this as a process of exclusive concentration, comparable to the manner in which a man can concentrate fully on a certain task and completely forget everything else. I will discuss this issue in greater detail in the section on involution and evolution.

One reality, different worlds

As we have seen, consciousness in the Indian tradition is not equated with ordinary human mentality. The authors of the ancient Indian scriptures practiced and achieved phenomenological access to an exceptionally wide range of conscious experiences. They speak, for example, not only of what we now call lucid dreams, but also of a clear consciousness maintained in deep sleep and in a fourth state (*turya*) beyond waking, dream, and sleep. So it is hardly surprising that the Indian concept of consciousness is rarely, if ever, limited to the type of sensory awareness we have in the ordinary waking state. Sri Aurobindo (1991, p. 234) uses an analogy in which he compares different states of consciousness with the different frequency ranges available in sensory experience:

Consciousness is usually identified with mind, but mental consciousness is only the human range which no more exhausts all the possible ranges of

consciousness than human sight exhausts all the gradations of colour or human hearing all the gradations of sound – for there is much above or below that is to man invisible and inaudible. So there are ranges of consciousness above and below the human range, with which the normal human [consciousness] has no contact and they seem to it unconscious...

Technological advancement enables us to detect and interact with such frequencies of light and sound that are not within the range of human sensory perception. Similarly, it is through psycho-spiritual technologies that one can gain access to higher and lower forms of consciousness.

Earlier we have seen that in the Indian conceptualization, consciousness is not only an activity or a quality of individuals, but an essential aspect of all reality. In other words, consciousness exists not only within individuals, but also independently, on a cosmic scale, and the individual consciousnesses can be seen as instances, portions, or representatives of these different types of cosmic consciousness. These two aspects taken together, the gradedness and the cosmicity, make it possible to conceive of reality as a complex scheme involving interpenetrating but ontologically distinct worlds, each consisting of a different type of consciousness and being. ¹⁶ In the Vedas these different worlds, or births as they are sometimes called, are thus not considered to exist only subjectively in our mind, but are seen as having also an objective existence, in the same, limited sense in which it is generally presumed that the physical world exists independently of whether there are human beings around to observe it or not. These different worlds are, in fact, seen as different relations between conscious existence as observer and the same conscious existence as the observed. The so-called physical reality has in this view no privileged position. The physical reality as seen by the ordinary human mind is just one world amongst many others. Some of these other worlds are easily accessible – in dreams for example, many people visit the vital worlds – but there are other worlds that are more difficult to reach. Every relation between a grade of conscious existence as “observing self” and a grade of conscious existence as “observed becoming” makes another world. Strictly speaking, there exists thus neither a purely objective world “out there,” nor a purely subjective experience “in here.” Reality consists out of the different relationships between the two.

We mean [by planes of consciousness, planes of existence] a general settled poise or world of relations between Purusha and Prakriti, between the Soul and Nature. For anything that we can call world is and can be nothing else than the working out of a general relation which a universal existence has created or established between itself, or let us say its eternal fact or potentiality and the powers of its becoming. That existence in its relations with and its experience of the becoming is what we call soul or Purusha,¹⁷ individual soul in the individual, universal soul in the cosmos; the principle and the powers of the becoming are what we call Nature or Prakriti.

– Sri Aurobindo 1996a, p. 429

Sri Aurobindo does not perceive these different worlds as closed systems that are completely sufficient within their own parameters. But he doesn't consider it correct

to speak of interactions between essentially different types of substances or forces either. He sees the different worlds as interwoven in a different manner, based on an underlying oneness. In terms of the observing self, Vedānta holds that there is actually only one observing Self (the *paramātmān*). As I will discuss in more detail in the description of the process of involution, the many selves only appear separate and different from each other by a process of "exclusive concentration" that takes place in portions of the original Self that in essence remains one. Similarly, as the Sāṅkhya acknowledges, there is only one objective reality, which is ineffable, or, in the more descriptive Sanskrit phrase, *ananta-guṇa*, "of infinite quality." The only thing we can know about the reality is the interaction between the centre of consciousness we identify with and this ineffable nature, but in essence there is all the time only one conscious existence that separates itself, for the joy of manifestation, into an infinite number of relations between itself as observing consciousness and itself as nature.

One major difficulty in accepting the objective existence of non-physical realities, is the extent to which our perception is tied to our physical embodiment. Our ordinary waking consciousness is deeply embedded in the physical workings of our body. Of what surrounds us, we are primarily aware by means of our physical senses and we experience our feelings as embodied in our physical constitution and even our own thoughts we understand only after they have been clad in words. The Indian tradition holds, however, that such limiting dispositions are not more than deeply engrained and culturally reinforced habits, and that it is possible, at least with sufficient psychological training, to open oneself beyond the restrictions of sensory perception. One can then move freely in those additional aspects of reality that are often called the "inner worlds."

In the ordinary waking states we are moreover not aware of such inner worlds as they are in themselves. We are aware only of their subordinate manifestations within the physical world. However, in other states of consciousness it is possible to enter into contact with the inner worlds themselves through what is known in Vedānta as our inner senses. With increasing experience and knowledge, one can learn to identify their typical aspects and regularities and one can even act upon other persons and events in these inner worlds in a manner that supports the claim for their shared objective existence. Access to inner worlds is mediated in a psychological and phenomenological sense through a movement of consciousness that is experienced in its first steps as a form of "going inside." The inner worlds are, however, not supposed to be limited to one's own being or one's subjective consciousness; instead, Indian psychology considers them equally objectively real when compared with the physical world.

An interesting aspect of the planes of consciousness is that they are seen as corresponding to centres of consciousness in the (subtle) body, called *chakras* in Sanskrit. That different locations in the body would be related to different types of consciousness is not an idea that has arisen only in the Indian tradition. It is very much part of the English language, for example, to say that we feel fear in the pit of our stomach (the centre of our lower life energies), that we feel love in our heart (the

centre of the higher vital consciousness) and that we need to “use our head” to come to good mental conclusions. Even though science tells us that we both feel and think with our brain, many people actually experience it in the way our pre-scientific language suggests: if we really have to think hard, we frown and concentrate our energies somewhere behind the forehead, but if we feel a strong compassion or love for someone, we “open our heart” and experience the centre of our awareness in the (subtle physical) heart centre, which is in the middle of the chest. With some training one can increase this ability to centre one’s consciousness at will at different levels in one’s (subtle) body and experience the different types of consciousness that correspond to them. One can also train the ability to observe from which centre different emotions and impulses arise. These two skills taken together can contribute considerably to one’s control over one’s psychological reactions and thus to one’s social competence.

Involution and evolution

As we have already seen, Sri Aurobindo takes consciousness as “the primary thing” and not as just one out of several fundamental elements of reality. In any philosophy that posits an absolute consciousness as the basic “stuff” out of which the universe is made, the crucial question is how out of this single, indeterminate absolute of being and consciousness, could arise the multiplicity, the variation of forms, and the limitations of power, joy, and consciousness that constitute our experience of the universe. The process by which the infinite, absolute consciousness, being, and joy turns into existence as we know it, Sri Aurobindo generally calls “involution,” which he presumes to have preceded evolution – if not in time, at least in logical sequence. At one place he portrays this involution as a two-step process. He describes the first step as the manifestation of multiple instances of the one Self out of Itself – multiple, but still identical. He gives the second step as a gradually increasing self-differentiation through a process that he compares with our human form of exclusive concentration. On the level of the individual human being, exclusive concentration is a mental activity in which we forget ourselves and all but a small part of the reality on which we are focused. At the level on which the cosmic Infinite differentiates itself into the multitudinous universe, Sri Aurobindo sees exclusive concentration as “a self-limitation by idea proceeding from an infinite liberty within” (Aurobindo 1990, p. 267).

Elsewhere, Sri Aurobindo gives a slightly different description. He says there that to understand the origin of inconscient matter and the individual centres of limited consciousness we take ourselves to be, we need to presume three powers of the Infinite consciousness: self-variation, self-limitation, and self-oblivion. The first of these three is a free power of self-variation in which “a manifold status of consciousness” (*op. cit.*, p. 342) is created in which still “the One is aware of itself simultaneously in all of them” (*ibid.*). The second power, the power of self-limitation, is needed to initiate the possibility of an individualized but still fully spiritual consciousness. At this level there is variation and individuality, but not yet what in Sanskrit is called *avidyā* (ignorance). ¹⁸ *Avidyā* is the knowledge that arises from a

half-obscure consciousness, which is not anymore aware of the One but only of the multiplicity. For *avidyā* to arise, Sri Aurobindo suggests that one needs to consider a third power, the power of self-oblivion.

As consciousness diminishes in this manner during the involution, the hierarchy of archetypal planes of consciousness and being comes into existence until in the end the supramental Truth-Consciousness is hidden completely in the nescience of matter. Thus the descending ladder of the different planes of consciousness and being, which I have described in the previous section – the Overmind, Intuition, Illumined Mind, Higher Mind, Ordinary Mind, Life, and finally the subtle, Physical planes – comes into being as a series of intermediate worlds between the supramental Truth-Consciousness above and the nescient below. According to Sri Aurobindo all these planes of consciousness still exist as static, interwoven, and interacting but basically independent, archetypal worlds. When self-oblivion is complete, we get the elemental particles of physics moving about in the seemingly inconscient, but still lawful, organization of matter:

. . . 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.

– *op. cit.*, p. 344

To describe how in matter consciousness is totally lost to itself except in the form and in what one could call the fixed habitual ways in which its forces act, Sri Aurobindo uses the metaphor of a man who is totally concentrated on his work and who forgets himself and his surroundings.

Scientific theory does not ascribe sentience or consciousness to the physical world, yet different models of dynamic interaction are recognized. Sri Aurobindo agrees that matter lacks sentience in the human sense, yet he reasons that out of this apparently insentient material basis, gradually higher and higher forms of consciousness evolve through a process in which the material substrate is being transformed and continues to express the evolving consciousness. At each transition the new power not only evolves out of the old, but also transforms whatever preceded it in a creative interaction. In this way, first matter evolves under influence from the already existing subtle physical world. In the next stage, when matter has become sufficiently complex and plastic, within matter life-forms evolve. Still later, when material life has become sufficiently subtle and complex, within these physical life-forms the mind begins to evolve, and this takes place again under the guidance from the already existing mind-planes above it. ¹⁹

Many contemporary philosophers object to such cosmology. For example, Daniel Dennett (1994, pp. 73-80) discredits any cosmology that includes a higher sentience or conscious presence by introducing the analogy of construction cranes that stand solidly on the ground and erect themselves without any need for “sky-hooks” to pull themselves up. However, Dennett’s premise is masked as an observation. If one looks only for physical things, then all one sees is that physically the crane and the building are built from the bottom up. Double-aspect theories like Sri Aurobindo’s do not deny this. What they add is that neither the building nor the crane would

have appeared on the site at all if someone did not have the idea of a high-rise building in the first place. The real second aspect is not a physical hook hanging from a physical sky but a mental force in a mental sky, and it need not surprise anyone that a committed materialist like Dennett does not detect it.

The next step in the evolution of consciousness

In the current stage of the evolution of consciousness, nature is mainly busy perfecting the mind, guiding human mental development to become increasingly subtle and flexible, more detailed and analytic, as well as more comprehensive and synthetic. According to Sri Aurobindo (1990, pp. 3-4), the next major step is in the meantime preparing itself, and we are on the way to the manifestation of the next higher plane of consciousness, what Sri Aurobindo calls the "supramental Truth-Consciousness," as part of ordinary biological life.

To those who object that a minor improvement in our functioning might still be possible but that the chances are rather remote for the arrival of a divine Truth-Consciousness within our physical tenement, Sri Aurobindo answers that if anybody would have looked at the universe in its first, inorganic, stages, the spontaneous appearance of plant life would not have looked very plausible either, and that nobody seeing the first plants covering the globe would ever have guessed that some day small bipeds would calculate the age of the universe, write poetry, or enjoy books about the Tao. So, if Nature would surpass her apparent limits again, she would simply continue an old habit.

The change Sri Aurobindo envisions as the next step in evolution is not a minor one. It might begin with a limited number of individuals or small groups evolving through great personal effort to higher levels of awareness. But if this were all, it would leave unchanged the basic principle on which life in the world is based. What Sri Aurobindo envisages is a whole new stage of evolution, in which a true Gnostic consciousness becomes an organic, incarnate aspect of physical life, in the same natural manner as, at present, life and mind are a normal part of the physical universe.

The difference between the mental and the supramental life would in a way be bigger than the difference between plant-life and mental life as we now know it. As we have seen in the description of the levels of mind, our ordinary mind is based on ignorance and tries from there to arrive at knowledge, and its knowledge is thus inherently approximate and fallible. The supramental knowledge, as Sri Aurobindo describes it, is based on a fully conscious identity with the whole. It knows the universe as if from inside. Perhaps one could say that it knows the world in the way the Divine knows the world, and if there is limitation of knowledge or power it is a willed and conscious diminution for the sake of the harmony and development of the whole.

If such a consciousness could indeed manifest on earth, it would mean a continuation, but also a radical reversal of the development that has taken place so

far. Evolution until now has taken place primarily within matter. As we have seen, our human consciousness is strongly embedded in the workings of the physical brain and as such is limited by this physical apparatus. The supramental consciousness, on the other hand, is primarily based in the Spirit, and from there, in that freedom, it engages matter, expresses itself in it and, while doing so, transforms it.

Though the idea of a Golden Age (*Satya Yuga*) to some extent implies it, there doesn't seem to be any reference in the Indian literature of the possibility that the original Truth-Consciousness could become an integral, inherent part of biological life on earth. In fact the entire manifested reality is often held to be the result of a distorting, illusion-creating *Māyā*. Sri Aurobindo claims that it is because the later Indian systems did not distinguish clearly enough between the overmental and supramental planes that they presumed that the world was the creation of the Overmind *Māyā*, and thus intrinsically a world of ignorance out of which it is best to escape into some *nirvāṇa* beyond (Aurobindo 1991, p. 250). He argues that if they had made a clear distinction between Overmind and Supermind, they would have realized that the Overmind *Māyā* can not be the original creator of the world but that it must be a secondary force that introduces the first elements of Ignorance and division in a manifestation that has its real origin in the divine Truth-Consciousness itself and that is thus, intrinsically, capable of evolving into a true manifestation of the divine perfection.

To the limited inner vision of the later Indian traditions, the world has the appearance of an overmental creation rooted irretrievably in ignorance and suffering. To the physical senses on which science basis itself, life appears as gradually emerging out of unconscious matter through a purely mechanical process. In Sri Aurobindo's synthesis both theories appear as partial truths. The former describes the manifestation of the material universe out of consciousness but misses out on the dynamic link between the divine consciousness and the manifestation. The latter describes the outer mechanism of the evolution, but misses out on its inner meaning and the role of consciousness in the whole process. The two views cover a different aspect of the picture. As such they don't contradict but enrich and complement each other. Sri Aurobindo adds to this synthesis of these two theories the suggestion that if we superimpose the understanding of the different planes of consciousness that Vedānta developed on the Western idea of evolution, there should be the possibility of the manifestation of the highest forms of supramental consciousness right here in matter, as part of the biological evolution.

His explanation of creation as a form of "exclusive concentration" is as interesting for what it contains and implies, as for what it does not contain. Suffering, for example, is not, as in the Bible, the result of something done by man against the will of God. The world is also not, as often held in India, a bad dream or a lie imposed, as from outside, on an unconcerned Divine. It is also not a series of chance events, nor a mechanical process. None of these explanations is commensurate with the definition of God as the *summum bonum*, the absolute of consciousness, existence and bliss. If there is a Divine, omniscient and omnipotent, then whatever happens in

this world must be her will. ²⁰ It is She who involves her absolute consciousness into its very opposite, into the depth of inconscience, and it is she who evolves out of it as matter, life, mind, and Supermind. It is none-else than the Divine herself who is the stage, the act and the actor with us for his roles (Aurobindo 1994, p. 61).

This is then, in short, the process by which Sri Aurobindo visualizes first the involution of the divine consciousness into matter – matter that seems in every respect the exact opposite of its luminous origin – and subsequently the evolution, within the material world, of life, mind and ultimately the Supermind.

The individual consciousness and its transformation

The next question that arises is how this cosmic consciousness in its vast and magnificent splendour relates to our individual centres of consciousness, for they seem to be so different as to look almost unrelated. Within the individual consciousness Sri Aurobindo makes a clear distinction between a person's ego and his or her individual essence. The ego is, according to Sri Aurobindo, no more than a temporary construction, made out of memories, habits, emotions, vital and mental preferences, and necessary to give form to individualization:

But what is this strongly separative self-experience that we call ego? It is nothing fundamentally real in itself but only a practical constitution of our consciousness devised to centralise the activities of Nature in us. We perceive a formation of mental, physical, vital experience which distinguishes itself from the rest of being, and that is what we think of as ourselves in nature – this individualisation of being in becoming. We then proceed to conceive of ourselves as something which has thus individualised itself and only exists so long as it is individualised, – a temporary or at least a temporal becoming; or else we conceive of ourselves as someone who supports or causes the individualisation, an immortal being perhaps but limited by its individuality. This perception and this conception constitute our ego-sense. Normally, we go no farther in our knowledge of our individual existence.

– Sri Aurobindo 1990, p. 367

This ego-sense does not suffice, however, for understanding human individuality. The Vedic tradition holds that, besides the ego, there is also a greater Self that supports and determines the individual, but that exceeds the temporal personality. Within this "true" Self, Sri Aurobindo distinguishes two aspects. The first is what in the Indian tradition is called the *Jīvātman*, who presides, as from above, over our individual existence. It is a containing consciousness, eternal and unchanging, which is forever one with all other Selves and one with the cosmic and transcendent Divine. The second aspect Sri Aurobindo calls the psychic being, *caitya puruṣa*, which one could consider the delegate or representative of the *Jīvātman* within the temporal world in which we live. In experience we reach the *Jīvātman* through an upward movement of our consciousness: it is experienced as if above the head. The psychic being, on the other hand, is contacted by going deep inside, its presence is felt behind the heart. In its essence it is the divine spark, the soul spoken of in some

form or another in almost all religious and spiritual traditions. Sri Aurobindo holds that this divine spark exists from before the beginning of time and slowly grows into a "being" that evolves over time. The idea of an evolving psychic being takes a very central place in Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary ontology of consciousness. We have seen that he sees the evolution primarily as an evolution of consciousness that is slowly moving toward the manifestation of a supramental consciousness on earth. Psychologically, the interesting point here is that he sees this evolution not only as a process on a cosmic scale, but also as something that takes place in each individual, with the psychic being as the carrier of this evolutionary process. In its earliest stages there is only a psychic entity, an individualized centre of consciousness that carries in itself, as in a seed, the entire potential of its individuality. Sri Aurobindo sees this psychic entity as created even before time and as developing slowly, over time, into a true "psychic being." He does not consider this a process that could possibly take place within one lifetime. The psychic element is supposed to move through a process of reincarnation from life to life, gathering varied experience and slowly bringing a larger and larger part of the inner and outer nature under its influence. It shows itself at first as not more than an occasional influence, which gives a certain psychic touch to human life: an appreciation of beauty, a gesture of unselfish love, a noble impulse. But gradually this influence becomes more permanent, until finally the whole nature becomes a faithful expression of the unique qualities of one's soul. It is through the psychic being that we have direct contact with the Divine and the psychic transformation is thus the beginning of the gradual divinisation of our nature. When this process is completed and the whole nature is an expression of the psychic being, Sri Aurobindo speaks of a psychic transformation.

The different philosophical systems of India have quarrelled extensively over the nature of the Self as distinct from the ego. For example, the Sāṃkhya say that while nature is one, the individual Selves are many. In contrast, Advaita Vedānta stresses that there is only one Self because our individual Self, or *Ātman*, is ultimately one with the cosmic Self or Brahman. Most schools of Buddhism go one step further and claim that there is no Self at all. Although these different statements seem to contradict each other if one looks at them from within the framework of semantic rationality, Sri Aurobindo holds that they do not contradict each other in what he calls the logic of the infinite. Within such logic, the dualities of active and passive, personal and impersonal, individual and cosmic, transcendent and individual, are no longer mutually exclusive. They are seen, rather, as different aspects of a single reality that enrich and complement each other. From an experiential viewpoint each of these three seemingly irreconcilable theories about the Self is rooted in a distinct spiritual experience, but it is possible for a single individual to have each of these experiences, consecutively or even, to some extent, simultaneously. One can have at the same time a sense of egolessness as well as a sense of one's own eternal individuality and its oneness with a cosmic or even transcendent Divine.

Ordinarily, humans tend to identify with their ego and more specifically with their bodies, needs, drives, and feelings, with certain habitual ideas, personal ways of thinking, psychological qualities, political boundaries, cultural norms, etc. If any of

these grounding norms are threatened, which all of them are at some time or another, one can easily feel threatened in one's very existence. If one recognizes and annihilates the sense of a limited ego-based identity, there would in principle be no reason for sorrow of any kind. Of course it does not follow that bliss would take the place of sorrow, since it is conceivable that this liberation could result in nothing more than a dull indifference. In actual practice, however, it is a blissful presence that replaces regular emotions of joy and sorrow, as those who have had experiences of this type testify in a pretty unanimous fashion. In scientific literature there is no unanimity on whether such a state of egolessness can actually be achieved. Carl Jung, for example, denies this possibility on the ground that all consciousness inherently implies the existence of an ego that is aware (quoted in Dalal 1991, p. 19). It can be conceded that the ordinary waking consciousness is not conceivable without ego, and that all our conscious mental processes are in some manner or another related to the ego-sense. It is even plausible that the ego-sense is an unavoidable stage in the gradual emancipation of individualized consciousness out of the amorphous generality of biological nature. But this does not preclude the occurrence of other forms of consciousness that do transcend ego. The various schools of Yoga all claim to have specific techniques that can lead to the liberation from the ego.

Sri Aurobindo accepts that in the early stages of individual development it is necessary to develop a well-functioning ego, but he holds that this is not where personal development has to end. In harmony with the Vedic tradition, he contends that through Yoga or otherwise one can actually rise above the limitations that the individual ego entails. The inner process that leads to this begins with a progressive disidentification from every aspect of one's ego-identity: one detaches oneself from one's body, one's impulses, and one's emotions; one detaches oneself from one's thoughts and ideas, and eventually one detaches oneself even from the very sense of having, or rather being, a separate ego. In the process one attains an increasing equanimity and peace, and one arrives gradually at a sublime inner silence. Together with this, in a sense, negative movement of disidentification, there are basically two positive directions that one can pursue in Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, separately, consecutively, or even simultaneously. The first is to nurture one's psychic being, the individual centre of divine beauty, truth, and love that one can find behind the heart. This brings an inner change that leads to an increasing ability to act directly from this inmost centre of one's being. The other is to identify oneself increasingly with one's eternal, and immutable Self, watching one's life as an unmoved, blissful witness from above. Either way one begins to see the personality and its adventures in time as comparatively minor events, that happen somewhere inside one's own infinitude, which is felt more and more as stretching out over the entire manifestation and eternal time:

. . . in the end this Purusha, this cause and self of our individuality, comes to embrace the whole world and all other beings in a sort of conscious extension of itself and to perceive itself as one with the world-being.

– Sri Aurobindo 1990, p. 368

I have already mentioned that for Sri Aurobindo liberation from the limitations of the ego is not the final aim of life, as this “escape” leaves the world as it is and as such deprives the creation (and thus our sojourn in it) of its meaning and purpose. He takes liberation as not more than a first, and very necessary, step on a further road to transformation. With transformation he means nothing less than a complete change of every part of human nature under the influence of the next higher plane of consciousness, which he calls the gnostic or supramental plane:

By transformation I do not mean some change of the nature – I do not mean, for instance, sainthood or ethical perfection or yogic *siddhis* (like the Tantrik’s) or a transcendental (*cinmaya*) body. I use transformation in a special sense, a change of consciousness radical and complete and of a certain specific kind which is so conceived as to bring about a strong and assured step forward in the spiritual evolution of the being of a greater and higher kind and of a larger sweep and completeness than what took place when a mentalised being first appeared in a vital and material animal world. If anything short of that takes place or at least if a real beginning is not made on that basis, a fundamental progress towards this fulfillment, then my object is not accomplished. A partial realisation, something mixed and inconclusive, does not meet the demand I make on life and yoga.

– Sri Aurobindo 1991, p. 98

Though he considers this “radical and complete change of consciousness” as the inevitable next step in the evolution of consciousness, he does see a major role for the individual in the process of transition because in man the evolution of consciousness has reached a peculiar phase. In the earlier stages the evolution has taken place by an automatic and not overtly conscious operation of nature. But in the human being nature has become self-conscious. We are aware both of our present limitations and of our latent possibilities. One could well see in our persistent aspiration for change and progress a sign that nature is attempting to move forward in us and through us. While in previous phases the physical change, at least on the surface, always preceded the change of consciousness, in the present stage, through our conscious cooperation, Sri Aurobindo expects that a change of consciousness will precede the physical change.

Sri Aurobindo visualizes this change of consciousness as a “triple transformation.” The first step of this is the psychic transformation mentioned earlier. Following the psychic transformation, or sometimes simultaneous with it, there is the possibility of a spiritual transformation. This spiritual transformation comes about by a series of ascents and descents, by a raising of our consciousness into the higher planes of the mind, which have been described earlier, and by a bringing down of the powers of these higher planes into our nature. It is a slow and highly complex process. Every time one tries to reach a higher plane of consciousness, the lower nature has to be sufficiently purified and prepared, while on the other hand, to prepare the lower nature fully is only possible under influence of the higher plane. In spite of these difficulties it is considered quite possible to achieve a considerable spiritualisation of selected parts of the mental and vital nature. Though this is striven after by almost all spiritual traditions, concrete results remain extremely rare. A complete spiritual

transformation of the entire nature, inclusive its physical body, is generally considered impossible. According to Sri Aurobindo this is due to the limitations inherent in even the highest of the mental planes. He considers that a complete transformation, which includes even the physical body, is only possible under influence of the Supramental Consciousness.

This supramental transformation can really begin only after the psychic and spiritual transformations have prepared the ground. The process remains the same in principle, but different in stress. While in the earlier stages personal effort played a major role, in the later stages this is less and less so. As the vanity of one's personal ego-sense becomes more and more clear and one's sense of identity with the Divine increases, the sense of personal effort loses its meaning and the only tools left are sincerity and a "vast surrender" (Aurobindo 1994, p. 315). The result the transformation aims at is a taking up of the entire nature into the supramental consciousness, a rising out of the ignorance into the perfect, manifold truth, power, beauty, and joy of the divine existence. Sri Aurobindo sees this as a process that in first instance will take place on a small scale only, but he predicts that gradually it will have a greater and greater effect on society as a whole.

Some epistemological considerations

In the Vedāntic worldview, truth is considered to be a quality of consciousness rather than a property of sentences, and Vedāntic knowledge is primarily concerned with experience or "truth-events." ²¹ Descriptions of the relations between things and processes are, at least in works dealing with consciousness and metaphysics, considered not more than means toward this end. The objective of the Vedāntic pursuit of knowledge consists of the very act of seeing, realizing, or even becoming ever-higher levels of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo describes Vedāntic knowledge as follows:

. . . the knowledge we have to arrive at is not truth of the intellect; it is not right belief, right opinions, right information about oneself and things, that is only the surface mind's idea of knowledge. To arrive at some mental conception about God and ourselves and the world is an object good for the intellect but not large enough for the Spirit; it will not make us the conscious sons of Infinity. Ancient Indian thought meant by knowledge a consciousness which possesses the highest Truth in a direct perception and in self-experience; to become, to be the Highest that we know is the sign that we really have the knowledge... For the individual to arrive at the divine universality and supreme infinity, live in it, possess it, to be, know, feel and express that one in all his being, consciousness, energy, delight of being is what the ancient seers of the Veda meant by the Knowledge.

– Sri Aurobindo 1990, pp. 685-6

Vedic knowledge is thus something quite different from scientific knowledge. The knowledge of ordinary science can be rendered exhaustively in explicit sentences or mathematical formulas, but the statements of Vedāntic knowledge are never more

than hints or aids, meant to arrive at a direct perception of a deeper truth, which itself remains concealed behind the outer formula. As Forman (1990, p. 41) describes it rather neatly with respect to "Pure Consciousness Events," "linguistic systems are afloat, not pinned down to the terms in which the mystic undergoes the event." In Vedic theory, thinking itself is not seen as a means to arrive at truth, but rather as a means to express as faithfully as possible a truth already seen or lived on a "higher" level of consciousness. The verbal expression is seen as a means, or even as a force that, by the quality of the consciousness inherent in it, can help others to experience that truth directly for themselves. Though the scientific and the Vedic ways of knowing seem so different as to be incompatible, they may in practice be complementary and equally needed to arrive at a complete picture of ourselves and of the world in which we live. While scientific knowledge has been most effective in its dealings with physical nature, Vedic knowledge has focused mainly on our inner nature and the not-primarily physical aspects of life.

We saw in the beginning of this chapter that even Chalmers, who is one of the most enthusiastic proponents of panpsychism in the present debate on the nature of consciousness, still takes matter as more basic than consciousness. I took this as a sign of a pervasive tilt in favour of a materialistic worldview, and argued that the necessity for such an acceptance of matter as the fundamental basis of reality is not self-evident, as there are well-worked out and sophisticated Indian systems of thought that hold that it is not matter but consciousness that forms the basis of all manifestation. There is a similar physicalist tilt regarding the relative value of objective and subjective knowledge. Objectivity has presently the connotation of being real, reliable, and fair. Subjectivity is equated with being arbitrary, imaginary, and influenced by personal feelings. According to the Indian tradition there is no intrinsic reason for objective knowledge to be more reliable than subjective knowledge, rather the contrary. Objective knowledge is, after all, indirect, as it requires mediation through our clearly imperfect physical sense organs, while subjective knowledge arises, according to this worldview, directly out of consciousness itself. That in practice, objective knowledge appears to be more reliable than subjective knowledge is, however, not difficult to understand. There can be no doubt that the ordinary mind is much more capable in its dealings with the physical world than in its dealings with the much more fluid and subtle inner realities. This is, however, not an irremediable difficulty. Just as science has put effort in fine-tuning and perfecting objective knowledge, so the spiritual traditions have developed the methodologies required for refining and honing subjective knowledge. It seems to me obvious that in order to develop a truly integral epistemology and methodology for the effective and comprehensive study of consciousness and all things psychological, we should make full use of the best that the Western and the Eastern thought systems have brought forth. This must include an extensive use of what the Indian tradition has to tell on the purification of the inner instrument of knowledge, the *antaḥkāraṇa*, through the methods of yoga. It must be understood, however, that the methods of yoga cannot be fruitfully applied in isolation; they must be supported by a deep understanding of their philosophical background and grounded in the richness of lived experience.

Conclusion and evaluation

This, then, is, in some rough and simplified lines, Sri Aurobindo's evolutionary ontology of consciousness: The origin, and essential nature of the world, is an absolute consciousness and being that creates within itself a multitude of individual centres of consciousness, forming by this division space and time. By a process of exclusive concentration these centres of consciousness involve themselves subsequently into a hierarchy of archetypal planes of ever diminishing levels of consciousness, until they reach the state of complete self-oblivion, which we know as matter. Subsequently the centres of material consciousness coalesce into increasingly complex units, in which consciousness gradually re-emerges, manifesting itself in the form of plants, animals, and eventually man. Our present, human state is a state of mental consciousness in which it is possible to "play with ideas in the mind." Science is the most typical and well-established manifestation of this level of emancipation. But though the scientific mind is the highest type of consciousness in which humanity has a fair degree of mastery, a large percentage of humankind reports occasional experiences that within Sri Aurobindo's framework can best be described as contacts with higher levels of consciousness. These experiences are often regarded as the highlights of life. At the summit of this capacity, there are the mystics, numerically rare, but historically influential, who are, to different degrees, capable of separating the essential core of their consciousness from their individual physical and mental ego and merge it with the original Absolute consciousness. According to Sri Aurobindo, however, neither the scientific nor the mystical mastery denotes the final stage in the evolution of consciousness. The logical next step is for a non-dual, supra-mental consciousness to manifest right here in a physical body and to transform human life in the same way as mind has transformed animal life in the previous major step in the ongoing evolution of consciousness.

A scheme like this obviously poses some difficult problems to traditional science. If it is true that there are different levels of consciousness, then the higher levels must, as Wilber (1997) has stressed, transcend and include the lower ones. This implies that from any one level one can deal effectively with the levels below but not with the levels above oneself. In other words, science, which is typically a mental activity, can deal effectively with matter and life, gets into serious methodological difficulties while dealing with its own plane (in psychology and philosophy) and flounders with the layers above the mental plane. The easiest way out of this conundrum is to limit mental science to matter and the mechanical part of life with which it is comfortable, manage as best as one can with the humanities, and leave the higher planes to religion and spirituality. With a few significant exceptions, this seems to have been the solution favored so far. But there are serious reasons, not philosophical but social and political reasons, that this is not a desirable compromise. The main one is that it leaves society in a state that can be described as akin to Multiple Personality Disorder: in government, business, education, and mainstream media people follow the premises of materialist science, and in their private life, after six and on Sundays, they can if they like celebrate their religious and spiritual leanings. This split has left both sides diminished. ²² It has deprived religion and spirituality of the best that the

human intellect could have given it. It has deprived mainstream public life of meaning and direction. Both are equally serious threats to our collective existence. On the religious side, we see a welter of uncritically accepted beliefs. On the side of science, we see an ever-increasing technical power without the wisdom to use it. The result is bound to be an increasing frequency of alienation and depression on the individual level and on the collective level an increasing disharmony between human life and the life of the rest of the planet. That this is not a theoretical problem is there for all to see.

In the Vedic tradition it is held that individuals and groups of individuals can attune their consciousness to the harmony of a higher consciousness that exceeds in every respect our present evolutionary status. Entering this Consciousness allows one's feelings, thoughts, will, and action to flow in an intuitive harmony, achieving at every step the best possible in terms of the individual as well as the whole of which he or she is a part. This is the reality Sri Aurobindo suggests in his ontology, a reality very much worth striving for. "This is the supreme birth which maternal Nature holds in herself; of this she strives to be delivered" (Aurobindo 1990, p. 59).

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Endnotes

1. The Sanskrit word *yoga* means union with the Divine or the conscious seeking for this union. It is also used as a generic name for any discipline by which one attempts to pass out of the limits of one's ordinary mental consciousness into a greater spiritual consciousness. In this context, it is used for a specific school of philosophical thought that supports such disciplines. In English the word "Yoga" is often used as a shortcut for *haṭhayoga*, which is the Yogic discipline that uses the physical body as its starting point.

2. In Indic studies the English word "consciousness" is used as the equivalent of different words in Sanskrit. Sri Aurobindo uses it primarily for the Sanskrit "Cit." Other authors (e.g., K. Ramakrishna Rao, 2000) use consciousness for "*Puruṣa*," which Sri Aurobindo translates as "Self." Obviously, this leads in some respects, to quite different views of the Vedāntic concept of consciousness.

3. This statement is touching upon a fundamental difference in outlook between language philosophy that perceives truth as a variable of sentences and the Vedic

ontology, where Truth-Consciousness (*Ṛta-Cit*) is taken as an absolute standing outside and comprehending the duality of true and false statements. Compared to it, the world of philosophical language is part of the "ignorance" (*avidyā*), exactly because linguistic mentality is necessarily wrapped up in discriminatory categories such as the duality of true and false. Even within the relative world of ignorance, knowledge is not primarily seen as a collection of sentences but experientially as a collection of "truth-hitting episodes" or *pramāṇ* (Matilal 1986, p. 22).

4. It may be noted in passing that in such a scheme there is no absolute distinction between realities that are subjective and objective, there is rather a fluid gradient between them. The "objective", material world is also not considered intrinsically more "real" than "subjective" experience.

5. Right from Descartes to many postmodern and contemporary writers (e.g., Maxine Sheets-Johnstone 1999) the embodied nature of emotions has been stressed. In man emotions also have an unmistakable mental element. Still, to the extent one accepts the existence of typical worlds, one can agree that their "centre of gravity", their typical characteristics, belong to the life world.

6. Sri Aurobindo's use of the phrase "evolution of consciousness" should be distinguished from its usage in evolutionary biology where it is increasingly being used to describe the appearance of consciousness in amoebae, mollusks, and pre-human primates. In contrast to this, Sri Aurobindo was mainly interested in the stages that would evolve after the ordinary human level of development. Where it is needed to distinguish the two I will refer to Sri Aurobindo's conception as the "ongoing evolution of consciousness" even though Sri Aurobindo never used this phrase as such.

7. The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy for example doesn't even try (Mautner 1997).

8. The necessity to posit the existence of consciousness in deep sleep becomes even more obvious once one realizes that it is difficult but not impossible to retain alertness not only during dreams (in so-called lucid dreams) but even during the states of pure consciousness in between.

9. The case of meditation is especially interesting because there are types of meditation in which the level of consciousness achieved is experienced as inversely proportional to the complexity of the contents and the awareness of the surroundings. In this type of meditation one experiences oneself as most conscious when one is least aware of one's surroundings.

10. There can be little doubt that "panpsychism" is the Western concept of consciousness that comes closest to Sri Aurobindo's view. But the two are not equivalent. Panpsychism as commonly understood doesn't involve any transcendent consciousness, just like its sister term "pantheism" doesn't include the idea of a transcendent Divine. Vedānta, on the contrary, is emphatic that all manifestations of consciousness are subservient to an encompassing transcendent consciousness. In

the Indian tradition, it is not matter but consciousness that is considered more fundamental.

11. Daniel Dennett, Valerie Hardcastle, and Patricia Churchland are amongst the most outspoken proponents.

12. See Beloff's opening article in the first volume of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, (1994, pp. 32-7).

13. Descartes seems to have been an exception as he postulated the reality of his thinking before he admitted the reality of what his senses perceived. But the remarkable argument he gave for accepting his sense-impressions - that God is good and thus could not have given man false witnesses as sense-organs - and the confidence with which he subsequently embarked on the study of the physical world, give the impression that he doubted the reliability of what his senses told him, but not the existential reality of the perceived world. As far as he did express doubt about the actual existence of the physical reality, it impresses as a rhetorical device but seems to miss the experiential profundity of similar doubts expressed in the mystical traditions (see Descartes, 1931, p. 101 ff.).

14. For typical examples see David Ray Griffin's (1997) presentation on panexperientialist physicalism and Chalmers' introduction of panpsychism at the end of his original article on the hard question (see Chalmers, 1995).

15. A concise description of Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the Vedas can be found in "The Doctrine of the Mystics" (Aurobindo, 1995). For his interpretation of the Upanishads one can read the last section of his commentary on the *Iśa Upaniṣad* (Aurobindo, 1996b).

16. The names and delineations of these worlds differ, but a typical series would include some nether regions, the physical world, the worlds of the life-forces, the mental worlds and, above these, the worlds of the spirit.

17. According to Sri Aurobindo the original Consciousness, which is one with Existence, splits itself in two: "the consciousness that sees and the consciousness that executes & formalizes what we see" [Aurobindo, 1997, p. 194]. Using Sāṃkhya terminology, he calls the first *Puruṣa*, or Self, the second *Prakṛti*, or Nature. Sri Aurobindo does not accept Sāṃkhya's dualistic philosophy, but he makes extensive use of its distinction between *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* as an important aid during the early stages of *sadhana*. It is interesting that in the system of the Sāṃkhyas, mental processes are considered part of nature and illumined by the self, but not part of the self. This comes quite close to the modern division between objective thought-processes and subjective experience. In this "standard" scientific view mental processes are seen as correlated with, or even identical to, objective processes in the brain while consciousness is seen as a subjective phenomenon of a different character. One may note that this is very different from the traditional dualism of Descartes, who placed thinking without the slightest hesitation on the side of the

self. Technology has thus naturalized the information aspect of knowledge and has left, as in ancient India, only pure consciousness on the side of the self.

18 *Avidyā*, literally no-knowledge, is a technical term that is generally translated as “ignorance.” It denotes all knowledge that is not knowledge of the Absolute. It is specifically used for knowledge of the world, that is, for science. According to the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, both *vidyā* (knowledge of the One) and *avidyā* (knowledge of the multiplicity) are needed for a complete understanding of ourselves and the world:

Into a blind darkness they enter who follow after the Ignorance, they as if into a greater darkness who devote themselves to the Knowledge alone.... He who knows That as both in one, the Knowledge and the Ignorance, by the Ignorance crosses beyond death and by the Knowledge enjoys Immortality (trans. Sri Aurobindo 1996b, pp. 21-2).

19 Life and mind that have evolved within matter do not have the full freedom and splendour of life and mind in their own planes, as anyone who has access to those planes in dream or meditation can attest. The manifestation in matter imposes a compromise with the limitations matter can handle. Of course, matter also adds its own virtues of stability and refinement of detail.

20 Sri Aurobindo holds that the Divine is beyond the personal and impersonal and can appear to us as either. There is a long tradition in the Indian civilization to describe the world as a manifestation of male-female dualities like *Puruṣa-Prakṛti*, *Īśa-Īshwarī*, *Shiva-Shakti*, etc. The male principle generally stands for the inner containing and supporting consciousness, and the female for the outer active, manifesting force. The ultimate Godhead is sometimes depicted with a body, half female, half male. There has been a tendency in Indian thought to hold that an impersonal, abstract description of the Divine is superior to a description of the Divine as a Person, but Sri Aurobindo does not subscribe to this view.

21 Skt:*pramāḥ*, see endnote 3.

22 It is commonly held that this split has been a major facilitating factor in the phenomenal growth of science and technology since the European Enlightenment. It is extremely difficult to assess what the exact factors have been, but it seems likely that it had less to do with a materialist stance (which came much later), than with the shift from a highly centralized, doctrine based authority in the field of knowledge, to the typical decentralized competitive-cooperative social structure of the modern academic world. It is noteworthy that in terms of social structure and lines of authority, the spiritual tradition in India has much more in common with the modern university system than with the Roman Catholic Church.

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