

METAPHYSICS AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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A Study Of Aurobindo's Theory of Human Development

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### **Abstract**

This dissertation is a study of Aurobindo's theory of human development and its metaphysical foundations. I argue that in accordance with his affirmation of the priority of metaphysics, Aurobindo builds his theory of human development on the basis of his system of metaphysics, and that, therefore, an understanding of his metaphysics is indispensable. I claim that the core of his metaphysics is constituted of seven theories: 1) the theory of Brahman, 2) the theory of the Supermind, 3) the theory of Involution, 4) the theory of Supraphysical Worlds and Beings, 5) the theory of Evolution, 6) the theory of Rebirth, and 7) the theory of Human Nature. I then deal with some issues pertaining to these theories.

In Part II, I offer a reconstruction of Aurobindo's theory of the stages of human development and his developmental model. I clarify his descriptions of the higher stages of development and provide illustrations of the types of states of consciousness corresponding to them. I also extract his hitherto unrecognised developmental model from his numerous observations on the course of development and compare it with the standard model derived from the work of Piaget and Kohlberg. I argue that Aurobindo's model is a

better model and refer to some recent criticisms of the Piaget-Kohlberg model.

I conclude that although Aurobindo has linked his theory of human development to his metaphysics such that if we accept his metaphysics we are bound to accept the major claims of his theory of human development, the two can be delinked, and that his theory of human development can be evaluated independently of his metaphysics by reference to historical and cross-cultural data on spiritual development.

## **PREFACE**

I first read Aurobindo's writings when I was seventeen. At that time I was impressed by the depth and scope of his philosophical vision and his profound and penetrating observations on the spiritual path. I had no idea, when I first read his works in India, that one day I would write a dissertation on Aurobindo in a Canadian university and play the role of a philosophical spokesman for him, extracting the theories implicit in his voluminous writings, clarifying their central claims, identifying and evaluating the arguments, dealing with criticisms, and drawing parallels with thinkers in the Western tradition.

I have tried to approach Aurobindo's work in a critical spirit, but I have also tried to take a balanced approach avoiding the lopsidedness of an exclusively right-brain or left-brain orientation. If I frequently use expressions such as "Aurobindo holds that" or "Aurobindo mentions that", I do not intend to imply that the fact that he holds or mentions something suffices to make it true. Rather, I am concerned with drawing attention to the fact that he holds a particular view. And this is necessary in a work which seeks to provide a comprehensive exposition of his views and is important if the fact has not received attention in the extant literature.

Many formidable inner obstacles and a few external obstacles have interfered with my work. There have been many

occasions when I almost abandoned the idea of continuing this dissertation to completion. Doubts about its feasibility have quite persistently occurred. Without the blessings of Swami Krishnananda of the Sivananda Ashram at Rishikesh in Northern India, the encouragement of my supervisory committee, and the support of some close friends, I could not have completed this dissertation.

I am indebted to my supervisor Professor Evan Simpson, presently the Dean of Humanities at McMaster, for his remarkable patience, tolerance, and guidance in various stages of composition of this work. He has been an ideal supervisor in many respects. I am fortunate to have him as my supervisor.

I thank Professor John McMurtry for his encouragement and guidance in the initial stages of this thesis. Professor Ken Dorter's role in the final stages of this thesis has been crucial and I appreciate his sagacious advice. Professor Sami Najm also helped me to improve the thesis with his painstaking, perceptive, and critical comments on matters of substance and style.

I also thank Professor Francis Guth of Algoma University College for his interest in my thesis. I have benefited from conversations with him during my appointment at Algoma College as sessional instructor last spring.

I am grateful to my parents for their support and the quite incredible freedom of pursuit they gave me in my for-

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I am also profoundly indebted to Marcela Aracena for her invaluable companionship, support, advice, and encouragement. Her exemplary dedication to her own thesis was very inspiring. Yogi Sri Krishnaprem once remarked that there are many valuable things about life known to women which most men never come to know. Without Marcela's companionship I would have remained ignorant of these things.

My friend Tony Couture gave helpful advice and encouragement. I have learned a great deal from his commitment to academic philosophy and his love of plants.

I am also very grateful to my good friends John Taylor and Marie Taylor. John offered invaluable assistance with his computer in the final stages of this thesis. Their hospitality and goodwill were exemplary and taught me something about the Bahai way of life.

Finally, I would like to bow down in gratitude and reverence to the All-pervasive and Ever-present Light whose boundless compassion has made all existence and activity possible.



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## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing interest in the possibility of development beyond the Piagetian stage of formal operations. Recent work by Charles Alexander, Ken Wilber, Herb Koplowitz, explores higher stages of development in adulthood. There is also increasing recognition that contemplative or spiritual development is related along a single continuum to the lower stages of cognitive and affective growth investigated by developmental psychologists. Given these trends, Aurobindo's comprehensive theory of human development which provides quite detailed descriptions of higher stages of development should be of interest and significance to theorists of transpersonal development and those involved in research on human potential. Further, since Aurobindo rests his theory of human development on certain metaphysical theories, his work should also be of interest to philosophers concerned with the wider ramifications of metaphysics, particularly its relationship to forms of human praxis.

In this dissertation, I have tried to identify the central theories constitutive of Aurobindo's metaphysics. I have tried to present these theories in a clear and systematic fashion so as to make them amenable to philosophical analysis and criticism. I have also tried to deal with some issues pertaining to those theories. A complete evaluation of his metaphysics is beyond the scope of this thesis and my present level of competence.

I also offer a reconstruction of his theory of human development, particularly his account of stages and his model of development, and explain the connections with his metaphysical theories.

There is no work on Aurobindo's metaphysics or his theory of human development which adequately explores the connections between his metaphysics and his theory of human development. This is not surprising given the fact that there is no work which presents a systematic and analytical account of his theory of human development. Although there are a number of works on Aurobindo's metaphysics, they generally fail to extract and clarify and evaluate its core truth-claims. Nor do they adequately explain the deductive structure of his metaphysics.

Beatrice Bruteau's Worthy Is The World: The Hindu Philosophy Of Sri Aurobindo makes a good attempt at showing the links between different constitutive claims of Aurobindo's metaphysics, but there is no attempt to examine his theory of human development and its relationship to his metaphysics. Apart from the fact that the description of Aurobindo's thought as "Hindu philosophy" is not entirely appropriate, the work fails to clarify the ontological status of "Overmind", "Higher Mind" etc., in his metaphysics, and fails to explain the logic of the sequence of involution, an absolutely crucial issue in Aurobindo's metaphysics.

June O'Connor's The Quest For Political And Spiritual Liberation is an interesting exploration of the relationship

between Aurobindo's theory of political liberation and his theory of spiritual liberation. But she makes no attempt to situate Aurobindo's theory of spiritual liberation within the framework of his theory of human development. Her account of Aurobindo's metaphysics is very sketchy and consequently the important connections between his metaphysics and his concept of spiritual liberation remain unexplored and unclear.

Jan Feys' book Evolution In Aurobindo And Teilhard draws our attention to interesting parallels, convergences, and divergences between the theories of evolution of the two thinkers, but it fails, like most other works, to adequately clarify some of the key concepts of Aurobindo's thought, and does not address the crucial issue of the logic of involution. Rama Shanker Srivastava's work Sri Aurobindo And The Theories Of Evolution suffers from the same drawbacks.

Six Pillars: Introduction To The Major Works Of Sri Aurobindo edited by Robert A. McDermott contains several articles dealing with different aspects of Aurobindo's thought. During the course of his rather cursory account of Aurobindo's theory of higher levels of consciousness, Robert McDermott remarks that "...neither Sri Aurobindo nor any of his interpreters offer a single example of these levels". McDermott fails to consider that Aurobindo did provide examples of the kind of poetic inspiration that originates in these higher levels of consciousness. Aurobindo also made some attempts to relate certain kinds of mystical experiences to these levels. In this dissertation I have tried to clarify

and illustrate Aurobindo's descriptions of these higher levels of consciousness.

Stephen Phillips's book Aurobindo's Philosophy Of Brahman is a good analytical account of Aurobindo's views on the nature of Brahman and raises important issues concerning those views. But some of Phillips's criticisms seem to miss or overlook Aurobindo's point. I have discussed this in my thesis.

Ken Wilber makes some references to Aurobindo's stages of the life cycle in his Transformations Of Consciousness. He does not provide any textual evidence from Aurobindo's works for his "reconstruction". According to Wilber the developmental stages in "Aurobindo's life cycle" are as follows:

1. Sensorimotor (physical, sensory, and locomotive aspects)
2. Vital-emotional-sexual ("prana"; libido or bioenergy)
3. Will-mind (simple representational and intentional thought)
4. Sense-mind (thought operations performed on sensory or concrete objects)
5. Reasoning mind (thought operations performed on abstract objects)
6. Higher mind (synthetic-integrative thought operations, "seeing truth as a whole")
7. Illumined mind (transcends thought and "sees truth at a glance"; psychic or inner illumination and vision)

8. Intuitive mind (transcendental-archetypal awareness; subtle cognition and perception)

9. Overmind (unobstructed, unbounded spiritual awareness)

10. Supermind (absolute identity with and as spirit)

Wilber merely cites Aurobindo's works The Synthesis Of Yoga and The Life Divine without giving specific references in support of this scheme of developmental stages. He writes that "...if one examines Aurobindo's meticulous descriptions of these first six stages, one finds that they bear striking and detailed resemblances to aspects of the works of Piaget, Loevinger, and Kohlberg"<sup>1</sup>.

Stages 6-10 are explicitly mentioned by Aurobindo in Chapter X of The Life Divine. Although one can find terms like "sense-mind" and "will-mind" in the earlier work, The Synthesis Of Yoga, to my knowledge there is no evidence that Aurobindo correlated them with or regarded them as constituting distinct developmental stages. Aurobindo's central concern is with adult development and he does not explicitly refer to any stages of child development at all. He does refer to three structures of mind: physical mind (of which "sense-mind" is a substructure), vital mind, and thought-mind or reasoning mind. He also refers to three stages of adult mental development constituted by the dominance of one of these three structures of mind.

As I argue in Chapter Eight, there are nine developmental stages mentioned by Aurobindo in The Life Divine: physical-mental, vital-mental, intellectual-mental, psychic, higher-



mental, illumined-mental, intuitive-mental, overmental, and supramental. Contrary to Wilber, Aurobindo does regard the supramental stage as a distinct stage of development.

The attribution to Aurobindo of the first five or six stages of Wilber's scheme may be motivated by a desire to make Aurobindo more presentable to contemporary developmental psychology. One can claim that these stages could be accommodated into Aurobindo's developmental theory with consistency, but this would be different from the claim that they are the stages of Aurobindo's theory.

Wilber also fails to deal adequately with Aurobindo's stage model. As I argue in Chapter Nine, Aurobindo's developmental model differs in many important respects from the Piaget-Kohlberg model, and there are good reasons to think that his model is a better one. Wilber's account of Aurobindo's higher stages is superficial and does not do justice to the originality, complexity and depth of his theory of spiritual development.

Thus most of the works on Aurobindo have these drawbacks: 1) They do not clarify some of the key terms and central arguments in Aurobindo's metaphysics, 2) They deal inadequately with his theory of human development, and do not offer a systematic explication and assessment of its central claims and its model of development, and 3) They fail to show the connections between the theory and the metaphysics. In this dissertation I make an attempt to overcome these drawbacks.

It is important to first understand the general nature of Aurobindo's philosophical work. I will then examine his thesis that metaphysics has priority for a theory of human development.

### **Spiritual Philosophy**

Aurobindo described his work as "spiritual philosophy", a form of philosophy which consists in the articulation and elaboration of what is fundamentally a spiritual vision or realisation. A spiritual philosophy may also develop a framework in terms of which other spiritual experiences or realisations are explained and evaluated in comparison with the spiritual realisation on which it is based. The basic concepts of a spiritual philosophy are "experience-concepts", concepts which are not intellectual abstractions, or worse, empty words, but refer to realities which can be experienced. The fundamental goals of a spiritual philosophy are to communicate clearly a spiritual experience or realisation, draw out its consequences for our understanding of reality, and specify a method or path by means of which the spiritual experience or realisation can be had by others.

The spiritual philosophy of Aurobindo, comprising his metaphysics, theory of human development, and his integral yoga, is based on four fundamental spiritual realisations. These are: 1) The realisation of the transcendent reality or Brahman beyond time, space, quality, and activity, 2) The realisation of the cosmic consciousness in which all things are perceived as manifestations of Brahman, 3) The realisa-

tion of the transcendent and the dynamic as two integral aspects or "poises" of Brahman, and 4) The realisation of higher levels of consciousness leading up to the Supermind, or the creative, world-manifesting, and world-governing "poise" of Brahman.

Aurobindo's description of his work as a spiritual philosophy and his reference to the four fundamental realisations which constitute its foundations must be considered seriously in order to avoid misconceptions or misunderstandings of the nature of his philosophical work.

The central task of spiritual philosophy is to articulate and elaborate the spiritual vision or realisation of a seer or mystic. All its constitutive claims are based on this spiritual vision or realisation. The adequacy of a spiritual philosophy rests, in the ultimate analysis, on the adequacy of its underlying spiritual vision or realisation. This implies that the adequacy of a spiritual philosophy can be finally assessed only by recourse to spiritual vision or realisation. One can determine that a spiritual philosophy is inadequate only by recourse to a spiritual vision or realisation which is more complete, inclusive, or adequate, than the vision or realisation underlying the spiritual philosophy in question. This is analogous to judgments about works of art. One can determine the artistic merit of a work of art only by recourse to aesthetic experience.

All this does not imply that there is no place for reasoning or argument in spiritual philosophy. But the proper

role of reasoning or argument in spiritual philosophy must be understood. The function of argument in spiritual philosophy is to render the spiritual realisation or vision intelligible, to draw out its implications, and to put together the different truth-claims implied by the realisation or vision into a coherent whole. Aurobindo's central concern is to present the implications of his spiritual realisations in terms of a coherent whole. He is primarily concerned with presenting a coherent, unified, and holistic philosophical framework or perspective, and only secondarily with arguments in favor of its constitutive claims or in favor of the philosophical perspective itself. He once acknowledged the lack of rigorous argumentation in his work as follows:

There is very little argument in my philosophy—the elaborate metaphysical reasoning full of abstract words with which the metaphysician tries to establish his conclusions is not there. What is there is a harmonising of the different parts of a many-sided knowledge so that all unites logically together. But it is not by force of logical argument that it is done, but by a clear vision of the relations and sequences of the Knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

It should be noted that these remarks were made in 1936 some years before the publication of the first edition of The Life Divine, Aurobindo's philosophical magnum opus. In this work there are a lot of arguments, albeit implicit, and there is an attempt to consider objections, examine alternatives etc. One of the central objectives of this dissertation is to dispel the misconception that there are no arguments in

Aurobindo's writings. In fact, his works are rich in arguments, but the arguments are implicit, and are mostly suggested, rather than "rigorously" worked out. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that Aurobindo is primarily concerned with integrating his spiritual realisations and their implications into a harmonious whole.

Another misconception is that Aurobindo's philosophy is some sort of a theology of the Vedas, the Indian scriptures. While Aurobindo did make important contributions to the interpretation of the Vedas and builds on the work of the Vedic seers, his spiritual philosophy goes well beyond the Vedas in its scope and method. Therefore, it would be wrong to maintain, as V.S.Naravane does, that "Aurobindo's entire attitude to Indian culture is based on the presumption that the highest truths of philosophy, social life, and even science are already contained in the Vedas".<sup>3</sup>

Aurobindo held that there were possibilities of spiritual realisation and transformation which were not explored by the Vedic rishis or seers. He argues that although the Vedic seers had an inkling of the Supermind and attempted to attain the supramental consciousness, they did not conceive of the possibility of a new form of existence on earth based on the supramental consciousness. As Aurobindo writes:

The Vedic Rishis never attained to the Supermind for the earth, or perhaps did not even make the attempt. They tried to rise individually to the supramental plane, but they did not bring it down and make it a permanent part of the earth-consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

And although Aurobindo wrote a masterly commentary on the Hindu scripture The Bhagavad-Gita, he was far from regarding it as the last word on spiritual development. Aurobindo maintained that his spiritual philosophy was not contained in its entirety in the Gita. In his words

It is not a fact that the Gita gives the whole base of Sri Aurobindo's message; for the Gita seems to admit the cessation of birth in the world as the ultimate aim or at least the ultimate culmination of Yoga. It does not bring forward the idea of spiritual evolution, or the idea of the higher planes and the supramental Truth Consciousness, and the bringing down of that consciousness as the means of the complete transformation of earthly life.<sup>5</sup>

Aurobindo also distinguished his spiritual philosophy from the dominant tendencies of the Hindu religious tradition. He maintained that his spiritual philosophy differed from the Hindu religious tradition in that it did not view the world as either an illusion, or a purposeless play or Lila of Brahman, or as a cycle of births and deaths from which one ought to escape, but rather as a field of Brahman's manifestation in which there is a development of the soul through progressively higher levels culminating in the supramental consciousness and the organisation of a divine life on earth.<sup>6</sup>

The following remarks should dispel once and for all the misconception that Aurobindo is a "traditionalist", or a theologian of Hinduism, or a "Hindu fundamentalist":

Why should the past be the limit of spiritual experience? ... Truly, this shocked reverence for the past is a wonderful and fearful thing. After all, the Divine is infinite and the unrolling of the Truth may be an infinite process or at least, if not quite so much, yet with some room for new discovery and new statement, even perhaps a new achievement, not a thing in a nutshell cracked and its contents exhausted once for all by the first seer or sage, while the others must religiously crack the same nutshell all over again....<sup>7</sup>

All fanaticism is false, because it is a contradiction of the very nature of God and of Truth. Truth cannot be shut up in a single book, Bible or Veda or Koran, or in a single religion. The Divine Being is eternal and universal and infinite and cannot be the sole property of the ...Semitic religions only...All religions have some truth in them, but none has the whole truth. All are created in time and finally decline and perish...God and Truth outlast these religions and manifest themselves anew in whatever way or form the Divine Wisdom chooses.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to understand Aurobindo's inclusive and integral philosophical method. The inclusiveness of his method consists in not excluding or leaving out any aspect of reality. The integral method consists in the harmonious integration of the truths of particular theories into a single unified theory.

Some of Aurobindo's observations on his "artistic method" in his poetic magnum opus Savitri should be taken into consideration because they throw light on his philosophical method in The Life Divine. In response to a critic who objected to the length of his epic poem, Aurobindo writes:

One artistic method is to select a limited subject and even on that to say only what is

indispensable, what is centrally suggestive and leave the rest to the imagination or understanding of the reader. Another method which I hold to be equally artistic, or, if you like, architectural, is to give a large and even a vast, a complete interpretation, omitting nothing that is necessary, fundamental to the completeness. That is the method I have chosen in *Savitri*.<sup>9</sup>

Aurobindo could have added that it is also the method in his philosophical work *The Life Divine* which runs into 1070 pages and deals with every aspect of reality and human existence.

The integral method in philosophy consists in overcoming the one-sidedness, negations, and oppositions of particular views of existence and in harmonising and integrating their partial truths in a larger perspective, or framework, which has an integral value, value for our life as a whole, and not merely an intellectual appeal.<sup>10</sup> According to Aurobindo, no single perspective, theory, or view, can be wholly true and complete in itself. It has to be made complete by taking into account other perspectives, theories, or views, which seem to differ from it and even to contradict it, but in reality only serve to enlarge it<sup>11</sup>. The driving force of Aurobindo's philosophical work is the search for "the widest, the most flexible, the most catholic affirmation possible" and the attempt to "found on it the largest and most comprehensive harmony".<sup>12</sup>

### **The Priority Of Metaphysical Knowledge**



Aurobindo holds the view that metaphysical knowledge has priority for a theory of human development. No attention has been paid to this view in the comparatively scanty literature on his philosophy of human development. The priority of metaphysical knowledge means that our theory of human development should be determined by our metaphysical knowledge. As Aurobindo writes:

Our metaphysical knowledge..should naturally be the determinant of our whole conception of life and attitude to it; the aim of life, as we conceive it, must be structured on that basis..It is on the fundamental realities that the processes depend; our own process of life, its aim and method, should be in accordance with the truth of being that we see....<sup>13</sup>

These remarks not only support my claim that Aurobindo subscribes to the priority thesis, but they also suggest an argument for the thesis. In order to understand that argument we should first understand Aurobindo's concept of metaphysics.

In the literature on Aurobindo's metaphysics there is virtually no discussion of his conception of metaphysics. Perhaps the reason for this is that Aurobindo did not extensively or systematically reflect on the nature of metaphysics. Nevertheless, there are a few remarks on the nature of metaphysics in The Life Divine which deserve attention because they enable us to better understand the structure of his metaphysical system.

There are three important aspects of Aurobindo's concept of metaphysics: metaphysical truth, the sources of metaphysical knowledge, and the criteria of integral value of metaphysical truth. Although Aurobindo does not explicitly define "metaphysical truth", the contexts in which he employs the notion make it clear that a metaphysical truth is a truth pertaining to the nature of ultimate reality or its relation to phenomenal reality and processes<sup>14</sup>. Metaphysical knowledge consists in the knowledge of metaphysical truths. Since these truths pertain to a reality that is beyond the bounds of sensory experience and the material world, they cannot be known through the senses or through thought operations on physical data.

Aurobindo claims that there are three means by which metaphysical truths can be comprehended. First, by means of "pure reason" or thought operations unconfined by physical data. Second, by means of intuition. And third, by means of spiritual experience<sup>15</sup>.

According to Aurobindo, pure reason or reason unconstrained by physical data can arrive at a conceptual understanding of metaphysical truths and it is satisfied with a neat and tidy system of concepts. But a neat and tidy system of concepts alone cannot satisfy our whole being. There is a demand in our being to experience what these concepts are all about. As Aurobindo perceptively remarks "...every concept is incomplete for us and to a part of our nature almost unreal until it becomes an experience"<sup>16</sup>.

He further claims that "...where there are truths attainable by reason, there must be in the organism possessed of that reason a means of arriving at or verifying them by experience"<sup>17</sup>. Since metaphysical truths are conceivable by human reason, there must be in the human being some faculty or ability by means of which those truths can be verified by experience. This faculty is intuition. It is an extension, into the sphere of our mind, of a mode of knowledge which Aurobindo characterizes as "knowledge by identity", i.e., by identity with the object. Knowledge of our own existence and of our mental states are analogues of "knowledge by identity".<sup>18</sup>

Metaphysical truths can also be known through spiritual experiences, or in higher states of consciousness where there is some form of contact with the realm of fundamental realities. It is interesting to note that Aurobindo allows for the possibility of qualitative contrasts between competing intuitions and spiritual experiences. Intuitions and spiritual experiences may be compared with respect to their illuminative power, comprehensiveness, and conclusiveness.<sup>19</sup>

There remains the issue of the value of metaphysical truths. The following passage indicates Aurobindo's requirements concerning the value of metaphysical truths:

...we must...regard the metaphysical truth we have...stated as a determinant not only of our thought and inner movements, but of our life-direction, a guide to a dynamic solution of our self-experience and world-experience.. otherwise our metaphysical truth can be only a play of the intellect without any dynamic

importance..But the truth, once discovered, must be realisable in our inner being and our outer activities. If it is not, it may have an intellectual but not an integral importance; a truth for the intellect, for our life it would be no more than the solution of a thought-puzzle.<sup>20</sup>

Aurobindo seems to specify two requirements which must be satisfied by any putative metaphysical truth. The first may be characterized as the realizability requirement or the requirement that a metaphysical truth must be realizable or experiencable by the individual. The second is the transformability requirement or the requirement that a metaphysical truth must enable the transformation of our inner and outer life.

The question which arises in this context is this: Are these requirements constitutive of metaphysical truth? The passage makes it clear that Aurobindo's emphasis is on the integral value of putative metaphysical truths. His distinction between intellectual value and integral value supports this interpretation. A putative metaphysical truth has integral value if it meets the two requirements and may have only intellectual value otherwise. Thus realizability and transformability are requirements of the integral value of metaphysical truths and not of metaphysical truth as such.

It is Aurobindo's view that the stock of metaphysical truths which comprises a metaphysical system must have integral value and not just intellectual value or value only for a limited aspect of our existence. He does not value

metaphysical theories and systems which have no significance for human praxis. He writes:

There is no human pursuit more barren and frivolous than metaphysics practised merely as an intellectual pastime, a play with words and thoughts, when there is no intention of fulfilling thought in life or of moulding our inner state and outer activity by the knowledge which we have intellectually accepted.<sup>21</sup>

Since Aurobindo affirms the dependence of processes on the fundamental realities, or in other words, the dependence of truths about processes on truths about being or existence, it follows that the process of human development is also dependent on the fundamental realities. The nature of fundamental realities and their relation to the domain of phenomenal reality in which human development takes place must determine the forms, principles, stages, and goal of human development. Metaphysics is the inquiry into the truth about the fundamental realities and their relation to the phenomenal reality. A theory of human development must give us the truth about the forms, principles, stages, and goal of human development. Therefore, metaphysics has priority for a theory of human development.

I would argue that since the nature of being determines the nature of becoming or process, it follows that the nature of a being determines the nature of its becoming or process of development. The process of development of a being is determined by its nature. Therefore, if we want to understand the process of human becoming or development, we must first

understand the nature of human being. It is the task of metaphysics to understand the nature of being, and therefore, the nature of human being. Therefore, metaphysics has priority for a theory of human development.

I would also argue that development is goal-directed, and, therefore, an understanding of human development requires an understanding of its goal. But, according to Aurobindo, the goal of human development is determined by the goal of evolution of which human development is a sub process. The goal of evolution itself is determined by the fundamental realities underlying it. Thus only metaphysical knowledge of the fundamental realities underlying evolution can enable us to understand the goal of evolution and, hence, the goal of its sub process, human development. Therefore, metaphysics has priority for a theory of human development.

On Aurobindo's view, a theory of human development must be integral and not one-sided or partial. This implies that it cannot just be a descriptive or explanatory account of human development. A theory of human development must also meet the requirements of realizability and transformability. It must enable the individual to realize metaphysical truths and transform inner and outer existence in the light of that realization. In other words, a theory of human development must not have merely intellectual importance, but integral importance. And the priority thesis entails that we can have such a theory of human development only if we have an integral metaphysical knowledge.

In accordance with his priority thesis, Aurobindo has attempted to build his theory of human development on the foundations of his system of metaphysical knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary to first examine his metaphysical system. Part I of this thesis deals with Aurobindo's metaphysics. I identify the seven central theories constitutive of his metaphysical system and examine some issues pertaining to them. These theories are: 1) theory of Brahman or the Absolute, 2) theory of the Supermind or God, 3) theory of Involution, 4) theory of Supraphysical Worlds and Beings, 5) theory of Evolution, 6) theory of Rebirth or Reincarnation, and 7) theory of Human Nature. A separate chapter is devoted to each of these theories. In Part II, I offer a reconstruction of Aurobindo's theory of the stages of development and his model of development.

## CHAPTER 1

### BRAHMAN

The central claim of Aurobindo's theory of Brahman is that there exists a being, Brahman or the Absolute, whose nature is Sat or absolute substance, Chit or absolute consciousness, and Ananda or absolute bliss.

#### **Sat**

Brahman is absolute substance. This implies that Brahman must be an absolutely conscious, infinite, eternal, formless, self-existent, immutable, all-inclusive, omnipresent, and ultimate reality. Absolute substance cannot be inconscient or bereft of consciousness. It must be conscious substance, and its consciousness must be absolute or unlimited. Absolute substance cannot be limited in space and time. Hence, it must be an infinite and eternal substance. Form implies limitation and absolute substance is unlimited. Therefore, it must be formless in its essence.<sup>22</sup> Infinite substance cannot be conditioned by form, quality, and quantity. In Aurobindo's words, "It is not an aggregate of forms . . . If all forms, quantities, qualities were to disappear, this would remain".<sup>23</sup>

If Brahman is absolute substance, then it must be self-existent, not dependent on anything for its existence. And this implies that Brahman has no cause because if it had a cause, it would be dependent on the cause. Absolute substance is immutable in the sense that its essential nature does not



undergo change, and not in the sense that it is static or devoid of any activity. Absolute substance must be an all-inclusive substance. Nothing can exist independently or "outside" of absolute substance. All things must exist "within" it as its own modes or manifestations. Further, an infinite and all-inclusive substance must necessarily be omnipresent. Finally, there can be nothing greater or beyond absolute substance. It is the groundless ground of all things, the ultimate reality.

According to Aurobindo, becoming is a potentiality of absolute substance or being. This means that absolute substance or being is capable of becoming an infinite variety of things. Becoming is thus an activity of absolute being. Since absolute being or substance is conscious, becoming must be its freely chosen conscious activity.<sup>24</sup>

It could be objected that becoming implies that absolute being is incomplete or imperfect. If this objection means that having the capacity to engage in the activity of becoming implies imperfection, it is obviously mistaken. On the contrary, if absolute being were incapable of the activity of becoming, then it would be imperfect. An absolute conscious being is not an inert or static being. It must be capable of activity. Or the objection could mean that if absolute being actually engages in the activity of becoming, this implies that it is incomplete or imperfect. In this sense the objection assumes that perfection is a static condition. But

perfection can be a dynamic condition in which the agent or being in question expresses its perfection by engaging in the activity of becoming. Thus an absolute being can engage in the activity of becoming in order to express its perfection in manifold ways. Therefore, becoming does not detract from the perfection of absolute being.

### Chit

Brahman is also absolute consciousness. This implies absolute freedom or autonomy. All of Brahman's activities and states of being should be self-determined. Absolute consciousness must possess creative force or energy. Aurobindo refers to this force as "consciousness-force" or "conscious-force". It is a conscious and, therefore, self-regulating and purposive force or energy. This is the force which brings about the existence of the cosmos, sustains all things, and brings about all of the changes and developments in the cosmos. All natural forces or energies, all powers of sentient and conscious beings, are forms of Brahman's consciousness-force.

There are three primary powers of absolute consciousness: 1) The power to bring about infinite variations in its own state or status, and in its creations, 2) The power to determine the scope and intensity of its own manifold powers, and 3) The power of self-absorption, or the power of plunging itself into a state in which there is self-awareness but no self-knowledge, or only partial self-knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

Absolute consciousness must be capable of functioning simultaneously in many different states and levels without losing its identity.<sup>26</sup> It can be simultaneously passive and active or dynamic, witnessing and supporting from its passive state the operations of its dynamic state "like an ocean immobile below (while) throwing up a mobility of waves on its surface".<sup>27</sup> It is simultaneously conscious of itself as constituting the transcendent, the cosmic, and the individual levels of existence.<sup>28</sup>

Our finite human consciousness is limited to one particular mode or poise of being at any given time. But the infinite conscious being of Brahman can take many simultaneous and enduring modes or poises. As Aurobindo writes:

We human beings are phenomenally a particular form of consciousness...and can only be...one thing at a time, one formation, one poise of being...But the Divine Consciousness is not so particularized, nor so limited; it can be many things at a time and take more than one enduring poise even for all time.<sup>29</sup>

Brahman's consciousness can organize itself in many forms. We tend to conceive of consciousness after our own normal waking consciousness. We identify "consciousness" with this normal waking consciousness, or normal human awareness. According to Aurobindo, this is a vulgar and shallow conception of consciousness. Consciousness has many forms or ranges. There is a form of consciousness unique to atoms and molecules. There is a vital form of consciousness which is

present in living entities ranging from the cell to the plant. And there is a form of consciousness unique to animals, a vital-mental consciousness which operates in terms of instinct and habit. "Mental consciousness", a form of consciousness which functions in terms of subject-object dichotomy, particularity, and multiplicity, and which is characterized by the limitations of ignorance, error, and falsehood or deformation of truth, is only the form of consciousness possessed by humans in their present stage of evolution. The fact that some humans have attained higher states of consciousness, e.g., mystical states of consciousness, and higher powers of consciousness, e.g., genius, inspiration, clairvoyance, etc., indicates that there are higher forms of consciousness as superior to the normal human mental consciousness as the latter is to plant-consciousness and animal-consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

### Ananda

Absolute bliss or "delight of being" is also the nature of Brahman. Aurobindo asserts that "Absoluteness of conscious existence is illimitable bliss of conscious existence".<sup>31</sup> This suggests that absolute conscious being must necessarily be absolutely blissful. Absolute conscious being is not limited by anything. There can be no suffering in it due to ignorance or incapacity. Therefore, it must also possess an unlimited joy or delight of existence.

According to Aurobindo, this delight or bliss of existence is dynamic and can express itself in manifold forms. Further, it is not a monotonous joy or delight. Since absolute consciousness has the capacity to bring about infinite variations in its states of being, it can also bring about infinite variations in its delight of being and activity.<sup>32</sup> Absolute bliss or delight is inherent in Brahman and has no cause. It is unconditioned, not dependent on or modified by anything. This delight or bliss is universal, all-embracing, and all-encompassing.

The ascription of unconditioned bliss or delight of being to the Absolute distinguishes Aurobindo's conception from Hegel's conception of the Absolute. According to Aurobindo, the Absolute reveals itself as Satchitananda or being-consciousness-bliss, and not as a "bloodless ballet of categories", to use Bradley's phrase. The bliss of the Absolute constitutes the beauty and value of the world in as much as its being constitutes the reality of the world and its consciousness constitutes the intelligibility of the world. The world as a manifestation of the Absolute must exhibit features corresponding to being, consciousness, and bliss of the Absolute, i.e., reality, intelligibility, and beauty.

According to Steve Odin, there is a parallel between Aurobindo's emphasis on being, consciousness, and bliss as the essential and interlocked aspects of the Absolute and Pierce's emphasis on the categories of Firstness (aesthetic

value), Secondness (existence), and Thirdness (logical structure) as constitutive, in their interlocked togetherness, of all phenomena. Odin writes that

Pierce made a thoroughgoing critique of the history of western philosophy, arguing that all speculative systems were constructed upon the basis of one or two of these categories, but prior to his own scheme, none had framed reality in terms of all three essential categories in their interlocked togetherness. Operating on similar premises regarding the tripartite structure of reality, Sri Aurobindo criticizes the notion of the Absolute as merely Sat (being) and Cit (consciousness), arguing that it must include the Ananda or aesthetic-value aspect as well.<sup>33</sup>

There is another important difference between Hegel's conception of the Absolute and Aurobindo's conception. Aurobindo does not identify absolute consciousness with reason. Aurobindo would argue that reason is a faculty of Mind, and Mind is only a limited mode or form of consciousness. Since absolute consciousness is unlimited, it cannot be identified with reason or with the Mind.

### The Argument From Religious Experience

One of the Sufis was asked, "What is the proof of the creator's existence?" He replied, "The morning renders the lamp unnecessary." Another of them says, "One who seeks God through logical proof is like someone searching for the sun with a lamp."

Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi

What sort of an argument does Aurobindo offer in support of his claim that there exists a being whose nature is absolute substance, absolute consciousness, and absolute bliss?

Although Aurobindo refers to utterances in the Upanishads describing Brahman, he does not argue that Brahman exists because the Upanishads affirm its existence. Instead, he appeals to spiritual or religious experience. The following remarks show that he relies on the argument from spiritual or religious experience for the existence of Brahman:

...the belief in the Divine...rests on a great mass of human experience which has been accumulating through the centuries....<sup>34</sup>

Spiritual experience tells us that there is a reality which supports and pervades all things... and is at its summits and in its essence an infinite and eternal Being, Consciousness, and Bliss of existence.<sup>35</sup>

Our fundamental cognition of the Absolute, our substantial spiritual experience of it...is of an infinite and eternal Existence, an infinite and eternal Consciousness, an infinite and eternal Delight of existence.<sup>36</sup>

We should note that as a mystic who is aware of the reality of Brahman, Aurobindo does not need any "proof" or evidence of the existence of Brahman. The issue, therefore, is what sort of evidence does he offer to non-mystics in support of his affirmation of Brahman's existence.

Aurobindo describes his position as "mystic empiricism", a form of empiricism which countenances spiritual experiences in addition to ordinary sensory and psychological

experiences. According to this "mystic empiricism" spiritual experiences have the same status, in regard to claims about Brahman, that sensory experiences have in regard to claims about physical objects. Stephen Phillips in his Aurobindo's Philosophy Of Brahman ascribes the following "parallelism thesis" to Aurobindo:

In whatever way a basic proposition justifies an objective claim, in just that way basic mystic propositions justify objective mystic claims.<sup>37</sup>

Basic propositions are observation statements. An objective claim is a claim which if true would entail the existence of an object that is intersubjectively experienceable. A basic mystic proposition is a description of an immediate mystical experience. An objective mystic claim is a claim that goes beyond the mystical experience and entails objective existence.

Phillips calls this thesis the "parallelism thesis" because it affirms an epistemic parallelism between mystic or spiritual experiences and sensory experiences. Mystical or spiritual experiences reveal objects in the same or in a parallel way to the revelations of sense experience.

Aurobindo's mystic empiricism presupposes that mystical or spiritual experiences are veridical or have cognitive value. Several objections could be raised against this presupposition. In fact, Aurobindo states some of these objections and attempts to meet them.



One objection is that spiritual experience cannot be reliable source of knowledge because it is subjective and, therefore, could be tainted with error, delusion, and the preconceptions of the individual.

Aurobindo's response to this objection is that spiritual experience is indeed subjective because it pertains to an inner reality and not to a physical or material object or phenomenon. He remarks that "...the object of the mystic is self-knowledge and God-knowledge, and that can only be arrived at by an inward and not by an outward gaze....".<sup>38</sup> But error, delusion, and preconceptions of the individual are not peculiar to spiritual experiences or to the subjective domain. These factors can also taint sensory experiences and there is nothing inherent in the physical or objective domain that excludes them. The possibility of error and delusion etc., are always present in any form of experience or domain of knowledge and cannot constitute an a priori reason for dismissing spiritual experience as a source of knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

Aurobindo argues that our consciousness is the means of our knowledge of external objects. Subjective experience is an indispensable condition of objective knowledge, our knowledge of the external world. Thus if subjective experience is inherently unreliable, then it follows that our objective knowledge is also in jeopardy. If subjective experience cannot support claims about Brahman or other "inner realities", it also cannot support claims about external

objects or everyday psychological claims. It would evidently be arbitrary to assume that subjective experience can have veridicality only in the case of claims about the external world. As Aurobindo writes:

Indeed, we have no means of knowing the objective universe except by our subjective consciousness of which the physical senses themselves are instruments...If we deny the evidence of this (consciousness) for subjective or for supraphysical objectivities, there is no sufficient reason to concede reality to its evidence for physical objectivities; if the inner or supraphysical objects of consciousness are unreal, the objective physical universe has also every chance of being unreal.<sup>40</sup>

Here Aurobindo implicitly relies on the principle of credulity according to which if it seems to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present. He seems to think that there is no good reason to withhold this principle in the context of mystical or spiritual experiences while applying it in the context of ordinary sensory and psychological experiences.

Richard Swinburne's defense of the principle of credulity is worth considering in this context. Swinburne points out that the failure to apply the principle of credulity in the context of ordinary experiences will land us in the sceptical bog and that if it is legitimate to apply this principle to ordinary experiences, it must be shown why it is not legitimate to apply it to spiritual or religious experiences.

One argument is that the principle of credulity is not an ultimate principle of rationality, but itself requires inductive justification. The fact that it appears that x is present is good evidence for supposing that x is present only if it is true that whenever in the past it appeared that x was present, it turned out to be the case that x was present. Such inductive justification is available in the case of ordinary experiences, but not in the case of religious experiences. Therefore, the principle of credulity must be restricted to ordinary experiences.<sup>41</sup>

Swinburne argues that the main problem with this argument is that in order to inductively justify the belief that a table is present because it seems so, we must have evidence of past experiences. But an inductive inference from past experiences to future experiences is only reliable if we correctly remember our past experiences. And we cannot inductively justify our supposition that we correctly remember our past experiences. It would be circular to offer an inductive justification of the reliability of memory-claims. Thus we have to rely on the basic principle that things are what they seem, that the fact that it seems to us that we have had certain past experiences is good evidence for the belief that we had those experiences. Therefore, if it is justifiable to rely on the principle of credulity when other justifications fail in memory cases, it must be justifiable

to rely on it in other cases, such as religious experiences, when other justifications fail.<sup>42</sup>

However, Swinburne acknowledges that there are special considerations which limit the principle of credulity. These are considerations which undermine the claim that since *x* appears to be present, it is so. First, it may be shown that the claim was made under conditions or by a subject found in the past to be unreliable. Thus one may show that the given subject's perceptual claims are generally false, or that perceptual claims are generally false when made under the influence of a hallucinogenic, and that since the subject is under the influence of a hallucinogenic, his or her perceptual claims are false. Secondly, it may be shown that the perceptual claim pertains to an object of a certain kind in circumstances where similar perceptual claims have proved false. Thus if it seems to *A* that he has read what is on the cover of a book at a distance of more than a hundred yards, we can test him on a number of other occasions and see if he is able to read what is written on the cover of books at that distance. If he is unable to do so, we have good evidence that the original claim was false.

The third challenge involves showing that on background evidence it is probable that *x* was not present. Swinburne thinks that in this case the background evidence has to make it very improbable that *x* was present if it is to outweigh the force of the subject's experience sufficiently for it to

remain more probable than not that x was not present. Fourthly, it may be shown that x was probably not the cause of the experience of its seeming to me that x was there. The claim that x is present is challenged by producing a causal explanation of why it seemed to me that x was there, without reference to x at any stage.

Swinburne argues that since most religious experiences are had by subjects who normally make reliable perceptual claims, and have not had those experiences under the influence of hallucinogens, the first challenge cannot generally undermine claims based on religious experiences. The second challenge would consist in showing that normally claims based on religious experiences were unreliable, and this can only be accomplished by providing a good proof of the non-existence of God or any other "object" of religious experience. The third challenge consists in showing that it is more probable than not that x was not present. If God exists, then it is omnipresent. It would not be present only if it did not exist. Therefore, to be successful this challenge must prove that it is more probable than not that God does not exist.

The fourth challenge consists in showing that a given religious experience had a cause other than its purported object, e.g., God. Again, Swinburne argues that if God exists, then all causal processes only operate because God sustains them. Any experience which seems to be of God, then, will be of God. Therefore, any attempt to show that God was

not responsible for the processes which caused a given religious experience of a subject can be successful only if it is also shown that there is no God.<sup>43</sup>

To return to objections to Aurobindo's mystic empiricism, it could be argued that spiritual experiences are not normal experiences and that claims based on them cannot be verified or confirmed by ordinary individuals. By contrast, claims about physical reality can be verified in terms of the normal or everyday experiences of individuals. Therefore, claims based on spiritual experiences are suspect in comparison with claims about physical reality.

Aurobindo argues that this objection assumes the correctness of the standard that only a claim which can be verified or confirmed by ordinary individuals in terms of their everyday experiences can be said to be true. He thinks that this standard is based on the egoistic illusion of the ordinary individual to be the judge of everything merely on the basis of his or her limited experience. He points out that this standard of truth would exclude a priori everything that exceeds the bounds of the average individual or the common mentality. In Aurobindo's words:

Obviously this is a false standard of reality and of knowledge, since this means the sovereignty of the normal or average mind and its limited capacity and experience, the exclusion of what is supernormal or beyond the average intelligence. In its extreme, this claim of the individual to be the judge of everything is an egoistic illusion...The greatest inner discoveries, the experience of

self-being, the cosmic consciousness, the inner calm of the liberated spirit, the direct effect of mind upon mind, the knowledge of things by consciousness in direct contact with other consciousness or with its objects, most spiritual experiences of any value, cannot be brought before the tribunal of the common mentality which has no experience of these things....<sup>44</sup>

Aurobindo also argues that even in matters pertaining to the objective, physical order of reality, the individual must acquire the requisite capacity by training before he or she can judge whether a claim is true or false. How can an individual untrained in physics judge whether the theory of relativity is true or false? How can an individual untrained in chemistry judge whether an experiment has been successful? Similarly, not every individual can set himself or herself as the judge of spiritual claims or experiences without having the appropriate experience and ability.

It should be emphasized that Aurobindo does not reject the criterion of intersubjective verifiability nor does he exclude it from the domain of spiritual experiences. He maintains that all individuals can verify or judge spiritual experiences, but only by undergoing spiritual training themselves. Unless one has spiritual capacities, one cannot verify or adjudicate claims based on spiritual experiences. In Aurobindo's words:

All reality, all experience must be indeed, to be held as true, be capable of verification by a same or similar experience; so, in fact, all men can have a spiritual experience

and can follow it out and verify it themselves, but only when they have acquired the capacity or can follow the inner methods by which that experience and verification are made possible.<sup>45</sup>

The upshot of Aurobindo's remarks is that a non-mystic would be unable to test the truth of an objective mystical claim or the veridicality of a mystical or spiritual experience except by having that mystical or spiritual experience.

A major challenge to the argument from religious or spiritual experience is that because there is so much diversity in alleged spiritual experiences, and there are mutual conflicts among the claims made by individuals who have those experiences, spiritual experiences cannot be a reliable source of knowledge of the existence of Brahman.

Aurobindo responds to this challenge with the argument that the realm of spiritual experience is the realm of the Infinite, and, therefore, must admit of an infinite diversity of experiences and expressions. He also argues that the challenge presupposes that uniformity of experience and description is the criterion of veridicality or truth of claims about Brahman. Aurobindo maintains that this criterion is an illegitimate extension of the criterion of truth employed in the realm of physical objects. The truth about a physical object may be expressed in terms of a single idea or claim or theory compelling universal acceptance and exclusive of alternative ideas, claims, or theories. The truth of a claim about a physical object or phenomenon may be a function



of its correspondence to a universally recognized or recognizable fact or a set of facts. But spiritual truth, the truth about Brahman, the truth of a claim about the nature of Brahman, is not analogous to physical truth, the truth about the physical world, the truth of a claim about the nature of the physical world:

...this objection is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of spiritual knowledge. Spiritual truth is a truth of the spirit, not a truth of the intellect, not a mathematical theorem or a logical formula. It is a truth of the Infinite, one in an infinite diversity, and it can assume an infinite variety of aspects and formations...The hard logical and intellectual notion of truth as a single idea which all must accept, one idea or system of ideas defeating all other ideas or systems, or a single limited fact or single formula of facts which all must recognise, is an illegitimate transference from the limited truth of the physical field to the much more complex and plastic field of life and mind and spirit.<sup>46</sup>

In the case of physical or material reality there is generally a uniformity of experience and description among normal human subjects. Normal individuals generally perceive material objects in a uniform way. But at the vital level, the level of desires, emotions etc., and even at the level of bodily life, there is less uniformity and greater diversity. No two individuals have the same degree of desire for the same object every time. No two individuals respond to the same illness in the same way. At the level of mental life the diversity becomes more sharply pronounced. There is a great

diversity in what individuals think or believe and how they think. We should only expect that at the level of the spirit, an infinite reality, there should be a diversity richer and greater than would be possible at the lower levels.

But it is also important to note that there is some unity in diversity at the vital and mental levels. Therefore, at the level of the Spirit there should also be a greater unity in diversity. Aurobindo maintains that there is a unity of truth of all spiritual experiences and there are general and universal aspects common to all spiritual experiences and lines of spiritual development. But all this unity and universality also admits of variations in content and form of expression. As Aurobindo writes:

The fundamental truth of spiritual experience is one, its consciousness is one, everywhere it follows the same general lines and tendencies of awakening and growth into spiritual being; for these are the imperatives of the spiritual consciousness. But also there are, based on those imperatives, numberless possibilities of variation of experience and expression....<sup>47</sup>

Thus it does not follow from the fact that there is a diversity of spiritual experiences that there is no common reality to which they pertain. There is diversity here because the Reality in question is infinite and admits of diverse aspects, modes of manifestation, paths, and forms of expression. But it is the same infinite reality which discloses itself to the aspiring soul in accordance with the

latter's stage of development and nature of aspiration. To the soul which aspires for a transcendental experience Brahman discloses itself as the supreme reality transcending the whole of the cosmos. To the soul which aspires for a personal union or communion Brahman discloses itself as a supreme person with whom the soul can have manifold relationships. Brahman thus adapts itself to the soul's stage of development and nature of aspiration. But perhaps Brahman has surprises as well. It may choose to disclose itself in a mode of being utterly new or novel to the soul. These novel disclosures are the source of the claims of some mystics that God is ever-new.

One should also consider the distinction between the spiritual experience and the form in which an individual gives expression to it. The form of expression is, of course, conditioned by the nature of the individual and his or her cultural environment. It is possible that two apparently different accounts may refer to the same experience. Thus just because we have two different accounts or descriptions we should not jump to the conclusion that they refer to two different experiences. Aurobindo believes that the medieval European and Indian mystics had substantially the same experiences of the Divine Reality even though their accounts differ in terms of names, forms, and religious coloring.<sup>48</sup>

The diversity of spiritual experiences is not only due to the nature of the Reality to which they pertain, but also due

to the stage of spiritual development of the individual. Aurobindo would explain disagreements among those who have authentic spiritual experiences in terms of differences in their stage of spiritual development.<sup>49</sup> One's understanding of spiritual reality, of the nature of God, varies in accordance with one's stage of development, with one's level of consciousness. According to Aurobindo, there is a hierarchy of levels of consciousness each with its own range of spiritual experiences. Consequently, there will be qualitative differences among spiritual experiences corresponding to different levels of consciousness.

Most of the conflicts or oppositions in the description of spiritual reality are due to the nature of the mental consciousness which functions in terms of divisions and oppositions. The unity behind diverse and apparently conflicting spiritual experiences can only be discerned at the highest level of consciousness, the supramental.<sup>50</sup>

Another challenge to the argument from spiritual experience comes from Freudian psychoanalysis. Spiritual experiences can now be explained away in terms of childhood trauma, repressed sexuality, psychological fixations etc. Since we can give psychoanalytic causal explanations of spiritual experiences, such experiences have no evidential force in regard to the existence of Brahman.

Aurobindo's remarks on Freudian psychoanalysis and its attempt to explain away religious experience are interesting

and illuminating and have not been seriously considered in the extant literature:

The psycho-analysis of Freud...takes up a certain part, the darkest, the most perilous, the unhealthiest part of the nature, the lower vital subconscious layer, isolates some of its most morbid phenomena and attributes to it and them an action out of all proportion to its true role in the nature...As in all infant sciences, the universal habit of the human mind-- to take a partial or local truth, generalise it unduly and try to explain a whole field of Nature in its narrow terms --runs riot here.<sup>51</sup>

I find it difficult to take these psycho-analysts...seriously when they try to scrutinise spiritual experiences by the flicker of their torch-lights...They look from down up and explain the higher lights by the lower obscurities; but the foundation of these things is above and not below. The superconscient, not the subconscient, is the true foundation of things...The self-chosen field of these psychologists is besides poor, dark, and limited; you must know the whole before you can know the part and the highest before you can truly understand the lowest.<sup>52</sup>

It is clear from these comments that Aurobindo rejects reductive psychoanalytic explanations of religious or spiritual experience. The problem with Freudian psychoanalysis is that it tries to explain the higher aspects of our existence in terms of the lower. But according to Aurobindo, the lower levels of our being are dependent on the higher. The superconscient or the spirit illumines all aspects of our existence, including the lower ones. But the workings of the spirit cannot be explained in terms of what goes on in the lower levels of our being. As Aurobindo remarks "The sig-

nificance of the lotus is not to be found by analysing the secrets of the mud from which it grows here; its secret is to be found in the heavenly archetype of the lotus that blooms for ever in the Light above".<sup>53</sup>

Further, it is a mistake to try to understand the whole in terms of the part. The part must be understood in terms of its place in the whole. Freudian psychoanalysis seeks to understand the whole structure of the human person in terms of one obscure part, the subconscious or subconscient. Moreover, it examines only the subconscious sexual tendencies. There are other tendencies at work in the subconscious. More importantly, there are other parts of the human person, and the complex interaction between their tendencies constitutes the psychological life of individuals. It is not reasonable to attempt to understand the whole of the psychological life of individuals in terms of one part or structure, much less in terms of one type of tendency of a part. Aurobindo does not deny that subconscious sexual desires or tendencies do influence behavior, but he rejects the attempt to explain all aspects of our existence in terms of those tendencies.

Given the existence of Brahman, what is its relationship to the world? How does the world come into being? Aurobindo tries to account for the existence of the world in terms of his theory of the Supermind.

## CHAPTER 2

THE SUPERMIND

The concept of Supermind plays a very important role in Aurobindo's metaphysics. Given its importance, it is disconcerting to note ambiguities in Aurobindo's conception of the ontological status of the Supermind. He sometimes conceives of it as an inherent creative power of Brahman. On other occasions, he seems to imply that it is an agent. And finally, he also asserts that it is a mode of Brahman and corresponds to the "God" of theism. In this third sense, the Supermind is Brahman as God, Brahman not in its transcendent poise of pure, infinite being, but in its poise or mode of being as the creator, sustainer, and developer of all worlds. As Aurobindo writes:

We have to regard this all-containing, all-originating, all-consummating Supermind as the nature of the Divine Being, not indeed in its absolute self-existence, but in its action as the...Creator of its own worlds. This is the truth of that which we call God.<sup>54</sup>

No doubt it is Satchitananda itself that is this (Supermind), but Satchitananda not resting in its pure infinite invariable consciousness, but proceeding out of this primal poise...into...creation.<sup>55</sup>

Ram Shanker Misra's exposition faithfully reflects the ambiguities in Aurobindo's conception of the Supermind. Misra writes that "Supermind is not something different from

Satchitananda...It is Satchitananda itself in its aspect of creator. It is through the Supermind that Satchitananda manifests the universe...It is an intermediary principle between Satchitananda and the world".<sup>56</sup> On the one hand, Misra suggests that the Supermind is Satchitananda or Brahman itself in its poise or mode as the creator. On the other hand, he suggests that it is the means or instrument by which Satchitananda creates. And then he goes on to assert that the Supermind is an "intermediary principle" between Satchitananda and the world.

I think it is coherent to view the Supermind as a mode of Brahman rather than as an independent agent or a power. It would not be coherent to suppose that the Supermind is an agent independent of Brahman because it is supposed to be an infinite being and there cannot be two infinite beings or agents. While it is possible to consider it as a power of Brahman, this interpretation is at odds with Aurobindo's ascription of a distinctive mode of knowledge, i.e., knowledge by identity, to the Supermind. It would not be appropriate to ascribe a mode of knowledge to a power of a being. Thus we are left with the coherent interpretation of the Supermind as one of the modes or poises of Brahman, the creator mode in which Brahman conceives, actualises, and governs worlds.

Although the Supermind corresponds to the "God" of theism, it has some distinctive features. It is involved or



immanent in the world and is not an "extra-cosmic" creator. It does not create ex nihilo, but manifests all things from its own being. Most importantly, it represents the highest state of consciousness attainable by individuals. There is no unbridgeable gulf between the individual and the Supermind. The individual can not only have glimpses or experiences of the Supermind, but also attain an enduring state of oneness with it and partake its knowledge, power, and bliss. As Aurobindo writes,

This (Supermind) is not entirely alien to us; it does not belong solely and incommunicably to a Being who is entirely other than ourselves...If it seems to be seated on heights far above us, yet are they heights of our own being and accessible to our tread. We can not only infer and glimpse that Truth, but we are capable of realising it...to dwell there permanently on this last and highest summit...is in the end the supreme ideal for our evolving human consciousness when it seeks not self-annulment but self-perfection.<sup>57</sup>

The Supermind or God is necessarily omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. All things are forms of the Supermind's conscious being and exist within it. Therefore, it is necessarily present in them. Since all things are constituted by the Supermind's consciousness and experienced by it, it is necessarily omniscient. The will of the Supermind cannot be limited or contradicted by anything external or internal. There can be nothing external to the Supermind, and so there is no question of limitation or contradiction by anything

external. And since the Supermind's consciousness is absolutely harmonious, there can be no internal limitation or contradiction of its force and will. Hence, it is necessarily omnipotent.

The Supermind or God, as a mode or poise of Brahman, must possess absolute bliss of existence. Aurobindo thinks that absolute bliss entails absolute goodness and absolute love.<sup>58</sup> A being whose nature is absolute bliss must necessarily be absolutely good, and therefore, absolutely loving. This claim raises the interesting philosophical issue of whether a being whose nature is absolute bliss, delight, or joy, can be evil.

I think it could be argued that there is an incoherence in the notion of an absolutely blissful or joyous, but morally evil being. Evil implies a division between the self and the other and a hostile attitude towards the other. Absolute joy or bliss involves absence of division between self and the other and certainly excludes a hostile attitude towards the other. Therefore, absolute joy or bliss and evil cannot coexist in a being.

Aurobindo maintains that absolute beauty is also the nature of God.<sup>59</sup> He thinks that God's beauty is an expression of its absolute bliss of being.<sup>60</sup> Aurobindo follows Hindu theism in ascribing absolute beauty to God. Mainstream Judeo-Christian theism and Islamic theism do not seem to include or emphasize beauty as an attribute of God. This is a significant lacuna in these conceptions of God. If absolute

beauty is also the nature of God, it would follow that the experience of God is the highest aesthetic experience we can have. God would thus have significance for our aesthetic needs as well.

Aurobindo also makes a reference somewhere in his writings to God's humor and playfulness. Most theologians and mystics in the Judeo-Christian tradition do not seem to have glimpsed or emphasized this aspect of God's infinitely rich nature. An intelligent and blissful being must have the capacity for humor and playfulness. It is important to acknowledge and emphasize these attributes in order to "save" God from the clutches of a portentous, pinched and hidebound, life-quelling and laughterless religiosity!

Before we examine Aurobindo's arguments for the existence of the Supermind, we should note that he affirms the coherence or intelligibility of its attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence etc. He claims that "...the current religious notions of the omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence of the Divine Being, far from being an irrational imagination...are perfectly rational and in no way contradict either...logic...or the indications of observation and experience."<sup>61</sup> But there have been attempts in contemporary philosophy of religion to show that some of these attributes are incoherent.

It has been argued that the concept of omnipotence involves a logical paradox. If a being is omnipotent, then it

can perform all logically possible actions. Therefore, an omnipotent being should be able to create a being it cannot subsequently control. If it cannot create such a being, then there is a logically possible action an omnipotent being cannot perform, and this is self-contradictory. But if it can create such a being, then again there would be a logically possible action, namely controlling this being, which an omnipotent being cannot perform, and this is also self-contradictory. Either way, the supposition that there is an omnipotent being entails a logical contradiction, and therefore the concept of omnipotence is incoherent.

One of the problems with this argument is that it assumes that it is logically possible for an omnipotent being to create something it cannot control. I think that it does not make sense to suppose that an omnipotent being can create something it cannot control. An omnipotent being cannot perform actions or bring about states of affairs which is not logically possible for it to do or bring about. However, it is logically possible for an omnipotent being to create something which it chooses not to control. Since the Supermind is also completely free, it can choose not to exercise its powers of control in order to preserve a great good, in this case the free will of the being it has created. This does not imply that it has undergone any change in its essential nature as an omnipotent being.

The coherence of the concept of an omniscient being has also been challenged. Norman Kretzmann argues that some propositions can be known only at certain times or by certain persons. The proposition "Today is March 28" can only be known on March 28. Kretzmann distinguishes this proposition from the proposition that on March 28 it is March 28, which can be known at any time. The proposition "Today is March 28" cannot be known at any time before or after March 28. Therefore, at any instant of time a person must be necessarily ignorant of a true proposition which can be uttered at another instant. Hence, at any instant a person must be necessarily ignorant of something. It follows from this that there cannot be an omniscient being.

Richard Swinburne defends the coherence of the concept of omniscience by arguing against Kretzmann's objections. Swinburne argues that if A knows on October 2 that "Today is Oct 2", B can certainly know on Oct 3 A's item of knowledge even though B cannot express that knowledge in the same words or sentence as A does. Two people can know the same thing even if they must use different words to express their knowledge.

Swinburne accepts Hector-Neri Castaneda's principle that if a sentence of the form "X knows that a person Y knows that..." formulates a true statement, then the person X knows the statement formulated by the clause filling the blank "...". If Elgabrownny knows that Omar knows that Cairo is the

capital of Egypt or that Halemi is sick, then Elgabrownny knows that Cairo is the capital of Egypt or that Halemi is sick. But if "Omar knows that Mary knows that her own house has two bedrooms", it does not follow that "Omar knows that her own house has two bedrooms", but that "Omar knows that Mary's house has two bedrooms".

Swinburne argues that if Castaneda's principle is correct, then Kretzmann's claims seem false. If A knows on March 28 the proposition "Today is March 28", B on March 29 can know that A knew what he did on March 28. We can report B's knowledge as follows: B knew on March 29 that on the previous day A knew that it was then March 28. Hence, according to Castaneda's principle, B knows on March 29 what A knew on March 28.

I am inclined to agree with Swinburne that the concepts of omnipotence and omniscience are coherent. Omnipotence and omniscience are intuitively intelligible to us. The onus is on the critic to show that individuals, theists and atheists alike, are mistaken in thinking that they understand what it is for there to be an omnipotent and omniscient being.

There have also been arguments to the effect that some of the attributes of God are not mutually consistent. According to Aurobindo the Supermind or God is absolutely free and omniscient. But it has been argued that omniscience and freedom are incompatible. If omniscience entails foreknowledge, then the Supermind must have foreknowledge of its own

actions. But if the Supermind has foreknowledge of its own actions, then it cannot but perform those actions. Hence, it cannot be free not to perform those actions. Thus an omniscient being cannot also be absolutely free.

The compatibility of omniscience and immutability has been questioned by Norman Kretzmann. If God is omniscient, then it has knowledge of time. Knowledge of time is changeable knowledge. Therefore, if God has knowledge of time, then God's knowledge must change. And if God's knowledge is subject to change, God cannot be immutable.

The plausibility of the argument for the claim that a being cannot be omniscient and perfectly free rests on the premise that omniscience entails foreknowledge. If we construe omniscience in terms which do not involve foreknowledge or in terms which restrict the scope of foreknowledge, then omniscience and freedom can be made compatible.

Thus if omniscience is construed in terms of knowledge of all true propositions, one could then argue that propositions about the future actions of agents are neither true nor false until the agents perform the actions, and that, therefore, a being will not have to know them in order to be omniscient. It follows that an omniscient being does not necessarily have to know its own future actions. Hence, it can be free in respect of its own future actions.

Swinburne suggests that God could limit its own omniscience in order to preserve its freedom. God could limit its omniscience such that it knows everything except which free choices it will make. I think this implies that omniscience has to be construed in terms of the capacity to know any state of affairs. Since God is free, it is free to exercise this capacity or not to do so at any time. Since God has good reasons to preserve its own freedom, it would choose not to know in advance about its future actions. Thus, on this construal of omniscience, a being can be perfectly free and omniscient.

The validity of the objection that a being cannot have knowledge of time and yet be immutable depends on how we understand God's immutability. According to Richard Swinburne, God's immutability can be understood in a weaker or stronger sense. In the weaker sense, immutability means that there is no change in God's essential nature. In the stronger sense, immutability means that there is no change at all in God. It is clear that immutability as understood in the weaker sense is compatible with having knowledge of time. God's knowledge of time is changeable, but this does not imply that God's essential nature undergoes change. In this context, it is worth noting that Aurobindo understands God's immutability in the weaker sense and not in the stronger sense. This is clear from the fact that he affirms that God engages in the activity of becoming. If God engages in the



activity of becoming, then there is change in God, and this is inconsistent with the stronger sense of immutability.

### **The Existence Of The Supermind**

In the extant literature on Aurobindo's metaphysics there is hardly any adequate attempt to extract and examine his arguments for the existence of the Supermind. One gets the impression that Aurobindo affirms the existence of the Supermind solely on the basis of his own spiritual experiences. This is not the case. Although Aurobindo appeals to his own spiritual experiences and the experiences of the poet-seers who composed the Vedas, he also offers other quite original arguments for the existence of the Supermind.

We should recall that the Supermind is not a distinct entity, but a mode or poise of Brahman. Brahman in itself is a spaceless, timeless, pure, transcendent Being. It is the "One" and the "All". There are no manifestations, relations, etc., in it. It is the sole and supreme reality. From the standpoint of this transcendent poise of being, there is nothing else for Brahman to perceive. There are no worlds, objects, beings, etc., at all for Brahman. But in its poise of being as the Supermind, Brahman is aware of the potentialities of its nature and brings about their actualisation and development. The Supermind is immanent in the whole of space and in all things. It is not timeless, but eternal. It is the creator, sustainer, and developer of all things.

Aurobindo appeals to spiritual experience in support of his claim that the Supermind exists. The experience of the transcendent Brahman or the Absolute is distinct from the experience of the Supermind. These are experiences of two distinct modes of being of Brahman. In an experience of the transcendent mode of Brahman, there is the abolition of individuality and world-consciousness. In this state of consciousness, Brahman is the sole and supreme Reality. Sri Ramakrishna compared this experience to the dissolution of a ball of salt in the ocean. But the experience of the Supermind does not involve abolition of individuality and world-consciousness. One perceives the world as a single harmonious whole existing in the Supermind. The nature of all things, the significance of their relationships and patterns of development are self-evident to the individual consciousness.

Aurobindo also argues that if we admit the existence of Brahman and accept the reality of a spatio-temporal universe of finite entities with determinate qualities governed by laws of causation, we are bound to admit the existence of the Supermind. Since Brahman in itself, in its transcendent poise is without any movement of becoming or manifestation, the universe could not have come into being from this transcendent poise or mode of Brahman. It could have been manifested only in another poise or mode of Brahman, i.e., the Supermind, in which Brahman as an omnipresent, omnipotent,

and omniscient being conceives and brings about the existence and development of diverse objects, forces, phenomena, etc.<sup>62</sup>

The Supermind is the necessary condition of the orderly, law-governed manifestation of the potentialities inherent in Brahman. There are infinite potentialities in Brahman and there are infinite forms in which they can be manifested. Without the omniscient, selective, and order-imposing action of the Supermind, the manifestation of these potentialities would result in a chaos and not a cosmos. As Aurobindo writes:

Without this ordering (Supermind) the manifestation would be merely a shifting chaos, precisely because the potentiality is infinite which by itself might lead only to a play of uncontrolled, unbounded Chance. If there were only infinite potentiality without any law of guiding truth and harmonious self-vision...the world could be nothing but a teeming, amorphous, confused (existence).<sup>63</sup>

Aurobindo argues that the Supermind brings about the existence of universes of determinate entities by means of two fundamental processes, involution and evolution. Involution is a necessary condition of evolution and therefore precedes the latter. I will examine Aurobindo's theory of involution in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### INVOLUTION

Aurobindo's theory of involution tries to explain why life and mind have evolved in matter. There are no laws of matter which necessitate the evolution of life and mind. Therefore, an explanation of the fact of evolution of life and mind is required. This explanation must be distinguished from an explanation of the process of the evolution of life and mind. The scientific theory of evolution has been concerned with the process of evolution, but it has failed to offer an explanation of why there is an evolution of life and mind from insentient and unconscious matter.

The theory of involution explains the evolution of life and mind in terms of their involution in matter. A central claim of this theory is that only that which exists involved, that which is implicit, or immanent, can evolve. Thus y can evolve from x if y is involved or immanent in x. As Aurobindo declares:

...all that evolves already existed involved,  
passive or otherwise active, but in either  
case concealed from us....<sup>64</sup>

...only what is involved can evolve, other-  
wise there could be no emergence.<sup>65</sup>

Nothing can evolve out of Matter which is not  
therein already contained.<sup>66</sup>

If all that evolves from y already existed involved or implicitly in it, then there must have occurred a process by which the evolutes or evolving elements became implicit or involved in y. This process is involution. Thus the evolution of life and mind from matter presupposes that sentience and consciousness are implicit or involved in matter. And this implicit or involved existence of sentience and consciousness in matter further presupposes the occurrence of a process of involution by which life and mind, or powers of sentience and consciousness, became implicit or involved in matter.

The notion of "involved existence" needs clarification here. The involved existence of x in y consists in the implicit existence or immanence of x in y. What does this mean? This means that a) all the powers of x exist in potentiality in y, b) only some of the powers of x are explicit in the initial state of y, and c) the rest of the powers of x become explicit with the development of y. Thus if the life-force is involved in matter, then a) all the powers of the life-force exist in potentiality in matter, b) only some of the powers of the life-force are explicit in the initial state of matter, and c) the rest of the powers of the life-force become explicit in matter with the latter's development.

The claim that life and mind were made implicit or immanent in matter presupposes the existence of life, mind, and matter. How were these general determinates or "first principles" of our universe created by the Supermind? Matter

is a delimited manifestation of Sat or the divine substance of the Supermind, life-force is a delimited manifestation of divine energy or force, and mind is a delimited manifestation of the divine consciousness.<sup>67</sup> He maintains that these delimited "first principles" were manifested in the following sequence: 1) Mind, 2) Life-force, and 3) Matter.<sup>68</sup> I will examine the rationale of this sequence later.

Aurobindo does not clarify the notion of a delimited or finite manifestation in this context. I suggest that if x is a delimited manifestation of y, then x has only some of the powers and properties of y.

Aurobindo would reject the hypothesis that matter, life-force, and mind were created by the Supermind out of nothing. He thinks that the notion of ex nihilo creation by God is incoherent. It is not logically possible that things could have been created by God out of nothing because there is nothing else than God! Talk of creation out of nothing implies that there was a "nothing". But God is an infinite being and this excludes the possibility of creating out of an independent "nothing". Since God is an infinite being, creation must necessarily be a form of self-manifestation. God is Sat or infinite, all-inclusive substance. Therefore, all things must exist within God as its own manifestations. In Aurobindo's words:

It is not possible that (things) are made out of a Nothing, a Non-Existence other than the Absolute...Whatever is created must be of it

and in it...since there could be nothing else out of which it could create, any basis of creation seeming to be other than itself must be still really in itself and of itself and could not be something foreign to its existence.<sup>69</sup> The Infinite does not create, it manifests what is in itself, in its own essence of reality; it is itself the essence of all reality and all realities are powers of that one Reality....<sup>70</sup>

### The Stages Of Involution

Aurobindo asserts that involution has stages.<sup>71</sup> This implies that involution is not a random process. The general determinates, or "first principles", constitutive of our universe, e.g., Matter, life-force, and Mind, are not manifested randomly. There is an order, a direction, to involution. But it is not a progressive order or progressive directionality. Involution is an inverse process of development tending towards increasingly limited, exclusive, and fragmented levels of being.

Aurobindo refers to four major stages of involution. His account of these stages is sketchy and sometimes obscure. In the following paragraphs I will offer a reconstruction of Aurobindo's account of the stages of involution and examine its plausibility.

The first stage of involution is marked by the manifestation of the "Overmind" and the organisation of the overmental level of existence. The "Overmind" is a delimited Power.<sup>72</sup> Aurobindo uses the term "Overmind" to refer to both a power and an agent. Thus he describes it as "the Power that

at once connects and divides".<sup>73</sup> He also describes it as a "lower Power" in comparison with the Supermind.<sup>74</sup> But when he describes the Overmind as an "organiser", "a magician craftsman", "a delegate of the Supermind", and a "creator", he clearly has in mind an agent of some sort.<sup>75</sup>

It could be objected that the Overmind cannot both be a power and an agent. A power is a property of a substance or an agent and therefore cannot itself be an agent. But the "Overmind" is not a power in this sense. It is a "Power" in the sense in which Hitler can be described as an "evil power" or America can be described as a "great power".

I should also mention that sometimes Aurobindo uses the term "Overmind" to refer to an ontological level, a level of consciousness.<sup>76</sup> Thus when he claims that the higher types of Gods exist "in" the Overmind, he is evidently referring to an ontological level or "plane of existence".<sup>77</sup>

The main function of the "Overmind" is to bring about multiplicity and diversity in the universe. It separates the powers and aspects of the Absolute and brings about the manifestation of innumerable forms of substance, force or energy, consciousness, and bliss. The undivided wholeness of substance, consciousness, and bliss is modified by the "Overmind" into a teeming mass of independent potentialities of substance, consciousness, and bliss. As Aurobindo writes

Overmind thus gives to One Existence-Consciousness -Bliss the character of a teeming of infinite possibilities...Overmind is an



organiser of many potentialities, each affirming its separate reality but all capable of linking themselves together in many different but simultaneous ways, a magician craftsman empowered to weave the multi-colored warp and woof of manifestation of a single entity in a complex universe.<sup>78</sup>

The "Overmind" brings about the existence of innumerable independent, but complementary "Godheads" or Gods. Each God is a personification of a power or aspect of the Absolute and is capable of creating its own world, and each world is capable of interaction with the others.<sup>79</sup> Although the action of the "Overmind" is separative, it can also bring about various combinations of the powers and aspects of the Absolute. The Overmind has a tacit or implicit understanding of the essential unity of the separated powers and aspects. Further, the all-harmonising power of the Supermind is at work behind all the operations of the Overmind. This ensures that there is no conflict or opposition among the independent powers or Gods of the overmental level.

In the second stage of the involution, the Overmind brings about the manifestation of the "cosmic Mind", and through its medium organises the mental level. Aurobindo thus refers to "the original Mind principle in the involutory descent...."<sup>80</sup> Before I examine the nature of this "Mind", I would like to point out that Aurobindo gives an incoherent account of some intermediate stages or substages. He writes that "Overmind in the descent towards material creation has originated modifications of itself (such as) Intuition

especially with its penetrative lightning flashes of truth...."<sup>81</sup> "Intuition" seems to be used here in the sense of a form of consciousness. In the following lines Aurobindo refers to this "Intuition" as a "higher range of consciousness". All this contributes to a serious muddle! If the "Overmind" is an agency, then it does not make sense to speak of a form or "range" of consciousness as a "modification" of the "Overmind". And I fail to see how "Intuition" can be an agency. There can be agents with this capacity of "Intuition", but it does not make sense to construe it as an agency in itself.

Aurobindo fails to provide details which might enable us to construe "Intuition" as a further delimited power analogous to the "Overmind". He does not specify its function in the involutionary process nor does he explain why it is a "modification" of the Overmind. Perhaps Aurobindo intends to draw attention to intermediate levels of existence between the overmental and the mental levels, but his point is obscured by his language.

Why should the Supermind create the Overmind? Aurobindo thinks that the Supermind creates and acts indirectly through the medium of the Overmind in order to bring about an evolutionary material universe. If the Supermind were to create directly, an evolutionary material universe characterised by the struggle of consciousness to liberate itself from the inconscience and ignorance of matter would not

exist. A universe created directly by the Supermind would be perfect to start with and there would be no need of evolution or development:

If supermind were to start here from the beginning as the direct creative Power, a world of the kind we see now would be impossible; it would have been full of the divine Light from the beginning, there would be no involution in the inconscience of Matter, consequently no gradual striving evolution of consciousness in Matter.<sup>82</sup>

Supermind cannot manifest itself as the Creator Power in the universe from the beginning, for if it did, the Ignorance and Inconscience would be impossible or else the slow evolution necessary would change into a rapid transformation scene.<sup>83</sup>

Since the evolution of a divine life in a universe which begins in inconscience and ignorance is the challenge which the Supermind has set for itself, it has to create and act in terms of delimited intermediate powers such as the Overmind in order to bring about a universe whose origins lie in a fragmented, insentient, and unconscious material substance, and whose destiny consists in the struggle and liberation of consciousness.

To return to the second stage of involution, the "cosmic Mind" seems to be a more delimited power.<sup>84</sup> Aurobindo also refers to it as "universal Mind". This is actually a power of the Overmind which is separated from its source in involution.<sup>85</sup> The function of this power is to measure,

delimit, and divide the powers and aspects of the Absolute into mutually exclusive units. The Supermind holds the powers and aspects of substance, consciousness, and bliss in an indivisible unity. The Overmind separates the powers and aspects of substance, consciousness, and bliss, into independent, but concordant elements. But the Mind divides the powers and aspects of substance, consciousness, and bliss into exclusive units. Thus it is the Mind which creates the possibility of existence without explicit consciousness and consciousness without explicit bliss.

All opposites, e.g., heat and cold, light and darkness, pain and pleasure, are created by the divisive action of this power. The conflict and opposition of various entities and forces in the universe is due to the action of this Mind-Power. But the Supermind acts from behind a veil as it were and prevents all this division and conflict from relapsing into chaos and disintegration.

Aurobindo describes the "Mind" as an ignorant power.<sup>86</sup> The "Overmind" knows that it is a "delegate" of the Supermind and is conscious of the unity of existence. But the "Mind" acts as if it were an independent creative power. It does not know the existence of the Overmind and the Supermind and cannot comprehend the totality and the essential undivided wholeness of things.<sup>87</sup> Its action and understanding are confined to particular entities and compounds. Mind creates endless distinctions, divisions, and oppositions. As Aurobindo

remarks "Mind may divide, multiply, add, subtract, but it cannot get beyond the limits of this mathematics".<sup>88</sup>

Why should the Supermind bring about the manifestation of "Mind"? Aurobindo thinks that "Mind" is necessary to create a universe of finite individual entities and forces with fixed or determinate properties, relations, and lines of development.<sup>89</sup> A universe whose order is determined by checks and balances requires a power such as "Mind". This power is also needed to actualise opposites.

The third stage of involution is marked by the separation of the energy or force of Mind from its source. This energy or force is "Life". Aurobindo remarks that "Mind once existent, Life and Form of substance follow".<sup>90</sup> This stage also marks the descent from the mental level to the vital level, i.e., from a level of existence in which consciousness is free although limited, to a level in which it is "submerged" or absorbed in force or energy. The function of this life-force is to organise innumerable independent units of sentient substance and determine their relations.<sup>91</sup>

While the "Overmind" and "Mind" are conscious powers, "Life" is a subconscious power. This life-force is actually a delimited form of consciousness-force, a form in which the force is predominant and the consciousness is involved or only partially explicit. It appears as if consciousness has been separated from force, and, consequently, this life-force seems to operate blindly, apparently without any purpose or

intelligence. But the Supermind ensures that the operations of this life-force conform to a predetermined and meaningful pattern of creation.

The final stage of involution is characterised by the manifestation of "Matter", a delimited form of substance. This stage marks the descent into the level of the "Inconscient", the level of fragmented material particles with no explicit energy, sentience or consciousness in them. It is the culmination of the process of division of substance, force, consciousness, and bliss which begins at the level of the "Mind".

In this process of involutory manifestation by the Supermind, the higher Powers become involved or implicit in the lower Powers. Thus all the higher Powers, Supermind, Overmind, Mind, and Life, are involved in "Matter".

While it is quite clear from Aurobindo's account that each succeeding stage corresponds to a more delimited power and ontological level, and that, therefore, a process of involution is going on, the logic of the sequence of the stages is obscure. Why does the involutory manifestation start with the "Overmind" and culminate in "Matter"? What is the "necessity" of the order of the involutory manifestations? Aurobindo has not provided an adequate explanation and his commentators have failed even to raise the issue.

A plausible explanation of the sequence of the stages of involution can be provided by showing that the Power or

"principle" corresponding to each succeeding stage presupposes the existence of the Power or "principle" corresponding to the preceding stage. Thus we would have to show that the "Overmind" presupposes the existence of the Supermind, "Mind" presupposes the existence of the "Overmind", "Life" presupposes the existence of "Mind", and "Matter" presupposes the existence of "Life".

The function of the "Overmind" is to separate the powers and aspects of absolute substance, consciousness, force, and bliss, into independent, but complementary units or "Godheads". The Overmind can do this only if these powers and aspects have been differentiated and held in a state of interlocked togetherness and interdependence. And the Supermind is the Power which differentiates these powers and aspects, but holds them together in a state of interdependence. It is in this sense that the Overmind presupposes the existence of the Supermind.

The function of the "Mind" is to divide the powers and aspects of the absolute substance, consciousness, etc., into opposites. Now unless these powers and aspects are separated into independent units, it would not be possible to create divisions or oppositions among them. Thus the "Mind" presupposes the existence of the "Overmind".

It is more difficult to account for the order of the next two stages of involution. We would have to show that "Life" presupposes the existence of "Mind", and "Matter"

presupposes the existence of "Life". "Life" is a type of force or energy. Why should it presuppose the existence of the "Mind"? Aurobindo, in a different context, writes that "Life appears as a form of energy of consciousness...it may be said to be an energy aspect of Mind...."<sup>92</sup> This gives us a clue to the answer to our question. If "Life" is an energy or force of "Mind", and is separated into an autonomous subconscious power by involution, then evidently it presupposes the existence of "Mind".

The existence of atomic material particles would presuppose the existence of "Life" only if those particles came into being by a process of fragmentation and condensation of life-energy into infinitesimal units of Matter. Aurobindo seems to think that this would be the culmination of the divisive action of "Mind".<sup>93</sup> "Mind" brings about a fragmentation of life-energy into infinitesimal quanta or pockets of energy which are then "condensed" as material particles. Thus the existence of "Matter" presupposes the existence of "Life" and "Mind".

It could be asked whether involution is a temporal process. Aurobindo does not address this issue. Only one of his Indian commentators, Nolini Kanta Gupta, raises this issue. He admits that it is a temporal process, but his claim that involution does not occur in "physical time", but in "something antecedent, something parallel to it in another dimension" is too vague to merit consideration.<sup>94</sup> Since



involution has stages, and stages are temporal units, it follows that it is a temporal process or a process which takes time.

Another issue is whether involution happens only once or continuously. Aurobindo gives no indication that involution occurs continuously. If involution occurred continuously, then each involutory movement would culminate in a universe of primal atomic matter parallel to the others including ours and would be followed by evolution. But it could be argued that a continuous involutory process would be superfluous given the Supermind's project of bringing about the evolution of the divine life in an inconscient universe. Nothing significant would be achieved by this proliferation of universes of inconscient Matter.

Why does the Supermind initiate this process of involution? The answer lies in the claim that involution is a necessary condition of evolution. If the Supermind intends to bring about an evolutionary manifestation of its potentialities in Matter, and involution is a necessary condition of evolution, it follows that the Supermind must bring about its own involution into Matter.

But why does the Supermind choose to bring about an evolutionary manifestation of its potentialities in Matter?

An evolutionary form of manifestation consists in the Supermind's bringing about the development of its potentialities from some basic substance. This evolutionary mani-

festation implies that those potentialities gradually become explicit and develop in and from that basic substance. It also presupposes that those potentialities exist involved or implicit in the basic substance. A non evolutionary form of manifestation consists in the Supermind's bringing about the instantaneous manifestation of its potentialities. This implies that its potentialities are manifest in a fully developed form and do not undergo further development.

It is important to note that Aurobindo allows for the Supermind's choice of evolutionary and non-evolutionary forms of self-manifestation. He does not claim that the Supermind chooses only an evolutionary form of manifestation.

It is important to note that involution is a necessary condition only of the Supermind's evolutionary manifestation in Matter and not of its manifestation as such. The Supermind does not require involution into Matter in order to manifest its potentialities. It requires involution into Matter only in order to manifest its potentialities in it in an evolutionary form. As Aurobindo remarks "...the infinite Reality is free in the play of its consciousness, it is not bound to involve itself in the nescience of Matter before it can at all manifest".<sup>95</sup>

Aurobindo suggests that an evolutionary manifestation is a possibility which should be immensely attractive to the Supermind because of the challenges it presents. An evolutionary form of manifestation should also be attractive

because it enables the Supermind to bring about novel forms of existence. A process which makes possible the creation of novelty, the creation of entities, processes, and phenomena with properties qualitatively different from the properties of their causes or antecedent states or entities, should be maximally attractive to the Supermind.

Why does the Supermind choose to manifest its potentialities in an evolutionary form in Matter? The primal state of Matter represents the apparent opposite of the undivided wholeness of absolute substance, absolute consciousness, and absolute bliss. The greatest and maximally attractive challenge of the task of bringing about an evolutionary manifestation of its potentialities from a state of existence such as that of primal atomic matter, from the Inconscient, must be the reason for the Supermind's choice of an evolutionary manifestation in Matter.

### The Case for Involution

Aurobindo's argument for the involved or implicit existence of Supermind, Overmind, Mind, and Life-Force, in Matter takes the form of an inference from the best explanation, or what Peter Achinstein calls "the explanatory mode of inference." It is regrettable that the extant literature on Aurobindo has overlooked his use of this mode of inference. This is the inference that a hypothesis is plausible on the grounds that it would explain the evidence better than the

alternatives. Charles Pierce described this mode of inference as "abduction" or "retroduction".

Before we examine Aurobindo's abductive argument, it is important to consider some of Achinstein's observations on the explanatory mode of inference. Achinstein notes that the fact that a hypothesis, if true, would explain the data in question does not imply that the hypothesis is true. For instance, the hypothesis that the CIA stole my missing bicycle, if true, would explain the loss of my bicycle, but this does not imply that the hypothesis is true. The hypothesis would be plausible only if in the light of our background knowledge or framework of assumptions it accounts for the data more successfully than others.

Achinstein also observes that the conclusion of an abductive inference is not necessarily that the hypothesis provides the best explanation and is therefore true, but sometimes that the hypothesis explains the data as well as other competing ones and is therefore plausible. Further, the data are typically not explained by a single hypothesis but by that hypothesis in conjunction with others which form part of the background knowledge. Finally, the hypothesis in question is not compared with all possible alternatives, but only with those that it is reasonable to consider as alternatives given the data and the background information.

Let us consider the hypothesis that Life-Force is involved in Matter. What would this hypothesis explain? It

would explain why there has occurred an evolution of life in Matter. It would also explain why such phenomena as attraction and repulsion exist in the atomic level. At present we have no explanation of why life evolved in Matter, although we have explanations of how life evolved in Matter. Thus the hypothesis of an involved or immanent Life-Force in Matter needs to be taken seriously because it makes the phenomenon of the evolution of life intelligible.

The very fact that life and consciousness have evolved in Matter implies the involved existence of the Life-Force and Mind in Matter. The argument is as follows:

1. Only what is involved can evolve.
2. Thus if x evolves from y, then x must be involved in y.
3. Life and consciousness have evolved from Matter.
4. Therefore, life and consciousness must be involved in Matter.
5. Therefore, Life-Force and Mind must be involved in Matter.

Any evidence in material particles of the responsiveness characteristic of life and the intelligence or purposiveness characteristic of consciousness would support the hypothesis of an involved Life-Force and Mind. Aurobindo thinks that the reactive properties of chemicals and metals can be treated as evidence of the operation, however subdued, of the life-force in matter. In the very heart of matter, the phenomena of

attraction and repulsion of atomic particles indicate the presence of some form of consciousness. It is the same force of consciousness or conscious-force which is manifest at all levels of existence although its form of manifestation or self-organisation varies from one level to another.

It is interesting to note that some contemporary physicists write that "The assumption of "intelligent life" at the micro-level is not alien to the spirit of modern science. Several hypotheses on the possible forms of the life-type organisation of matter have been discussed in recent years."<sup>96</sup> These hypotheses are consistent with Aurobindo's theory of involution.

The hypothesis of an involved Mind in Matter would explain why there is an evolution of consciousness. It would also explain the existence of opposites and conflict among different kinds of material particles and energies.

Aurobindo does not address the question of evidence for the involved existence of the Overmind in Matter. But his observations on the function of the Overmind should give us an idea of the sort of evidence which would support belief in its involved existence in Matter. Aurobindo refers to the "...Overmind law of each force working out its own possibilities"<sup>97</sup> and claims that the "play of the lines of possibility and their combination" in the development of life and mind is "the stamp of Overmind intervention".<sup>98</sup> These remarks suggest that the existence of objects and forces with

determinate essences or natures, but with different possibilities of behavior, development, and interaction, within the range determined by their essences or natures, constitutes evidence for the involved existence of the Overmind in Matter.

Aurobindo claims that the hypothesis of an involved Supermind in Matter provides a good explanation of the following features of the universe: 1) the existence of determinate entities, forces, and processes, 2) novelty, 3) diversity, and 4) order.

The existence of entities, forces, and processes with determinate qualities or properties constitutes the basic problem for any theory of the universe. It is not sufficient to describe the fundamental character or the ultimate nature of the universe in terms of an indeterminate original principle or state such as a featureless Absolute, or Non-Being, or space-time continuum, or "Big-Bang". We also need an explanation of the reason for the emergence of determinate entities, forces, and processes from the original indeterminate principle. Since it is conceivable that they do not, it is necessary to explain why they do come into being from the original indeterminate principle or state. It is also necessary to explain the process of their emergence.

According to Aurobindo, the universe is constituted of fundamental general determinates and particular determinates. The fundamental general determinates are Matter, Life-Force,

and Mind. The particular determinates are specific types of material objects and forces, specific forms of life and Life-Force, and specific kinds of mental states and processes.

How does Aurobindo account for the existence of these general and particular determinates? He claims that the fundamental general determinates--Matter, Life-Force, and Mind--are delimited spatio-temporal manifestations of the Supermind's substance, force or energy, and consciousness. The particular determinates are the forms of expression of the attributes and powers of the Supermind implicit in the fundamental general determinates.<sup>99</sup>

But why does the Supermind bring about the manifestation of Matter, Life-Force, and Mind? And how does it bring about their manifestation from its substance, force or energy, and consciousness?

The Supermind brings about the manifestation of these fundamental general determinates in order to make possible the evolution of a divine life. A divine life is a form of life characterised by a perfect body and a perfect mode of conscious existence. Hence, a form of substance which contains powers of sentience and consciousness is necessary.

Aurobindo also argues that the existence of novelty can also be explained by the hypothesis of a universally immanent Supermind.<sup>100</sup> There is novelty at the levels of Matter, Life, and Mind. The combination of the atomic constituents of some elements gives rise to an element with new properties or



properties not present in the original constituents, for e.g., water consists of molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, but has novel properties. The processes of life such as evolution and reproduction bring about novel species and offspring with novel characteristics. Human creativity is an example of how cerebral processes can bring about the existence of things with properties entirely different from the properties of their antecedent processes. Sentience and consciousness are emergents with properties very different from the properties of Matter.

If an infinite consciousness with infinite potentialities is implicit or involved in Matter, Life, and Mind, we should expect it to endlessly manifest new potentialities in these modes or levels of existence by means of appropriate processes. Novelty is thus more probable on the hypothesis that the Supermind exists involved in Matter than on any other alternative.

The existence of diversity at all levels of existence is explained by Aurobindo in terms of the Supermind's power to freely bring about variations and its Ananda or delight in diversity. The diversity in the universe is not a chaotic diversity, but a diversity based on unity and stability. It is a function of exuberant variations on a persistent substance, form, genus, or species. There is a sameness of the underlying general determinate behind the diversity of particular determinates.<sup>101</sup>

Aurobindo also argues that nothing in the general or generic determinate necessitates or determines the variations in the individual.<sup>102</sup> Why should there be so much variation from one individual to another of the same species? Why is there so much variation from one leaf to another in a single tree? Why are there so many different kinds of fishes, dolphins, whales, dogs, etc.? According to Aurobindo it is the Supermind's Ananda or delight that accounts for these exuberant variations. The Supermind takes delight or joy in these variations in just the way a musician takes delight in the variations of a theme.<sup>103</sup> It should be emphasized that Aurobindo is concerned with the problem of explaining why there are such variations rather than with the problem of explaining the process underlying these variations.

Order consists in regularity and design. Of all the regularities in the universe, the most striking are regularities of development, such as the predictable development of a human embryo from a fertilised human egg, the development of an oak tree from an acorn etc. The Supermind has the power to bring about lawful development in accordance with the essence of each thing.<sup>104</sup> The hypothesis of an immanent or involved Supermind can therefore explain the existence of regularities of development in Matter, Life, and Mind.

Aurobindo argues that the lawlike behavior of material particles is explained by the hypothesis that the Supermind is involved in Matter. This hypothesis explains why the

behavior of material particles is lawlike. The behavior is lawlike because a supreme intelligence which functions in terms of self-determined laws exists involved in those particles. Some contemporary physicists think that quantum mechanical dynamics can be explained in terms of or related to the theory that there is some sort of an inherent intelligence in individual microparticles. They argue that the "freedom of choice" of a microparticle can be treated as a manifestation of its intelligent nature or as evidence for such intelligence.<sup>105</sup>

### **Alternative Explanations**

Aurobindo refers to four alternative explanations of novelty, diversity, the evolution of life and consciousness, order etc. These are: 1) explanation in terms of the random action of natural forces or energies, 2) explanation in terms of mechanism, 3) explanation in terms of constructivism, and 4) explanation in terms of an extracosmic deity or God.<sup>106</sup>

Aurobindo rejects the first explanation on the grounds that there is more of determinateness or particularity, diversity, novelty, and order or regularity (viz., structure, law, teleology, adaptation or design) than could be probable on the theory of random events and processes.<sup>107</sup> It seems very improbable that the random action of natural forces can account for many of the features of the universe. An obvious limitation of this explanation is that it presupposes the

existence of natural forces, a fact which is itself in need of an explanation.

Another serious problem for this theory is the occurrence of developmental processes or processes which have directionality or an end-state. A developmental process cannot consist of random events and cannot be explained in terms of random events. The development of an oak tree from an acorn cannot be explained in terms of random events because the development is predictable and randomness excludes predictability. The theory of random events may have some explanatory power in regard to novelty and diversity, but runs into serious difficulties in the face of the existence of determinate entities, order, and the evolution of life and consciousness.

Neo-Darwinists appeal to "chance mutations" to account for the evolution of life and consciousness. Errol Harris argues that the claim that chance mutations alone can account for the evolution of life and consciousness is even less plausible than the claim that the true picture of a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle could be gradually assembled by the method of shuffling the pieces in a revolving drum and spilling them out into a frame.<sup>108</sup> He writes:

As jig-saws go, a 500-piece puzzle is a fairly complicated example, but in comparison with the most elementary of living organisms, it is the extreme of simplicity. If the probability of the construction of a jig-saw picture by mere chance collocation of parts is so small as to require an astronomically

long series of chance arrangements, the time needed to produce, by a comparable process, even the most primitive of modern organisms would exceed the age of the earth.<sup>109</sup>

Harris also argues that the notion that nothing but accidental change and selection have brought about the evolution of life and consciousness is incoherent and circular. Talk of mutation or selection or accidental change presumes the existence of "auturgic open systems", systems which maintain themselves through changes in environmental conditions by means of adjustive modifications of their internal structures and processes. As Harris remarks "Without such a system there is no life and so nothing to evolve."<sup>110</sup> The Neo-Darwinist claim that chance mutations and natural selection alone can account for evolution presupposes that the emergence of life had been simply the result of increased complexity of inorganic chemical change and that subsequent mutations were merely random alterations in a system of chemical reactions. On these presuppositions, however, the notion of survival value makes no sense because no system of mere chemical reactions has greater survival value than any other system. We cannot coherently speak of the "survival" of any such system in the absence of a unique principle of organisation in it. Harris concludes "Consequently selection also loses its meaning for without a coherent system as the basis of mutation there would be nothing to select."<sup>111</sup>

Harris opines that the assumption of a complex self-replicating chemical system as the unit of evolution is quite unintelligible. The Neo-Darwinist notion that such a system evolves purely as a result of random changes within it which give it some advantage in maintaining itself is incredible without the assumption that the system is auturgic or self-maintaining, i.e., that it is a living system of some sort, because in a non-auturgic system random changes will lead to disintegration. Random changes would only increase disorder and would not lead to greater and more integrated complexity.

The Neo-Darwinist could object that self-replication would increase the chances of random changes tending towards greater integration. Harris replies that without the presumption of auturgy it would be less probable that random changes would occur in favor of replication rather than non-replication because, again, purely chemical self-replicating systems are more likely to break down as a result of accidental change.

Harris's criticisms are insightful and give credence to Aurobindo's rejection of the explanation of the nature of our universe and the evolution of life and consciousness in terms of random changes. There is an echo of Bergson's argument from improbability, which Harris endorses, in Aurobindo's claim that there is more of order and design than would be probable on the hypothesis of random changes. According to Bergson's argument, it is highly improbable that the

evolution of the vertebrate and the cephalopod eye could have come about by means of random changes because the changes required to bring about their evolution were all interdependent and none of them in isolation would be advantageous, while the probability of all of them occurring together solely by chance was too remote.

The second explanation in terms of mechanism or "mechanical necessity" fails to account for the mind boggling variations in nature, for diversity and novelty. According to Aurobindo the stumbling-block in the way of this theory is the evolution of consciousness from matter. He remarks that "...it is a phenomenon which can have no place in an all-pervading truth of inconscient mechanical necessity."<sup>112</sup> How can an inconscient mechanical necessity bring about the development of a self-reflective, intentional, and creative mind? Aurobindo argues that if there is a necessity in the emergence of consciousness, that can only be due to its involution or immanence in material substance.<sup>113</sup>

The third explanation in terms of constructivism is tantamount to the view that "design", "order" etc., are constructs of the human mind and do not really exist "out there". As Aurobindo points out, proponents of this view tend to end up with the first explanation in terms of the random operations of an inconscient energy. If order and design are not "out there" but imposed by the human mind on nature, then what is really out there may only be a randomly operating

inconscious energy.<sup>114</sup> But then, Aurobindo asks, how is it possible that a randomly operating unconscious energy has created a mind, a consciousness so radically different from itself that it cannot act randomly as its parent energy does, but has to impose its constructions on the operations and results of that energy in order to make it seem orderly? There is here a double enigma, one being the emergence of consciousness from an unconscious energy, the other being the emergence of a mind of order and reason seeking to find order and reason in the operations of that energy.<sup>115</sup>

Aurobindo also rejects the fourth explanation in terms of an extracosmic God, a God who is not present in the cosmos, for e.g., the God of the Tractatus who is "outside the world" and "does not reveal himself in the world". The conception of God as only an extracosmic being faces the basic problem of explaining the reason for creation. Why would a being that would not be involved in its creation, or participate in its existence and development, create at all? The central difficulty in accepting this theory is the existence of pain, ignorance, and evil. Why would a morally perfect God create a world with pain, ignorance, and evil? The problem is only aggravated by the fact that this God, being extracosmic, is not in the least affected by what goes on in the world. Aurobindo thinks that all theistic explanations which postulate an extracosmic God run into this problem and can only evade it instead of solving it. The problem, he



maintains, can disappear only if God, although not limited to the world, is yet immanent in it. Then there would be no question of sadism in God because God would, being immanent in the world, also bear its burden of pain, ignorance, and evil.<sup>116</sup>

Aurobindo has not shown that the theory of an extracosmic God cannot explain diversity, novelty, order, the evolution of life and consciousness, etc. He has only pointed out some problems facing this theory. The theory of an intracosmic Supermind also faces the problem of evil. The claim that the Supermind bears the burden of pain, ignorance, and evil, avoids the charge of sadism, but it does not solve the problem of why there is pain, ignorance, and evil. Further, it also seems to lead to an incoherence because it implies that an all-knowing, absolutely blissful, and absolutely good being experiences ignorance, pain, and evil.

Aurobindo seems to have two different answers to the problem of pain, ignorance, and evil. One answer is that pain, ignorance, and evil, are the opposites of bliss, knowledge, and goodness, and that since manifestation pertains to all possibilities, the opposing possibilities of pain, ignorance, and evil, must also be manifested. (The Riddle Of This World) Another answer is that these are the consequences of the involution into a state of inconscience in primal atomic Matter. The evolution from this state of inconscience is essentially the struggle of life and con-

sciousness to liberate themselves in Matter, and pain, ignorance, and evil, are temporary elements of this struggle.

It could also be argued that although Aurobindo's Supermind has ducked the charge of sadism, it is now faced with the charge of masochism! Why would the Supermind bear pain, ignorance, and evil? The charge of masochism rests on a mistake. Masochism implies that there is a desire to subject oneself to pain. The Supermind has no desire to subject itself to pain and thus cannot be masochistic. Aurobindo would argue that it allows and accepts pain etc., as temporary necessities of the evolutionary process and as temporary consequences of the involution into the inconscience and ignorance of material existence.

A fundamental issue is whether Aurobindo's claim that the Supermind brings about its own involution into finite and delimited modes of existence is coherent. It could be argued that his claim is incoherent because it is not logically possible for an infinite and unlimited being to become involved in finite and delimited modes of existence. A claim is not logically possible if it involves or implies a contradiction. The claim that the Supermind brings about its own involution into finite and delimited modes of existence implies that a) The Supermind is infinite and unlimited, and b) It is involved in finite and limited modes of existence. Since a) and b) are inconsistent, the claim is incoherent.

This begs the question of why (a) and (b) are inconsistent. Claim (b) does not imply that the Supermind has ceased to be infinite and unlimited. It only implies that the Supermind is present in finite and limited modes of existence, but does not make all of its powers and attributes explicit.

Aurobindo's might also respond that the law of contradiction breaks down in the context of an infinite reality. The law of contradiction is a formulation of the finite human mind and may hold true of finite realities, but it cannot be extended to or imposed on the workings of an infinite consciousness. The infinite consciousness can simultaneously constitute itself into many finite modes, forms or structures without abrogation of its essential nature.

Another criticism would be that Aurobindo's hypothesis of the involved existence of the Supermind is redundant given his affirmation of its omnipresence. If the Supermind is omnipresent, then it must be present in Matter, etc. Therefore, there is no need to bring in the notion of its involved existence in Matter. Aurobindo can defend himself against this serious criticism only by successfully distinguishing his concept of involved existence from the traditional concept of divine omnipresence. He could argue that involved existence is a special form of omnipresence, one in which the Supermind exists "concealed" or "veiled" by the nature of the object, a nature which it has itself determined. Thus the involved existence of the Supermind in an

object implies that it has to act in accordance with the nature of the object and its relationship to other objects.

The involutory process also brings about the organisation of increasingly limited and fragmented levels of existence culminating in the level of matter. Each ontological level is more limited in respect of substance, force, consciousness, and bliss than the previous level. Substance becomes increasingly limited and fragmented in its extension and increasingly recalcitrant to the powers of the higher levels. It becomes more dense. Force or energy becomes mechanical in its operations and increasingly constrained by substance and form. Consciousness is also limited in respect of knowledge and capacity. And bliss or delight of existence is limited in its intensity and duration and increasingly threatened by its opposites of pain and suffering.

In each of these ontological levels or levels of existence, there are appropriate types of worlds, forces, and beings. According to Aurobindo, the level of matter, our present ontological level, is the last and the lowest level of existence. There are higher ontological levels which were constituted in the involutory process prior to the level of matter. I will examine Aurobindo's account of these ontological levels, worlds, etc., in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

SUPRAPHYSICAL WORLDS AND BEINGS

Aurobindo's theory of supraphysical worlds and beings has not received any mention or discussion in the extant literature on his metaphysics, but the theory is an important component of his world-view and constitutes the basis of some of his claims about the evolutionary process and human development. Therefore, it deserves mention and critical discussion. I will first expound his views on the nature of these supraphysical worlds and beings and then examine the case for "supraphysicalism".

Aurobindo devotes a separate chapter entitled "The Order of the Worlds" in The Life Divine to the problem of the existence of supraphysical worlds and agents. He also provides vivid descriptions, avowedly based on his occult experiences, of these worlds and agents in book two of his mystical epic poem Savitri.

As I observed in the previous section, the involutory process brings about the organisation of increasingly delimited ontological levels prior to the level of matter. These ontological levels correspond to particular types of worlds, forces, and beings. The beings in each succeeding ontological level are more limited in their consciousness than the beings in the preceding level.

There are four major ontological levels corresponding to the four major stages of involution: 1) the overmental, 2) the mental, 3) the vital, and 4) the material. Aurobindo also refers to some intermediate ontological levels. For instance, he refers to an intermediate level between the vital and the gross material, the level of "subtle matter". These levels also have their gradations. Thus the mental level has its "higher" and "lower" grades. There are qualitative differences between the beings in the higher grades of a given level and the beings in its lower grades.

### **The Kingdom Of Subtle Matter**

The ontological level immediately higher to our gross material level is the level of "subtle matter". Although the subtle-material level is "closest" to our level, it has qualitatively different conditions. Aurobindo claims that "...the subtle physical has a freedom, plasticity, intensity, power, colour...of which, as yet, we have no possibility on earth".<sup>117</sup>

Aurobindo describes this higher level in Savitri in the canto entitled "The Kingdom of Subtle Matter". This is a "world of lovelier forms" where "all shapes are beautiful". One finds "a life that (lives) not by the flesh" and "a light that (makes) visible immaterial things". All sounds are notes of a harmony and all sights are "celestial". Aurobindo further writes:

material level contain entities described in theosophical literature as "elementals" and in Indian occultism as "Bhutas". Some kinds of "elementals" are mischievous.<sup>123</sup> These mischievous elementals are behind small, irksome accidents or mishaps, and some episodes of absent-mindedness, in everyday human life.<sup>124</sup> They are also responsible for that intriguing phenomenon of not being able to find something even though it is right there in front of us. These elementals throw a "veil", as it were, on our eyes for fun.

### The Vital Worlds

Higher than the subtle-material level is the vital level. In this level, the Life-Force is the dominant "principle" and substance, form, and consciousness are subordinate to the Life-Force. This means that in the vital worlds the processes of life are less hampered by the structure of substance than they are in our material level. Growth, reproduction, regeneration, etc., are faster in the vital universe than they are in our universe. Forms are more plastic and can be easily changed by the pressure of the Life-Force. As Aurobindo writes:

In this world forms do not determine the conditions of the (life-force), but it is life which determines the form, and therefore forms are there much more free, fluid, largely and to our conceptions strangely variable than in the material world.<sup>125</sup>

The primary law of existence in the vital worlds is the satisfaction and fulfillment of impulse and desire.<sup>126</sup> The

consciousness of beings in the vital worlds is dominated by impulse and desire. They exist in order to satisfy their impulses and desires. Abstinence would be alien to their form of life.

Aurobindo claims that the heavens and hells described in ancient traditions correspond to the vital worlds. The vital worlds are characterised by intense and continuous enjoyments quite inconceivable to human beings, but they are also characterised by equally intense and continuous sufferings. Aurobindo admits that human imagination has shaped accounts of these vital worlds, but he does not reject the existence of these worlds. He maintains that the human mind has interpreted its intuitions or experiences of these worlds in fanciful terms or in terms of physical images or concepts, e.g., accounts of hell in terms of people being roasted in a cauldron of oil, mountains as the abodes of Gods, etc.<sup>127</sup>

There are various types of beings in the lower and higher subplanes of the vital level. The beings in the lower subplanes usually have a deformed or ugly appearance which reflects their deformed consciousness, but they can mask or disguise their true form. The beings of the vital level generally have this capacity for disguising or varying their true forms of appearance. As Aurobindo observes, "A vital being has a characteristic form but (it) can vary it or mask (its) true form under others".<sup>128</sup>



According to Aurobindo, the Rakshasas, a voracious and violent type of demons, exist in the lower vital worlds. The Rakshasas represent "violent passions and influences".<sup>129</sup> The nature of the Rakshasas can be better understood if we look at the actions of those "human beings" who seem to be driven or possessed by them, e.g., mass murderers and serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy.

The lower vital plane is also the home of the Pishachas, a type of devils which exult in aberration, perversity, and sacrilege.<sup>130</sup> The Pishachas take delight in the destruction and desecration of the good, the beautiful, and the holy. The macabre, the weird, the perverse, and the bizarre are the trademarks of the Pishachas. Both the Rakshasas and the Pishachas have an ugly or evil appearance.<sup>131</sup>

The Vampires, in whom for some unidentified reason there is greater popular interest these days, are beings of the vital plane. They are not dead human beings who rise from the grave at night and go around sucking blood from human beings who are asleep! The legend that the vampire can change its form into a bat or a wolf is a fanciful way of expressing the truth about the plasticity of form at the vital level and the capacity of a vital being to disguise its true form.

Aurobindo also observes that "In a mere vampire there is no (psychic being), for the vampire is a vital being...."<sup>132</sup> The "psychic being" is an evolving soul drawn towards truth, good, beauty, and the Divine. The Rakshasas, Pishachas, and

vampires are typal beings, or non evolutionary beings, who are fixed in their particular natures and are incapable of changing themselves or evolving to a higher state of consciousness, except by means of rebirth in the human body.

There are also beautiful, good, and harmonious beings in the vital universe. These beings exist in the higher vital worlds. The Gandharvas or gods of beauty and love, and the Kinaras or Muses exist in the higher levels of the vital plane.<sup>133</sup>

### **The Mental Plane**

The mental plane is a level of existence higher than the vital plane and is characterised by the dominance of Mind-power. At this level, substance and life-force are subordinate to Mind-power to a far greater degree than they are at the vital level or the material level. As Aurobindo writes:

What has been said of the life-world applies with the necessary differences to still higher planes of the cosmic existence. For beyond that is a mental plane, a world of mental existence in which neither life, nor matter, but mind is the first determinant. Mind there is not determined by material conditions or by the life-force, but itself determines and uses them for its own satisfaction.<sup>134</sup>

The mental plane has its higher and lower levels or gradations. These gradations have their appropriate types of beings. According to Aurobindo, the Asuras of Hindu mythology exist in the lower levels of the mental plane.<sup>135</sup> The Asuras

are non-evolutionary or typical beings characterised by egotism and opposition to the law of the Divine. The Asuras have a mind, sometimes a highly intellectual mind, but it is at the service of their ego and desire, and not truth or the Divine.<sup>136</sup> Thus they are similar to Lucifer in the Christian tradition. Unlike the the Rakshasas and the Pishachas, many Asuras have a beautiful form and even have an aura of splendor or light.<sup>137</sup> Thus it is easy to mistake them for true divinities or Gods.

The Asuras are capable of great austerity, penance, abstinence, etc., but use these capacities as a means of expression of egotistical strength or as a means of acquiring power. The will-to-power is the credo of the Asuras.

The Asuras, Rakshasas, Pishachas, and Vampires are "hostile forces", or forces hostile to divinity and the higher aspirations of humanity.<sup>138</sup> These forces attempt to impede the spiritual development of the individual by creating inner and outer obstacles. I will discuss this claim later.

### The Overmental Plane

The overmental plane is the domain of the great primal Gods, beings who are personifications of the powers and aspects of the Divine Being.<sup>139</sup> The overmental Gods possess a cosmic consciousness. They have an understanding of the "play of forces" in the cosmos and permit each force to work out its potentialities independently. Aurobindo's ascription of a

"vast and endless catholicity" to the overmental consciousness suggests that the overmental Gods are "super liberals" who permit everything in the cosmos to fulfill its own nature and function in relationship with the rest of existence and in accordance with the laws determined by the Supermind.<sup>140</sup> They are aware of the unity and complementarity underlying the diversity and disparateness of existence. These Gods must not be confused with the Gods of the Indian and Greek mythology who often quarrel with each other. The latter correspond to beings who belong to the mental plane.

Aurobindo maintains that the Gods are also non-evolutionary beings. He remarks that "...the Gods cannot be transformed for they are typical and not evolutionary beings....".<sup>141</sup> Both the Gods and the "hostile forces" have a fixed nature, the former have a fixed divine nature and the latter a fixed undivine or anti-divine nature.

### **The Case For Supraphysicalism**

Supraphysicalism is the view that there exist nonphysical or "immaterial" worlds, forces, and beings. Aurobindo is aware that the view requires justification and that modern rationalistic thought rejects supraphysicalism as a vestige of a bygone superstitious era. He thinks that supraphysicalism has been rejected, not after careful examination of its claims and the evidence for them, but on the grounds of its incompatibility with the dogmas of materialism. As he writes:

In the last rationalistic period of human thought from which we are emerging, this belief (in supraphysicalism) has been swept aside as an age-long superstition; all evidence or intimations of its truth have been rejected a priori as fundamentally false and undeserving of inquiry because incompatible with the axiomatic truth that only Matter and the material world and its experience are real....<sup>142</sup>

Aurobindo argues that if we accept that an absolute Spirit has manifested Matter and has brought about the evolution of Life and Mind in Matter, we cannot suppose that it is limited in its creative action to this kind of manifestation. The absolute Spirit must be capable of forms of self-manifestation with Mind or Life-Force as the basic or first principle. In other words, it must be capable of creating universes in which Mind or Life-Force, and not Matter, is the first principle. As Aurobindo writes:

Spirit must be capable of basing its manifestation on the Mind principle or on the Life principle and not only on the principle of Matter; there can then be and logically there should be worlds of Mind and worlds of Life; there may even be worlds founded on a subtler and more plastic, more conscious principle of Matter.<sup>143</sup>

It is not clear from this passage why the claim that Spirit must have the capacity for self-manifestation on the basis of Mind or Life should entail the existence of "worlds of Mind and worlds of Life". Unless we suppose that Spirit must bring about all that it is capable of bringing about, it simply does not follow from the fact that it can bring about

forms of self-manifestation based on Life or Mind, that worlds in which Life is the first principle and worlds in which Mind is the first principle actually exist. Aurobindo can reasonably maintain only that it is very probable that Spirit has manifested worlds based on the life-principle or mind-principle. And we still need evidence for their existence.

Another argument offered by Aurobindo is that if there are invisible material or physical forces that can act on material bodies, there is no good reason to suppose that it is improbable that there exist invisible mental and vital forces which act on the vital part or the life-force and the mind of human individuals. In Aurobindo's words:

Modern thought is aware of no invisible forces other than those revealed or constructed by Science; it does not believe that Nature is capable of creating any other beings than those around us in the physical world...but if there are invisible cosmic forces physical in their nature that act upon the body of inanimate objects, there is no valid reason why there should not be invisible cosmic forces mental and vital in their nature that act upon his mind and his life-force.<sup>144</sup>

Again, all that this argument does is to show that in light of our background knowledge of the existence of invisible physical forces which act on material bodies, it is not improbable that there are invisible life-forces and mental forces which act on the life-force and the mind of human beings. But, of course, this does not itself imply that it

would be reasonable to believe that such forces actually exist. We need independent evidence for their existence and influence on the vital being and mind of individuals.

Aurobindo also argues that if we admit that the Life-force and Mind have organised living beings and conscious beings in the world of matter, we cannot rule out that in their own native ontological levels they can organise different kinds of conscious beings. As he writes:

...if Mind and Life, impersonal forces, form conscious beings...in physical forms and in a physical world and can act upon Matter and through Matter, it is not impossible that on their own planes they should form conscious beings whose subtler substance is invisible to us or that they should be able to act from those planes on beings in physical Nature.<sup>145</sup>

Even if we admit the existence of Life and Mind as creative Powers which have organised forms of existence in the world of matter, it would not follow that there must be a "vital world" or a "mental world" with their own types of beings. It would be plausible only to argue that since Life-Force and Mind have organised life-forms and conscious-forms in Matter, it is very probable that they have also organised life-forms and conscious-forms in their own native spheres or levels of operation beyond the material sphere or level of existence. The claim that it is "not impossible", or not inconceivable, or not improbable, that Life and Mind have organised conscious beings with a subtler substance in the vital plane and the mental plane does not establish the

existence of such beings. I think that, in this context, Aurobindo may be concerned with establishing the "prior probability" of the existence of such "planes of existence" and beings, rather than with establishing their actual existence. His reasoning here resembles the reasoning of some physicists concerned with the possibility of particles called "Tachyons" which travel faster than light. These physicists argue that there are no good reasons to exclude the possibility of existence of such particles, and since Nature is lavish, such particles probably exist.

Aurobindo does address the issue of evidence for supra-physicalism. I think he is correct in rejecting the demand for "physical evidence", or evidence in terms of physical or material phenomena, of supraphysical facts as "irrational and illogical".<sup>146</sup> It would not be reasonable to demand that we should be able to see or hear or touch supraphysical beings with our physical senses. If they are supraphysical entities, then they cannot normally be perceived with our physical senses. Nor can we reasonably demand that supraphysical beings should normally be able produce physical phenomena or affect physical things. If they exist in supraphysical worlds, then they cannot normally directly affect the physical world in the way physical forces and entities do.

Aurobindo argues that while it is possible for a supra-physical force or being to act on the physical world and produce physical results, and even actualise itself to our



physical senses, these are not normally the ways in which its existence can be discerned. A supraphysical force or being typically produces a direct effect on our mind and vital or the appetitive and emotional part of our being. This is because of a correspondence between the mental plane and our mind, and between the vital plane and our vital or appetitive and emotional part. A supraphysical force or being can normally affect the physical world and physical life only by means of its influence on our mind and vital. As Aurobindo writes:

A supraphysical fact may impinge on the physical world and produce physical results; it may even produce an effect on our physical senses and become manifest to them, but that cannot be its invariable action and most normal character or process. Ordinarily, it must produce a direct effect or a tangible impression on our mind and our life-being, which are parts of us that are of the same order as itself, and can only indirectly and through them, if at all, influence the physical world and physical life.<sup>147</sup>

There are two kinds of evidence for supraphysical forces and beings: psychological and occult.<sup>148</sup> A supraphysical force or agent can induce certain kinds of thoughts, feelings, impulses, desires, cravings, and dreams in us. This is how it produces a "direct effect or a tangible impression on our mind and life-being". But we are not normally aware of this and take all thoughts, feelings, etc., as formations of our own consciousness even when our reason and will reject them or struggle against them.<sup>149</sup> There can also be occult or

psychic experiences in which a supraphysical force or being can be perceived by our "subtle" or inner senses, i.e., the mind's eye and ear. <sup>150</sup>

Aurobindo needs to provide criteria by which to recognise certain thoughts, feelings, dreams, etc., as induced in us by supraphysical agencies. Since he acknowledges that some thoughts, feelings, dreams, etc., originate in ourselves or are initiated by us, he needs to provide the distinguishing marks of those which "bear the stamp of another origin, an insistent supraterrrestrial character".<sup>151</sup> Further, since he also distinguishes between good and bad supraphysical agents, he needs to offer criteria by which we can distinguish those psychological occurrences induced by bad supraphysical agents from those induced by good ones.

Aurobindo does not go about providing such criteria in a systematic fashion and we have to scan his writings for hints about them. One criterion was mentioned earlier. If a thought, feeling, desire, etc., is rejected or resisted by our reason and will, then it may be induced in us by supraphysical agents. A psychological occurrence can be regarded as induced in oneself by a supraphysical agent if calm and careful reflection shows that it would be unreasonable or irrational to believe in the thought or idea in question, or to act on the desire, impulse, or "suggestion" which has taken shape in our consciousness, and the thought or idea is something one would not normally believe in, or the desire or

impulse something one would not normally act on. I think that suicidal thoughts and feelings are a good example.

But not all thoughts, feelings, and desires which are resisted by our reason and will are necessarily induced in us by supraphysical agents. According to Aurobindo's, theory of human nature, there are different parts or structures of the self and their tendencies may not always be in concordance. Thus the tendencies of the vital or appetitive part may not be in concord with our reason and will. Therefore, some cases in which a thought, feeling, or desire is resisted or rejected by our reason and will may be due to factors internal to the psyche rather than supraphysical factors. Thus resistance or rejection from our reason and will is a necessary, but not sufficient criterion of the inducement or "suggestion" of a thought, feeling, or desire, by a supraphysical agent.

However, it should be noted that Aurobindo does not seem to regard explanation by reference to supraphysical agencies as exclusive of reference to the nature of the individual. He claims that these agencies influence thought and action by exploiting aspects or features of the individual's nature.<sup>152</sup> As he remarks "Of course, these forces find their point d'appui in the seeker himself, in the ignorant parts of his consciousness and (his) assent to their suggestions and influences...."<sup>153</sup>

Another criterion is the sense of being overwhelmed and held captive to the force of a thought, feeling, or desire, despite one's natural inclinations or good sense.<sup>154</sup> This is a more definitive indication of influence from a supraphysical agency.

Aurobindo also thinks that the extremity or abnormality of certain psychological states and actions constitutes a criterion of a strong influence from a supraphysical source. He thus refers to "life-impulses which are..inordinate and out of measure..perverse and abnormal" in connection with influences from Rakshasic and other demonic agencies.<sup>155</sup> He also mentions that in cases of possession by a supraphysical agent the human individual may be pushed to exceed the limits of normal human good and evil.<sup>156</sup> This can also be extended to human groups.

The diabolical nature of the actions of human groups such as the Nazis, Pol Pot, Bosnian Serbs, etc., becomes intelligible in light of Aurobindo's supraphysicalism. "Humanistic-rationalistic" intellectuals who are bewildered by the reality of horrifying atrocities committed by individuals and groups of their much-esteemed and highly rational human species should give some thought to supraphysicalism.

It may be evident to Aurobindo that certain psychological states are induced in us by supraphysical agencies, but to those who have not developed the capacity for occult perceptions or experiences it is not evident that these

psychological states are the result of influences from supraphysical agencies. At best, such persons can consider supraphysicalism as one of the explanatory theories in the market. Aurobindo's argument for supraphysicalism, then, can be construed as an abductive argument, an argument that the hypothesis of supraphysicalism provides a good explanation of the occurrence of certain psychological states and patterns of behavior and is therefore plausible.

The issue is whether supraphysicalism is a good explanatory theory. It should be mentioned that a supraphysical explanation is a type of personal explanation, or explanation by reference to the powers, intentions, and nature of an agent. There is an analogy between the explanation of the action or behavior of a human individual in terms of influence, or persuasion, or coercion from another human individual, and the explanation of the psychological state or behavior of a human individual in terms of influence from a supraphysical agent. A supraphysical explanation thus has the simplicity of all personal explanations. Further, it coheres with our background knowledge that the mental state or behavior of an agent could be the result of influence, persuasion, or coercion from another agent.

But it could be objected that the notion of a supraphysical agent is not a simple one and that our background knowledge about agents makes it difficult to comprehend how

such supraphysical agents can influence or affect physical agents.

We should bear in mind that a supraphysical agent is not a "disembodied spirit". Therefore, the conceptual problems raised by Terence Penelhum and others in connection with the notion of a "disembodied spirit" do not arise in this context. A supraphysical agent is very much an embodied agent, but in a body made of a subtler form of substance than the gross material substance. Aurobindo claims that there are grades of substance ranging from the gross material to the pure spiritual substance. Each higher grade of substance is less constrained by form, has greater capacity for flexibility, interfusion, interpenetration, assimilation, interchange, variation, and transmutation.<sup>157</sup>

These grades of substance correspond to the different ontological levels organised in the involutory process. They can be distinguished from each other in terms of their subordination to a dominant principle. Thus higher than the gross material substance is the subtle material substance which is lighter, more symmetrical in form, and more luminous and colorful than the gross material substance. Higher than that is "vital substance" characterised by subjection to the life-force. A further higher grade of substance is "mental substance", a form of substance characterised by subjection to the force of mind, to thought-power. Higher than the

"mental substance" is spiritual substance which is not subject to inertia, insentience, decay, and disintegration.<sup>158</sup>

Thus the supraphysical agents are embodied in bodies constituted of different kinds of substances. Since there is a continuum of levels and grades of substance, there is the possibility interaction among the forces and beings in the various levels. But this interaction is not free or random. It is conditioned by the nature of each force or being and the laws governing each ontological level and grade of substance.

According to Aurobindo, there is a correspondence between our vital or appetitive being and the vital plane and between our mind and the mental plane. I guess this means that our vital being and mind are, respectively, receptive to the vital plane and the mental plane. And this makes it possible for the beings of the vital plane to influence our feelings, appetities, desires, etc., and for the beings of the mental plane to influence our thoughts, ideas, etc.

How do these supraphysical agencies influence human behavior? Aurobindo claims that the supraphysical agents telepathically transmit certain thoughts, feelings, desires, etc., to us. He writes that "When the vital forces or beings throw an influence, they give it certain forms of thought...and put them in the minds of people so that they feel, think, act, and speak in a particular way".<sup>159</sup> I think that a good explanation of how telepathy is possible between

two minds may provide a basis for understanding how supra-physical agents can transmit thoughts and feelings to us telepathically.

But the lack of an adequate explanation of the precise mechanism by which supraphysical agents influence our thoughts and feelings, and thereby our actions, has no bearing on the question of the evidence for the existence of these agents, or even on the explanatory force of supra-physicalism. Reproduction and digestion were known to humans long before their intricate mechanisms were understood. The fact that the moon has an influence on tides and that the sun has an influence on vegetation were known long before the mechanism of their influence was somewhat understood. Thus the issue of whether we have an adequate explanation of the mechanism by which supraphysical agents influence human thought and feeling is logically independent of the issue of whether these agents exist and the issue of whether the hypothesis that these agents exist has explanatory value. However, a full-fledged supraphysical theory should specify the mechanisms by which these beings and their forces affect us.

Supraphysicalism can provide a good explanation of possession-behavior, Gilles de la Tourette's disease, some cases of insanity, epilepsy, individual and mass psychopathology, nightmares, and the occurrence of inner and outer obstacles on the path to spiritual perfection.



Possession-behavior has not received sufficient attention from mainstream western psychologists. But it is an intriguing phenomenon which occurs in many cultures and deserves explanation. According to supraphysicalism, the behavior is the result of a temporary dominance of a supra-physical agent, often a Pishacha, over the mind, vital, and body of the individual in question. The drastic psychological and physiological changes which occur in the "possessed" individual seem to be best accounted for in terms of supra-physicalism.

Gilles de la Tourette's disease is a strange mental disease characterised by the compulsion to utter an uninterrupted stream of obscenities and profanities. According to supraphysicalism, this is again the result of domination of the individual's mind by a Pishacha. The Pishacha begins by "whispering", as it were, obscenities and profanities in the "mind's ear" of the individual and ends up compelling the individual to repeat those obscenities and profanities aloud. The alternative explanation of Western medical science is that the disease is due to a deficiency in a "neuronal transmitter chemical" in the brain. But we do not have any idea of what sort of a "neuronal transmitter chemical" is involved or why its deficiency should cause the disease in an individual. It is also a problem for this theory that the drug haloperidol which is usually administered to patients suffering from the disease is not always effective.

Supraphysicalism would explain insanity in terms of possession by a supraphysical agent. Aurobindo claims that "Insanity is always due to a vital attack, or rather possession, although there is often a physical reason as well".<sup>160</sup> By "vital attack" he means an attack by a vital being. Notice that Aurobindo acknowledges that there is a physical basis or cause, and this is perhaps taken advantage of by the supraphysical being in its attempt to possess or dominate the individual. He further writes that "...everything manifested in the physical must have a physical support or means for its expression".<sup>161</sup>

He also regards epilepsy as a sign or symptom of a "vital attack" on the nervous system of an individual. The scientific medical account of the disturbances in the nervous system of the individual during epilepsy only tells us about the process of epilepsy and does not identify its root cause. According to supraphysicalism, a vital being transmits a force which adversely affects the vulnerable points of the nervous system of the individual which results in the epileptic attack.

Nightmares are intriguing phenomena which supraphysicalism is quite well-equipped to explain. Certain kinds of nightmares would be explained as actually encounters with beings of the vital plane. Others are due to thought-formations transmitted telepathically by those beings.

Many serial killers and other psychopaths have mentioned in interviews that there was a voice "inside their heads" goading them to perform the actions they did. Some stated that they heard two voices, one goading them to kill and the other dissuading them from the heinous crimes. Supraphysicalism would regard these "voices" as the suggestions of supraphysical beings.

All this does not imply that the individuals in question are not responsible for their actions. An individual who commits a crime on the urgings of another individual is still responsible for the crime. Similarly, the individual who yields to the "voices" or suggestions of malignant supraphysical beings is no less responsible for the crimes committed by him. Since he chooses to obey the suggestions of those supraphysical beings, he is responsible for those actions.

As I mentioned earlier, some of these supraphysical agencies are "hostile forces" or beings hostile to the spiritual evolution of the human individual. Mystics in all cultures and ages have alluded to these hostile forces and warned spiritual aspirants of the tremendous obstacles created by them which must be faced in the spiritual path. Since spiritual evolution brings about an emancipation from the hold of these beings and gives the individual the power to deal with them in accordance with the divine will, these beings do everything they can to prevent the individual from

progressing in the spiritual path. They normally create inner and outer obstacles designed to discourage the individual from treading the spiritual path, or attempt to divert the individual into a path which leads one away from the goal. The intensity of their attacks is proportional to the degree of progress made by the individual in the spiritual path.<sup>162</sup>

Aurobindo tries to distinguish "normal human defects" from the problems created by the hostile forces. He writes:

Normal human defects are one thing...the action of the hostile forces is a special intervention creating violent inner conflicts, abnormal depressions, thoughts and impulses of a kind which can be easily recognised as suggestions, e.g., abandoning the yoga, revolt against the Divine, suggestions of calamity and catastrophe, apparently irresistible, irrational impulses and so on. It is a different order from the usual human weaknesses.<sup>163</sup>

The specific form of these obstacles varies from one spiritual aspirant to another and depends on the strengths and weaknesses of the individual nature. The individual with an active kinetic temperament may be bombarded with suggestions about pursuing apparently more attractive alternatives and may face the difficulties of ambition, restlessness, anger, egoism, sensationalism, etc. The individual with a passive temperament may be troubled by suggestions about the futility of it all, and face the difficulties of sterile and stagnant scepticism, cynicism, pessimism, sloth, torpor, etc. The characteristically perceptive remarks of Sri Krishnaprem,

an Englishman who left his position at Cambridge to embrace the spiritual life in India in the late 1920's, and who from his writings appears to have attained considerable spiritual understanding, are worth citing in this context:

...the inner difficulties...are bound to come from time to time...for there are parts of our nature, as well as forces in the universe which are hostile to this path and wish to prevent our treading it. Such attacks or storms come in many shapes sometimes violent and at other times dark and enervating...In the rajasic (kinetic) type the mind is assailed by violent desires to do something else--something which if examined calmly can be seen to be quite futile and which in fact is seldom if ever done if the mind does yield and give up its path. In the tamasic (passive) type the trouble comes like a fog of doubt which suggests that nothing at all is worth doing and that all is quite futile.<sup>164</sup>

Supraphysicalism thus has explanatory value in regard to the inner and outer difficulties faced by the individual in his attempt to tread the spiritual path. It offers the explanation that these difficulties are created by forces or beings hostile to spiritual evolution.

Supraphysicalism is as good as any other "naturalistic" explanation of the phenomena mentioned above. The trouble with "naturalistic" explanations is that they lead to an infinite regress. The supraphysical explanation has the ultimacy or finality of all personal explanation. Once we refer to an agent's intention and capacity we have reached the terminus of explanation. I can explain the complex proc-

ess by which the light goes on when the switch is pressed, but the terminus of explanation is reached when I refer to an agent's action of pressing the switch.

Aurobindo is aware that ordinarily people explain the above-mentioned phenomena by reference to "their own thoughts and feelings" and to environmental factors. But he thinks that this is due to a superficial understanding of these matters. From the standpoint of the ordinary mental level of consciousness, the inner states and behavior of the individual seem to be the result of personal, inter-personal, and environmental factors, but with the development of the power of introspection and inner vision, one becomes directly aware of the play of supraphysical agencies. As he writes:

...once one begins to get the inner view of things, it is different. One begins to experience that all is an action of forces, forces of Nature, psychological as well as physical, which play upon our nature, and these are conscious forces or are supported by a consciousness....One is in the midst of a big universal working and it is impossible any longer to explain everything as the result of one's own sole and independent personality.<sup>165</sup>

I mentioned earlier that according to Aurobindo there are two kinds of evidence for the existence of supraphysical agencies: psychological states and occult experiences. Aurobindo affirms that occult or psychic experiences give support to supraphysicalism.<sup>166</sup> An occult experience is an experience in which a "supernatural" or supraphysical force,

or agency, or phenomenon seems to be present. The issue, of course, is whether we have good grounds for concluding on this basis that the supraphysical force, being, or phenomenon is actually present. The problems and considerations which can be raised here are similar to those raised in the context of religious or spiritual experiences. Aurobindo's arguments in defense of the veridicality of religious experiences can be employed in defense of the veridicality of occult or psychic experiences as well.

There is also the evidence of near-death or after-death experiences for the existence of supraphysical worlds and beings. According to a research conducted by Dr. Michael Sabom of the Veterans Administration Medical Center in Decatur, Georgia, thirty-two patients remembered a "transcendent" experience characterised by, among other things, consciousness of being in a foreign dimension, a brightly lit region of "great beauty".<sup>167</sup> These descriptions seem to correspond to Aurobindo's account of the "kingdom of subtle matter". Other studies by Raymond Moody and Karlis Osis indicate similar experiences. I will examine the veridicality of such experiences in the section on Aurobindo's theory of rebirth.

I mentioned that supraphysicalism provides the basis for some of Aurobindo's remarks about the nature of the evolutionary process. He claims that "pressure" from the vital plane and the mental plane has contributed to the evolution

of life and consciousness in our universe.<sup>168</sup> The influences of the vital plane and the mental plane on our universe has contributed to the liberation of the involved life-force and mind-power in atomic matter. The influence of the higher spiritual planes on our universe will eventually bring about the evolution of higher forms of consciousness than the mind-consciousness.

The implications of supraphysicalism for human development are far-reaching. The reality of supraphysical agencies and their capacity to influence human thought and feeling has serious implications for our understanding and control of our inner and outer life, and for our development as free, autonomous beings. It becomes imperative to gain an understanding of the workings of these agencies so that we can overcome our subjection to their influences. If we become aware that some thoughts and feelings have their origins in an alien and possibly hostile source, then perhaps we would no longer be driven by or subject to them. And if we develop our capacity to identify and reject certain thoughts and feelings which come to us from supraphysical agencies, we may also be able to prevent others from being overcome by those thoughts and feelings. The discovery of these agencies could have the same importance for our mental and spiritual health which the discovery of viruses had for our physical health.

The belief in supraphysicalism, in the existence of supraphysical agencies with the capacity to influence our



psychological states, cannot reasonably be dismissed as "paranoia". Paranoia can arise even within a naturalistic or scientific belief-system. One can become paranoid about the Aids virus, about harmful radiation from outer space, about earthquakes, etc. But that does not make belief in the existence of the Aids virus, or harmful rays, or earthquakes, a case of paranoia. I see no reason why the belief in the existence of supraphysical agencies with the capacity to either help or harm the psyche of human beings should itself be a case of paranoia. Of course, one can get paranoid about harmful supraphysical agencies, but this is not very different from getting paranoid about the Aids virus.

## CHAPTER 5

EVOLUTION

As mentioned in the section on Aurobindo's theory of involution, the Supermind has good reasons to bring about an evolutionary manifestation of its potentialities and powers in matter. Thus Aurobindo has a good answer to the question "Why is there evolution?" or "Why is there an evolutionary universe?". There is evolution because the Supermind chooses to bring about a manifestation of its potentialities and powers by means of an evolutionary process.<sup>169</sup> Modern evolutionary theory offers explanations of the process of evolution, but it does not have an answer to this question. It views the occurrence of evolution itself as a "brute fact". But the very occurrence of a process as complex and continuous as evolution certainly needs an explanation. Theistic thinkers in the western tradition who view evolution as compatible with God's existence, e.g., Richard Swinburne, have surprisingly failed to raise the question of why God would bring about evolution. I think it is to Aurobindo's credit that he has a good answer to this question.

Aurobindo also seems to have a good answer to the question "Why is there an evolution of life and mind in matter?". This is not a question about the process of the evolution of life and mind in matter, but about the reason for their evolution. Since it is not only conceivable that life and

consciousness may not have evolved at all in matter, but also very improbable, on the modern scientific theory, that they could have evolved given the initial state of matter and the laws governing its structure, a good reason for the evolution of life and mind must be provided. Again, the scientific theory of evolution has not provided us with any good reason for the evolution of life and mind. On its account, the evolution of life and mind was just a freak accident, a random event, and thus has no reason at all. But the mind-boggling complexity of the process and the availability of evidence which shows that it is "fine-tuned" definitively rules out that the emergence of life and consciousness was a freak accident or random event. It was certainly the result of an aeonic developmental process in matter.

According to Aurobindo, the evolution of life and mind was not a random event, but a necessary and inevitable one. It was necessary and inevitable because what is involved must evolve, and life-force and mind are involved in matter. The key premise is the claim that what is involved must evolve. Aurobindo asserts that "Evolution of the involved there must be" and that "...that which is involved must evolve".<sup>170</sup> In The Synthesis Of Yoga he writes that "...the whole principle...of the material world must be the evolution of what is involved and the development of what is undeveloped".<sup>171</sup> I would argue that this claim is not analytic because it is logically possible that what is involved does

not evolve. It seems to be a synthetic a priori claim like "Every event must have a cause". Thus the necessity in question cannot be logical necessity, but a metaphysical necessity of the sort involved in "Every event must have a cause".

It could be argued that if the evolution of life and mind in Matter was necessary, then this implies that the occurrence of evolution was also necessary, but this is inconsistent with the notion that the Supermind freely chooses to bring about evolution.

The claim that the Supermind freely chooses to bring about evolution does not imply that it does so without any law-governed process. The Supermind's freedom is consistent with activity in accordance with self determined laws. If it is a law of nature that what is involved eventually evolves, then in bringing about the evolution of what is involved the Supermind would only be acting in accordance with a law of its own making. Thus the "metaphysical necessity" of the evolution of life and mind is compatible with the Supermind's freedom.

We are also faced with another serious objection. Aurobindo makes two claims: 1) the Supermind is the initial principle or "prime mover" of involution, and 2) the Supermind will be the last and supreme emergent in evolution. The objection is that this implies that the Supermind is at the same time both actual and potential, and this is not possible. But (2) does not imply that the Supermind is potential.

It only implies that the Supermind is involved in Matter, and involved existence is not existence in potentiality. As mentioned in the context of Aurobindo's theory of involution, the Supermind is involved in Matter in the sense that only some of its powers and aspects are explicit or directly operative in Matter. And this is again due to its capacity to withhold or conceal its own powers and aspects. Therefore, the objection fails.

In this context, we should also consider Aurobindo's idea that "pressure" from the vital and mental planes has contributed to the liberation or evolutionary manifestation of life-force and mind in matter. He refers to two movements: an upward-tending movement from below and a upward-drawing movement from above. There is an innate tendency of the involved life-force and mind to become explicit, to evolve in matter, and there is also an innate tendency of the vital plane and the mental plane to act on matter and assist in the liberation of their corresponding first principles or powers from an involved existence in matter.<sup>172</sup> In Aurobindo's words:

Evolution comes by the unceasing pressure of the supra-material planes on the material compelling it to deliver out of itself their principles and powers which might conceivably otherwise have slept imprisoned in the rigidity of the material formula. This would even so have been improbable, since their presence there implies a purpose of deliverance; but still this necessity from below is actually very much aided by a kindred superior pressure.<sup>173</sup>

In this passage Aurobindo seems to waffle on the question of whether life-force and mind would have become active in Matter without intervention from the "supramaterial planes". He first suggests that without that intervention life-force and mind might have "slept imprisoned in the rigidity of the material formula" and then denies that they could have because their involved presence in Matter "implies a purpose of deliverance", or, in other words, that they must evolve because they are involved in Matter. But if they must evolve because they are involved, why is any intervention from the "supramaterial planes" required at all? Since such intervention is not necessary for the evolution of life and mind, it is a contingent fact that the pre-existent "supramaterial planes" assist in the liberation of life-force and mindconsciousness in Matter.

There are important issues concerning the stages of evolution. Why does evolution begin with a stage marked by the development of matter? Are there stages of evolution higher than the present stage of development of mind? What is the final stage, or the highest stage, of evolution?

Aurobindo claims that evolution is the inverse process of involution.<sup>174</sup> Involution is the process by which the Supermind constitutes increasingly delimited levels of existence and creates worlds, forces, beings, etc., corresponding to each level of existence. It is also the process by which all the powers of the Supermind become involved or immanent

in the final principle, Matter. Evolution is the inverse process of involution in the sense that it consists in the organisation of increasingly higher levels of existence and their corresponding forms of existence in Matter. It is also the process by which all the powers of the Supermind become manifested and developed in Matter in the form of diverse capacities possessed by sentient and conscious beings. Aurobindo also argues that evolution is the inverse process of involution because the initial or original principle or power in the involution, viz., the Supermind, is the last and supreme principle or power to emerge in the evolution, and the last principle in the involution, viz., Matter, is the initial and basic principle in the evolution.<sup>175</sup>

It seems to follow that the sequence or order of the stages of evolutionary manifestation must be the inverse of the sequence or order of the stages of involution. Thus evolution has the following stages: 1) material, 2) vital, 3) mental, 4) overmental, and 5) supramental. The first stage is marked by the organisation of primal atomic matter and the formation and development of material substances, or elements, and spheres of existence constituted of these substances or elements, e.g., stars, planets, etc. Several material forces also come into being as forms of the conscious-force immanent in matter. In the second stage, life-force becomes active in matter and brings about the organisation of progressively complex life-forms. In the third

stage, mind, a delimited conscious-power, becomes active in matter and brings about the development of corresponding capacities of consciousness in life-forms with sufficient complexity. These capacities achieve full expression and development in the human physical form.

Aurobindo argues that since there are conscious powers higher than mind which are involved in matter, such as the Overmind and Supermind, the emergence and development of mind-consciousness cannot be the culmination of the evolutionary process. These higher powers must also become directly active in matter, in contrast to their present indirect action, and bring about the development of corresponding capacities or forms of consciousness. All this implies not only that human beings must eventually develop capacities higher than those of their present form of consciousness, mind-consciousness, but also that the evolutionary process must eventually create a species with an immensely higher form of consciousness than the human species, a species Aurobindo describes as "gnostic beings" or "supramental beings".

I think Aurobindo is on the right track in predicting the development of higher capacities in human beings and in predicting the evolution of a higher species. It seems absurdly anthropocentric to suppose that human beings are the "crown of creation" and that the aeonic process of cosmic evolution has come to a full stop with the emergence of the



human species. It is also odd that evolutionary theory has not addressed the issue of whether evolution would bring about a higher species in the future. Perhaps the implicit "anthro-egocentric" assumptions of modern evolutionary theory are responsible for this lacuna. Surely, after all the volumes on the past of the evolutionary process, one wants to know about whether evolution is still going on and whither!

According to Aurobindo, evolution is still going on, but it is no longer, at least on earth, concerned with the production of novel biological forms. Rather, it is concerned with higher capacities and states of consciousness. In other words, evolution is now a process of development of consciousness, human consciousness, toward higher levels of being. It will find its consummation, if not culmination, in the emergence of a supramental or supermind-consciousness.

### **The "Logic" Of Evolution**

The evolutionary process has the following features: 1) teleology, 2) creativity, 3) continuity, 4) integration, 5) dialectical relationship between the higher and lower "principles", and 6) Progress (expansion, ascent, integration, transformation).

### **Teleology**

Aurobindo maintains that the evolutionary manifestation of the Supermind has a definite purpose or goal.<sup>176</sup> The purpose or goal is to bring about a divine life in the universe, a form of life of sentient and conscious individuals in which

there is a completeness of being, completeness of consciousness, and completeness of bliss or delight of existence and activity. As Aurobindo remarks "To become complete in being, in consciousness of being, in force of being, in delight of being, and to live in this integrated completeness is the divine living".<sup>177</sup> By "completeness" Aurobindo means perfection. The divine life is thus a form of life characterized by an integrated perfection of being, consciousness, and bliss or delight of existence and activity.

A perfect body must be an essential component of the divine life. The divine life is a terrestrial life of total, integral perfection. Therefore, it cannot be based on an imperfect body. A perfected body, and not a crucified one, is the foundation of the divine life.

In the divine life, the body would no longer be an obstacle but a perfect shrine and frame of the soul.<sup>178</sup> It would be a pliable medium of expression of the powers of the soul and would not be subject to inertia, unconsciousness, decay, incapacity, disease, and death. This presupposes that it would have a radically different substance and structure. This perfect body would not emerge miraculously but as a culmination and consummation of a developmental process. It would exist and function in terrestrial nature, but it would also have a vastly extended range of operation. It would be constituted of a qualitatively higher form of matter more

capable of bearing the touch of the spirit and containing its potencies.

The divine life would be a perfect life, a life of plenitude of energy, will-power, and powers of action. It would be free of cravings, frustrations, perversions, and fears. It would also be free of egoistic seeking and domination. These are the characteristics of an imperfect form of consciousness. Since the divine life would be constituted of a perfect form of consciousness, such features cannot be present in a form of life based on it.

There would not be any form of ignorance, error, and falsity in the form of consciousness which constitutes the divine life. There would be no sense of division or conflict between the self and others, between the self and the world. The unity of existence, the oneness underlying and constituting the multiplicity and diversity of existence would be self-evident. There would be an undistorted and perennial awareness of the harmonious totality of existence.

A perfect bliss and delight of being and activity would also be an essential feature of the divine life. There would be no pain and suffering in it. Being, becoming, and activity would be expressive of an inalienable bliss and delight.

Aurobindo holds that the divine life is inevitable. The inevitability of the divine life in the universe follows from the claim that the formation of a divine life in the universe is the purpose of the Supermind's evolutionary manifestation.

Since the Supermind is omnipotent, nothing can prevent the realisation of its goal or purpose, and if the organisation of a divine life is its purpose, then it must be inevitably realised or fulfilled.

This argument presupposes that the Supermind has a purpose in choosing an evolutionary manifestation. Aurobindo considers the objection that the Supermind need not have a purpose in choosing an evolutionary manifestation. The argument in support of this objection is that having a purpose implies a desire to accomplish or achieve something, and since the Supermind is perfect, it does not need to accomplish or achieve anything. Therefore, the Supermind need not have a purpose in choosing an evolutionary manifestation. Evolution may well be a creative play or drama, a Lila, of the Supermind, without any final act, goal, or outcome.<sup>179</sup>

Aurobindo concedes that it is conceivable that evolution has no goal or final outcome and that this is not incompatible with the nature of the Supermind. But he argues that it is conceivable and more probable that God chooses an evolutionary manifestation with a purpose or goal. Delight of being and activity is the underlying reason for God's self-manifestation, but this delight is not incompatible with having a motive or purpose in self-manifestation. A play or drama without an outcome or conclusion is an artistic possibility, and evolution may have this character, but it is more probable that it has a goal or purpose.<sup>180</sup>

The claim that a divine life is the purpose or goal of the Supermind's evolutionary manifestation is not incompatible with the claim that the Supermind is perfect. The realisation of a self-determined goal is not incompatible with divine perfection. A perfect being can set itself problems or goals and resolve or achieve them as an expression of its perfection. Aurobindo can thus consistently argue that Brahman is perfect and also that Brahman chooses an evolutionary manifestation with a motive or purpose. As Robert Nozick argues, the perfection of Brahman is a dynamic perfection and includes the realisation of self-determined projects:

...the existence of the world becomes a component of Brahman's all-inclusiveness and perfection...We would like a theory that gives us both timeless perfection along with a process of transcending and overcoming, a process of accomplishment. Both are supplied by a view of Brahman as Satchitananda and (simultaneously at some level) as casting itself forth into another state so as to overcome limitations...then slowly evolving back to an awareness of its true perfect nature as Brahman.<sup>181</sup>

It is also important to take note of Aurobindo's view that Brahman would achieve a new affirmation of itself in its own apparent opposite by bringing about a divine life in Matter.<sup>182</sup> Thus an evolutionary manifestation would be significant to Brahman notwithstanding its "timeless perfection". Stephen Phillips' criticism that Aurobindo faces a difficulty in providing a satisfactory account of the significance, if any, of an evolutionary manifestation to Brah-

man, is thus baseless.<sup>183</sup> Although Phillips takes note of Aurobindo's claim that the Ananda or delight of Brahman in manifestation does not exclude the realisation of a purpose, he fails to consider Aurobindo's assertion that the process of manifestation in Matter has significance for Brahman because it makes possible a new affirmation of itself in what seems to be inconscient substance.

Phillips in his interesting work Aurobindo's Philosophy Of Brahman also criticises Aurobindo for "waffling" on the question of the inevitability of the divine life. He cites the following passage in The Life Divine in support of his criticism:

A drama without denouement may be an artistic possibility, existing only for the pleasure of watching the characters and the pleasure in problems posed without a solution or with a forever suspended...solution; the drama of the earth evolution might conceivably be of that character, but an intended or inherently predetermined denouement is also and more convincingly possible...Ananda does not exclude a delight in the working out of a Truth inherent in being....<sup>184</sup>

Here Aurobindo acknowledges that it is possible that the evolutionary manifestation of Brahman may be without a purpose or goal, but he argues that a predetermined goal is not only compatible with Brahman's nature, it is also "more convincingly possible" or more probable. In this passage Aurobindo is not concerned with the inevitability of the divine life. He is concerned with the problem of whether the

evolutionary manifestation of Brahman need have final goal or outcome. The context of the passage is a discussion of objections to Aurobindo's teleological theory of evolution. Phillips' criticism is based on a misreading of this passage. If the passage makes the claim that it is more probable that the divine life is inevitable, then Aurobindo could justifiably be charged with "waffling" on the question of the inevitability of life. Since it does not, Phillips's criticism is a nonstarter.

Phillips also fails to consider another line of argument which Aurobindo pursues in support of his thesis of the inevitability of the divine life. This line of argument is based on the inevitability of the evolution of the supramental consciousness. The argument here is as follows: a) The supramental consciousness is the necessary condition of the divine life, b) The evolution of the supramental consciousness is inevitable, and c) Therefore, the divine life is inevitable.<sup>185</sup>

Aurobindo writes that "The manifestation of a supramental truth-consciousness...will make the divine life possible".<sup>186</sup> The divine life presupposes a form of consciousness in which there is no falsehood, error, deviation, incapacity, and ignorance. The supramental consciousness is a truth-consciousness which has an inherent knowledge of the divine reality and its workings in the world. It does not proceed from ignorance to partial knowledge like the mental con-

sciousness, but rather from truth to greater or more inclusive truth. In its own highest native status it is omniscient and omnipotent, but even in its evolutionary form it must be necessarily free of ignorance and error. Whatever it knows is true and whatever it wills is also true. If the supramental consciousness wills that  $p$ , then necessarily  $p$ . It does not stumble or falter in its ability to actualise or organise things in accordance with its conception. In the supramental consciousness there can be no deviation or deformation of perception, thought, feeling, will, and action. These are ever in accordance with truth, beauty, and goodness. Aurobindo remarks that "All the life and action and leading of the Supermind is guarded in its very nature from the falsehoods and uncertainties that are our lot".<sup>187</sup>

Aurobindo also claims that "A manifestation of the Supermind and its truth-consciousness is inevitable".<sup>188</sup> We have noted earlier that the argument for the inevitability of the evolution of the supramental consciousness is based on two premises: a) the involved existence of the Supermind in Matter, and b) the principle that what is involved must evolve. Given the inevitability of the evolution of the supramental consciousness, it follows that the divine life must be the inevitable culmination of evolution. Hence Aurobindo concludes that "...Supermind...will bring necessarily the divine life with it and establish it here".<sup>189</sup> I



think that Aurobindo has a valid argument for the inevitability of the divine life.

We should take note, in this context, of the distinction between a deterministic teleology and an indeterministic teleology. In a deterministic teleology the end-state or goal is reached despite fluctuations, for e.g., the development of an egg into a chicken, or of a human zygote into a human body. Further, the characteristics of the end-state are largely predetermined by the initial state. In an indeterministic teleology the end-state is not specifically predetermined by the initial state, but it is rather a function of selection from several available alternatives. However, this selection cannot be random because that would imply that there was no teleology at all. At the same time, the availability of specific alternatives may depend on environmental or historical factors, and, therefore, the end-state is not generally predictable. Thus an indeterministic teleology countenances random or stochastic and deterministic elements.

In Aurobindo's teleology the end-state of evolution, the Divine Life, is regarded as inevitable and is reached despite environmental, historical, and developmental fluctuations. Its general features, viz., fullness of being, consciousness, and delight, are also predetermined by the initial state, i.e., the involution of absolute being-consciousness-delight in Matter. However, Aurobindo's teleology allows for free

variations in the forms of materialization of the Divine Life and in the patterns of their development. The forms of materialization of the Divine Life and their patterns of development are a function of selection from environmentally or historically conditioned alternatives, and, therefore, are not predictable.

### **Creativity**

Aurobindo affirms that the evolutionary process is creative. Creativity consists in the production of novel things, but not out of nothing. It could be argued that there is no place for novelty, and, therefore, for creativity in Aurobindo's theory of evolution. According to his theory evolution is the inverse process of involution and all the stages of evolution are determined by involution. If evolution is only the unfolding of all that is folded up in Matter, then all that comes into being in evolution already existed in an involved condition in Matter. Therefore, there is no novelty or creativity in evolution. It is simply a re-run of involution in a different order.

It is true that, on Aurobindo's account, evolution is determined by involution. This implies that the stages of evolution, their constitutive structures, and their order of development are determined by involution. But there is a radical difference between involution and evolution. In evolution there is a basic structure or foundation from which all other structures evolve. And these structures evolve in

terms of diverse individual forms. Whereas in involution they manifest as universal structures.

It is also important to be clear about the meaning of Aurobindo's thesis that only what was involved in Matter can evolve from Matter. It is essential to emphasize that Aurobindo refers only to the evolution of basic structures like Life, Mind, Overmind etc., and not to their particular formations or forms of embodiment. He argues that Life and Mind evolved from Matter because they were already involved in it and that Overmind and Supermind must also evolve from Matter because they are involved in it. He does not argue that particular forms of life evolved because they were already involved in Matter.

Aurobindo's thesis does not imply that all that evolves from Matter existed preformed in it. It only implies that all that evolves from Matter existed in potentiality in it. Thus there can be novelty or creativity in evolution in terms of novelty or creativity in the forms of embodiment or materialisation of Life, Mind etc., and their processes of development. The evolution of Life and Mind was necessary and inevitable because of the fact that they already came into being in involution and became involved in Matter, but their forms of embodiment and the processes of development of their forms of embodiment are not made necessary or inevitable by anything in the involution.

### **Continuity**

Aurobindo affirms the continuity of the evolutionary process. He maintains that higher forms evolve from the lower forms. And although there are radical transitions in evolution, in the sense of transition from one form to another very different and superior form, this does not break the continuity of evolution. The existence of intermediate or transitional forms ensures the continuity of the evolutionary process<sup>190</sup>. As Aurobindo observes "...in the evolution there are indeed radical transitions, but these leaps, even when considerable, are to some extent prepared by slow gradations which make them conceivable and feasible".<sup>191</sup> Continuity and graduality are thus related.

This implies that the process is fundamentally a gradual one. Aurobindo maintains that there are subtle preparatory steps preceding apparently rapid transitions. He writes that "...a slow, creeping, imperceptible, or even occult action is followed by a run and an evolutionary saltus across the border".<sup>192</sup>

### **Integration**

Integration is the incorporation of the elements of the lower stage into the higher stage. Of course, the lower is not incorporated as it is. The lower elements are transformed and incorporated into the higher. Thus the evolution of Life brings about the transformation and integration of Matter into the forms of life. Each higher form of life transforms

and integrates the substance and activities of the lower form. In Aurobindo's words, integration implies "A taking up of what has already been evolved into each higher grade as it is reached and a transformation more or less complete so as to admit of a total changed working of the whole being and nature...."<sup>193</sup>.

Integration occurs in all developmental processes in varying degrees. But a total transformation and integration of the elements of the lower stage into the higher stage is an ideal of development.

### **Dialectics**

There is also a dialectical relationship between the lower structure or form and the higher. The higher exists in a rudimentary form in the lower and evolves from it. This evolution or development is not a free transference to a higher stage. The higher structure or form has to struggle to liberate itself from the lower. The lower constrains and conditions the development of the higher, and at the same time, the higher, as it develops from the lower, exerts a transforming influence on it. The degree of power of the transforming influence of the higher structure is determined partly by its own essential nature, partly by its stage of development, and partly by the nature of the lower structure in which it is involved.<sup>194</sup>

### **Progress**

There is progress in evolution. This claim not only implies that evolutionary change is directional, but also that the change represents a betterment or improvement. An evolutionary change is progressive if the later stages or members represent a betterment or improvement in regard to a specific feature or a set of features.

Uniform progress must be distinguished from net progress. There is uniform progress if every later member or stage represents a betterment or improvement over every earlier stage or member. There is net progress if the later members or stages represent a betterment or improvement, on the average, than the earlier members or stages. Net progress thus allows for fluctuations.

There is also a distinction between general progress and particular progress. General progress occurs when there is progress in all sequences or domains of evolution. Particular progress occurs when there is progress in a given sequence or domain, or some sequences or domains, but not in all sequences or domains.

We can thus distinguish among four forms of progress: 1) Uniform general progress, 2) Uniform particular progress, 3) Net general progress, and 4) Net particular progress.

Uniform general progress occurs when there is uniform progress in all sequences or domains of evolution. Uniform particular progress occurs when there is uniform progress in a one or some sequences or domains, but not in all. Net

general progress occurs when there is net progress in all sequences or domains. Net particular progress occurs when there is net progress in one or some sequences or domains, but not in all.

Before we can determine which of these four forms of progress is characteristic of evolution, from Aurobindo's point of view, we must be clear about the criteria of progress in evolution. Aurobindo mentions some criteria of progress: 1) complexity of substance, 2) diversity, 3) widening of the range of being and consciousness, 4) heightening of the force or power of consciousness, and 5) integration.<sup>195</sup>

The first criterion pertains to the complexity of structure. There is progress from stage a to stage b, if the structure of the developing entity becomes more complex in stage b. Increasing complexity of structure is thus an indicator of progress. The second criterion pertains to progress in macro-evolution. If we consider the development of matter, progress would be indicated by the number of qualitatively different kinds of material substances and formations. Progress in the evolution of life would again be indicated by the number of kinds of organisms. Progress in the development of consciousness would be indicated by the number of kinds of capacities, dispositions, emotions, etc.

Widening of the range of being and consciousness occurs with the capacity to assimilate diverse kinds of experiences and the extension of the domain of application of present

capacities. Heightening of the force of consciousness involves the development of new and higher capacities or operations. Integration pertains to the transformation and incorporation of the previously developed capacities into the newly developed structure.

Aurobindo affirms the reality of progress in evolution. He thus describes evolution as a "progressive self-manifestation of the Spirit in a material universe".<sup>196</sup> I think he would affirm that there has been net progress in evolution.

Why is there progress in evolution? It could be argued that since involution is a process of regressive manifestation of the Spirit, and since evolution is the inverse process of involution, evolution is a progressive manifestation of the Spirit. Alternatively, it could also be argued that since evolution is the liberation of a hierarchy of powers of consciousness involved in Matter, it must be progressive. If Mind is a higher power than Life-force, then the liberation of the Mind in Matter and its direct creative action in Matter must ensue in higher forms of conscious life. Similarly, if the Overmind is a higher power than Mind, then its liberation and direct creative action in Matter must ensue in further higher forms of conscious beings.

Why is evolution not uniformly progressive? Aurobindo would reply that evolutionary progress is partly a function of the extant level of organisation of matter and partly a function of the extant power of the emerging principle. The



evolution of life has not been uniformly progressive because it is partly a function of the extant level of organisation of physical forms and partly a function of the extant power of emergence of life out of the inconstance of matter. Slackening or reversal in the evolution of life would be explained by Aurobindo in terms of either the inadequacy of the available level of organisation of physical forms or the inadequacy of the power of emergence of life due to the "continuing grip of the inconstance".<sup>197</sup>

Aurobindo maintains that the clue to the significance of the evolutionary process does not lie in biological evolution or the evolution of biological forms. The development of biological forms which constitutes the subject-matter of scientific evolutionary theory is only the outward aspect of a subtle inner process, the ascent of consciousness to higher levels of existence and function. Aurobindo views biological development as providing the basis for the development of consciousness from one grade of existence to another. The survival of the fittest is not an end in itself but only a means for the development of consciousness. As Aurobindo writes

The essential purpose and sign of the growing evolution here is the emergence of consciousness in an apparently inconstant universe, the growth of consciousness and with it growth of the light and power of the being; the development of the form and its functioning, or its fitness to survive, although indispensable, is not the whole meaning or the central motive.<sup>198</sup>

Thus the evolution of forms of life constitutes an ascent of consciousness to a higher level because living organisms respond to their environment and their activities are of a totally new and higher order than the processes of inanimate matter.<sup>199</sup> The higher grades in the evolution of life, i.e., animals, mark yet another ascent of consciousness. Aurobindo argues that the emergence of animals constitutes a further heightening and widening of the force of being and consciousness, and its range, in the world of matter and life.<sup>200</sup> Arguments have been advanced in recent ethology for the continuity of awareness between the higher animals and humans. W.H. Thorpe points out that studies in animal behavior tend to show that animals have the capacity for a) ideation and manipulation of abstract ideas, b) anticipation and expectancy, c) self-awareness, and even d) aesthetic appreciation. He argues that "...evidence suggests that consciousness must have evolved, certainly more than once and probably a number of times, in different animal lineages".<sup>201</sup>

The evolution of *Homo sapiens* signals a further ascent of consciousness. Humans are capable of a higher power of observation, invention, imagination, and aesthetic creation. They are capable of activities which are a function, not of a reflexive or reactive, but of a "mastering, understanding, self-detaching intelligence".<sup>202</sup> There is a further heightening of the force of consciousness and a widening of

its range. Humans are able to experience and understand more of the world. There is also an augmented transformation and integration of the capacities and responses of the animal mind.

According to Aurobindo, the most distinctive feature of humans is their capacity for self-development, their capacity for consciously directing and governing their own development. He observes that "It is in all human nature to exceed itself by conscious evolution".<sup>203</sup> This evolutionary impetus takes many forms, such as the aspiration for perfection, discontent with all forms of limitation, the striving for ideals, and, more importantly, the spiritual endeavor. These forms of the evolutionary impetus are the means by which nature continues her ongoing evolutionary experiment in the laboratory of human existence.

Aurobindo claims that there is also an evolution of the individual being embodied in a physical form. This leads us to his theory of rebirth.

## CHAPTER 6

### REBIRTH

O Mortals ! chill'd by dreams of icy death,  
Whom air-blown bubbles of a poet's breath,  
Darkness and Styx in error's gulph have hurl'd,  
With fabled terrors of a fabled world;  
Think not, whene'er material forms expire,  
Consumed by wasting age or funeral fire,  
Aught else can die: souls, spurning death's  
decay,  
Freed from their old, new tenements of clay  
Forthwith assume, and wake to life again.

Ovid

The central claim of Aurobindo's theory of rebirth is that rebirth into successively higher types of physical forms is a necessary mechanism by which the soul develops its consciousness in an evolutionary world. A corollary of this claim is that the soul continues to be reborn in a given type of physical form until it has exhausted the possibilities of experience and development afforded by that physical form.

My formulation of Aurobindo's argument for the claim that rebirth is a "necessity" for the evolving soul is as follows:

1. There exists an evolutionary universe
2. The individual soul is immortal.

3. The individual soul takes birth in the evolutionary universe in order to develop and express its consciousness in Matter through manifold experiences and activities.

4. One birth is insufficient for the complete development and self-expression of the individual soul in Matter.

5. Therefore, rebirth is necessary for the development of the individual soul.<sup>204</sup>

The first premise can be accepted without much ado. The fact that all individual beings are curious about their environment and try to dominate it in various ways lends support to the notion that individual beings tend to develop by seeking manifold experiences and avenues of activity. And if they are souls which have assumed physical forms, it is reasonable to suppose that they have done so in order to develop and express themselves in Matter. The fourth premise is also plausible. Given the limited duration and in-built constraints of any type of physical body, it would not be possible to completely develop and express the potentialities of consciousness in one birth in a particular type of physical body.

Premise (2) receives support from near-death experiences. Numerous studies have shown many common features of near-death reports and these similarities constitute good grounds for their veridicality. The similarities are more striking in light of their cross-cultural invariance. Researchers have also discovered that differences in medical and demographic circumstances do not radically alter the nature of near-death experiences. The common elements of near-death reports are:

1) seeing one's own body from a distance, 2) awareness of the physical environment, e.g., awareness of doctors attempting to resuscitate one's body etc., 3) the experience of being transported swiftly through a long dark tunnel, 4) visions of deceased relatives and friends, 5) encounter with a loving "being of light" who helps one to understand the pattern of events in one's life, 6) panoramic replay of one's entire life, 7) a sense of being compelled to return to one's earthly body because one is not yet ready to leave the physical world, and 8) overwhelming feelings of joy, love, and peace, bordering on the mystical.<sup>205</sup>

Another aspect of near-death accounts is that the experience does not conform to individual or socially conditioned expectations. There are cases in which the content of the near-death experience diverged from the subject's professed desires, fears, or beliefs. According to Raymond Moody, most near-death reports do not correspond to what is commonly imagined to happen to the dying person. Further, the reports are nontraditional and do not refer to harp-playing angels or demons with pitchforks. This makes it probable that reports are veridical.

It has also been argued that the occurrence of verified paranormal episodes associated with the near-death experience supports the accuracy of reports. If a patient can accurately describe the events of his resuscitation, then his account of

other aspects of the near-death experience may also be accurate.<sup>206</sup>

The most important reason in favor of the veridicality of near-death experiences is their transforming effect on the individual. If the experience can bring about a lasting positive transformation in the life of the individual, this is evidence that the experience was very probably veridical or authentic.

There is also the argument from the cumulative force of the above-mentioned considerations. Even though each one of them may not sufficiently establish the veridicality of the near-death experience, they do so cumulatively.

Critics have argued against the view that near-death experiences are veridical. They maintain that these experiences are hallucinations produced by one or more of the following factors: 1) drugs, 2) oxygen deprivation, 3) limbic lobe syndrome, 4) endorphins, and 5) sensory deprivation.<sup>207</sup>

There seems to be a great contrast between the widely divergent types of hallucinations produced by drugs and the relative uniformity and consistency of near-death experiences. Not all near-death subjects investigated by researchers were under heavy medication. Therefore, it is not plausible to explain away their experiences as drug induced hallucinations. Further, some of the subjects were no strangers to drug-induced hallucinatory experiences and

testified that the near-death experience was unlike the former experiences.

The appeal to oxygen deprivation seems to have a prima facie plausibility. The near-death state is one in which there is a great deal of disturbance in the metabolism of the body and this can be an effective cause of delirium and delusion. The neurologist Ernst Rodin describes his own near-death experience under surgery as "one of the most intense and happiest moments of my life", but concludes that it was a "toxic psychosis" induced by his oxygen starved brain. But hallucinations induced by oxygen deprivation typically do not resemble near-death experiences. Oxygen deprivation results in unconsciousness or illusory perceptions of objects and people as distorted, confusion, etc. This warrants the conclusion that the classification of near-death experiences in the same category as hallucinations induced by oxygen deprivation is quite problematic.

Other explanations of near-death experience refer to seizure activity in the brain's limbic system. This system is associated with memory, mood, and emotion. Thus the features of panoramic memory, mood elevation, love, etc., of near-death experiences are due to limbic lobe agitation. There is at present no clinical evidence linking near death experience with the limbic lobe syndrome.<sup>208</sup> Further, as Michael Sabom has pointed out, limbic lobe disorder also causes feelings of despair, suicidal urges, and vestibular and olfactory



sensations. These elements are notably absent in near-death experiences.

Endorphins are also supposed to "explain" near death experience. Due to the stress created by the process of dying, the brain cells secrete morphine like chemicals such as endorphins and enkephalins which act as hallucinogens and thus account for the "pathogenesis" of near-death experiences. But the great mystery here lies in the correspondence between the endorphins and the contents of the near-death experiences. How does the secretion of endorphins bring about the experience of encounter with a loving being of light which helps one to understand the pattern of events in one's life?

Sensory deprivation has also been proposed as a plausible cause of near-death experience. But it is not true that being bedridden is a case of significant sensory deprivation. Most patients are bombarded with all sorts of sensory stimuli even in the hospital setting. Further, since there is no reason to suppose that in sensory deprivation experiments there has ever been a contact with a loving being of light in a different plane of existence, it is quite problematic to explain away near-death experience as caused by sensory deprivation.

All these explanations fail to come to terms with one basic feature of near-death experience, a heightened clarity of consciousness. If all these "brain disorder" stories are

right, how is the subject is able to recall his or her experiences lucidly? How is it possible for some subjects to accurately describe what was going on in the room? And what brings about the lasting positive transformation in their life? How can an episode of limbic seizure lead to a conquest over the fear of death?

The importance of near-death experience for Aurobindo's metaphysical views is evident. If the evidence is well-established, it would support his account of supraphysical worlds and his affirmation of the immortality of the soul. But evidence for survival does not directly establish the rebirth theory. However, one aspect of the near-death experience, panoramic memory, is relevant to Aurobindo's theory of rebirth. If there is a development of the soul over several births, then the occurrence of panoramic memory is significant. It would be a means by which the soul understands the significance of its past incarnation and prepares for the future.

Aurobindo suggests an inductive argument for rebirth based on the facts of "fragmentary recollections of past births" and "cases of astonishingly exact and full memory in the child-mind"<sup>209</sup>. It was left to an American professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, Dr. Ian Stevenson, to develop a plausible case for the occurrence of rebirth or reincarnation by means of carefully documented cases of recollection of former lives by children all around the

world. In a number of cases, the recollections or memories of the children were verified and found accurate.<sup>210</sup>

One well-known case which occurred in India deserves mention. In the early 1930's a four-year old girl called Shanti Devi who was living in Delhi began to talk about a previous life she had lived in the town of Mathura, a hundred miles from Delhi. She said she had lived in a yellow house and that her husband had been a cloth merchant named Kedar Nath Chaubey. A retired school principal obtained the address of the place in Mathura from Shanti Devi and wrote a letter. He was surprised to receive a reply from a man called Kedar Nath. Kedar Nath confirmed many of the details of his life mentioned by Shanti Devi and requested that his relative in Delhi be allowed to talk to the girl. When the man arrived, Shanti Devi recognised him as her "husband's" cousin, Kanji Mal, and soon convinced him of the authenticity of her recollections. Kanji Mal reported back to Kedar Nath about the authenticity of Shanti Devi. Kedar Nath no longer hesitated, he rushed to Delhi and the girl flung herself into his arms. She was able to answer his questions about her previous existence as his wife and mentioned a box containing a hundred rupees that she had buried in one of the rooms of their house in Mathura.

When Shanti Devi was finally taken to the town of Mathura, she again recognised many things. She correctly identified the elder brother of Kedar Nath, pointed out



buildings that were not there when she had lived in Mathura, directed people to the first house in which she and her husband had formerly lived, and recognised various relatives of her former life.<sup>211</sup>

There are two conditions in which a memory-claim concerning previous lives is justified:

1. The memory-claim is veridical.

2. The ostensible memories are genuine memories, i.e., it is known that the person had no opportunity to acquire the information through other sources.

Although verified memories of previous lives support the theory of rebirth, the absence of memories of previous lives does not disprove the theory. One would be committing the fallacy of denying the antecedent if one were to argue otherwise.

One of the common objections to the theory of rebirth is that we have no memories of previous lives. Aurobindo remarks that "The absence of any memory of past existences is wrongly and very ignorantly taken as a disproof of the actuality of rebirth".<sup>212</sup> He argues that we have no memories of our infancy even in this life. But we cannot conclude on this basis that we had no infancy! The absence of memory of previous lives does not imply that there is no rebirth. Perhaps there are factors which account for the general inability to recall previous lives.

The 19th century Tamil mystic St.Ramalingam (1823-1874) considers the objection from absence of memory and deals with it as follows in his quite incomparable essay Jivakarunya Ozhukkam (The Path Of Compassion):

Some raise the following question: If there is a previous life, then tell us who you were and the history of your previous life. But if you ask someone who is seventy years old "Tell me about your life when you were five years old", he will answer "I can't even remember what happened yesterday, how can I tell you about my life when I was five years old?". Since a person is unable to remember his past even in this life, how will it be possible for him to remember previous lives?<sup>213</sup>

But there are exceptions to this general inability to recall previous lives. The cases documented by Stevenson constitute evidence for exceptional instances of recollections of previous lives. Why don't people generally remember their previous lives?

Aurobindo distinguishes between detailed memory and general or synoptic memory. A detailed memory of the past is an exception even in this life. What we normally have is a general or synoptic memory of the past. Aurobindo argues that if even in this life we have no detailed memory of the past, then it is plausible to suppose that surface memory or overt memory and detailed memory would be lost in the process of rebirth. This loss of memory would also be more likely if we consider the internatal journey of the soul in supraphysical worlds after the death of the body. As Aurobindo writes:

...it is evident that so radical a change as a transition to other worlds followed by new birth in a new body ought normally to obliterate altogether the surface...memory, and yet that would not annul the identity of the soul or the growth of the nature. <sup>214</sup>

It is important to take note of the concluding sentence in this passage. Aurobindo makes the same point when he writes that

...yet with all this hiatus of memory we can grow and be...the mind is even capable of total loss of memory of past events and its own identity and yet it is the same being who is there and the lost memory can one day be recovered.<sup>215</sup>

The point here is controversial. Memory is not indispensable or necessary for identity and development of the soul. Aurobindo also suggests that it is possible to recover the lost memory of previous lives.

First, let us consider his claim that memory is not indispensable for the identity and development of the soul. There is a distinction between knowing one's identity and having an identity, between knowing that one is the same person and being the same person. There is also the important distinction between the criteria of identification and the criteria of identity.

The first distinction implies that I can be the same person without knowing that I am the same person. I do not lose my identity because of my amnesia. I have only lost a sense of my identity. I may not know that I am the same

person who wrote the previous paragraph, but that does not imply that I am not the same person who wrote that paragraph. If my memory is constitutive of my identity, then the fact that I do not remember my infancy would imply that there is no identity between myself and a certain infant. But this is false. Therefore, loss of memory does not imply loss of personal identity. Memory is a criterion of identification, but it does not constitute my identity. Of course, this is not to deny that there are fairly established procedures of identification of my identity with a certain infant. That is a different issue.

Aurobindo also maintains that memory is not indispensable for the development of the being. There can be development through rebirth, across lives or incarnations, without memory of previous lives. This development of the being, of the soul, occurs by an assimilation of the essence of past experiences, the essential results of past efforts or actions, somewhat like the growth of a tree by the assimilation of the energies of sunshine, wind, soil, and rain.<sup>216</sup>

The development of the soul does not consist in the accumulation of knowledge, but in the growth of its consciousness and the expression of its nature. Surface memory and detailed memory are not essential for this growth of consciousness. Aurobindo argues that rebirth is a process



of renewal and not repetition. The soul takes a new birth in a new body, vital, and mind. Each birth marks the beginning of a life which is new in many important respects. A persistent or complete memory of the previous lives would actually be an obstacle to the continued development of the soul, it would prolong the old temperament, tendencies, preoccupations etc., and stand in the way of renewal and creative development and acquisition of new experiences:

...A clear and detailed memory of past lives, hatreds, rancours, attachments, connections would...bind the reborn being to a useless repetition or a compulsory continuation of his...past and stand heavily in the way of bringing out new possibilities from the depths of the spirit...The law that deprives us of the memory of past lives is a law of the cosmic wisdom and serves...its evolutionary purpose.<sup>217</sup>

It is interesting to note that the nineteenth century Cambridge philosopher John McTaggart who also defended the theory of reincarnation, or "the doctrine of a plurality of lives" as he described it, held a similar position on the issue of the importance of memory to identity and development across incarnations or lives. Incidentally, Aurobindo mentions in one of his letters that he had heard of McTaggart but had not read any of his works.<sup>218</sup>

McTaggart also maintains that loss of identity would not affect continuity of character and would not destroy the identity of the self.<sup>219</sup> He holds that development could

continue from one life to another despite a temporary loss of memory (temporary because in the final stage of development there is memory of all the previous stages). He argues that there are three possible ways in which memory could assist development across a plurality of lives: 1) Memory may make us wiser. The memory of events we have experienced and the knowledge we have gained may increase our wisdom. 2) Memory may make us more virtuous. The memory of a temptation resisted or succumbed to may help us in resisting present temptation. 3) Memory may give us knowledge that the people to whom we are now related are the people whom we have loved in the past and this may enable us to love them in the present life or enhance our love of them. McTaggart observes:

The value of memory, then, is that by its means the past may serve the wisdom, the virtue, and the love that are present. If the past can help the future in a like manner without the aid of memory, the absence of memory need not destroy the possibility of an improvement spreading over many lives.<sup>220</sup>

McTaggart now argues that we could be wiser by reason of experiences which we have forgotten. Wisdom depends primarily on a mind qualified to observe facts and draw appropriate conclusions. The process of acquiring knowledge strengthens the mind regardless of whether all the bits of knowledge are remembered or not. Thus a person who died after a life spent in the acquisition of knowledge might begin a new life without memory of the knowledge he acquired in the previous

life, but with the increased strength and suppleness of mind he had gained in the previous life. Moreover, the mere accumulation of knowledge, if the memory never ceased, would be worse than useless. As McTaggart remarks "It is better to leave such accumulations behind us, preserving their greatest value in the faculties which have been improved by their acquisition".<sup>221</sup>

McTaggart also argues that "...the memory of moral experiences is of no value to virtue except in so far as it helps to form the moral character, and, if this is done, the loss of the memory would be no loss to virtue"<sup>222</sup>. A moral virtue may persist in the absence of the memory of an event which led to its cultivation or growth. Thus an individual can carry over into his next life or incarnation the strength of character he has gained due to the moral experiences of this life and the value of those experiences would not be destroyed by the death which destroys the memory of them.

The next issue is whether the value of past love is lost when memory of that love is lost. Would the loss of memory of past love fail to strengthen present love? McTaggart maintains that present love can be stronger and deeper because of past love which has been forgotten. He points out that a lot of things are forgotten in any close relationship which has lasted for years in the course of a single life, but they have contributed to the strength of present love. Similarly, a relationship of love between two persons in

their previous lives can strengthen their love for each other in the present life if they meet again and love each other again, despite the loss of memory of their past love for each other. Thus the value of past love is not lost with the loss of its memory.<sup>223</sup> McTaggart echoes Aurobindo when he writes that

The past is not preserved separately in memory, but it survives, concentrated and united, in the present. Death is thus the most perfect example of the "collapse into immediacy"--that mysterious phrase of Hegel's--where all that was before a mass of hard-earned acquisitions has been merged in the unity of a developed character.<sup>224</sup>

These words recall Aurobindo's view that the essence of past experiences is assimilated by the being without retaining a detailed surface memory of those experiences.

Both Aurobindo and McTaggart affirm that the loss of memory is only temporary. According to McTaggart there will be a recollection of all the past stages in the final stage of development<sup>225</sup>. Aurobindo maintains that the general memory of past lives stored in the subliminal structure of consciousness, the "subliminal memory", can be retrieved at the conscious levels at a certain stage of inner development through the practice of yoga.<sup>226</sup>

Aurobindo emphasizes that rebirth involves a creative beginning of a new life. A new personality, a new body, vital, and mind are organised by the soul as the means of its creative development. Rebirth is not a matter of a useless

repetition or continuation of the past personality and its constitutive dispositions and capacities. There is continuity, but there is also a creative departure in many directions:

There is an assimilation, a discarding, and strengthening and rearrangement of the old characters and motives, a new ordering of the developments of the past and a selection for the purposes of the future without which the new start cannot be fruitful or carry forward the evolution. For each birth is a new start; it develops indeed from the past, but is not its mechanical continuation: rebirth is not a constant reiteration but a progression....<sup>227</sup>

Elsewhere, Aurobindo argues that the soul creates and expresses itself in a new personality, a new and temporary structure of dispositions, attitudes, and capacities, in each incarnation. For instance,

Supposing Virgil is born again, he may take up poetry in one or two other lives, but he will certainly not write an epic but rather perhaps slight but elegant and beautiful lyrics such as he wanted to write, but did not succeed, in Rome. In another birth he is likely to be no poet at all, but a philosopher and a Yogin seeking to attain and to express the highest truth--for that too was an unrealised trend of his consciousness in that life. Perhaps before he had been a warrior or ruler doing deeds like Aeneas or Augustus before he sang them.<sup>228</sup>

As the soul develops it accumulates its personalities and becomes more rich and complex. These past personalities may be implicit in a given incarnation and express some of their hues, their traits and capacities, in certain domains, or

they may be more or less explicit and contribute towards a versatile, many-sided character. Even if a former personality's capacity or trait is expressed in the new incarnation, it will not take the same form or expression. The old trait or capacity will be cast into new forms and integrated into the present structure of personality.<sup>229</sup>

Aurobindo's view of reincarnation diverges from the traditional Indian theory of reincarnation. According to the traditional theory the soul takes rebirth in order to experience the results of its actions in the previous life. The quality of its present life is determined by the quality of its actions in the previous life. Good fortune in its present incarnation is the inevitable result of good actions performed in the previous life and misfortune is the inevitable result of bad actions performed in the previous life. The soul thus gets a moral education on earth by experiencing the results of its own actions in the previous lives.

Aurobindo maintains that the soul takes birth not for moral education, but for manifold experiences, self-expression, and development. The soul chooses to descend into the physical world in order to participate in God's great adventure of self-discovery and self-expression in Matter. Since it is a microcosm of God in its essential status, it is not an infant to be coddled and whipped into virtuous ways by a mechanical system of rewards and punishments.<sup>230</sup> The law of

Karma is not a mechanical or deterministic law, but a complex spiritual law which operates in accordance with the developmental requirements of the soul. The events in a given life are not the mechanical consequences of the results of actions performed in the previous lives, but serve the developmental requirements of the soul.

The traditional theory would explain the sufferings of a good person in this life as the inevitable consequences of bad actions performed in the previous life and the good fortunes of a bad person in this life as the inevitable consequences of good actions performed in the previous life. But the theory does not explain the purpose of rewarding the new and bad personality for the good deeds performed by the old personality, and of punishing the new and good personality for the bad deeds performed by the old personality. Aurobindo remarks that "A total change of this kind between life and life is possible though not likely to be frequent, but to saddle the new opposite personality with the rewards or punishments of the old looks like a purposeless...procedure".<sup>231</sup>

Aurobindo also argues that the traditional theory fails to explain the significance of the loss of memory of the deeds, good or bad, performed in the previous life for which one is being whipped or coddled in the present life. If the purpose of rebirth is to gain moral education by reaping the consequences of one's deeds in the previous life, it does not

make sense to be deprived of the memory of those deeds since this memory would enable the individual to realise the significance of the reward or punishment. As Aurobindo writes:

If indeed rebirth were governed by a system of rewards and punishments, if life's whole intention were to teach the embodied spirit to be good and moral...then there is evidently a great stupidity and injustice in denying to the mind in its new incarnation all memory of its past births and actions. For it deprives the reborn being of all chance to realise why he is rewarded or punished or to get any advantage from the lesson of the profitableness of virtue and the unprofitableness of sin....<sup>232</sup>

The soul is the ultimate determinant of its own development. The law of karma cannot be the sole determinant of the circumstances of rebirth and the events of the new life.<sup>233</sup> Those circumstances and events may be shaped in part in accordance with the law of karma, but fundamentally the developmental requirements of the soul determine the nature of its experiences in the new incarnation. Aurobindo writes that "All the secret of the circumstances of rebirth centres around the one capital need of the soul, the need of growth, the need of experience; that governs the line of its evolution and all the rest is accessory".<sup>234</sup>

Aurobindo also diverges from Plato's theory of reincarnation. It should be noted that there are some common aspects of the traditional Indian theory of rebirth and Plato's theory. Plato's primitive theory also affirms the



logic of retribution for good and bad deeds committed by the soul. In The Republic Plato refers to a system of rewards and punishments according to which there is tenfold penalty for every unjust act of the soul and tenfold reward for every just act. The object of rebirth is to learn the knowledge which would enable the soul to distinguish between the good life and the bad life. The good life is that which leads the soul to being more just and the bad life is that which leads the soul to being more unjust. Aurobindo's criticisms of the traditional Indian theory would hold good of Plato's theory also.

Plato affirms that the soul can take rebirth in an animal body after taking birth in a human body. He mentions that the soul of Ajax chose a lion's body and the soul of Agamemnon chose an eagle's body. Aurobindo maintains that this sort of reversion into an animal form of life is an exception rather than a norm. Once the soul has made the momentous transition to a new and higher level of development by taking birth in a human body, it is not likely to regress back into an animal body. He argues that the decisive conversion of consciousness marked by the transition to human life cannot be normally overturned by rebirth into an animal form. Such a regression can occur only if the soul is in not in a position to continue to be faithful to the human type of consciousness and develop securely at the level of human existence, or if

there are overwhelming animal propensities which require fulfillment by the assumption of an animal body.<sup>235</sup>

The soul continues to take birth in a given type of organic or physical form until it is ready to make the transition to a higher type of organic form, and its readiness here is determined by whether or not it has exhausted the possibilities of experience afforded by that type of organic form.

It follows that the soul continues to take birth in the human form until it has exhausted the possibilities of experience afforded by that form. Evidently one birth or life in the human form is not sufficient for the development of the soul in that form. The possibilities of human experience and consciousness cannot be exhausted in the short span of life characteristic of the human body. Therefore, a series of births in the human form is necessary for the development of the higher possibilities afforded by the human form. If an embryonic form of the supramental consciousness is the highest possibility of the human form, then the soul has to continue to take birth in the human form until it realises that possibility. And even then it will continue to take rebirth in a higher type of organic form capable of expressing the potentialities of the supramental consciousness. The highest levels of the mental consciousness do not mark the limits of human potential. As Aurobindo writes

...the soul has not finished what it has to do by merely developing into humanity; it has still to develop that humanity into its higher possibilities...We may reasonably doubt whether even a Plato or a Shankara marks the crown and therefore the end of the outflowing of the spirit in man...if the present leading principle of the mind as man has developed it, the intellect, is not its highest principle, if the mind itself has other powers as yet only imperfectly possessed by the highest types of the human individual, then a prolongation of the line of evolution and consequently of the ascending line of rebirth to embody them is inevitable.<sup>236</sup>

Thus there is multiple life-span development or development over several lives. The individual soul continues its journey towards the supramental stage over several incarnations.

I think that the plausibility of the theory of reincarnation depends heavily on the veracity of cases of the sort investigated by Ian Stevenson. But it is important to pay attention to cultural inhibitors and suppressers of memories of previous lives. In contemporary western societies and some non-western societies, such memory-claims by children are not seriously considered and dismissed as imagination. If there is a growing awareness of the importance of these memory-claims, and an attempt to encourage children who make these claims, we may have a more solid foundation for research and evaluation of the theory of rebirth.

We should also consider the explanatory value of the reincarnation theory. The theory of reincarnation can provide a good explanation of the following phenomena: 1) phobias of infancy and early childhood, 2) unusual interests and types of play in childhood, 3) unusual aptitudes and untaught skills of early childhood, 4) gender-identity confusion, and 5) differences between members of one-egg twin pairs.

According to Ian Stevenson, the explanatory value of the reincarnation theory is enhanced by the fact that there are no satisfactory alternative explanations of these phenomena. For example, monozygotic twins have uniform genetic material and an early environment that is quite similar even if they are not conjoined. But there are great differences in the personalities of the two members of a conjoined twin pair. The original "Siamese twins", Chang and Eng, showed marked differences in personality. Chang drank alcohol excessively, whereas Eng was a teetotaler. Such differences seem presently inexplicable, and the theory of reincarnation can account for such differences in terms of tendencies cultivated in the previous lives of the two members. The theory of reincarnation leads us to expect significant differences, whereas the modern genetic theory leads us to expect otherwise. It could be argued that since it makes these differences more probable, it is well supported by the actual occurrence of such differences.

Gender-identity confusion in childhood is another good example. There are cases in which children reject their anatomical sex and believe that they really belong to the opposite sex. Since it was fashionable to ascribe all emotional problems to the conduct of the parents, cases of gender-identity were also supposed to result from parental misconduct. But there are cases in which the child rejected its anatomical sex at an early age and in which it does not seem reasonable to hold that parental conduct had anything to do with it. A biological factor, such as Klinefelter's syndrome, was held responsible, but the occurrence of cases in which there is no evidence of this syndrome undermines the view that gender identity is caused by this biological factor. According to Stevenson, "It seems fair to say that Western psychiatrists and psychologists have no fully satisfactory explanation for the occurrence of gender-identity confusion".<sup>237</sup> On the reincarnation theory, however, such confusions occur due to the fact that the present birth occurred in a body whose gender is the opposite of the gender of the previous birth. We can conclude, therefore, that the reincarnation theory has explanatory value in regard to this phenomenon. Whether it has greater explanatory value or power than alternative explanations is a moot issue.

The simplicity of the explanation offered by the reincarnation theory is another factor in favor of its consideration. Further, its cumulative explanatory force must

also be considered as enhancing its value in comparison with alternatives. As Stevenson has pointed out, the theory also has predictive power. He argues that some predictions made on the assumption of the occurrence of reincarnation concern the existence of birthmarks in a given individual on the basis of information about fatal wounds received in the previous life. He also thinks that the reincarnation theory can offer "large scale demographic predictions of changes in the conditions and behavior of groups of people", but he acknowledges that "It will take much discipline to frame such predictions so that the results will clearly favor either reincarnation or some alternative theory".<sup>238</sup>

The soul is the source of self-consciousness, subjectivity, individuality, and personhood. There cannot be a self-conscious individual without the soul. Thus the soul is the essential structure of the individual. The body, vital, and the mind are the contingent and instrumental structures of the soul. They are the instruments by which the soul develops and expresses its possibilities in the world.

The human individual is thus a soul using the body, vital, and mind as the instruments of its experience, development, self-discovery, and self-expression. As Aurobindo writes, "Man is a developing spirit trying here to find and fulfill itself in the forms of mind, life, and body".<sup>239</sup>

I will now consider each of these five structures in detail.

### The Body

The body has a great significance in Aurobindo's philosophy. It is the indispensable foundation for the development of the soul in the world. He writes:

All the sum of what we call life in the physical world is a progress of the soul and proceeds by birth into the body and has that for its fulcrum, its condition of action, and its condition of evolutionary persistence.<sup>240</sup>

Aurobindo affirms the dependence of the mind on the body. He remarks that "the mind has to build its operations upon a corporeal basis and use a material instrumentation".<sup>241</sup> He

acknowledges that even purely mental activities such as the conception of a poem require a properly functioning brain<sup>242</sup>. This acknowledgment of the importance of the body, which is consistent with his affirmation of a complex form of interactionism, is in line with his theory of evolution which affirms the need for a sufficiently developed physical or biological basis for the evolution of life and consciousness.

Aurobindo rejects the conception of the body as a solely material entity as a "capital and common error"<sup>243</sup>. It is an error because there is a consciousness immanent in the body, a form of consciousness Aurobindo refers to as "body-consciousness" and "bodymind". Thus he writes of "...the obscure consciousness proper to the limbs, cells, tissues, glands, organs"<sup>244</sup>. This body-consciousness accounts for the fact that the body does not always obey the dictates of the mind proper. It also accounts for the fact that the body has its own way of functioning in the face of illness or fatigue and its own automatic functioning's not always in accord with the mind's commands. Although the body-consciousness is an obscure form of consciousness and is characterised by a tendency toward inertia and dullness, it can be trained and made more conscious so that it can automatically perform what the mind requires of it. This training of the body-consciousness is one of the central tasks of Aurobindo's integral yoga and is necessary for the perfection of the body.



It is interesting to note that the notion of a body-consciousness or body-mind is gaining currency in contemporary medical theory, particularly in the fast developing field of PNI or psychoneuroimmunology. One of the well-known figures in this field, Dr. Deepak Chopra, has argued in his best-selling Quantum Healing: Exploring The Frontiers Of Mind/Body Medicine for the notion of a "network of intelligence" embedded in the body. Chopra claims that "the body must be credited with an immense fund of know-how"<sup>245</sup>. This fund of know-how which is exhibited by every constituent or part of the living body is consistent with Aurobindo's hypothesis of a body-consciousness or body-mind.

It should be mentioned that Aurobindo affirms that there is also a subtle-physical body and a "causal body" or the native body of the soul. As G.R.S. Mead has pointed out in his book The Doctrine Of the Subtle Body In Western Tradition, the notion that the individual possesses other non-physical bodies is also affirmed in the Neo-Platonic, Hermetic, and Gnostic-Christian traditions. In Aurobindo's perspective, there is really no such thing as "disembodied existence". The soul is always embodied in one type of body or another. After the death of the physical body, the soul functions and has experiences in terms of the subtle-physical body. This subtle-physical body is also eventually discarded and the soul then functions in terms of its original or native body, the "causal body".

### The Vital

According to Aurobindo, the vital or life-being is a structure distinct from the physical body, the mind, and the soul<sup>246</sup>. In the Western philosophical tradition, there has been a tendency to identify the vital with the body, or the mind, or the soul. As Aurobindo observes:

The European mind, for the most part, has never been able to go beyond the formula of soul + body, usually including mind in soul and everything except body in mind...There is no clear distinction between mind and vital, and often the vital is taken for the soul.<sup>247</sup>

Aristotle, for instance, in his De Anima fails to distinguish the soul from the vital when he conceives of the soul as that which animates the body or constitutes the "livingness" of the body. By contrast, Aurobindo maintains that the "livingness" of a body is due to the vital: "...it is the vital which animates and moves the body"<sup>248</sup>. The vital is the source of vitality or the life-force which is the indicator of sentience. Sentience is a function of the operation of life-force. Aurobindo thus affirms the central tenet of vitalism, the reality of the vital force or elan vital. He writes that "...vitality means life-force. Wherever there is life, in plant or animal, or man, there is life-force. Without the vital there can be no life in matter and no living action".<sup>249</sup>

The vital is not only the source of vitality or life-energy, but it is also the source of desires, emotions, and

the energies which make any form of activity possible<sup>250</sup>. Thus Aurobindo's concept of the vital is much broader than the "vital force" of the Western vitalists. He refers to the "desires, emotions, passions, ambitions, possessive and active tendencies of the vital"<sup>251</sup>. He also writes about the "unquiet passions, ardours, troubled emotions, cloudings, depressions, despairs" of the vital being<sup>252</sup>.

What does it mean to say that the vital is the "source" of desires, emotions etc.? Aurobindo seems to suggest that these are the movements or processes of the vital being in just the way hunger and thirst are the movements or processes of the body. A person would not have desires or emotions etc., without having a vital being or structure.

Earlier I observed that there is a set of needs or wants, capacities, tendencies or dispositions corresponding to each of the four structures of the individual. What are the distinctive needs or wants of the vital? According to Aurobindo, "Its whole principle and aim is to be, to assert its existence, to increase, to expand, to possess, and to enjoy: its native terms are growth of being, pleasure, and power"<sup>253</sup>. The vital seeks the maintenance and enlargement of its powers or energies. It seeks self expansion, creation, possession, domination, and enjoyment.

The vital has the capacities of regulation, regeneration, and attraction. The ability of many living organisms to continue to develop in such a way that a more or less normal

structure is produced even if a part of the organism is removed, is due to the vital. The classical example of regulation is provided in Hans Driesch's experiments on sea-urchin embryos. It was discovered that even when one of the cells of a very young embryo at the two-celled stage was killed, the remaining cell continued to develop not into half of a sea-urchin, but into a small but complete sea-urchin<sup>254</sup>. Regeneration is the capacity to replace or restore damaged structures. Many plants and lower organisms show amazing capacities of regeneration. If a flatworm is cut into several pieces, each can regenerate into a complete worm. If the lens is surgically removed from a newt's eye, a new lens regenerates from the edge of the iris<sup>255</sup>. The vital has the capacity for attraction. The phenomenon of the charisma, the "magnetism" of certain individuals is due to a well-developed vital. The phenomenon of "animal attraction", of "chemistry" between the sexes is again due to the interchange of compatible vital energies.

Aurobindo also distinguishes between different kinds of movements or dispositions or tendencies of the human vital. He distinguishes between the lower, middle, and higher vital movements or dispositions<sup>256</sup>. The lower vital movements are petty desires, e.g., desires for certain kinds of foods, sexual desires, superficial attractions and repulsions. Vanity, quarrelsomeness, perverse desires, petty ambitions, and envy are also lower vital tendencies. The middle or

central vital movements are powerful desires or passions and reactions such as great ambitions, pride, fear, love of fame, hatred etc.<sup>257</sup> The higher vital movements are creativity, mastery, dedication, generosity, and altruism<sup>258</sup>.

Aurobindo's criteria of this hierarchical classification of the tendencies or movements of the vital are not clear. In classifying desires for certain foods, sexual desires, petty ambitions, and perverse desires as on a lower scale than great ambitions and love of fame, he seems to be using the nature of the object of desire or ambition as the criterion. But when he classifies superficial attractions and repulsions as on a lower scale than powerful desires or passions, he seems to be using the intensity of the desire or emotion as the criterion. A third criterion seems to be at work in his classification of creativity, mastery, generosity etc., as higher than the others.

There are three important issues pertaining to Aurobindo's theory of the vital. First, what is the vital? what is its ontological status? Second, what are its referential criteria? This will help us to distinguish between the vital and the other structures. Third, what is the explanatory value or force of his theory? What does the hypothesis of a vital structure explain?

Aurobindo's answer to the first question would be that the vital is a structure of life-energy or life-force. He

would also maintain that it is actually a truncated structure of the force or energy of consciousness.

The referential criteria of the vital are: 1) sentience, 2) desire, 3) emotion, and 4) enjoyment. We identify the existence of the vital structure in a being in terms of whether that being exhibits the property of sentience, whether that being has desires and emotions, and whether that being has the capacity for enjoyment.

The explanatory value of Aurobindo's theory of the vital lies in its ability to explain the phenomena of regulation, regeneration, attraction, and enjoyment.

### The Mind

Aurobindo points out that in ordinary parlance the words "mind" and "mental" are used to refer indiscriminately to every non-physical aspect of the individual. Thus thoughts, desires, and emotions are all lumped together as "mental states". In Aurobindo's psychological theory "mind" refers to a structure of consciousness having to do with cognition, intelligence, ideas, and the reactions of thought to things<sup>259</sup>. Thus, in his view, an individual has thoughts, cognitions, and intelligence, by virtue of having a mind.

The mind is a complex structure. Aurobindo remarks that "There are many parts of the mind, each with its formations, functioning's, interests, and they may not agree"<sup>260</sup>. He also claims that "Our mental existence is a very complex matter and is made up of many elements"<sup>261</sup>). He refers to physical

mind, vital mind, and thought-mind or intellect. I suggest that these can be construed as the structures or substructures of the mind.

The physical mind could be described as the concrete-operational mind, a structure of mind which functions primarily in terms of concrete-operational thought. I use the term "concrete-operational mind" to give a sense, albeit a Piagetian one, of what Aurobindo is referring to. But it must be noted that the "physical mind" includes a lot more than just concrete-operations. I admit that the term "physical mind" might seem oxymoronic particularly to those unfamiliar with forms of philosophical terminology which do not have their origins in Oxford. By "physical mind" Aurobindo does not denote a mind which is physical in nature. Rather, he refers to a structure of mind which is exclusively concerned with physical objects, phenomena, and actions. Aurobindo describes the "physical mind" as follows:

The physical mind is that part of the mind which is concerned with the physical things only--it depends on the sense-mind, sees only objects, external actions, draws its ideas from the data given by external things, infers from them only, and knows no other truth until it is enlightened....<sup>262</sup>

The physical mind is the instrument of understanding and ordered action on physical things.<sup>263</sup>

The nature of the physical mind can be examined in terms of its essential functions, characteristic operations, processes, and dispositions.

It is evident from Aurobindo's remarks that the physical mind is a structure of mind by means of which we understand and act on the physical world. It depends on the "sense-mind" or sensory mind which organizes our visual, auditory, and tactile perceptions. Thus the physical mind depends on visual, auditory, and tactile perceptions for its understanding of external objects. The objects of its operations are external physical objects and external actions or behavior. The ideas or concepts of the "physical mind" are derived only from external objects and actions. Its thought operations or reasonings are based solely on external physical objects and actions.

There are two important functions of the physical mind. First, to work on external things and to impose an order on them for the purpose of their effective utilisation. Second, to materialise or to put into effect the ideas, plans, dreams, or fantasies<sup>264</sup>. For example, it is by means of the physical mind that we can make use of physical objects and construct artifacts. All forms of manual labor or work require the use of the physical mind. Indeed, we cannot function in the physical world without the physical mind. It is by means of it that we can materialise or actualise in the physical world our ideas, plans, dreams etc. The physical



mind is the instrument by which we execute our intentions and purposes.

It is the function of the physical mind to translate into recognisable sensations all that impinges on the physical organs and the nervous system<sup>265</sup>. It is also the function of the physical mind to give a verbal or linguistic form to ideas.<sup>266</sup>

Habit formation is a process of the physical mind. Another peculiar process of the physical mind is the repetition, without rhyme or reason, of thoughts, images, and the internal audition of sounds heard. We are all familiar with the experience of having repetitive thoughts, images, melodies, or lines from some song "go through" our heads mechanically or involuntarily. This is an inherent tendency of the physical mind. It tends to repeat whatever it registers.<sup>267</sup>

Finally, the physical mind also has certain dispositions. According to Aurobindo, because the physical mind is fixed on physical objects and processes and can understand and deal only with them, it loses its bearings in regard to things of a supraphysical nature and tends toward doubt, scepticism, and denial of anything of a nonphysical nature.<sup>268</sup>

The vital mind is that part of the mind which is concerned with appetites, desires, and emotions. The primary function of the vital mind is to give expression to, and seek the means of fulfillment of, appetites, desires, and

emotions<sup>269</sup>. Its characteristic activity is imagination. Dreams of greatness, happiness etc., are also forms of vital-mind activity<sup>270</sup>. Day-dreaming is thus a typical activity of the vital mind<sup>271</sup>. The vital mind typically does not reason or evaluate. It imagines, dreams about, and plans or desires that something should be the case in a random and undisciplined fashion<sup>272</sup>. Aurobindo remarks that the vital mind is the source of "...all the fine imaginations and long stories which men tell themselves in which they are the heroes and do great things"<sup>273</sup>. Another peculiar feature of our mental life, the imaginary conversations or arguments which we have inside our heads with other people, is also due to the vital mind.<sup>274</sup>

The vital mind is the instrument by which we recognise and express our appetites, desires, and emotions. It is also the instrument by which we recognise other people's appetites, desires, and emotions. The vital mind is thus the instrument of knowledge of our own desires and emotions and those of others. The realm of appetite, desire, and emotion is something concrete and tangible to the vital mind in just the way the realm of physical objects is concrete and tangible to the physical mind. Thus the vital mind has an acute sense of some of the basic realities of our inner life which are beyond the ken of comprehension of the physical mind.

The thought-mind is the intellect or reason. Its primary functions are understanding, evaluation, and judgment<sup>275</sup>. Deduction and induction are the activities of the thought-mind. It is the thought-mind which imposes a logical or theoretical structure on things<sup>276</sup>. The thought-mind is concerned with abstract concepts and ideas. What seem to be unreal abstractions to the physical mind are to the thought-mind as concrete, tangible, and real as physical objects. To the vital mind ideas are bloodless abstractions, and passion, desire, and emotion are vivid realities. But to the thought-mind ideas are realities which are no less enchanting or interesting or pleasurable than the objects of desire. The thought-mind is also the instrument of discovery and invention.<sup>277</sup>

These structures of mind are developing structures. Cognitive development, in childhood, consists in the development of these three structures of mind. Aurobindo is not interested in cognitive development in childhood, but he seems to imply that they develop in the following sequence: physical mind, vital mind, and thought mind. It should be emphasized that according to Aurobindo's logic of development, the development of the vital mind and the thought-mind or reason could begin before the physical mind has developed to maturity. They do not wait for the development of the physical mind to be completed.

It should also be noted that these structures of mind are evolutionary structures or structures developed in the course of the long mental evolution of the human species. Aurobindo observes that these structures are "the steps of Nature's evolution of the mental being towards its self-exceeding"<sup>278</sup>.

Aurobindo claims that his theory of the mind is based on the yogic method of studying the nature of the mind through introspection and meditation. He argues that the application of this yogic method reveals the different structures underlying the different functions, processes, and activities of the mind. The ordinary consciousness perceives only a jumble of mental functions, processes, activities, and states. But in the practice of yoga one becomes aware of the different mental structures and their characteristic functions and tendencies.

The existence of diverse mental functions and processes is better explained in terms of Aurobindo's tripartite structure of the mind. The argument could begin with the claim that we can sort out all the mental functions, operations, and processes into three types or kinds: 1) those which pertain to physical objects, 2) those which pertain to appetites, desires, and emotions, and 3) those which pertain to abstract ideas or concepts. The next step is to take a structuralist view of these three types of mental functions and processes and affirm the existence of a distinct structure underlying each of these three types of mental

functions and processes. From here it is but a short step to Aurobindo's view of the mind.

What is the justification for sorting out mental functions, operations, and processes into the three types? The justification lies in its simplicity, comprehensives, and intuitive appeal.

I would also argue that there are structuralist undertones to the very term "mind". Why do we employ the term "mind" at all? Why not just refer to particular functions, operations, and processes? It is because we think that there exists some sort of an order, an overall organization to these functions and processes. They constitute a whole and this whole is the mind. If we acknowledge that the term "mind" refers to a structure of consciousness which holds together diverse cognitive functions, operations, and processes, then the issue facing us is whether this structure is simple or complex. Aurobindo argues that the mind is a complex structure because of the diversity of functions, operations, and processes. The hypothesis that the mind is a complex structure can better explain the fact of the diversity of mental processes. If the classification of mental functions etc., into three broad categories is tenable, then the structuralist approach leads us to a conception such as Aurobindo's which postulates the existence of three distinct substructures of mind.

One could also advance a Platonic argument for the existence of the three substructures of the mind based on the phenomenon of mental conflicts and dissonance. For instance, there could be a conflict between a tendency to control a particular desire, or passion, and a tendency to seek its immediate gratification or fulfillment. It is clear that these are mutually conflicting tendencies. How can they both be the tendencies of the same structure? It seems simpler and plausible to explain them as the tendencies of two distinct structures or substructures. In Aurobindo's view the first is characteristic of the thought-mind or intellect and the second is characteristic of the vital mind.

### The Soul

I pointed out earlier that Aurobindo diverges from the Aristotelian conception which views the soul as the principle which accounts for the vitality which distinguishes humans, animals, and plants, from other material entities. According to Aurobindo, it is the vital, a structure of life-energy or life-force, which accounts for the sentience of humans, animals, and plants. He would also diverge from the Cartesian conception which views the soul as consciousness per se. This conception conflates the distinction between the soul and the mind, a central distinction in Aurobindo's metaphysics. Further, Aurobindo maintains that the soul is not merely bare consciousness or awareness, it has certain distinctive needs, capacities, and dispositions. Although consciousness is an

essential attribute of the soul, its ontological status is different from that of the mind. The mind is an instrument of cognition. The soul is the subject of cognition.

According to Aurobindo, the soul is "...that by which we exist and persist as individual beings in nature"<sup>279</sup>. Thus the soul is the source of our existence as individuals and our persistence as individuals. The sense that I am an individual person comes from the soul. The sense that I will continue to exist as an individual person also comes from the soul. The soul is thus the source of subjecthood and personal identity.

Aurobindo observes that "The soul is the witness, upholder, experiencer"<sup>280</sup>. The soul is the subject. It is the soul which constitutes the unity of our experiences. The soul is that which knows that the physical, vital, and mental states are the states of a subject<sup>281</sup>. I am aware of certain perceptions and mental states as had by me, as my perceptions and mental states by virtue of being a soul.

The soul is that which knows. The mind is the medium or instrument of knowledge. An individual has the capacity to know and to form beliefs in virtue of having a mind, but he or she is aware of those beliefs as his or her beliefs by virtue of being a soul. One can have or possess cognitive capacities, but one cannot have or possess a soul. One is a soul, a person, an experiencer, a subject. <sup>282</sup>

The soul is the subject. This implies that the soul is the experiencer. The capacity to experience is inherent in

the soul. If we were not souls, we would not have any experiences at all. There is a distinction between the experiencer, the medium or instrument of experience, and the object of experience. The soul is the experiencer. The body, the vital, and the mind are the mediums or instruments of experience. Unless we were souls we would not have any experiences at all, but we can have specific or particular experiences only by means of the body, the vital, and the mind. Without the body the soul cannot have physical experiences. Without the vital the soul cannot have any affective experiences such as desires and emotions. And without the mind the soul cannot have knowledge of the physical world, knowledge of desires and emotions, and knowledge of ideas.

If the soul is the subject or the experiencer, it is necessary for any experience. There can be no experience without an experiencer. Further, the experiencer is necessarily independent of the instruments of experience. Thus the soul is independent of the body, the vital, and the mind. This is analogous to the independence of the individual from his or her spectacles. The spectacles are the means by which an individual is able to have a better vision of things, but obviously the individual is not identical with his spectacles! Analogously, the body, the vital, and the mind are the means by which the soul can have certain



experiences and can act in the world, but it is not identical with those instruments or means.

What is the nature of the soul? According to Aurobindo the soul is not a bare subject or experiencer bereft of any qualities or attributes. The soul has an essential nature. It is a "spark" or microcosm of Satchitananda and therefore has all the essential attributes of Satchitananda such as absolute existence, absolute consciousness, and absolute bliss. Because its own essential nature is absolute existence, absolute consciousness, and absolute bliss, it is always yearning after whatever enhances and expands the range of being, consciousness, and delight of existence in its status as a developing individual in an evolutionary world.

The soul seeks to recover its knowledge of its essential nature and to express its nature in the world. The aspiration for Truth, Good, and Beauty is the means by which it tries to do so<sup>283</sup>. Thus the soul is not a featureless spiritual substance, but a being which is the source of moral, aesthetic, and spiritual aspirations.

The soul aspires for Truth, Good, and Beauty in its evolutionary ascent from a state of inconscience and ignorance. But it has an inherent, although veiled, knowledge of Truth, Good, and Beauty. Aurobindo writes that the soul is

...immediately, intimately, directly aware of truth of being and truth of nature; it is deeply conscious of Truth, Good, and Beauty because (they) are akin to its own native

character, forms of something that is inherent in its own substance.<sup>284</sup>

Aurobindo claims that the soul is the "true original conscience" deeper than the "constructed and conventional conscience of the moralist"<sup>285</sup>. It is the soul's inherent knowledge of what is morally good that makes it possible for an individual to depart from and oppose the customary morality in favor of the truly ethical. The influence of the soul is thus manifest in all attempts to create and pursue progressively adequate moral principles and values.

The soul is conscious of the opposites of Truth, Good, and beauty. It is also conscious of the deformations of Truth, Good, and Beauty. But its characteristic attitude towards these opposites and deformations is one of rejection and not acceptance or acquiescence<sup>286</sup>. This does not rule out the possibility of its acceptance of and indulgence in what is contrary to Truth, Good, and Beauty, because of the burden of ignorance it has to bear as a consequence of its participation in the involutory process. Thus acceptance of or indulgence in what is contrary to Truth, Good, and Beauty is not impossible for the soul, but that is not its characteristic attitude towards these things.

Aurobindo conceives of the soul as a developing being. He remarks that "The psychic being is the soul within that experiences life and develops with the evolving mind and life and body"<sup>287</sup>. The development of the soul consists in its

gradual awakening and dominance over its instruments, viz., body, vital, and mind. The awakening of the soul is the process by which it becomes progressively conscious of its essential nature and the purpose of its embodiment in the world. The dominance of the soul consists in its ability to transform its instruments and thereby the world so that it can fully express its nature in its instruments and in the world.

Aurobindo claims that while the body, the vital, and the mind are mutable and perishable structures, the soul is immortal and immutable in its essential nature<sup>288</sup>. This thesis of the immutability of the soul seems to be inconsistent with the thesis that the soul is a developing being. It could be argued that if the soul is a developing being, this implies that it undergoes change from one stage to another, and if it undergoes change, it cannot be immutable. First it is important to get clear about what Aurobindo means by the immutability thesis and the development thesis. He writes that the soul remains "fundamentally the same always"<sup>289</sup>. The essential nature of the soul, the fact that it is the microcosm of Satchitananda and has the features of absolute existence, absolute consciousness, and absolute delight, is not altered or changed by the vicissitudes of its terrestrial development. The development of the soul consists in the progressive realisation of its essential nature and its progressive expression of that nature in the world. This does

not imply that its essential nature undergoes change, but only that it becomes progressively manifest in the world.

Would there not be a change in the soul if it develops from a stage in which it is ignorant of its essential nature to a stage in which it is fully conscious of its nature? This kind of change is a change in the state of the soul and not in its essential nature. The knowledge of its essential nature is inherent in the soul, but it is veiled by its participation in the involutory process. Aurobindo subscribes to the Platonic view of all knowledge as a form of recollection. Thus when we state that the soul has developed from a stage of ignorance to a stage of knowledge, we mean that it has reached a stage in which it can recollect its knowledge of its own nature and not that it has obtained knowledge that it never possessed before.

The soul undergoes the "envelopment" of the conditions of the body, the vital, and the mind<sup>290</sup>. The soul experiences all the states and conditions of the body, the vital, and the mind. But Aurobindo also asserts that the soul is not tarnished by the imperfections, impurities, defects, and depravations of the body, vital, and mind<sup>291</sup>. It could be argued that these two claims are inconsistent. If the soul experiences the conditions and states of the body, vital, and mind it must be affected by their imperfections, impurities etc. In claiming that the soul is not tarnished by the imperfections etc., of the body, vital, and mind, Aurobindo

means that its essential nature is not modified by its experience of those things. The claim that the soul experiences a given imperfection of the body, vital, or mind means that the soul is conscious that the body, the vital, and the mind have that imperfection. This, of course, does not necessarily imply that the soul consequently has that imperfection. As Aurobindo writes, the soul is "...an ever-pure flame of the divinity in things and nothing that comes to it, nothing that enters into our experience can pollute its purity or extinguish the flame".<sup>292</sup>

### The Ego

It is also important to take note of Aurobindo's distinction between the ego and the soul. The ego is the "surface being", a separative structure of self-consciousness which exists and functions in terms of the consciousness of a separate body, vital, and mind. To have an ego is to be conscious of oneself as a separated individual with a body, vital, and mind, as a separated centre of sensations, desires, emotions, and thoughts.<sup>293</sup>

Aurobindo asserts that "the self is not the ego"<sup>294</sup>. Elsewhere he distinguishes the "true individual", or the soul, from the apparent individual, the ego<sup>295</sup>. The identification of the self with the ego, with a separate body, vital, and mind, is false subjectivism. The two central truths of true subjectivism are: 1) The individual is a soul, and 2) There is a secret solidarity of the individual with

all other individuals<sup>296</sup>. The realisation of one's true individuality can be attained only by acknowledging one's solidarity with all others. Aurobindo remarks that "there is a secret solidarity which our egoism may kick against, but from which we cannot escape".<sup>297</sup>

Aurobindo also observes that "...the ego is a falsification of our true individuality by a limiting self-identification of it with this life, this mind, this body: it is a separation from other souls which shuts us up in our own individual experience...."<sup>298</sup> Thus the ego is constituted by the limiting identification with a body, vital, and mind. This limitation of ourselves by ego also separates us from God, our own highest reality, the ground of our being. In the higher stages of development, as the consciousness becomes more universal, ego begins to dissolve. Aurobindo writes that "As our consciousness changes into the height and depth and wideness of the spirit, the ego can no longer survive there: it is too small and feeble to subsist in that vastness and dissolves into it; for it exists by its limits and perishes by the loss of its limits".<sup>299</sup> But this loss of ego is not tantamount to loss of individuality. Individuality still persists in the form of an enlightened soul.

The ego is transitory, the soul is eternal. The ego is dependent on the body, the vital, and the mind. The soul is independent of them. The ego is the bearer of socio-historical identity. It is the ego which identifies with a

particular gender, race, species, community, character traits etc. The ego is the source of division between the self and the world, and between the self and others. The soul has the capacity to transcend particular identities and to form progressively inclusive identifications. The soul is the source of the unity between the self and the world and between the self and others. When we normally think of the "me", we are thinking of the ego. When we normally refer to others, we are referring to their egos. It is the ego which gives itself an identity in terms of gender, race, species and so on, and is the bearer of traits and tendencies of character. The soul does not need to give itself an identity in these terms. It knows that its true identity consists in being a microcosm of God.

This distinction between ego and the soul is common to most spiritual traditions. The notion that it is the ego which separates us from the stream of life and from God is also common to most spiritual traditions. Modern secular thought does not acknowledge the distinction because it does not acknowledge the existence of the soul. The individual, in this view, is constituted of the body and has identity in terms of gender, race, species etc. There is in fact a close connection between the conception of the individual as solely constituted of the body and the notion that the identity of the individual is fixed in terms of race, gender, etc. These identities pertain only to the body. It is the body which can

be categorized in terms of race, gender, country of birth, etc. If we conceive of the individual in spiritual terms, these identities cease to have importance. The soul has no race, gender, or membership in any species.

Aurobindo thinks that the ego serves a purpose in the scheme of things. The development of the ego is the means by which the consciousness of the individual affirms its individuality, organises itself, and distinguishes itself from the world. It is necessary for the effective action of the individual in the world. Otherwise the individual consciousness would lose itself in the mass consciousness or collective consciousness. But the affirmation of consciousness in terms of a separative ego is only a transitional phenomenon and can be replaced by a greater and luminous affirmation in terms of the soul. Aurobindo remarks that "the ego is the lynch-pin invented to hold together the motion of our wheel of nature. The necessity of centralisation around the ego continues until...there has emerged the true self, the spiritual being...that which holds all together, the centre and the circumference".<sup>300</sup>

The true individual is the soul, but this cannot be realised in the beginning due to the involution into the Ignorance, into the inconscience of Matter. Thus once the consciousness has distinguished itself and developed in terms of the ego, it becomes possible for it to transcend this ego and discover its true centre in the soul.<sup>301</sup>



According to Aurobindo, there is a distinct higher stage of development in which the individual finds himself or herself as the soul using the instruments of the body, vital, and mind. But this does not mark the endpoint of spiritual development. Rather, it constitutes the beginning of a process of development which proceeds through several complex stages. I examine Aurobindo's account of these stages in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 8

### STAGES OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Although there are many expositions of Aurobindo's theory of the stages of human development, they fail to do justice to the richness and depth of his theory. They also fail to clarify some of the key concepts employed by Aurobindo in his descriptions of these stages, and to provide examples of the experiences and capacities constitutive of the stages. In this chapter I will offer a systematic account of Aurobindo's theory of the stages of development based on his mature work and magnum opus The Life Divine and discuss some issues facing the theory.

It should first be noted that the stages of development Aurobindo describes in The Life Divine are stages of adult development. Although inferences about child development can be drawn from some of his observations, Aurobindo's central concern is the development of the adult human individual and not child development. It should also be noted that Aurobindo's stages are not just cognitive stages, but pertain to the self as a whole, to the individual consciousness as a whole, and include affect, will, and action.

There are nine stages of development. Aurobindo mentions three stages of mental development: 1) physical-mental, 2) vital-mental, and 3) intellectual-mental<sup>302</sup>. These stages of mental development have not received any attention in the

literature on Aurobindo's stages of development. The fourth stage is the psychic stage characterised by the emergence of the soul and its dominance over the body, vital, and the mind.<sup>303</sup> Aurobindo also refers to four stages of spiritual development following the psychic stage: 1) higher mental, 2) illumined mental, 3) intuitive mental, and 4) overmental.<sup>304</sup> The highest stage of development is the supramental stage following the overmental stage.<sup>305</sup> Thus there are nine stages of development.

The physical-mental, vital-mental, and intellectual-mental are the three stages of development at the mental level. It is useful to remember Aurobindo's concept of mind. The mind is not the whole of consciousness. It is only a limited structure of consciousness. The mind is a complex structure of consciousness constituted of three simple structures: physical mind, vital mind, and thought-mind or intellect. The mind is the most developed structure of consciousness at the present stage of evolution, but it is not the highest structure of consciousness. The supramental consciousness is the highest structure of consciousness. There are several intermediate higher structures of consciousness between the mind and the supramental consciousness. Spiritual development consists in the development of these higher structures of consciousness.<sup>306</sup>

### **Stage One: The Physical-mental Stage**

The first and the lowest stage of adult mental development is the physical-mental stage characterized by the dominance of the "physical mind" or concrete-operational mind.

The adult individual in this stage is the "physical man", a type of individual who gives great importance to objective, physical things and the outer life, has little understanding and intensity of subjective or inner existence, and subordinates the inner life to the demands of external life and physical reality. These types of individuals have an emotional life, but it consists of a customary and habitual circle of sensations, desires, hopes, feelings, and satisfactions dependent on external things and contacts and confined to what is "practical", immediately realisable or possible, common, and average. They also have a semblance of intellectual life, but this too is customary, traditional, practical, and objectivistic. They value ideas and theories etc., for their practical utility, their role in securing the satisfaction and comfort of bodily existence. The life of the heart and the life of the mind are viewed either as adjuncts of material life or as subjective and less substantial extensions of it.<sup>307</sup>

Aurobindo also points out that progress is onedimensional in this stage. There is only material or technological progress in this stage. If there is a form of rationality

which corresponds to this stage, it would be the "technical-instrumental rationality" described by Habermas.

The physical man is a one-dimensional man preoccupied with the physical world and physical life. But even he cannot live totally absorbed in corporeal existence like an animal because higher tendencies are still present, even though latently, in him. If these tendencies become active, then there is the possibility of the development of a higher type of physical man who can strive for and realise "a finer, more beautiful, and perfect physical life".<sup>308</sup>

The physical type of individuals have "a certain material poise and balance" because of his hold on material reality<sup>309</sup>. They are thus free of some of the problems of self-integration faced by the more kinetic and creative vital type and the idealistic intellectual type of individuals. But this "material poise and balance" is achieved by the normal physical type at the expense of the higher possibilities open to the vital and the intellectual types.

### **Stage Two: The Vital-mental Stage**

The second stage of mental development is the vital-mental stage. This stage is characterized by the dominance of the vital mind, a structure of mind concerned with the appetitive and emotional life. The individual representative of this stage is the "vital man" who is preoccupied with self-affirmation, self-aggrandisement, and the fulfillment of passions and desires.

In the vital-mental stage our subjective life or inner life becomes real to us and appears to have an existence independent of the body and the physical world<sup>310</sup>. The type of individual representative of this stage is the "vital man" to whom material existence has significance and value only as a means of expression and fulfillment of appetites, desires, and emotions. The vital type of individual thus subordinates physical life and the physical world to the imperatives of passion, ambition, exploration, discovery, creation, power or mastery, enhancement of life-experience and life-energy, adventure etc.<sup>311</sup>

The intellectual life of the vital type of individual is normally subordinated to and determined by appetites, desires, and emotions. If the intellectual and spiritual tendencies are active, there is the possibility of the development of a higher type of "vital man", e.g., the innovative intellectual, the zealot or the champion of a cause or an ideal, the artist, the poet, or the prophet.<sup>312</sup>

Since the vital part of the self is kinetic in nature, the vitalistic individual finds the task of self-integration a difficult one in comparison with the earthbound "physical man".<sup>313</sup>

The vitalistic individual can achieve some sort of an integration of the self, or rather some measure of internal stability, more by a forceful compulsion and constraint of his appetites, desires, and emotions, than by a harmonisation

of the warring factions of the self. Aurobindo argues that if the vitalistic individual can succeed in strengthening the power of reason over the other parts of his being, this can result in the formation of a personality more or less balanced, but powerful and effective in its dealings with the world.

### **Stage Three: The Intellectual-mental Stage**

The third stage of adult mental development is the thought-mental or intellectual-mental stage. This stage is characterized by the dominance of the thought-mind, or intellect, and represented by the intellectual type of human being, or the "mental man".

In the thought-mental or intellectual-mental stage the life of the mind acquires a greater reality and significance.<sup>314</sup> The "mental man" or intellectual is representative of this stage. The philosopher, the thinker, the scientist, the writer, the moral reformer, and the idealistic individual are the highest types of this stage of development. The things of the mind, e.g., ideas, theories, values, and ideals, are the most important realities for the mental or intellectual type of individual. The intellectual type of individuals subordinate their physical and emotional life to the imperatives of the intellect. Intellectual self-expression, intellectual aims, interests, and ideals are the dominant factors in their lives. The intellectual individual obviously has a life of bodily needs and appetites, and a

life of desires and emotions, and these elements can often constrain or even dominate his or her intellectual life. It is only in the highest type of intellectual or rational individual that the thought-mind or reason is to a great extent sovereign, and the physical and vital parts of the self are regulated by and subordinated to reason.<sup>315</sup>

Aurobindo argues that the "mental man" cannot bring about a total self-integration and transformation because of the limitations of the thought-mind. The thought-mind is a higher structure than the physical and the vital mind because it can regulate and govern the bodily and vital life to a great extent. It can impose an ascetic discipline on the physical and vital parts and reduce their clamorous interference to the minimum. But its hold on them can never be secure unless it is itself transformed in the light of a higher power. The thought-mind is often powerless before the fixed tendencies or habits of the body and is swayed by the desires, passions etc., which well up from the subconscious levels of our being. It is compelled to rationalise or justify habits, desires, passions, emotions etc. The classic problem of akrasia or weakness of will is sufficient proof that the thought-mind can, under the sway of habits and desires, pursue or sanction a course of action contrary to its perceptions. Thus although the thought-mind is the highest substructure of the mind or mental consciousness, it cannot



imperatives of desire, passion, ambition, power etc., and are unable to realise their own distinctive fullness. In the intellectual type, there is an order which is achieved at the cost of the impoverishment of the physical and vital parts of the self. Further, even in these forms of integration the dominant structure is not always dominant. Sometimes the psychological order is interrupted and there is a see-saw of the different structures or parts resulting in a state of disequilibrium of the self. Thus all these forms of integration are partial. Therefore, they can only be provisional or temporary forms of integration in our journey toward a complete integration, transformation, and perfection:

These harmonisations by an inferior control are...inconclusive because it is one part of the nature which dominates and fulfills itself while the others are coerced and denied their fullness. They can be steps on the way, but not final; therefore in most men there is no such sole dominance and effected partial harmony, but only a predominance and for the rest an unstable equilibrium of personality... sometimes a disequilibrium or unbalance due to the lack of a central government or the disturbance of a formerly achieved partial poise. All must be transitional until a first, though not a final, true harmonisation is achieved by finding our real centre.<sup>318</sup>

Our "real centre" is the soul and not the body, the vital, or the mind. The soul is the true sovereign of our being. It is by discovering our soul and making it the overt ruler of all the different parts of our being that the "first

true harmonisation" or the first true and enduring integration can be achieved. This harmonisation and integration of the being in terms of the soul or psyche constitutes the stage of "psychic transformation" which is necessary for a safe, secure, and successful spiritual development<sup>319</sup>. I will consider the nature of this "psychic transformation" in a later section.

One important issue concerning Aurobindo's account of adult mental development is whether the stages of adult mental development are alternative stages or sequential stages. If they are alternative stages, then adults can be either in the physical-mental stage, or the vital-mental stage, or the thought-mental stage. If they are sequential stages, then adults develop from the physical-mental stage to the vital-mental stage, and finally, to the thought mental stage. It is also important to note that although Aurobindo regards them as hierarchical stages this does not necessarily imply that they are sequential stages. There can exist a hierarchical relationship between alternative stages.

Aurobindo seems to view them as sequential stages:

These three degrees of mentality, clear in themselves, but most often mixed in our composition, are to our ordinary intelligence only psychological types that have developed, and we do not discover any other significance in them; but in fact they are full of significance, for they are the steps of Nature's evolution of the mental being towards its self-exceeding, and, as the thinking mind is the highest step she can now attain, the perfected mental man is the

rarest and highest of her normal human creatures.<sup>320</sup>

Another issue pertains to the basis of Aurobindo's hierarchical conception of these stages. I will deal with this issue in the next chapter on Aurobindo's developmental model.

### **Higher Stages Of Human Development**

It is a distinctive feature of Aurobindo's theory that it does not regard mental development as the highest form of development and the intellectual-mental stage as the highest stage. Piaget thinks that the level of formal operations, generally achieved by middle or late adolescence, is the highest level of cognitive development. He does not consider the possibility of modes of cognition higher than formal-operational thought or hypothetico-deductive thinking. He not only ignores the whole realm of affect or emotion, but also the realm of "paranormal" or extrasensory perceptions. He also turns a blind eye towards accounts of higher stages of knowledge offered by western philosophers such as Plato, Spinoza, and Fichte. And although Kohlberg speculates on the possibility of a "metaphorical" seventh stage of "ethical and religious thinking", he is yet confined by the assumptions that hypothetico-deductive thinking is the highest stage of knowledge and that mystical experience has no distinctive cognitive aspects.

Until quite recently, the dominant view in developmental psychology ruled out major qualitative advances in cognition, etc., in adulthood. It was held that the cognitive transformations which occur in childhood and characterized by inevitability, momentousness, directionality, uniformity, and irreversibility, do not typically occur in adulthood. The argument for ruling out major qualitative advances in adulthood seems to be based on the premise that cognitive transformations result from biological-maturational processes. Since major neurophysiological development is a necessary condition of cognitive-structural development, and since major neurophysiological development comes to a halt by late adolescence or early adulthood, it follows that further major cognitive advance in adulthood cannot occur.

But some theorists have argued that although neurophysiological development and corresponding "vertical" cognitive advancement appear to freeze by age 25, new life-experiences continue "horizontally" throughout the life span and may result in an increase in "wisdom" later in the life cycle. Nevertheless, the accumulation of new life-experiences has not been considered as promoting major qualitative advances beyond formal operations.

However, other theorists have argued that further qualitative advance in cognition and affect may take place in adulthood. According to Richards and Commons, "post formal" models propose more complex patterns of operational thought.

But these are still "hypothetico-deductive" in nature. Thus there has not been an attempt in mainstream developmental psychology to overcome the bias that hypothetico-deductive thought is the highest form of thought.

Charles Alexander, who obtained his doctorate in psychology at Harvard, makes a case for development beyond the formal-operational stage based on the work of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.<sup>321</sup> He specifies some requirements for higher stages of development. First, the higher stages should be at least as far beyond conceptual or representational thought as symbolic representation is beyond the Sensorimotor domain of infancy, i.e., not merely an extension of formal operational thought. Further, in just the way the sub-periods of the Sensorimotor period are superseded not simply by more complex forms of Sensorimotor action, but by a new mode of representation--the symbolic function--which comes to regulate the domain of action, development beyond the representational level should permit not only more effective conceptual thought, but also the emergence of a "post conceptual mode of knowledge" which comes to regulate the entire representational domain.

Second, such an advance in cognition would presumably require major neurophysiological maturation. Third, higher stages of development should resolve the fundamental epistemological and ontological constraint of formal operational thought, that the reflective knower cannot

directly know himself. The development of the ability to think about thinking allows us to ask the question "Who am I?", but does not help us to resolve it in terms of immediate, direct awareness. Qualitative advance beyond abstract reasoning should enable us to resolve conundrum that the knower cannot simultaneously be both the observer and the observed and the infinite regress of more and more abstract observers of the knower. Fourth, the higher stages should be not only nonrepresentational but truly post representational. They should be differentiated from and hierarchically integrated with the representational level. Thus the capacity for formal operational or conceptual thought would not be abandoned, but would take on the character of a "subsystem" within the mental life and not as the executor of it. Fifth, the higher stages should be higher not only in a structural sense, but also in a functional sense. They should be more adaptive and stable, and more accurate and comprehensive.<sup>322</sup>

Alexander points out that mainstream developmental psychology has not identified such qualitative advances in adulthood, nor has it tried to promote such advances. He claims that the goal of Maharishi's "Vedic psychology" is to promote such qualitative changes in the self. There are four higher stages of consciousness in "Vedic psychology": 1) transcendental consciousness, 2) cosmic consciousness, 3) refined cosmic consciousness, and 4) unity consciousness.

The first stage is characterized by "direct experience of the ultimate ground state of mind, pure consciousness, beyond the subtlest level of feeling or ego".<sup>323</sup> In Maharishi's words, transcendental consciousness is "a state of inner wakefulness with no object of thought or perception, just pure consciousness, aware of its own unbounded nature...beyond the division of subject and object".<sup>324</sup> Alexander comments that it is a purely nonrepresentational state because of the absence of thought and the division between the knower and the known. The purely self-referential character of transcendental consciousness permits the knower to know itself directly without symbolic mediation. When this state of consciousness is permanently maintained along with the three lower states of consciousness, viz., waking, dreaming, and sleeping, does one attain the first stable higher stage of consciousness.

The second stage is characterised by the development of "cosmic consciousness", one in which awareness no longer alternates between identification with the bounded ego and the underlying Self or Atman, but becomes permanently established in pure consciousness and is not overshadowed by thought, perception, and action. According to Alexander, "awareness is now primarily associated with the nonchanging, silent Self at the source of thought".<sup>325</sup> This stage is considered as post representational not because representational thought processes are abandoned, but because

they now function as a "subsystem" within, rather than as the executor of, mental life. The achievement of this stage is marked by "subject permanence", or the stable experience of the nonchanging Self as opposed to the changing representations of the ego. Alexander also observes that identity in cosmic consciousness is based on direct experience of one's foundations in the Atman and not on social roles and values. Thus identity in cosmic consciousness is not threatened by outward events and allows a growth of intimacy with the environment that is not restricted by self-protecting needs or motives.

The third stage corresponds to "refined cosmic consciousness". In this stage there is a higher-order appreciation of invariance in the objective world than was achieved during the representational periods. There is an awareness of the "finest relative level of creation" from which emerge all the diversified expressions of matter, life, and mind. Maharishi also describes refined cosmic consciousness as "God-consciousness" because one is said to directly perceive and intimately appreciate the grandeur of all levels of creation and of the ongoing process of creation.<sup>326</sup>

The fourth and highest stage of consciousness is unity consciousness. In unity consciousness all things are perceived as existing within the field of one's consciousness. There is no gulf between the knower and the



known, no dichotomy between subject and object. There is direct awareness of one ultimate and unified field of consciousness underlying all subjective and objective existence. Alexander observes that although this concept of the ultimate unity of all things may seem strange from the standpoint of the mechanistic paradigm of modern psychology, there is agreement among Quantum theorists that there is a completely abstract, unified field underlying all the diverse expressions of natural laws. Many theorists have also recognised that consciousness and objective reality are necessarily connected.<sup>327</sup>

Ken Wilber is another figure in contemporary transpersonal psychology who has postulated several higher stages of human development. Wilber's work shows a great deal of influence of Aurobindo. He offers a "full-spectrum" model of development which integrates "conventional development" and contemplative or spiritual development. By "conventional development" Wilber refers to forms of development such as normal cognitive, affective, and moral development investigated by Piaget, Freud, and Kohlberg. He claims that "conventional development" and contemplative development are related along a general continuum and do not describe parallel lines of development.

Wilber postulates five higher stages of development: 1) vision-logic, 2) psychic, 3) subtle, 4) causal, and 5) ultimate. The first stage is marked by vision-logic or

synthetic-integrative thought which apprehends a mass network of ideas and their interrelationships. The second stage is characterized by visionary insight best epitomized by the "third eye". The third stage is characterized by knowledge of archetypes, Platonic Forms, and transcendent insight and absorption. The fourth stage corresponds to knowledge of the unmanifest source or transcendental ground of all things, e.g., the "Abyss" of Gnosticism, the "Void" of Mahayana Buddhism. The fifth and final stage is characterized by identity with the Spirit and thus with all things.<sup>328</sup>

Herb Koplowitz postulates a stage of development beyond formal operations. He describes it as "unitary consciousness". In the stage of formal operations, the world is separate from and known by the self. The world is also perceived as filled with permanent objects with closed boundaries. Further, the world is also perceived as consisting of variables independent and separate from each other. In addition, the world seems to be modified by actions that are reversible. A cause of a given magnitude will have an effect of a predictable magnitude such that one can infer the magnitude of the cause from the magnitude of the effect. By contrast, the post-formal stage of unitary consciousness has the following features: 1) the self is not separate from the world, 2) the boundaries separating objects are open, 3) variables are interdependent and not completely separable

from each other, and 4) reality exists as a unity which includes the knower.

Apart from the vagueness of some of Koplowitz's descriptions, it appears that he may have collapsed into one description several distinct stages of growth towards "unitary consciousness". As we shall see, Aurobindo meticulously distinguishes the different stages of growth towards unitary consciousness.

### **The Limitations of Mind And Reason**

Aurobindo makes his case for higher stages and structures of consciousness by pointing out the limitations of the mental structure of consciousness and its highest faculty, reason. His central thesis seems to be that mind and reason cannot bring about a greater qualitative advance and transformation of human nature and existence. Thus he remarks that "The mental intelligence and its main power of reason cannot change the principle and persistent character of human life, it can only effect various mechanisations, manipulations, developments, and formulations".<sup>329</sup>

The essential characteristic of mind, its tendency to deal with parts as if they are separated entities and the whole as a mere aggregate or sum of independent parts, conditions all its operations pertaining to conception, perception, sensation, and even creative thought. Its essential function is to measure, delimit, and fragment existence. It can never intimately understand undivided

wholeness. It tends to conceptualise wholeness as an amorphous aggregate of homogeneous parts. Aurobindo remarks that "Mind may divide, multiply, add, subtract, but it cannot get beyond the limits of this mathematics".<sup>330</sup> It can create endless distinctions, divisions, and oppositions, but does not possess the vision of the oneness, intrinsic to the supramental consciousness, which encompasses all distinctions and differences, or the vision of the overall unity and harmony, intrinsic to the overmental consciousness.

Aurobindo's arguments in The Human Cycle concerning the limitations of reason should be considered in this context. He argues that the rational stage or the intellectual-mental stage is not the highest stage of human development because of the inherent limitations of reason and the presence of higher, suprarational faculties in us which are capable of development.

The fundamental limitation of human reason is that it has no "self-sufficient light" of its own, it has no inherent and intrinsic knowledge of reality. Therefore, it depends on the evidence of the senses and procedures of observation, experimentation, and action for the acquisition of knowledge. It proceeds by trial and error. It works in a piecemeal fashion and in terms of partial experiments, incomplete data, artificial classifications and distinctions, and constantly alternates between rival ideas or explanations.<sup>331</sup>

The second inherent limitation of reason is that because it is a structure of mind it cannot deal with reality as an integral whole or totality and can only understand it by breaking it down into separate parts and aggregates of parts.<sup>332</sup>

The third inherent limitation of reason is that it cannot know the Absolute or the Infinite. Reason can only understand the relative and the finite.<sup>333</sup> Aurobindo also argues that reason cannot arrive at any final truth or certitude about things because of its inability to get to the foundation of things and its inability to understand them in their totality or wholeness. As he writes:

The reason cannot arrive at any final truth because it can neither get to the root of things nor embrace the totality of their secrets; it deals with the finite, the separate, the limited aggregate, and has no measure for the all and the infinite.<sup>334</sup>

Reason is also afflicted by duality. On the one hand, it tends to be autonomous, detached, and regulative of bodily and vitalistic tendencies, but on the other hand, it also tends to get involved in and become subservient to those tendencies, rationalising or inventing reasons for their fulfillment or free play.<sup>335</sup>

Another form of this duality is that on the one hand reason tends to question and revise traditional ideas and opinions, and personal prejudices, but on the other hand it

also tends to justify, without questioning, traditional ideas and opinions, and sanctions personal prejudices.<sup>336</sup>

The subjection to bodily and vitalistic tendencies such as habits, desires, passions, and emotions is not the only form of subjection human reason is prone to. It can also be subject to the "tyranny of ideas". It can turn ideas into sources of personal or collective interests and engage in apologetics or ideology. It can also be dogmatic by limiting itself to its preferred or pet ideas and denouncing ideas different from or opposed to those ideas.<sup>337</sup>

Reason is also limited in its capacity to resolve the conflict of ideas and values. It fails to bring about a perfect reconciliation or harmonisation of conflicting ideas and values. Reason tends to alternate between the exclusive affirmation of these ideas or values and a compromise between them. For instance, it tends to affirm the primacy of liberty or the primacy of order over the other, or it tends to arrive at some sort of compromise between the requirements of liberty and those of order. It cannot bring about their perfect reconciliation or their perfect oneness, a condition in which liberty is order and order is liberty. Aurobindo holds that this perfect reconciliation or oneness can only be achieved by a higher form of consciousness or at a higher, suprarational stage:

In each sphere of human life...the intellect presents us with the opposition of a number of...ideas and...principles. It finds each to

be a truth to which something essential in our being responds...It seeks to fulfill each in its turn, builds a system of action round it and goes from one to the other and back again to what it has left. Or it tries to combine them but is contented with none of the combinations it has made because none brings about their perfect reconciliation or their satisfied oneness. That indeed belongs to a larger and higher consciousness, not yet attained by mankind, where these opposites are ever harmonised and even unified because in their origin they are eternally one.<sup>338</sup>

Another limitation of reason consists in its inability to bring about a harmonious integration of the self.<sup>339</sup> The self has many parts or structures, each with its characteristic nature, form of self-fulfillment, and mode of seeking self-fulfillment, not always in concordance with the nature, form of self-fulfillment, and mode of seeking self-fulfillment of the other parts or structures. For instance, the vital part or structure is kinetic in nature and its self-fulfillment consists in possession, enjoyment, and domination. The intellect or reason seeks to know, to understand. These tendencies of the vital and the intellect are not always compatible. The vital might want to possess, enjoy, and dominate something, but the intellect might want to study and understand it. Thus there can be a conflict between the tendencies of the vital and the intellect. Further, each part or structure may have conflicting tendencies. The vital might want to have the cake and eat it too. It may have mutually conflicting desires or passions or emotions. The intellect may also have its conflicting

tendencies. It may be inclined to hold beliefs that are not compatible. It may be divided between the tendency to justify indulgence and the tendency to justify abstention from indulgence.

Faced with all this strife within the self, human reason generally seeks to bring about some sort of integration or a semblance of it by the method of repression and subordination or by the method of compromise. Given the conflict between the vital and itself, reason tries either to repress the vital or to subordinate itself to it. Given the conflict between the tendencies of the vital, reason tries to repress some of them and give full reign to the others. Or it seeks to arrive at some sort of a compromise or balance between the conflicting parts and tendencies. But it fails to resolve the conflicts altogether and bring about a complete harmony in the self. Whatever integration or harmony it can bring about can only be partial, insecure, and impermanent. Reason cannot bring about or show the way to a total perfection and harmony of all the parts or structures of the self because it is not the sovereign or the highest structure of the self.<sup>340</sup>

A total perfection and harmony can only be achieved by the instrumentation of a higher consciousness. As Aurobindo remarks, "Man's impulse to be free, master of Nature in himself and his environment, cannot be really fulfilled until his self-consciousness has grown beyond the rational mentality".<sup>341</sup>



The limitations of human reason are also evident in the face of the problem of translating its ideas, ideals, theories, proposals, etc., into reality or practice. Human reason can construct impressive theories, erect lofty ideals, and advance grand proposals, but it founders in its attempts to translate them into practice. Aurobindo explains that this is because of the complexity of life and the tendency of reason to turn its ideas etc., into rigid systems to be imposed on life. He observes that "Life escapes from the formulas and systems which our reason labors to impose on it; it proclaims itself too complex, too full of infinite potentialities to be tyrannised over by the arbitrary intellect of man".<sup>342</sup>

In its attempt to govern life by its ideas, ideals etc., reason errs by turning these ideas and ideals into rigid systems and then discovers that life tends to elude its systems. Reason then stands back in frustration from the turbulent waters of life and becomes a "detached" and ineffective critic of life. Or it makes compromises with life and subordinates its ideas and ideals to the demands of life, to desires, interests, prejudices etc. In either case it fails to fully translate its ideas and ideals into practice.

Aurobindo also explains the inability of reason to fully translate its ideas and ideals into practice by reference to the complexity of human nature and the uniqueness of the individual. Each basic part of human nature seeks after its

own good in its own way and resists the attempt of reason to determine its good or regulate its seeking after its own good. Because of the uniqueness of the individual, the degree of dominance of the basic parts of his or her nature, the part which is dominant, and their interactions will also be unique to the individual. Therefore, reason is bound to fail in its attempts to govern human existence in terms of its rigid general principles or procedures.<sup>343</sup>

It follows from all this that reason cannot bridge the gulf between human aspirations and reality.<sup>344</sup> If reason is not capable of successfully governing our inner and outer life, it follows that it cannot bridge the gulf between the human aspiration for a true, good, and beautiful life and the reality of a human condition marred by falsehood, moral evil, and ugliness.

Another limitation of reason is its tendency to become subject to vested interests and powers in its very attempt to study and intervene in the conflict of interests and powers which is predominant in human life.<sup>345</sup> The existence of ideologies which legitimize class interests is sufficient proof of this limitation of reason.

Aurobindo also argues that reason can be used to justify any conceivable idea, philosophy of existence, system of society or government, ideal of individual or collective action, etc. He makes three important claims. First, reason is inherently capable of advancing reasons for and justifying

any preferred outlook, philosophy, theory, or system of values. Second, reason does not actually choose an outlook or theory. It is only an instrument of analysis and justification of whatever theory or outlook is chosen or preferred by the individual. Third, it is the soul which decides to adopt or choose a particular outlook or theory. Reason is only the instrument by means of which the soul justifies its choice of a particular outlook or theory.<sup>346</sup>

The fact that reasons for almost every outlook on life, theory, system of values etc., have been proffered is compelling evidence for the claim that human reason is capable of justifying any outlook, philosophy etc., chosen by the individual. Aurobindo's account of the choice of an outlook or position by an individual in terms of the "attraction" and "withdrawal" of the soul implies that there are deep psychological factors influencing the acceptance or rejection of beliefs and values. He seems to suggest that the attraction and withdrawal of the soul in relation to a system of beliefs and values, outlook etc., occurs prior to the process of giving or examining reasons for that system or theory. Reason offers justifications for the theory or outlook to which the soul inclines. The soul does not incline to a belief or theory because of the justifications offered by reason.

It would be appropriate to bring this section to a close with these lines from Savitri:

An inconclusive play is Reason's toil.  
 Each strong idea can use her as its tool;  
 Accepting every brief she pleads her case.  
 Open to every thought, she cannot know.  
 The eternal Advocate seated as judge  
 Armours in logic's invulnerable mail  
 A thousand combatants for Truth's veiled throne  
 And sets on a high horseback of argument  
 To tilt for ever with a wordy lance  
 In a mock tournament where none can win.  
 Assaying thought's values with her rigid tests  
 Balanced she sits on wide and empty air,  
 Aloof and pure in her impartial poise.  
 Absolute her judgments seem but none is sure;  
 Time cancels all her verdicts in appeal.  
 Although like sunbeams to our glow-worm mind  
 Her knowledge feigns to fall from a clear  
 heaven,  
 Its rays are a lantern's lustres in the Night;  
 She throws a glittering robe on Ignorance.  
 But now is lost her ancient sovereign claim  
 To rule mind's high realm in her absolute  
 right,  
 Bind thought with logic's forged infallible  
 chain,  
 Or see truth nude in a bright abstract haze.<sup>347</sup>

### **Aurobindo's Concept Of Higher Stages**

There are six higher stages of development in Aurobindo's account of human development: the psychic stage, the higher-mental stage, the illumined-mental stage, the intuitive-mental stage, the overmental stage, and the supramental stage.

#### **Stage Four: The Psychic Stage**

Although Aurobindo refers to a stage of "psychic transformation" and "psychic development", this stage has not been recognised as a distinct and important stage in the literature on his philosophy of human development. In Aurobindo's framework, the term "psychic" pertains to the

soul and its inherent tendencies and not to paranormal phenomena or the "occult". He refers to the soul as the "psyche", "psychic being", and "central being". The term "psychic emergence" refers to the emergence of the soul from a state in which it is dormant or latent and covertly active into a state in which it is manifest to our inner awareness and overtly active in our consciousness. Aurobindo defines "psychic emergence" as follows:

Very few people are aware of their souls. When they speak of their soul, they usually mean the vital + the mental being...The psychic remains behind and acts only through the mind, vital, and physical wherever it can...By its coming forward is meant that it comes from behind the veil, its presence is felt already in the waking daily consciousness, its influence fills, dominates, transforms the mind and vital and their movements, even the physical. One is aware of one's soul, feels the psychic to be one's true being, the mind and the rest begin to be only instruments of the inmost within us.<sup>348</sup>

"Psychic transformation" refers to the regulation and transformation of the physical, emotional, and mental life by the soul. "Psychic development" consists in the psychic emergence and transformation.<sup>349</sup>

The psychic emergence and transformation are preparatory to spiritual development. As Aurobindo writes, "there must first be the psychic change, the conversion of our whole present nature into a soul-instrumentation; on that or along with that there must be the spiritual change...".<sup>350</sup> He also

holds that the psychic emergence and transformation are necessary for a safe and secure development of the higher structures of consciousness. A premature opening of the consciousness to higher states or experiences, without the psychic emergence and transformation, may lead to serious aberrations and deformations of the consciousness such as megalomania, fanaticism, sexual obsessions, use of paranormal powers for personal aggrandizement, and abnormalities of personality and behavior due to the influences of hostile supraphysical agencies which take advantage of the opening of the individual consciousness to occult levels of reality.<sup>351</sup> Jim Jones, David Koresh, and their ilk in the West and the East are good examples.

Aurobindo writes that when the psychic being awakens one becomes conscious of one's soul and ceases to erroneously identify with the body, the vital, the mind, or the ego. Further, the awakening of the psyche gives one the capacity for true devotion to God and to one's spiritual guide.<sup>352</sup>

In the early stages of the evolution of the human species, the soul remains almost completely "veiled" by the body-vital-mind complex. Aurobindo claims that "The psychic has always been veiled, consenting to the play of the mind, physical, and vital, experiencing everything through them in the ignorant mental, vital, and physical way"<sup>353</sup>. There is no knowledge of the soul as distinct and independent of the body, the vital, the mind, and the ego. Further, although the

soul acts on the body-vital-mind complex, its influences and tendencies are mixed up with and modified by the tendencies of the body, the vital, and the mind. Therefore, it becomes difficult to distinguish the tendencies or influences of the soul, or to recognise them in their original forms<sup>354</sup>. It is the psychic emergence which enables us to distinguish between the tendencies or influences of the soul and the habits, desires, inclinations of the body, vital, and mind.

According to Aurobindo, human evolution would have been a "rapid soul-outflowering" if the soul had been manifest to our inner awareness from the beginning. As he writes:

If the psychic entity had been from the beginning unveiled and known...the human evolution would have been a rapid soul-outflowering, not the difficult, chequered, and disfigured development it now is; but the veil is thick and we know not the secret Light within us, the light in the hidden crypt of the heart's innermost sanctuary.<sup>355</sup>

The problem then is to explain why the soul was not from the beginning "unveiled and known". Aurobindo's explanation would be that it is a necessary consequence of the involution of the soul in matter. Since evolution is a gradual process, it would again follow that the soul has to gradually and progressively unveil itself under the conditions of its embodiment in an organic form. Given Aurobindo's insistence on the material and biological prerequisites for the evolution of the soul-consciousness, it follows that the

extent to which the soul can recover its self-knowledge would be determined by the complexity of the organic form in which it is embodied.

Further, the mind is the instrument of knowledge. It could be argued that unless the mind has developed to the point where it has the capacity for self-reflection, the soul cannot know itself in its embodied existence. The capacity for self-reflection is necessary, but not sufficient for the recovery of self-knowledge by the soul. Therefore, unless the soul is embodied in an organic form which can make self-reflection possible, it cannot recover its self-knowledge in its embodied state. It is only in the human organic form that there is the capacity for self-reflection. Therefore, the soul can recover its self-knowledge only in the human organic form. But then why was there no recovery of self-knowledge at the beginning of human evolution? As I pointed out, the capacity for self-reflection is necessary but not sufficient. Thus the embodiment in the human organic form is necessary but not sufficient for the recovery of self-knowledge by the soul. It is not sufficient because of the involvement of the soul in the bodily, vital, and mental processes and its tendency, acquired in its successive embodiments in organic forms, of identifying itself with the body-vital-mind complex.

The soul, therefore, must free itself from its involvement in the body-vital-mind complex and rectify its



tendency to identify itself with that complex. According to Aurobindo the soul can recover its self-knowledge in proportion to its ability to stand back and observe the bodily, vital, and mental states and processes.<sup>356</sup> This process has its stages. In the first stage the soul detaches itself from bodily states and processes and becomes aware of itself as greater than and supportive of the body. But this does not imply that it knows its true nature. The soul may still identify itself with the vital. In the second stage the soul detaches itself from the vital, from its appetites, desires, emotions etc., and becomes aware of itself as greater than and supportive of the vital. But again this does not imply that the soul knows its true nature. It may still identify itself with the mind, or more specifically, with reason or intellect. In the third stage the soul detaches itself even from the intellect, from its thoughts, ideas, judgments etc., and becomes aware of itself as greater than and supportive of the intellect. There is then a growing knowledge of itself as a divine principle which has chosen to become embodied for the supreme purpose of leading a divine life on earth.

There is an experiential basis to Aurobindo's concept of the awakening of the soul. It is not merely a matter of belief in the existence of the soul. The knowledge that one is a soul independent from and supportive of the body, the vital, the mind, and the ego is derived from a concrete

experience of being a soul, rather than the body, the vital, or the mind. This experiential thrust is evident in Aurobindo's insistence on the necessity of experiencing the soul as contrasted with mere intellectual belief in its existence.

We can form some idea of "psychic experiences", or experiences of the psyche, from the following account of it by Dilip Kumar Roy, a famous Indian musician and writer who has written about his encounters with such diverse figures as Bertrand Russell, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi. In the early twenties Roy gave up his lucrative career as a musician and became a disciple of Aurobindo. The letters written by Aurobindo in response to Roy's struggles with scepticism and despair in his spiritual life are invaluable for the evidence they provide of Aurobindo's deep, comprehensive, and tolerant understanding of the complexities of spiritual life and development.

During one of his moments of despair at not having achieved spiritual enlightenment even after a period of intensive spiritual practices, Roy prayed tearfully to his deity to give him a "sign" that his goal was not a chimera. What then happened is best stated in Roy's own words in his letter to his Guru Aurobindo:

O Guru, as soon as this prayer issued from my heart...I experienced a velvety softness within and a feeling of ineffable plasticity which rapidly grew into something so concrete that I felt almost as if I could touch it

with my fingers! But even this was not all. As soon as my pride admitted defeat, all my piled-up gloom of despair and frustration vanished as though by magic; my restlessness was redeemed by peace and my darkness by a radiance which seemed too incredible to be true and yet too vivid to be dismissed as wishful thinking. And to me it seemed so utterly convincing because it seemed to descend, like an avalanche, from nowhere, to sweep me off my feet when I had least expected it.<sup>357</sup>

In his reply Aurobindo affirms that Roy's experience was "a psychic experience par excellence" and writes that

A feeling of "velvety softness" and an "ineffable plasticity within" is a psychic experience and can be nothing else. It means a modification of the substance of consciousness and such a modification prolonged or repeated till it became permanent would mean a great step in what I call the psychic transformation of the being.<sup>358</sup>

Roy responded to Aurobindo's reply by raising the question of whether a "feeling" could be described as an experience. In Roy's words "Was not a mere feeling something too adventitious and subjective to be able to claim the status of an "experience"? According to Aurobindo, feelings or emotions, such as love or adoration or awe of the divine, are also forms of spiritual experiences. Feelings involve perceptions. Aurobindo remarks that "Feeling and vision are the main forms of spiritual experience".<sup>359</sup> Thus one can feel and perceive Brahman everywhere, one can feel a spiritual force or energy entering one's being, one can feel and

perceive the "descent of light", and one can also feel the "descent" of peace or rapture into one's soul. But the feeling and the associated perception, in this context, are inner states, and not physical such as the feeling of a cold wind or a stone. Nevertheless, the former are no less vivid or concrete than the latter.<sup>360</sup>

The psychic emergence involves more than the knowledge of oneself as a being independent of the body, the vital, the mind, and the ego. There is also a growing aspiration for perfection and a discontent with the imperfections of the self and the world. This usually takes the form of a pursuit of truth, good, and beauty and a rejection of falsehood, evil, and ugliness. In its higher form it becomes an aspiration for the Divine, for God. The psychic emergence brings about a heightened and accurate perception of the defects of one's nature. It brings about a heightened moral, aesthetic, and religious sensibility. There is a greater capacity for self-scrutiny and self correction. One has an accurate perception of the nature of one's motives, emotions, desires, habits, and actions, and the nature of the discordances and deviations that exist in the self.<sup>361</sup> This sort of heightened self-awareness and self-knowledge goes well beyond the conventional "moral sense" or the need for conformity to mores and codes of conduct of one's society. It has nothing to do with respectability, the smug complacency

of the moralist, the pretentious carping of the social critic, or the hysteria of televangelists.

The psychic emergence also enhances one's capacity for altruistic action and love. It also enhances the capacity for consecration or dedication of the whole being to God and the capacity for surrender or acceptance of the will of God. It enhances one's capacity for viveka, or discrimination between the evanescent and the eternal, the true and the false, the real and the illusory, and the pleasurable and the good.

The process of psychic transformation consists in the progressive transformation of physical, emotional, and mental life in terms of the imperatives of the soul.<sup>362</sup> The soul becomes more and more dominant over the body, the vital, and the mind. The body, vital, and mind are purified and harmonised by the transforming power of the soul. The body is freed from all its wrong or harmful and limiting habits. The vital is purified of all that is sordid, base, vulgar, and perverse. The mind is made steady, clear, flexible, and open to spiritual truth. This is followed by "psychic conversion" or the conversion of the ordinary consciousness into a soul-consciousness in which the turn towards the true, the good, the beautiful, the divine, becomes natural and permanent and the rejection of the false, the bad, the ugly, the undivine, also becomes natural and permanent.<sup>363</sup>

Certain lines of poetry can give us a good sense of the "psychic" and its characteristic modes of expression.

According to Aurobindo certain lines of poetry have behind them the "psychic inspiration" or inspiration from the soul. He regards some lines or verses of Shelley's poems as inspired by the psyche and best expressive of its tendencies. He regards the following lines from one of Shelley's posthumous poems as a "perfect example" of "psychic inspiration":

I can give not what men call love,  
 But wilt thou accept not  
 The worship the heart lifts above  
 And the heavens reject not:  
 The desire of the moth for the star,  
 Of the night for the morrow,--  
 The devotion to something afar  
 From the sphere of our sorrow?<sup>364</sup>

Aurobindo's commentary on these lines runs as follows:

Shelley says in substance: Human vital love is a poor inferior thing, a counterfeit of true love, which I cannot offer you. But there is a greater thing, a true psychic love, all worship and devotion, which men do not readily value...but which the Heavens do not reject though it is offered from something so far below them, so maimed and ignorant and sorrow-vexed as the human consciousness which is to the divine consciousness as the moth is to the star, as the night is to the day...It would perhaps be impossible to find in English literature a more perfect example of psychic inspiration than these eight lines....<sup>365</sup>

### Spiritual Development

The psychic stage is a preparatory stage of spiritual development. The later stages of spiritual development involve levels or structures of consciousness higher than the

mental. Aurobindo claims that spiritual development is a form of human development distinct from and higher than mental development. He strongly emphasizes the distinction between the mental and the spiritual. He writes that "This then is what has to be brought out: the clear distinction between the spiritual and the mental..."<sup>366</sup>.

Aurobindo's concept of spirituality provides us with criteria by which to distinguish mental and spiritual development. He defines spirituality first by means of the *via negativa* and then in a positive way.<sup>367</sup> He asserts that spirituality must not be confused with intellectualism, an idealistic approach to life, ethics, moral puritanism, asceticism, religiosity in its ordinary or extremist forms, or a blend of all these things. Aurobindo also maintains that spiritual achievement and experience must not be confused with mere adherence, however sincere and ardent, to a system of beliefs, or with the regulation of one's life according to a religious creed or a moral system.<sup>368</sup>

Aurobindo then defines spirituality in terms of a specific form of awakening, aspiration, experience, realisation, and transformation. Spiritual awakening is the process of becoming conscious of the soul. This is the process of psychic emergence. The psychic emergence is a part of spiritual development. Spiritual aspiration is the aspiration to know, to feel, to commune and become one with God. Spiritual experience is the experience of God. Spiritual

conversion or transformation is the process of the transformation of the self and its structures as the result of the spiritual awakening, aspiration, and experience.

It is also important to take note, in this context, of Aurobindo's distinction between a spiritual experience and a spiritual achievement or realisation. Spiritual experiences are shorter or longer glimpses, contacts, communions, and unions with God. They may also take the form of experiences of a symbolic character such as visions. A spiritual realisation consists in the permanent acquisition of the higher structures or states of consciousness. When spiritual experiences become settled and normal to the consciousness, they turn into spiritual realisations.<sup>369</sup>

We can now define Aurobindo's concept of spiritual development in terms of the foregoing. There are five basic components of spiritual development: 1) Spiritual awakening, 2) Spiritual aspiration, 3) Spiritual experience, 4) Spiritual realisation, and 5) Spiritual transformation. Each of these may also be regarded as a constitutive sub-process of spiritual development.

We have noted that psychic transformation pertains to the emergence and dominance of the soul over the other structures of the self. Psychic transformation is a prerequisite for spiritual development. But spiritual development involves a lot more than the psychic transformation. The spiritual transformation is the central component of spiritual



development. It consists in the transformation of the being, its tendencies and capacities, by the light and force of the higher structures of consciousness.

### **Stage Five: The Higher-Mental Stage**

The first of these higher structures of consciousness is the "Higher Mind". Despite Aurobindo's language, it is not necessary to construe this "Higher Mind" as some kind of a mind "out there". The "Higher Mind" refers to a developing structure of consciousness characterised by certain types of capacities and experiences. It is also important to distinguish higher-mental states of consciousness and the permanent acquisition of the "Higher Mind". It is only when higher-mental states of consciousness and capacities become normal to one's nature that one can be said to have permanently acquired the "Higher Mind" as a structure of one's consciousness.

The Higher Mind is a structure of consciousness greater than the normal human mental structure. It is characterised by a "large clarity of the Spirit", a "unitarian sense of being", and a "powerful multiple dynamisation".<sup>370</sup> It is not a mind marred by obscurity, falsehood, and partial knowledge. It has a "large clarity", an extensive clarity of knowledge of the Spirit. The normal human mind thinks, feels, and acts in terms of separation and division, but the higher mind has an intrinsic sense of the unity of reality. The normal human mind is considerably limited in its natural capacity to know

different aspects and processes of reality and to formulate those aspects in a single framework. It is also limited in its capacity to envisage alternative courses of action and to correctly ascertain their consequences. But the Higher Mind is characterised by a "powerful multiple dynamisation" or capacity for spontaneous knowledge of multiple aspects and processes of reality, the outcomes of multiple ways of action, and multiple patterns of meaning or significance.

Aurobindo also describes the Higher Mind as a "luminous thought-mind". It can conceive true ideas or beliefs swiftly, effectively, and multitudinously.<sup>371</sup> The Higher Mind typically conceives of systems of true ideas, rather than single ideas. Aurobindo writes that "...its most characteristic movement is a mass ideation, a system or totality of truth-seeing at a single view"<sup>372</sup>. We could describe this as systems-operational thought, thought which operates in terms of systems of ideas, rather than single ideas. The Higher Mind does not put together single ideas into a system like the normal human mind. It does not rely on logical inference, on linear or step-by-step reasoning towards a single conclusion. Rather, there is a spontaneous knowledge of a whole system of relations of ideas. In Aurobindo's words, "the relations of idea with idea, of truth with truth are not established by logic but pre-exist and emerge already self-seen in the integral whole".<sup>373</sup>

The ascent to the level of the Higher Mind is marked by the awareness of "a sealike downpour of masses of a spontaneous knowledge". Although this knowledge takes the form of conceptual knowledge, it is not acquired by means of seeking, mental construction, or speculation. This knowledge is spontaneously disclosed by the Higher Mind. Aurobindo also writes that "One observes that this thought is much more capable than the mind of including at once a mass of knowledge in a single view; it has a cosmic character, not the stamp of an individual thinking"<sup>374</sup>. In the words of Aurobindo's epic spiritual poem Savitri:

On summit Mind are radiant altitudes  
Exposed to the lustre of Infinity,  
Outskirts and dependences of the house of  
Truth,  
Upraised estates of Mind and measureless.  
A cosmic Thought spreads out its vastitudes;  
Its smallest parts are here philosophies  
Challenging with their detailed immensity,  
Each figuring an omniscient scheme of things.<sup>375</sup>

This stage corresponds to Ken Wilber's stage of "vision-logic", a mode of apprehension of networks of relationships among ideas or aspects of reality. It also marks the development of a higher-order synthesizing capacity, of making connections between apparently disparate ideas or aspects of reality, of relating truths, coordinating ideas, and integrating concepts.<sup>376</sup>

There some interesting connections between the higher-mental stage and an initial post-formal period identified by

some developmental theorists. Pascal-Leone and Basseches have labeled this period as "dialectical operations". In this stage one is supposed to recognize the limitations of the "closed-system" formal-operational thinking that excludes aspects of reality or sources of information that do not fit one's current world-view. There is an ability to relate apparently opposing conceptual systems to one another. According to Labouvie-Vief, this post-formal logic is more flexible and directs the more restricted logic of formal operations. Kramer suggests that there are two phases of post formal growth. The first enables seemingly opposing intellectual systems to be related to each other, and the second fosters synthesis of these views into a single system.<sup>377</sup>

Satprem, a generally reliable student of Aurobindo's thought, seems to be completely off the track when he describes the action of the Higher Mind as consisting in the "logicisation and fragmentation" of "little burstings of light" into "so many pages, words, or ideas".<sup>378</sup> His description is completely inconsistent with all that Aurobindo has written about the Higher Mind. I suspect that Satprem's derailment here is due to his notion that the Higher Mind "appears frequently in philosophers and thinkers". While one can find examples of philosophical work inspired by a higher-mental state of consciousness, e.g., Hegel and Spinoza, this does not imply that the action of the

Higher Mind consists in "logicisation and fragmentation" of spiritual truths.

Aurobindo writes that "the Higher Mind...creates a new action of thought and perception which replaces the ordinary mental..This kind of thought is not random and restless, but precise and purposeful, it comes only when needed or called for and does not disturb the silence".<sup>379</sup> He emphasizes that a complete silence of mind is an essential condition for the working of this higher thought.<sup>380</sup> Thus the higher-mental stage does not abolish thought, but transforms it. Further, the complete silence of the mind does not imply that one has slipped into a state in which one is incapable of focused thinking. On the contrary, as Aurobindo suggests, it enables a "precise and purposeful" thought process to take place without detriment to the silence of mind.

The ascent to the higher-mental states of consciousness is accompanied by a "calm and wide enlightenment" and a "vast descent of peace".<sup>381</sup> Aurobindo also describes this stage as corresponding to a "first plane of spiritual consciousness" characterized by awareness of the all-pervasive Self or Atman. He remarks that "The Self is first met on the level of the Higher Mind".<sup>382</sup> Thus we can correlate Maharishi's "transcendental consciousness" with this higher-mental stage. The transcendental consciousness can be viewed as one type of higher-mental state of consciousness. Alfred Lord Tennyson's

experience of "boundless being" is an example of this type of higher-mental state of consciousness. Tennyson reports:

A kind of waking trance I have frequently had... when I have been all alone...all at once, as it were out of the intensity of the consciousness of individuality, the individuality itself seemed to dissolve and fade away into boundless being, and this is not a confused state, but the clearest of the clearest, the surest of the surest...utterly beyond words....<sup>383</sup>

The higher-mental consciousness also possesses a greater will, a greater capacity of execution. It transforms the structures of the self, the body, vital, and mind, by means of thought-power or idea-power and will-power. For instance, in the higher-mental stage one can eliminate an emotional state such as depression by the power of the idea of cheerfulness and the will to cheerfulness. According to Aurobindo, in the higher-mental stage one can also recover from physical illness by means of the power of the thought or idea of health and the will to health. Aurobindo writes that "the idea generates the force and form proper to the idea and imposes it on our substance of Mind, Life, or Matter".<sup>384</sup> Thus in the higher-mental stage the "power of positive thinking" would be more potent and natural to the mind.

The higher-mental state of consciousness is also the source of inspiration for certain types and styles of poetry. Aurobindo remarks that "The Higher thought has a strong tread often with bare unsandalled feet and moves in a clear-cut

light; a divine power, measure, dignity is its most frequent character".<sup>385</sup> Milton's "grand style" and some of the lines of his poems have behind them a touch of the inspiration of higher-mental states of consciousness.

### **Stage Six: The Illumined-Mental Stage**

There are vasts of vision and eternal suns,  
Oceans of an immortal luminousness,  
Flame-hills assaulting heaven with their peaks,  
There dwelling all becomes a blaze of sight;  
A burning head of vision leads the mind,  
Thought trails behind it its long comet tail;  
The heart glows, an illuminate and seer,  
And sense is kindled into identity.<sup>386</sup>

The higher-mental stage is characterized by a clarity and peace of consciousness similar to "tranquil day light", but in the illumined-mental stage this gives way to "an intense lustre, a splendor and illumination of the Spirit...a fiery ardour of realisation and a rapturous ecstasy of knowledge".<sup>387</sup> Aurobindo compares the quality and intensity of experiences in the two stages in figurative terms as follows:

If we accept the Vedic image of the Sun of Truth...we may compare the action of the Higher Mind to a composed and steady sunshine, the energy of the Illumined Mind beyond it to an outpouring of massive lightnings of flaming sun-stuff.<sup>388</sup>

This stage, therefore, corresponds to Evelyn Underhill's concept of an illuminationist stage of spiritual development. Illumination and rapture or ecstasy are the central features of this stage.

of empirical or spiritual truths, and the inner perception of colors, lights, geometrical patterns, etc., which occurs during meditation, indicate the awakening of the power of inner vision.<sup>392</sup>

The workings of inner vision are somewhat like veridical dreams or dreams in which certain truths or solutions present themselves clothed in symbols. A classic example is Kekule's discovery of the structure of the benzene ring. He describes his discovery as follows:

I turned my chair to the fire and dozed. Again the atoms were gamboling before my eyes. This time the smaller groups kept modestly in the background. My mental eye, rendered more acute by repeated visions of this kind, could now distinguish larger structures, of manifold conformation; long rows, sometimes more closely fitted together; all twining and twisting in snakelike motion. But look! What was that? One of the snakes had seized hold of its own tail, and the form whirled mockingly before my eyes. As if by a flash of lightning, I awoke.<sup>393</sup>

This visionary experience led to Kekule's insight that organic compounds such as benzene were closed rings rather than open structures. Other examples include Bohr's formulation of his model of the atom on the basis of dream-images of planets whirling around a sun, Frederick Banting's dream about the physiological process that causes diabetes, and Elias Howe's invention of the sewing machine on the basis of a dream involving mobs of savages whose swords all had holes in their tips and went up and down, up and down.



In the illumined-mental stage, formal-operational thought is subordinated to inner vision and becomes a medium of expression of the latter. Formal operations exists as a subsystem of the illumined-mental structure of consciousness. It can be employed if needed, but it is not indispensable in this stage of development. As Aurobindo writes:

The human mind, which relies mainly on thought, conceives that to be the highest or the main process of knowledge, but in the spiritual order thought is a secondary and a not indispensable process.<sup>394</sup>

It could be objected that Aurobindo's claim that in the transition to the higher stage the structures of the lower stages are taken up, transformed, and integrated into the structure of the higher stage, implies that thought must be indispensable in the spiritual order.

This objection rests on a misunderstanding of Aurobindo's claim. The elements of the lower stages are taken up, transformed, and integrated into the higher structures, but this does not imply that they are essential or indispensable to the workings of the higher structures. Unless one has learnt to function well at the mental level, one cannot hope to function well at the higher levels of consciousness, but this does not imply that the capacities of the mental level are indispensable to effective functioning at the levels higher than the mental level. As Aurobindo maintains, thought is not the primary means of knowledge and action in the

illuminated-mental stage. Thought is not indispensable in this stage because knowledge can be obtained through inner vision.

Aurobindo also claims that inner vision is a higher, more adequate, means of knowledge than formal operational thinking. Inner vision is higher than thought because it is more direct and has a greater power of perception or comprehension. Thought cannot immediately or directly arrive at a true conclusion, but proceeds in steps. Inner vision directly "seizes" aspects of reality, truths, without mediation by thought. Further, inner vision reveals the substance or essence of things and not just their forms or appearances. It can reveal the form or the appearance, the significance or meaning of the form or appearance, and the underlying substance or essence. It can also reveal the forms or appearances of things more adequately than thought.<sup>395</sup>

The "fiery ardour of realisation and a rapturous ecstasy of knowledge", i.e., realisation and knowledge of the Spirit, are usually accompanied by a "downpour of inwardly visible Light". Aurobindo remarks that "That Light is not a metaphor--as when Goethe called for more light in his last moments--it presents itself as a very positive illumination actually seen and felt by the inner sense".<sup>396</sup> He explains that the phenomenon of light common in mystical experience is due to the fact that light is a manifestation of the Spirit in its illuminative and creative action.<sup>397</sup>

There are interesting similarities between Aurobindo's concept of the illumined-mental stage and the concept of illuminationist vision, al-mushahada al-ishraqiyya, in the spiritual philosophy of the twelfth century Persian sage Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi who was executed in 1191 on charges of proclaiming prophethood. Suhrawardi rejects the Aristotelian theory of definition on the grounds that the summum genus plus the differentiae of a thing cannot be exhaustively enumerated in any definition. An essentialist definition, the Aristotelian horos, is only a turn of phrase, tabdil al-lafiz. It is a tautology and does not convey knowledge of essence. The essence of a thing is not known through a constructed definition of it, but by a form of experience, an internal vision, mushahada, of the thing-as-it-is. In this internal vision, the subject is the philosopher-sage who has achieved purification through spiritual praxis, and the object is illuminated by a non corporeal light which emanates from a source described as the "Light of Lights", Nur al-anwar.<sup>398</sup>

Vision-illumination is also said to be accompanied by ecstasy and numbness of the body. As the following account by Hossein Ziai makes evident, Aurobindo's account of the illumined-mental states of consciousness is extraordinarily similar to Suhrawardi's description of vision-illumination:

Vision-illumination is accompanied by sensations of ecstasy...euphoric pleasure... and eventually, by a total numbness of the

body. In the beginning it induces visionary experiences of flashes of light, or lighting bolts of different degrees of duration and intensity, which are at times accompanied by thunderous sounds such as are not heard in the world. This veritable son-et-lumiere ...culminates in a spectacular vision of a "glittering divine light", al-nur al-ilahi...<sup>399</sup>

We can recall Aurobindo's references to "intense lustre, splendor and illumination of the Spirit" and "a play of lightnings of spiritual truth and power" which characterise the illumined-mental stage.

A remarkable experience of what seems to be an illumined-mental state of consciousness is described by a well-known contemporary figure in the science of Kundalini Yoga, Pandit Gopi Krishna, in his autobiographical work Kundalini: Path To Higher Consciousness. The experience occurred to Gopi Krishna sometime in December 1937 during one of his regular pre-dawn meditation sessions. He describes it as follows:

The illumination grew brighter and brighter, the roaring louder, I experienced a rocking sensation and then felt myself slipping out of my body, entirely enveloped in a halo of light. It is impossible to describe the experience accurately. I felt the point of consciousness that was myself growing wider, surrounded by waves of light. It grew wider and wider, spreading outward while the body, normally the immediate object of its perception, appeared to have receded into the distance until I became entirely unconscious of it. I was now all consciousness, without any outline, without any idea of a corporeal appendage, without any feeling or sensation coming from the senses, immersed in a sea of light simultaneously conscious and aware of every point, spread out, as it were, in all

directions without any barrier or material obstruction. I was no longer myself, or to be more accurate, no longer as I knew myself to be, a small point of awareness confined in a body, but instead was a vast circle of consciousness in which the body was but a point, bathed in light and in a state of exaltation and happiness impossible to describe.<sup>400</sup>

Another instance of a remarkable experience of an illumined-mental state of consciousness is described with immaculate simplicity and authenticity by the great Indian sage Swami Ramdas in his autobiography In The Vision Of God. Swami Ramdas refers to his endeavor and experience in the third person as follows:

...For some days his meditation consisted of only the mental repetition of Ram-mantram. Then the mantram having stopped automatically, he beheld a small circular light before his mental vision. This yielded him thrills of delight. This experience having continued for some days, he felt a dazzling light like lightning, flashing before his eyes, which ultimately permeated and absorbed him. Now an inexpressible transport of bliss filled every pore of his physical frame. When this state was coming on, he would at the outset become oblivious of his hands and feet and then gradually his entire body. Lost in this trance-state he would sit for two to three hours. Still a subtle awareness of external objects was maintained in this state.<sup>401</sup>

There are also poetic utterances inspired by illumined-mental states of consciousness. These are characterized by a flood of images and revelatory words and have what Aurobindo calls "a luminous sweep". An example of poetic utterance

inspired by an illumined-mental state of consciousness is the following line from Aurobindo's poem "Life-Unity":

I spread life's burning wings of rapture and  
 pain  
 Black fire and gold fire strove towards one  
 bliss.

There is also a better line from the poetry of Yeats:

O martyrs standing in God's holy fire  
 As in the gold mosaic of a wall.

The illumined-mental consciousness is a greater structure of consciousness than the higher-mental because it imparts a greater dynamism to the powers of the being and brings about a transformation of the self more swiftly and rapidly. It also brings about a more effective integration of the self. In the illumined-mental consciousness the intellect or reason is guided by inner vision and inspiration. Feelings and emotions are imbued with spiritual light and energy and the movements of the vital part are uplifted. Even the power and scope of sensation is enhanced such that it becomes possible to sense as concretely as possible the Divine in all things. The conservative inertia, doubts, etc., due to the dominance of the physical mind are also eliminated. Even the body undergoes a transfiguration and becomes more alive and luminous.<sup>402</sup>

### **Stage Seven: The Intuitive-Mental Stage**

A highest flight climbs to a deepest view:  
 In a wide opening of its native sky  
 Intuition's lightnings range in a bright pack

Hunting all hidden truths out of their lairs,  
 Its fiery edge of seeing absolute  
 Cleaves into locked unknown retreats of self,  
 Rummages the sky-recesses of the brain,  
 Lights up the occult chambers of the heart;  
 Its spear-point ictus of discovery  
 Pressed on the cover of name, the screen of  
 form,  
 Strips bare the secret soul of all that is.  
 Thought there has revelation's sun-bright eyes;  
 The Word, a mighty and inspiring Voice,  
 Enters Truth's inmost cabin of privacy  
 And tears away the veil from God and life.<sup>403</sup>

According to Aurobindo, higher-mental cognition and inner vision are derivative forms of a more primary mode of cognition, intuition. Intuition is a power or faculty of consciousness closer to the original knowledge by identity characteristic of the highest structure of consciousness, the Supermind.

Knowledge by intuition is a derivative form of an implicit or tacit knowledge by identity, identity, that is, with the object of knowledge. One knows x in a moment of identity with x. This is analogous to our knowledge of our own psychological states. We know them by being in those states. We know what is anxiety by the experience of being anxious. Thus knowledge of one's psychological states is an example of knowledge by identity.

How is knowledge by identity possible in the case of "external objects"?

Aurobindo's panpsychism implies that consciousness is universally immanent and that so-called external objects are all constituted by forms of self-organisation of

consciousness. In the intuitive mode of cognition the consciousness of the observer "resonates" with, or penetrates into the form of self-organisation of consciousness constitutive of the "external object", and knows it. Alternatively, since the consciousness of the subject, in its deeper levels, encompasses all things, intuitive knowledge of their natures can be obtained by a heightened form of introspection. A "contactual union" can also yield intuitive knowledge:

It is when the consciousness of the subject meets with the consciousness in the object, penetrates it and sees, feels, or vibrates with the truth of what it contacts, that the intuition leaps out like a spark or lightning flash from the shock of the meeting; or when the consciousness, even without any such meeting, looks into itself and feels directly and intimately the truth or the truths that are there or so contacts the hidden forces behind appearances, then also there is the outbreak of an intuitive light; or again, when the consciousness meets the Supreme Reality or the spiritual reality of things and beings and has a contactual union with it, then the spark, the flash, or the blaze of intimate truth-perception is lit in its depths. This close perception is more than sight, more than conception; it is the result of a penetrating and revealing touch which carries in it sight and conception as part of itself or as its natural consequence.<sup>404</sup>

Inner vision, higher-mental thought, and formal operations continue to exist as subordinate faculties of the intuitive-mental consciousness. As in the case of the previous stages, there is also a process of transformation and integration of the workings of the body, vital, and mind.



Their movements become progressively intuitivised or guided by intuition.<sup>405</sup>

Intuition, in this sense of a mode of cognition by implicit or tacit identity with the object, must be distinguished from the "intuitions" of mental consciousness. The "intuitions" of the ordinary human mind are tainted by the imperfections of the human mental structure of consciousness such as misinterpretation, wishful thinking, prejudices etc.

Aurobindo in the passage quoted earlier describes intuition as a "penetrating and revealing touch" on reality. It is important to take note of Aurobindo's use of the metaphor of touch or tactile perception to describe intuition. This suggests that intuition involves a more intimate form of contact with the object akin to touching it.

He also describes the workings of intuition in this stage by recourse to the Vedic poetic figure of a sea or mass of "stable lightnings". Truths break out in the consciousness like a mass of "stable lightnings". But as the intuitive-mental structure develops intuitions may come in lightning-flashes, in an isolated or inconstant fashion. In this stage reason can only act as an interpreter or communicator of the intuitions, and not as their judge. An isolated intuition can be completed or verified only by receiving a higher intuition or by receiving a global or "massed" intuition which can put all other intuitions in place<sup>406</sup>. Aurobindo's concept of

intuition thus differs from H.H. Price's conception according to which intuitive consciousness, while being "totalistic", is neither progressive nor additive.<sup>407</sup>

The intuitive-mental consciousness has four basic capacities or powers: 1) revelatory truth-seeing, 2) inspiration or truth-hearing, 3) truth-touch or immediate insight into significance, and 4) "true and automatic discrimination of the orderly and exact relation of truth to truth"<sup>408</sup>.

By "revelatory truth-seeing" Aurobindo refers to the vision mode of cognition characteristic of the illumined-mental consciousness. Presumably, the vision mode of cognition has greater capability when it is integrated into the intuitive-mental structure. Inner vision is "intuitivised" and becomes a form of intimate contact with the object. Inspiration at this level is a form of "truth-hearing". Inspiration discloses truth. Whatever is inspired is true.

Truth-touch" refers to the power of immediately grasping the significance or meaning of an utterance, proposition, aspect of reality, or manifestation of God. This is insight, but insight which has a far greater range and power than its counterpart at the mental level. The Intuitive Mind also possesses the power of true perception of the relationships between truths, between the multiple aspects of reality. Aurobindo maintains that these four powers enable the

Intuitive Mind to perform all the functions and operations of reason, including logical thinking, with a far greater speed and adequacy.<sup>409</sup>

We can somewhat understand "truth-seeing" and "truth-hearing" by looking at accounts of moments of creative vision, intuition, and inspiration, given by great writers artists, scientists, etc. Nietzsche's riveting observations on states of inspiration is of great help here:

Has anyone at the end of the nineteenth century a clear idea of what poets of strong ages have called inspiration? If not, I will describe it. If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one's system, one could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces. The concept of revelation--in a sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes visible, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down--that merely describes the facts. One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightning, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form...I never had any choice...Everything happens involuntarily in the highest degree...The involuntariness of image and metaphor is the strangest of all...It actually seems, to allude to something Zarathustra says, as if the things themselves approached and offered themselves as metaphors.<sup>410</sup>

A remarkable example of a sudden intuitive experience of the highest order is the Indian sage Ramana Maharishi's realisation of the Atman or the transcendental Self. This realisation occurred to Ramana Maharishi (1879 - 1950) in his

seventeenth year apparently without any conscious quest, or preparation, which makes it truly remarkable in the history of human spiritual experience. Ramana's description of the experience, as translated by Arthur Osborne, is as follows:

I was sitting alone in a room on the first floor of my uncle's house. I seldom had any sickness, and on that day there was nothing wrong with my health, but a sudden violent fear of death overtook me...I just felt "I am going to die" and began thinking what to do about it...The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally, without actually framing: "Now death has come; what does it mean? what is it that is dying? This body dies. And I at once dramatised the occurrence of death..."Well then, I said to myself, "this body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there burnt and reduced to ashes. But with the death of this body am I dead? Is the body I? It is silent and inert but I feel the full force of..."I" within me, apart from it. So I am Spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the Spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means I am the deathless Spirit." All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me as vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought process...From that moment onwards the "I" or Self focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death had vanished once and for all.<sup>411</sup>

According to Aurobindo, the poetic utterance which springs from intuition has the following features:

The Intuition is usually a lightning flash showing up a single spot or plot of ground or scene with an entire and miraculous completeness of vision to the surprised ecstasy of the inner eye, its rhythm has a decisive inevitable sound which leaves

nothing essential unheard, but very commonly is embodied in a single stroke.<sup>412</sup>

K.D.Sethna offers a line from Rilke's poetry which seems to have its source in intuition:

Durch alle Wesen reicht der eine Raum:  
Weltinnenraum.  
(A single space spreads through all things  
that are, World's inner space)

I wonder if some of Wittgenstein's philosophical aphorisms also spring from "Intuition". Some of his remarks in the Tractatus and other works seem to have the features specified by Aurobindo.

The intuitive-mental consciousness is not the highest structure of consciousness. Although it can bring about a considerable transformation of the being, it cannot completely transform the inconscient and subconscient foundations of our being. Aurobindo remarks that the basis of the Inconscience in our nature is too vast, deep, and resilient to be penetrated and completely transformed by the intuitive consciousness. He also points out the fundamental limitation of the intuitive-mental consciousness. He remarks that "...the limitation of the Intuition...is that it sees things by flashes, point by point, not as a whole".<sup>413</sup> This necessitates the ascent to a level of consciousness in which this limitation of the intuitive-mental structure is overcome and which will make possible the ascent to the stage of the

supramental consciousness. This is the stage of the overmental consciousness.

### Stage Eight: The Overmental Stage

Then stretches the boundless finite's last  
 expanse  
 The cosmic empire of the Overmind,  
 Time's buffer state bordering eternity,  
 Too vast for the experience of man's soul:  
 All here gathers beneath one golden sky:  
 The Powers that build the cosmos station take  
 In its house of infinite possibility;  
 Each god from there builds his own nature's  
 world;  
 Ideas are phalanxed like a group of sums;  
 Thought crowds in masses seized by one regard;  
 All time is one body, Space a single book:  
 There is the Godhead's universal gaze  
 And there the boundaries of immortal Mind:  
 The line that parts and joins the hemispheres  
 Closes in on the labor of the Gods  
 Fencing eternity from the toil of Time.<sup>414</sup>

In this stage, the individual becomes conscious of the Overmind and the overmental level of existence. I have described the nature of the Overmind in an earlier chapter. Here I will focus on the capacities, perspectives, powers of aesthesis etc., which develop in the individual as the overmental stage is attained.

In the overmental consciousness "Ideas are phalanxed like a group of sums". A vast network of ideas is immediately present to the consciousness. There is no labor of concatenation or organisation. This differs from the higher-mental cognition in respect of the scope or range of perception.

"Thought crowds in masses seized by one regard". Thinking is perspectival. The overmental consciousness can view an immense variety of aspects of reality in a single regard or perspective.

"All time is one body, Space a single book". To the overmental consciousness, past, present, and future are not separate, but constitute a unified whole. All parts of space also constitute a unified whole.

"There is the Godhead's universal gaze". In contrast to the flashes of the intuitional consciousness lighting up aspects of reality point by point, the overmental consciousness has a global perception and comprehends large totalities of existence, e.g., entire worlds.

The overmental consciousness is a cosmic consciousness. The term "cosmic consciousness" was first popularised by R.M.Bucke in his famous book on mystical experiences entitled Cosmic Consciousness. It should be mentioned here that Aurobindo was aware of this book. The term has since then been bandied about a great deal and has turned into a cliché. Almost every paranormal or mystical experience is now described as an experience of "cosmic consciousness". In Aurobindo's view, cosmic consciousness is the penultimate stage of a long and arduous spiritual development. It is almost the highest state of consciousness attainable by the individual.

There are many forms of overmental consciousness because it has a great "plasticity" and is a field of multiple possibilities. In one form of the overmental consciousness, there may be an awareness of the universe as encompassed by one's consciousness. In another form of overmental consciousness, there may be an identification with all things and beings, with the joys and sufferings of all living beings. There may also be a sense of the inclusion of other beings into one's field of consciousness and an awareness of their lives as part of one's being.<sup>420</sup>

A poem by Aurobindo entitled "Cosmic Consciousness" gives us a "feel" of this state of consciousness:

I have wrapped the wide world in my wider self  
 And Time and Space my spirit's seeing are.  
 I am the god and demon, ghost and elf,  
 I am the wind's speed and the blazing star.  
 All Nature is the nursling of my care,  
 I am its struggle and the eternal rest;  
 The world's joy thrilling runs through me,  
 I bear The sorrow of millions in my lonely  
 breast.  
 I have learned a close identity with all,  
 Yet am by nothing bound that I become;  
 Carrying in me the universe's call  
 I mount to my imperishable home.  
 I pass beyond Time and life on measureless  
 wings,  
 Yet still am one with born and unborn things.

Aurobindo remarks that "Overmind Consciousness is global in its cognition and can hold any number of seemingly fundamental differences together in a reconciling vision"<sup>421</sup>. The human mental consciousness perceives the world in terms of parts fragmented from the whole by the analytical reason



or in terms of sums of fragmented parts. It is also reductive and exclusive in its approach. It tries to reduce the whole of reality to a particular principle and excludes other principles, or countenances them as secondary derivatives.

Human mental consciousness thrives on distinctions, divisions, dichotomies, and oppositions. Thus it views the personal and the impersonal as mutually exclusive. It conceives of the ultimate reality as solely an impersonal existence or as solely a personal being. But to the overmental consciousness, the personal and the impersonal are interdependent, equal, and coexisting modes of one reality. And they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The impersonal mode can include the personal mode as a subordinate form of expression and the personal mode can include the impersonal as a subordinate form of expression. Aurobindo writes:

To the Overmind intelligence...the Impersonal Divine and the Personal Divine are equal and coexistent aspects of the Eternal...What to the mental reason are irreconcilable differences present themselves to the Overmind intelligence as coexistent correlatives; what to the mental reason are contraries are to the Overmind intelligence complementaries.<sup>422</sup>

The human mental consciousness perceives that Matter is the basis and substance of all things and concludes that Matter is the primary and ultimate reality of which life and mind are derivatives or "epiphenomena". Thus it embraces

materialism. Or it perceives the dominance of the life-energy and affirms Life as the primary and ultimate reality of which Matter is the medium and Mind an epiphenomenon. Thus we have vitalism. Or else it perceives the dominance of Mind over life and matter and affirms Mind as the primary and ultimate reality. We then have mentalistic idealism. Or it affirms Spirit as the primary and ultimate reality. So we have spiritual idealism. The mental consciousness can fix itself in any of these perspectives, but it regards them as individually exhaustive or complete, and mutually exclusive.

By contrast, the overmental consciousness perceives that there are laws of matter, laws of life, laws of mind, and laws of spirit and that each of these kinds of laws can determine the workings of an entire world or universe. But it also perceives that all of these laws may together govern the workings of a single world or universe. The overmental consciousness can easily countenance the possibility of a world based on the involution of the spirit into matter and its progressive evolution from matter in terms of the successively higher principles of life, mind, overmind, and supermind, each taking up the prior principle as a medium of its self-expression. In other words, the overmental consciousness can easily countenance the possibility of the truth of Aurobindo's own theory! Aurobindo is not only implying that his theory has its origins in the overmental

consciousness, but also that its veracity or validity would be self-evident at that level of consciousness.

Aurobindo also attributes to the overmental consciousness a "vast and endless catholicity"<sup>423</sup>. The overmental consciousness is free of the defect of erecting false oppositions and dichotomies. Its spirit is one of a global synthesis and reconciliation without abrogation of the individuality or autonomy of particular elements or truths:

To the Overmind, for example, all religions would be true as developments of the one eternal religion, all philosophies would be valid each in its own field as a statement of its own universe-view from its own angle, all political theories with their practice would be the legitimate working out of an idea force with its right to application and practical development in the play of the energies of Nature. In our separative consciousness, imperfectly visited by glimpses of catholicity and universality, these things exist as opposites; each claims to be the truth and taxes the others with error and falsehood, each feels impelled to refute or destroy the others in order that itself alone may be the Truth and live: at best, each must claim to be superior, admits all others only as inferior truth-expressions. An overmental Intelligence would refuse to entertain this conception or this drift to exclusiveness for a moment; it would allow all to live as necessary to the whole or put each in its place in the whole or assign to each its field of realisation or of endeavor.<sup>424</sup>

This passage suggests that a radical pluralism would be the outlook of the overmental consciousness.

The overmental consciousness would also possess the power to make this radical pluralism the organising principle of

life in the world. Aurobindo acknowledges that the mental consciousness can achieve a considerable comprehensiveness and catholicity, but he points out that it fails in its attempts to make that the organising principle of life in the world. A world governed by the mental consciousness is a world of patchwork and piecemeal harmony forever marred by outbreaks of discord and conflict. But a world governed by the overmental consciousness would be a harmonious whole in which opposites would be permitted to work out their possibilities without detriment to the unity of the system. However, this does not imply that in a world governed by beings with an overmental consciousness, the unity or harmony of the whole can be completely secure.

Aurobindo also maintains that in the overmental stage it would be self-evident that both the individual and the cosmos have their source in a transcendent reality. As he remarks, "Overmind consciousness is a state...beyond individual mind...it is self-evident here that both the individual and the cosmos come from a transcendent reality...".<sup>425</sup>

The dichotomy between the conception of God as possessing infinite attributes and the conception of God as transcending all attributes disappears in the overmental consciousness which perceives both conceptions as equally true because they refer to two modes of one being.<sup>426</sup>

A "universal gaze" is the highest characteristic of the overmental consciousness. Aurobindo ascribes to the

overmental consciousness a "universal aesthesis", the power of perceiving a universal beauty, of taking a universal joy or delight. We should recall that Aurobindo defines "aesthesis" as the capacity of consciousness for aesthetic enjoyment or delight in things. But this does not imply that the overmental consciousness fails to understand the differences perceived by the ordinary mental consciousness. An individual with the overmental consciousness will certainly distinguish between beautiful and ugly surroundings, but he or she will have the capacity to see the implicit aesthetic value of what is normally judged and abhorred as "ugly", to turn the transfiguring artistic light on ugliness.. This is something quite obvious to those with a heightened aesthetic sense. In Aurobindo's words:

Wherever the Overmind spiritual man turns he sees a universal beauty touching and uplifting all things, expressing itself through them, moulding them into a field or objects of its divine aesthesis; a universal love goes out from him to all beings...This universal aesthesis of beauty and delight does not ignore or fail to understand the differences and oppositions, the gradations, the harmony and disharmony obvious to the ordinary consciousness; but, first of all, it draws a rasa from them and with that comes the enjoyment, bhoga, and the touch or the mass of the Ananda. It sees that all things have their meaning, their value, their deeper or total significance which the mind does not see...it gives even to what is discordant a place in a system of cosmic concordances and the discords become part of a vast harmony, and wherever there is harmony, there is a sense of beauty.<sup>427</sup>

An illustration of an overmental state of consciousness is the following experience and subsequent realisation described by Swami Ramdas in his autobiography with his inimitable simple style:

...A stage was soon reached when this dwelling in the spirit became a permanent and unvarying experience with no more falling off from it, and then a still exalted state came on; his hitherto inner vision projected outward. First a glimpse of this new vision dazzled him off and on. This was the working of divine love. He would feel as though his very soul had expanded like the blossoming of a flower and, by a flash as it were, enveloped the whole universe embracing all in a subtle halo of love and light. This experience granted him a bliss infinitely greater than he had in the previous state. Now it was that Ramdas began to cry out "(God) is all, it is He as everybody and everything." This condition was for some months coming on and vanishing. When it wore away, he would instinctively run to solitude. When it was present, he freely mixed in the world preaching the glory of divine love and bliss...Its fullness and magnificence was revealed to him during his stay in the Kadri cave, and here the experience became more sustained and continuous. The vision of God shone in his eyes and he would see none but Him in all objects. Now wave after wave of joy rose in him. He realized that he had attained to a consciousness full of splendor, power and bliss.<sup>428</sup>

The development of the overmental structure of consciousness also alters the perception of so-called material forms or objects. This altered perception of material forms or objects is part of its greater aesthesis. Aurobindo describes the Overmind perception as follows:

...Overmind consciousness sees the object with a totality which changes its effect on the percipient even while it remains the same thing. It sees lines and masses and an underlying design which the physical eye does not see and which escapes even the keenest mental vision. Every form becomes beautiful to it in a deeper and larger sense of beauty than that commonly known to us. The Overmind looks...into the soul of each thing and not only at its form or its significance to the mind or to the life...In a highest, most integral experience it sees all things as if made of existence, consciousness, power, bliss, every atom of them charged with and constituted of Sachidananda. These things come not merely as an idea in the mind or a truth-seeing, but as an experience of the whole being.<sup>429</sup>

The scope of the overmental aesthesis extends also to truth. Aurobindo observes that the overmental consciousness takes an aesthetic delight in truth, a joy in its discovery and expression. Perhaps Aurobindo has in mind here Keats' line "Beauty is Truth, Truth is Beauty...."

As with the other levels, Aurobindo also gives examples of lines of poetry inspired by the Overmind consciousness. He mentions the following line from Virgil's Aeneid as one of the first among inspirations of overmind origin:

Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.

(the touch of tears in mortal things.)

According to Aurobindo, the overmental quality of inspiration of this line depends, not on its context, but on the perception of the universality of human suffering which it conveys and the inexorability of its language and rhythm. As Aurobindo observes:

The context of Virgil's line has nothing to do with and cannot detract from its greatness and its overhead character...he starts indeed by stressing the...fame of Troy and the interest taken everywhere in her misfortunes but then he passes from the particularity of this idea and suddenly rises from it to a feeling of the universality of mortal sorrow and suffering and of the chord of human sympathy and participation which responds to it from all who share that mortality. He rises indeed much higher than that and goes much deeper: he has felt a brooding cosmic sense of these things, gone into the depths of the soul which answers to them and drawn from it the inspired and inevitable language and rhythm which came down to it from above to give this pathetic perception an immortal body....<sup>430</sup>

Aurobindo also cites lines from Wordsworth and Shakespeare as approximating closely to the rhythm and inspiration characteristic of overmental poetry. He cites a line from Wordsworth "the winds come to me from the fields of sleep". Aurobindo mentions these examples mostly in his letters and quotes from his memory without giving references. This line is from Wordsworth's Ode "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood". The preceding lines are also worth citing in order to give a better idea of what Aurobindo has in mind:

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;  
 No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;  
 I hear the echoes through the mountains throng,  
 The winds come to me from the fields of sleep,



I think that Aurobindo would probably agree that Walt Whitman's poem On The Beach At Night Alone expresses an overmental state of consciousness:

On the beach at night alone,  
 As the old mother sways her to and fro singing her  
 husky song,  
 As I watch the bright stars shining,  
 I think a thought of the clef of the universes and of  
 the future.  
 A vast similitude interlocks all,  
 All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns,  
 moons, planets,  
 All distances of place however wide,  
 All distances of time, all inanimate forms,  
 All souls, all living bodies though they be ever so  
 different, or in different worlds,  
 All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the  
 fishes, the brutes,  
 All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilizations,  
 languages,  
 All identities that have existed or may exist on this  
 globe, or any globe,  
 All lives and deaths, all of the past, present,  
 future,  
 This vast similitude spans them, and always has  
 spann'd,  
 And shall forever span them and compactly hold and  
 enclose them.<sup>431</sup>

The consciousness of unity with all life characteristic of the highest state of overmental consciousness is expressed by the following line from a poem by the Vietnamese teacher and peace worker Thich Nhat Hanh:

the rhythm of my heart is the birth and death  
 of all that are alive.

It should be noted here that these examples of lines of poetry serve to give us an idea of the states of consciousness corresponding to a given stage and do not

necessarily indicate that a particular stage has been achieved.

The Overmind consciousness transforms and integrates into its structure the workings and movements of the body, vital, and mind. They are experienced as ripples in the wideness of the cosmic consciousness. Thought manifests from above or comes in waves. Feelings, emotions, and sensations are also felt as waves from the cosmic immensity breaking upon the individual.

Intuition, illumined vision, and higher thought are enlarged in their scope and power. They become more comprehensive, global, and many-faceted. Aurobindo remarks that "the whole nature, knowledge, aesthesis, sympathy, feeling, dynamism, become more catholic, all-understanding, all-embracing, cosmic, infinite".<sup>432</sup>

Aurobindo maintains that the overmental stage is not the highest stage of development. One has an implicit or tacit knowledge of the unity of the manifestation, but one continues to perceive reality in terms of the interaction of separated powers and entities, in terms of multiplicity and diversity. One attains a state of cosmic consciousness, but this is still different from a state of non-duality, a state of transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy.

Further, the overmental consciousness does not possess the power to completely transform the base or foundation of our being, the Inconscient material substance. It can

transform the individual consciousness, universalise it, and infuse into it the elements of cosmic truth and knowledge, but the Inconscient basis of the individual existence and the world would remain unchanged.<sup>433</sup>

The terrestrial development of the overmental consciousness would lead to the emergence of groups or communities of overmental humans amidst mental humanity and animals. These overmental humans may pursue their own independent development or might interact with mental humanity and animals. But they would not be capable of integrating the diversity into a single harmonious order. As Aurobindo remarks, "The supreme power of the principle of unity taking all diversities into itself and controlling them as parts of the unity, which must be the law of the new evolutionary consciousness, would not as yet be there".<sup>434</sup>

More importantly, the terrestrial development of the overmental consciousness would not provide immunity against the pull of the Inconscience, the tendency to stagnate, devolve, or relapse into the lower levels of consciousness. It would not provide total immunity against death, disease, incapacity, inertia, and disintegration which are the hallmarks of the Inconscient material substance out of which our terrestrial being is moulded. This Inconscient substance restricts our attempts to develop our consciousness. It invades and encompasses the light and power of the higher structures and constrains and cripples their action in the

being. Unless this unconscious foundation our being and the world's being is transformed, the action of the higher structures will not be wholly effective and will always be insecure. In Aurobindo's words:

But even when the higher powers and their intensities enter into the substance of the Inconscience, they are met by this blind opposing Necessity and are subjected to this circumscribing and diminishing law of the nescient substance. It opposes them with its strong titles of an established and inexorable Law, meets always the claim of life with the law of death, the demand of light with the need of a relief of shadow and a background of darkness, the sovereignty and freedom and dynamism of the Spirit with its own force of adjustment by limitation, demarcation by incapacity, foundation of energy on the repose of an original Inertia.<sup>435</sup>

The total immunity against the pull of the Inconscience and its complete transformation can only be guaranteed by the ascent into the supramental level of consciousness.<sup>436</sup>

### Stage Nine: The Supramental Stage

...music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the  
music  
While the music lasts.

T.S.Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"

All things are One.

Heraclitus

This stage marks the development of the supramental consciousness. There is a fundamental problem facing the attempt to describe the supramental stage. Any description would be a description in terms of the concepts to which the mental consciousness is accustomed and a description for a mental consciousness. But how can the workings of a supramental consciousness, a consciousness which completely transcends the mental consciousness, be adequately described in terms of the concepts of the mental consciousness or adequately understood by the mental consciousness? The ascent to the supramental stage implies that the standards and norms of mental cognition are no longer valid. Thus it is difficult for the mental thought to understand or describe the supramental consciousness. As Aurobindo writes:

A mental description of supramental nature could only express itself either in phrases which are too abstract or in mental figures which might turn it into something quite different from its reality. It would not seem to be possible, therefore, for the mind to anticipate or indicate what a supramental being shall be or how he shall act; for here mental ideas and formulations cannot decide anything or arrive at any precise definition or determination, because they are not near enough to the law and self-vision of supramental nature.<sup>437</sup>

We can form some conception of the nature of the supramental consciousness only in terms of the embryonic form of the supramental consciousness which emerges in the process of the ascent from the overmental to the supramental stage.

And this conception will necessarily be general and somewhat vague.

According to Aurobindo, the mental consciousness is a finite consciousness and a consciousness of finite realities. But the supramental consciousness is an intrinsic structure of consciousness of an infinite being and a consciousness of infinite reality as inclusive of finite realities. An immaculate oneness or non-duality is the hallmark of the supramental consciousness. It views all the multiplicity and diversity of the world, all its oppositions and contradictions, in the light of this oneness or non-duality. This means that to the supramental consciousness all things are one even in their apparent multiplicity, diversity, and opposition. The will, ideas, feelings, and sense-perceptions of the supramental being are permeated by this sense of oneness or non-duality.

The mental consciousness, by contrast, thinks, feels, and acts in terms of division or duality. It can construct a concept of unity, but division is in the very grain of its nature. Even if it has fleeting glimpses of oneness, it cannot but act in terms of division, dichotomy, difference.

But the supramental life, in Aurobindo's words, is "a life of essential, spontaneous and inherent unity". The activities of the supramental consciousness are not governed by any mental principle or rule, or any vital urges or impulses. It acts in concordance with an innate spiritual

vision, a comprehensive and exact understanding of the nature of the totality, the whole, and the individual entity. It acts in concordance with reality as it is, and not in terms of mental idea, conception, theory, norm of conduct, or principle. The supramental consciousness is calm, self-possessed, spontaneous, and plastic. It is guided by an inherent sense of identity with all things, a sense of identity which is native to its spiritual and universal substance of consciousness. It is a dynamic non-dual consciousness.

We also find in another of Aurobindo's works The Synthesis Of Yoga descriptions of the differences between the mental consciousness and the supramental consciousness. The fundamental nature of the supramental consciousness is that all its knowledge is a knowledge by identity and oneness with things. This is so even when it makes innumerable apparent distinctions. Its distinctions are based on a knowledge of oneness. As Aurobindo writes:

When it sees anything as an object of knowledge, it yet sees it as itself and in itself, and not as a thing other than or divided from it about which therefore it would at first be ignorant...and have to learn about it...(unlike) the mind (which) is at first ignorant of its object and has to learn about it because the mind is separated from its object and regards...it as something other than itself and external to its own being.<sup>438</sup>

The supramental consciousness sees the one divine being everywhere and knows that all things are manifestations of this divine being and exist within it. The supramental consciousness can know all things intimately and completely in their manifested form, in their essential truth or reality, and in their development. Aurobindo argues that although the kind of mental awareness or knowledge we have of our subjective existence or inner life may provide a clue to the nature of knowledge by identity, the latter type of knowledge of our inner life is deeper and more complete. The mental awareness pertains only to the superficial, partial, or derivative aspects of the inner life.<sup>439</sup>

The supramental consciousness has a total or integral knowledge of things. It has a transcendental vision of the cosmos and sees the universe not only in its totality and as a totality, but also in its relation to the Supermind or God. It has a universal vision and sees every individual entity and force in terms of its place in the whole and also in terms of the specific constitution and essential or inmost nature of the entity or force. It also sees all these individual entities or forces in their mutual relationships. This is because of the fact that it transforms and integrates all the previous structures of consciousness.

By contrast, the mental consciousness is limited in all these aspects. It cannot arrive at an identity with the Absolute, with God. It can form a concept of the Absolute,



but when it tries to discern the reality behind the concept it loses its bearings. The mental consciousness also cannot grasp the universal, the cosmic whole. It can arrive at a conceptual understanding of the whole or the universal as an extension of the part, or the individual, or as an aggregate of separate things. The independent and organic reality of the universal, the cosmic whole, eludes its powers of comprehension because of its analytical tendency of dividing reality into separate units and taking those units and their aggregates as realities.

Aurobindo argues that the mental consciousness cannot know truly and thoroughly even the individual and apparently separate entity because, again, it proceeds analytically by separating the parts, constituents, and properties, and by constructing a system of their external relationships. It can have some intimations of the essential or inmost nature of a thing, but it cannot adequately understand the thing in its inner spiritual reality and the relation between that inner spiritual reality and the external form, the significance or meaning of the external form.<sup>440</sup>

The mental consciousness strives to arrive at truth against the backdrop of an original ignorance and its strivings are constantly beset by incertitude and error. Its certitudes are for the most part relative and precarious. Its structure of knowledge is constructed from discoveries, concepts, experiences, logical principles etc., but this

structure is always limited. Further, the mind sets up other "willed barriers" admitting only certain parts and aspects of reality or truth and excluding all the rest because if it were otherwise all-inclusive, it would lose its bearings in an unreconciled plethora of views and be unable to act and construct in everyday life. And even when its structure of knowledge is most comprehensive, it still possesses only an indirect and objective knowledge of things, and not knowledge of things in their essential and inner spiritual reality.

The supramental consciousness is a "Truth-Consciousness". It possesses an inherent and direct knowledge of reality and does not require logical thinking or inferences from the known to the unknown etc. It holds all knowledge in itself and knowing is only an act of recollection for it.<sup>441</sup>

The supramental consciousness will not emerge suddenly and full-blown like Athena from the head of Zeus, but will develop gradually and progressively under the conditions of the terrestrial nature. Of course, its development will bring about a radical transformation in those very conditions, but this will not occur miraculously without any lawful process.

The development of the supramental consciousness will lead to the formation of a new type of being or individual on earth, the gnostic being. But the gnostic being will not be the sole result of the development of the supramental consciousness. There will also be the consummation of all the earlier structures of consciousness. The emergence of the

supramental consciousness will also make secure the terrestrial development of all the structures of consciousness higher than the mental structure, viz., higher mind, illumined mind, intuitive mind, and overmind, and pave the way for a hierarchy of spiritual individuals each representing a higher form of consciousness. According to Aurobindo all life-forms which are ready to go beyond the mental consciousness, but which are not yet ready for the supramental consciousness would find in the establishment of these intermediate grades of consciousness their means and basis of a higher evolution.<sup>442</sup>

The emergence of the supramental consciousness will affect the whole of evolutionary nature. The power and light of the new consciousness will penetrate all the lower recesses of existence, all life at the lower levels of the evolutionary ladder, and bring about a transformation in their modes of existence. There will be a change in human existence with the influx of a greater power of understanding and sympathy. In Aurobindo's words "A dominant principle of harmony would impose itself on the life of the Ignorance...A freer play of intuition and sympathy and understanding would enter into human life...."<sup>443</sup>. The evolutionary process which has been marked by the constant struggle between the growth of consciousness and the pull of the Inconscience, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, would change

its character and become a process of gradual progress from lesser to greater light.

All conscious beings in each rung of the evolutionary ladder would respond to the emergence of the supramental consciousness and develop the higher potentialities inherent in their natures. Each type of conscious being would develop toward the highest formulation of that type or level of existence. Thus human beings at the mental level would be moved by a new and powerful impetus to scale the heights of the mental level of consciousness. A higher type of mental being would evolve as a consequence of the supramental emergence on earth.

A being who attained the overmental consciousness would be aware of the unity underlying the multiplicity and diversity of existence, but he might still pursue an independent line of development in accordance with his own nature and in accordance with the divine will and leave the rest to their own line of development within the totality of existence. A form of life organised by the overmental consciousness could therefore be something separate and insulated from the rest of existence in the Ignorance. By contrast, the supramental gnostic being would create a "harmonic unity" with the rest of existence even if it is enveloped in the Ignorance. The supramental consciousness would perceive and bring out the evolving truth and principle of harmony involved in the formations of the Ignorance and

would have the power to integrate the rest of existence into its harmonious order. In other words, an order organised by the gnostic beings would have a place for mental humanity and animals as parts of its harmonious whole. This presupposes, however, a considerable change in the life of mental humanity and the animals, but that change would be the natural consequence of the emergence and universal influence of the supramental consciousness.<sup>444</sup>

It should not be supposed that all gnostic beings would be alike. The law of the supramental consciousness is an exuberant diversity on the basis of unity. Thus there would be infinitely diverse forms of the supramental consciousness, and consequently, an infinitely diverse number of gnostic beings. But this infinite diversity would not lead to chaos or conflict because it is a manifestation of the one supramental consciousness.<sup>445</sup>

The thought, life, and action of the gnostic beings would be governed by a vast universal spirituality. They would be perpetually aware of God's nature, presence, and activity in the world. According to Aurobindo, the gnostic being would "feel the presence of the Divine in every centre of his consciousness, in every vibration of his life-force, in every cell of his body".<sup>446</sup>

The gnostic beings would have an inclusive universal consciousness full of spontaneous sympathy with all in the universe. But this would not involve, in the gnostic

consciousness, any bondage to inferior tendencies, or any admission of conflict and confusion, or any distortion of the different harmonies that constitute the total harmony. There would be no deflection from the essential state of the supramental consciousness. The supramental consciousness would encompass the truth of particular things and maintain particularities in a "relation of diversified harmony".<sup>447</sup>

A completeness of being, consciousness, and bliss would be the natural state of the gnostic beings. Human beings struggle toward completeness and harmony and suffer most from imperfection, incapacity, and discordance in the self. These things arise from an incomplete and imperfect self-possession and self-knowledge. The gnostic beings would possess a complete knowledge of all things at all moments and would have complete mastery not only over the forces of nature, but also over the powers of their own consciousness. They would also possess the power of perfect self-expression in nature.

Human beings have an imperfect relationship with the world. They are ignorant of other individuals. They are not in harmony with the whole of things and struggle to achieve a compromise between their demands on the world and the world's demands on them. There is a conflict between their need for self-affirmation and the nature of the world, a world which is too immense and passes indifferently over them in its movement towards an unknown goal. They are ignorant of the relationship between their goals and the goal of the world's

development. In order to achieve some harmony with the world, they either have to impose themselves as much as possible on the world and make it subservient, or limit themselves and become subservient to the world, or achieve some compromise or balance between their requirements and the world's requirements.

The supramental beings will not have these problems. They have no ego to assert and affirm. They would know all the forces of existence and the significance of their play and act in accordance with their knowledge. They would know that both the individual and the world are simultaneous and interrelated expressions of one divine and transcendent being and would act harmoniously in terms of that knowledge. The division and conflict between the self and the world would not exist in the supramental stage. According to Aurobindo:

One in self with all, the supramental being will seek the delight of self-manifestation of the Spirit in himself but equally the delight of the Divine in all: he will have the cosmic joy and will be a power for bringing the bliss of the Spirit, the joy of being to others; for their joy will be part of his own joy of existence.<sup>448</sup>

The Indian spiritual tradition describes the enlightened or liberated individual as preoccupied with the good of all beings and as sharing in their joys and sorrows. Aurobindo argues that the supramental beings will have no need of such altruistic self-effacement because their natural state would be one of identity with the good of all beings. They would

not need to subordinate their own good to the good of others, nor to acquire a universal sympathy by sharing in the joys and sorrows of beings living in the Ignorance. Their cosmic sympathy is intrinsic to their consciousness and not dependent on personal participation in the joys and sorrows of other beings. Their sense of oneness excludes any possibility of conflict between their own good and the good of others. There is no place for any limited sense of selfhood, desire for personal satisfaction or fulfillment, r frustration, contingent happiness, or sorrow, in the gnostic consciousness. Aurobindo remarks that "...these are things that belong to the ego and the Ignorance, not to the freedom and truth of the Spirit".<sup>449</sup>

The development of the gnostic consciousness would bring about a transformation of the relationship between the individual and nature. At present, the individual existence is at once a subjection to nature, to the logic of life and matter, and a struggle with it. Our conscious existence is determined by the outer material conditions and our reactions to those conditions. If we shape our conscious existence at all, it is in most individuals less by the agency of a free soul or intelligence from within, than by a response to our environment and the world-nature acting upon us. But with the development of consciousness, there grows the power to create or recreate the outer life. The gnostic consciousness will consummate this power. The life of the individual will



consist in an illumined inner existence whose light and power will take perfect expression in the outer life.<sup>450</sup>

The gnostic being will thus overcome the antinomy of the inner and outer life. There will be no conflict between the inner life of oneness with the spirit and the outer existence in the world. The inner life has primacy in the spiritual path. The spiritualised individual always lives within the inner citadel of the soul, and in a world which clings to its Ignorance he has to guard his inner life against the intrusion and invasion of the forces of the Ignorance. Even when he acts on that world of Ignorance, he has to do it from within the walls of the inner citadel. But the gnostic being would have no need of this sort of insulation of the inner life. The gnostic consciousness will indeed have an inner existence of communion with God which nothing can invade or disturb. It will have the capacity for transcendence which is the hallmark of the freedom of the spirit, but it will also have the capacity to express the unbounded love, delight, and peace of God's being in the world. The gnostic consciousness will possess a "universal calm of equality" which will pacify and tranquilise all that enters into relation with it and extend its law of peace to the world.

The development of the supramental consciousness will bring about the supramental transformation and integration of the mind, the vital, and the body. It will bring about the

realisation of all the aspirations of the mind, vital, and body.

According to Aurobindo, the mind seeks for light, for knowledge of the ultimate truth of reality as well as the truth of its diverse phenomenal formations and processes. The intellect finds joy in the discovery of truth and in the unraveling of the mystery of existence. The supramental transformation will amply fulfill these aspirations of the mind, but it will also transform its nature. Knowledge will no longer be a discovery of what was unknown, but a matter of making explicit what was implicit in consciousness. All knowledge will be a luminous recollection.

The vital seeks for self-affirmation, plenitude of life-force, power, creation, joy, love, and beauty. The vital finds joy in self-expression, development, diversity of action, creation, and enjoyment. The supramental transformation will fulfill these aspirations, but it will also transfigure the nature of the vital. The gnostic being will not seek an egoistic self-affirmation or enjoyment. He will live and act in order to affirm the divine presence and nature in the world, or rather will be an instrument of the affirmation by the divine of its presence and nature in the world. The gnostic being will not seek an egoistic self-expression. All self-expression will be the expression of divine nature. All exercise of power will serve the same purpose and will be a manifestation of the fullness or

plenitude of the spirit. All conquest will be the conquest of the spirit over matter, life, and mind, and all adventure will be the seeking of the spirit for its own riches. Love will be a union of soul with soul. All creative action will be the shaping of significant forms of expression of the divine attributes.

The supramental transformation will also radically alter the relationship between the spirit and the body, and consequently, between the spirit and matter. In our present mode of existence, the body although it obeys the dictates of the vital and the mind, also limits and determines the movements and the scope of activity of the vital and the mind. The structure of the body, formed in the course of a long and arduous evolution in the Ignorance, imposes a constraint on the free expression of the soul. But in the gnostic existence the will of the consciousness would directly control and determine the tendencies and the laws of the body. The light of the supramental consciousness would penetrate the inconscient and subconscient basis of the body and transfigure them with its power. The body would thus become supremely conscious and receptive to the workings of the supramental consciousness. It would become a true and perfect instrument of the spirit.

This makes possible a free acceptance and affirmation of the whole of material nature, including one's bodily existence, instead of a withdrawal and rejection. In the

initial stages of spiritual development, it is imperative to transcend the body and to overcome the tendency to identify oneself with the body. But once this identification is overcome and a transcendence of the body is achieved, there can be a free acceptance of the body as an instrument of the spirit, and material nature as a manifestation and medium of God. The supramental consciousness would view matter as a manifestation of God, a medium of God's self-expression in the world. It would be aware of the presence of God in every atom and particle of matter. Aurobindo also observes that "A certain reverence, even, for Matter and a sacramental attitude in all dealings with it is possible"<sup>451</sup>. One has heard of Albert Schweitzer's ethic of reverence for all life, but one hears for the first time in the history of world spirituality, an ethic of reverence for Matter.

The gnostic beings will possess an intimate sense of the divinity of Matter. They will have a reverence for Matter in all their dealings with it. They will be free of the desire to possess, dominate, or exploit material nature. They will be conscious that Matter is a manifestation of Spirit in all their manifold and harmonious utilisation of material nature. In Aurobindo's words:

...The gnostic being, using Matter but using it without material or vital attachment or desire, will feel that he is using the Spirit in this form of itself with its consent and sanction for its own purpose. There will be in him a certain respect for physical things, an awareness of the occult consciousness in

them, of its dumb will of utility and service, a worship of the divine in what he uses, a care for a perfect and faultless use of his divine material, for a true rhythm, ordered harmony, beauty in the life of Matter, in the utilisation of Matter.<sup>452</sup>

The supramental transformation will fulfill all the aspirations of the body. It will overcome the frailties and limitations of the body. The body-consciousness craves for duration, health, strength, bodily ease, and liberation from suffering. According to Aurobindo, these demands are not in themselves mean, or illegitimate, or unacceptable, because they seek to render in material terms the perfection of form and substance, the power and delight, which should be the natural expressions of the Spirit. The action of the supramental force can fulfill these aspirations of the body-consciousness. It will restore to the body its native instincts and intuitions and enlighten and complement them with a greater conscious action. The body will then possess a right physical perception of things, a right relation and reaction to objects and energies, and a right biological rhythm. It would have the capacity to replenish and draw its energies from the vast storehouse of life-force in nature. It would be in "luminous harmony" with the physical world and would be capable of meeting, assimilating, and harmonising with itself all the forces of existence which act on it, and thereby acquire immunity to pain and disease.<sup>453</sup>

Thus the supramental stage would be characterised by an increasingly perfect form of terrestrial existence. It should be emphasized that development would continue in this stage. The supramental consciousness is a supremely creative and dynamic structure of consciousness and there are infinite possibilities of unfoldment of its potentialities, variations of its manifestations etc. The outflowering of a terrestrial divine life led and organised by a higher species of gnostic or supramental beings will be the consummation of the supramental development. In Aurobindo's words:

Thus shall the earth open to divinity  
And common natures feel the wide uplift,  
Illumine common acts with the Spirit's ray  
And meet the deity in common things.  
Nature shall live to manifest secret God,  
The Spirit shall take up the human play,  
This earthly life become the life divine.

## CHAPTER 9

AUROBINDO'S MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

In the previous chapter, I examined the specific features of Aurobindo's stages. It is also important to examine his account of the general features of stages and the "logic" of development through the stages. This I shall do in the present chapter.

Although Aurobindo's account of the specific stages of human development has received attention in the extant literature on his philosophy, there has been no attempt to figure out his model of development on the basis of his numerous observations on stages and the process of development. In this chapter I will try to explicate his model of development and compare it with the standard model of development derived from the work of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg.

**Aurobindo's Stage-Model**

It is evident from the previous chapter that Aurobindo's developmental model is a stage-model, a model which affirms the existence of qualitatively distinct stages of development. The notion of stage presupposes developmental change. It would be an inappropriate concept in the context of random, directionless change. What are stages? A minimal definition of "stage" would be that it is a qualitatively distinct temporal "slice" or "chunk" of a developmental

process. Although stages are temporal, it may not always be possible to make sharp chronological demarcations between one stage and another. If a developmental process is finite, i.e., has a beginning and ending in time, then its stages will also be finite. But if a developmental process is infinite, i.e., has no ending in time, then it can have a stage which has no ending in time.

The concept of stage implies that there are qualitative changes in the course of development. Each stage has a qualitatively different form of organization from every other stage. If different periods of development were not qualitatively different, there would be no reason to think that they were different stages of development. We consider one temporal slice or period of development as a particular stage and another temporal slice or period as another stage because something qualitatively different goes on in those two periods. The concept of stage thus groups together the qualitative changes which occur at a given period of development.

### **Structuralism**

I think that Aurobindo's stage-model is structuralistic because it affirms the reality of structure and structural transformation. Structuralism conceives of development in terms of structure and its transformation. The concept of structure implies the existence of a discernible pattern or form of organization underlying specific sorts of behavior



and mental operations. To have a structure is to exhibit a specific pattern of thought, feeling, and action. According to Howard Gardner, structure has the properties of cohesiveness, meaning, and generality. Structure can be discovered by analysis of behavior and mental functioning. John Flavell argues that the notion of structure entails that there are items or elements which are interrelated so as to constitute an organized whole.<sup>454</sup> Flavell also points out that such organizations of items or elements are stable and enduring arrangements, and that structure has generality in the sense that it is the common and underlying basis of apparently distinct and unrelated behaviors, actions, or mental operations.<sup>455</sup> Structure must have generality, otherwise there would be as many structures as behaviors or operations and this would detract from the explanatory value of structures. According to Jean Piaget, transformation is a key property of structure. Structures are not static forms like Platonic forms, Husserlian essences, or Kantian a priori forms of synthesis.<sup>456</sup>

Aurobindo widely employs the notions of structure and structural transformation. There are many references to "structure" in his magnum opus The Life Divine.<sup>457</sup> He also characterizes his theory of the higher stages of human development as a "structural map of the ascent to the supramental summit".<sup>458</sup> The basic units of development in his theory are structures of consciousness, e.g., mind, higher

mind, illumined mind, etc. We noted in the previous chapter that he refers to the development of a "cosmic structure of consciousness and action" in the Overmental stage. He also writes that this Overmental structure of consciousness "is not like the rigid mental structures; it is plastic, organic, something that can grow and develop"<sup>459</sup>. In Aurobindo's theory, structural transformation is an essential feature of development in the lower and higher stages. The conception of structure as a dynamic unit and not a static form is evident in the following remark: "...structures can constantly expand into a larger structure or several of them combine themselves into a provisional greater whole on the way to a yet unachieved integrality".<sup>460</sup>

Aurobindo's notion of structures of consciousness needs analysis. A structure of consciousness is a global structure underlying specific forms of experience, knowledge, capacities of action, and aesthesis. Structures of consciousness condition our modes of experience of reality, our modes of knowledge, our powers or capacities of action, and our aesthesis or our physical, vital, and mental capacity to draw the gist, the essence, the taste, or the "juice" from things or experiences. Structures of consciousness are thus more inclusive than cognitive structures or structures of affect. A structure of consciousness includes a cognitive structure and a structure of affect as its substructures. Structures of consciousness are also global in their range in

the sense that they govern functioning across different domains of development in a somewhat unitary manner.

Structures of consciousness can be simple or complex. A simple structure of consciousness does not have other structures as its constituents. A complex structure of consciousness has other structures as its constituents. I will refer to the component structures of a complex structure as its "substructures". For example, in Aurobindo's system, the mind is a complex structure of consciousness whose constituent substructures are physical mind, vital mind, and thought-mind.

Structures of consciousness are abstract in comparison with material and biological structures. But they are not just abstractions. Aurobindo strongly affirms their reality. Not only does he maintain that they are real, he also asserts that they have a higher degree or order of reality than material or biological structures.

Obviously, structures of consciousness cannot be directly observed or measured, but they can be inferred from the different forms of experience, knowledge, capacities, affect, and aesthesis common to a given stage of development. They are, in this respect, similar to cognitive structures and structures of affect. But psychologists do not regard cognitive structures or structures of affect as any less real because they cannot be directly observed or measured. According to Piaget, cognitive structures actually exist and

their existence can be inferred from the different intellectual operations common to a given stage of development. Charles Brainerd argues that the status of Piaget's cognitive structures is on par with that of electrons and genes. Electrons and genes cannot be directly observed or measured, but we infer their existence from certain observable or measurable effects on physical and biological systems. The existence of cognitive structures, such as those postulated by Piaget, can be inferred from their effects on the abilities and activities of an individual child.<sup>461</sup>

There is an important question which can be raised in this context: Where are these structures? According to Arnold Gesell, the structures which control behavior have a physiological and neurological basis. According to Piaget, the cognitive structures "exist" in the coordinated operational behavior of the subject and not in his or her consciousness. What would be Aurobindo's answer? I think that Aurobindo might answer that the structures of consciousness exist in potentiality in the soul or the subject. But since the evolutionary process has a material foundation, and since the soul evolves on the basis of the sentient physical body, these structures of consciousness have a biological basis.

According to a structuralist conception of development, the qualitative changes which occur in development are a function of structural transformation. Development is a

process of the emergence and transformation of qualitatively different structures. The emergence and transformation of a particular structure constitutes a stage in development. Thus in terms of a structuralist conception of development, the concept of stage is defined in terms of the concept of structure. Different stages are constituted by different forms of behavior or cognitive operations because of the existence of different structures.

I proffer the following structuralist definition of stage: A stage is a temporal slice or period of development characterized by the predominance of a specific structure. I think that in the absence of an explicit definition of a "stage" by Aurobindo this definition can and must be endorsed by him.

This definition allows for the development of more than one structure in a given stage of development. And this is something which is increasingly recognised in contemporary developmental psychology. The relation between stage and structure is not a "one-to-one" relation, but a "one-to-many" relation. This implies that two given periods of development may share the same structure(s). If so, how do we distinguish them as different stages? The definition provides a criterion of identification of the stage of development of an individual in terms of the predominance of a specific structure. Thus although structure x may be shared by two

stages A and B, structure y may be predominant in A and structure z may be predominant in B.

One way of determining the predominance of a structure is in terms of frequency. The frequency of mode of experience, mode of cognition, and mode of behavior etc., governed by a specific structure indicates the predominance of that structure. Thus despite the fact that more than one structure may be active in a given period of development of an individual, we can locate the individual in a particular stage and not another in terms of the predominance of a specific structure as determined by the higher frequency of the mode of experience, cognition, and behavior etc., governed by that structure.

Aurobindo also rejects the conception of a stage as exclusively constituted by one particular structure. He writes that the stages of development

...may be marked off from each other by the predominant play of one element, its force may overpower the others or take them into itself, or make some compromise, but an exclusive play seems to be neither intended nor possible.<sup>462</sup>

Although there is no explicit reference to structure in this passage, the notion of "element" can be interpreted as inclusive of structure. The passage also suggests other ways of understanding the predominance of a specific structure. Aurobindo indicates that a structure may "overpower" other structures. This could mean, as already noted, the higher

frequency of experiences, operations, and behaviors governed by that structure. It could also mean that the structure constrains and modifies the role of the other structures to a great extent. Aurobindo also indicates that other structures may be incorporated into the dominant structure and function as its substructures.

The structuralist construal of stage has implications for the current debate in developmental psychology about the reality of stages. It would seem that the reality of stages follows from the reality of structures and their development. If structures exist, and if they take time to develop, it would follow that stages, being periods of development of structures, must also exist. Piaget, in fact, makes this argument in favor of the reality of cognitive stages. He writes that

We have seen that there exist structures which belong only to the subject, that they are built, and that this is a step -by-step process. We must therefore conclude that there exist stages of development.<sup>463</sup>

The structuralist conception of stage, however, imposes constraints on our talk about stages. We cannot, for instance, as Aurobindo and other developmentalists tend to do, speak of stages as developing from each other or as "partially developed" in each other. We cannot speak, as developmentalists such as Turiel do, of "stage-mixture" or mixture of stages. Stages, on the structuralist account, are

not the sort of entities which can conceivably develop out of each other, be partially developed in each other, or be mixed together.

But we can meaningfully hold that a structure can be the basis for the development of other structures. We can intelligibly assert that some structures may be partially developed in a given stage of development. We can also assert that more than one structure may be active in a given stage and that this implies some sort of an interaction, or "mixture", of structures in that stage.

Aurobindo first wrote about the nature of stages in The Human Cycle which was published in 1918. The following passage from that work gives us an idea of his concept of stages:

We must not suppose that they are naturally exclusive and absolute in their nature, or complete in their tendency or fulfillment when they come, or rigidly marked off from each other in their action or their time. For they not only arise out of each other, but may be partially developed in each other, and they may come to co-exist in different parts of the earth at the same time.<sup>464</sup>

In this passage Aurobindo makes the following claims: 1) Stages are not exclusive and absolute in their nature, 2) Stages are not complete from their inception, 3) We cannot make sharp or rigid distinctions between stages in respect of their operations, and 4) We cannot make sharp or rigid demarcations between stages chronologically. He gives two



reasons: a) Stages develop out of each other, and b) Stages may be partially developed in each other.

Let us see whether claims 1-4 follow from a) and b). If stages themselves "develop", it follows that they cannot be complete or fully developed from their inception. If stages "develop" out of each other, i.e., if one stage "develops" out of another stage, there is bound to be some intermixture and this excludes the possibility of rigid demarcations between their operations or tendencies. If stages can be partially developed in each other, i.e., if one stage can be partially developed in another stage, it follows that they are not exclusive and absolute in their nature. If stages develop out of each other, it also follows that they would overlap in time and therefore cannot be rigidly demarcated chronologically. Thus claims 1-4 do follow from a) and b).

We should also take note of Aurobindo's claim that stages may co-exist in different parts of the earth at the same time. He means that different individuals or societies in different parts of the earth may be in different stages at a given time. It is also the case that different individuals at a given place in a given time may be in different stages. One individual may be in the higher mental stage while another may be in the overmental stage. One society may be in the infrarational stage while another may be in the rational stage. This is what Aurobindo means by the "co-existence of stages" at a given moment. All this implies that the rate of

development through a given order of stages varies from individual to individual, society to society.

Now I want to argue that some of the features Aurobindo ascribes to stages could be intelligibly ascribed to structures. I maintain that it would be required by Aurobindo's structuralism that those features be ascribed to structures. Stages are constituted by structures. If stages are temporal units or temporal slices, it would not be appropriate to claim that they develop out of each other, that they may be partially developed in each other etc. How can a period of development itself develop out of other periods? How can a period of development in itself be partially developed in another period of development? How can periods of development be exclusive or not exclusive of other periods?

A structure cannot be said to develop from another structure except in the sense that it develops on the basis of another structure. It would not make sense to say that a structure is "partially developed" in another structure. It would only make sense to claim that structures may be partially developed in any given period or stage of development. According to Aurobindo, a higher structure is not necessarily absent in the earlier stages of development. It may be partially developed in those stages. In the same way, an earlier or lower structure may continue to function

in a partial or limited fashion in the later stages or periods of development.

Structures can be said not to be mutually exclusive in the sense that the emergence of one structure in a given period of development does not exclude the possibility of the partial emergence of another structure or other structures during that same period of development. Structures can be said not to be absolute in their nature in the sense that they may only partially emerge, or develop, and their operations may be constrained or modified by other structures. Since they are developmental units, or undergo development, they can be said not to be complete in their emergence. They do not emerge complete or full-blown like Athena from the head of Zeus. If structures do not emerge fully developed, then they may have, as Piaget maintains, their preparatory and achievement phases.

Structures are not rigidly marked off from each other in their operations because there is a complex interaction which engenders operations or activities that cannot be easily identified as pertaining to one structure rather than another. It may not be possible to rigidly demarcate the periods of development of the different structures. One structure may develop before the development of the earlier structure is completed. It is in this sense that there may be overlap between stages.

The rate of development of the structures will also vary from individual to individual. Thus different individuals will exhibit behaviors or carry out operations governed by different structures at any given time and place. At any given time and place, A may be able to carry out operations characteristic of the higher mind while B may be able to carry out operations characteristic of the intuitive mind.

One implication of all this is that it is very likely that no individual will exhibit behaviors, abilities etc., characteristic only of one particular structure in any stage of development. In any stage of development, individuals will exhibit behaviors, abilities etc., characteristic of more than one structure because although one structure may be dominant, other structures may also be active in varying degrees. Thus there are both qualitative and quantitative considerations pertaining to structures. We must not only consider what kind of structure is active in a given stage of development, but also consider to what extent it is developed, how much of the individual's behaviors and abilities is characteristic of that structure.

### **Universality**

Let us turn to other important features of the stages, or structures, as the case may be, according to Aurobindo's stage-model of development. Universality has been regarded as an essential feature of stages of human development. The claim is that all individuals, regardless of gender, race,

and culture, go through the same stages of development. From a structuralist perspective what this claim means is that all individuals go through a period of development characterized by the predominance of a given structure. This implies that the structures of human development are universal. They are not specific to genders, races, or cultures. They develop in all individuals regardless of gender, race, or culture. But, of course, they do not develop in all individuals at the same time.

Aurobindo affirms the universality of stages or structures.<sup>465</sup> But he is also concerned to draw attention to the fact of variations among individuals, not only in the rate of development, but also in the nature of the structures themselves and their patterns of development. Given the uniqueness of individuals, it would follow that there must be something distinctive about the structures as they develop in a given individual. Aurobindo's emphasis on the uniqueness of individual development is evident in the following remark about spiritual development:

How precisely or by what stages this progression and change will take place must depend on the form, need, and powers of the individual nature. In the spiritual domain the essence is always one, but there is yet an infinite variety and...even when they walk in the same direction no two natures proceed on exactly the same lines, in the same series of steps or with quite identical stages of their progress.<sup>466</sup>

The existence of variations in the nature of the structures and their patterns of development among individuals does not imply that there are no factors which can enable us to recognise a given structure in those individuals, any more than the existence of variations in the skeletal structure among individuals implies that those individuals do not have something that is identifiable as a skeletal structure.

We should also distinguish between the structures and their forms of expression. The forms of expression of structures may be conditioned by culture or even gender, but the structure in itself is universal. The form of expression of the structure of consciousness Aurobindo refers to as the "Higher Mind" may vary accordingly as its individual bearer is male or female, European or Asian, but the higher mind in itself is not conditioned by gender or culture. There is no masculine higher mind or feminine higher mind, European higher mind or Asian higher mind.

### Invariance Of Sequence

Another important issue pertains to the invariance of the sequence or order of the stages of development. Aurobindo explicitly affirms the invariance of the sequence of stages of development. He argues that the law of the gradation or order of the stages holds despite the complexity of the developmental process.<sup>467</sup> He writes that "...all evolution must move by stages; even the greatest rapidity and

concentration of the movement cannot swallow up all the stages or reverse natural process and bring the end near to the beginning".<sup>468</sup> He makes the same point again in The Life Divine: "...a greater or concentrated speed does not eliminate the steps themselves or the necessity of their successive surmounting".<sup>469</sup> Finally, we also find him writing that "The spiritual evolution obeys the logic of a successive unfolding; it can take a new decisive main step only when the previous main step has been sufficiently conquered".<sup>470</sup> All these remarks clearly affirm the invariance of the sequence of the stages of development because they rule out the possibility of skipping any stages of development.

The issue of the invariance of the sequence of stages is in essence the problem of whether there is a fixed or invariant sequence of development of the structures in question. Since stages are only periods of development of structures, if the structures develop in an invariant sequence, the stages must also have a fixed or invariant order. The structures can be said to develop in an invariant sequence only if there is a logical relationship among them such that each succeeding structure presupposes the preceding structure.

Aurobindo has not displayed this relationship between the structures of consciousness which constitute his stages of development. Why does the development of the higher mind presuppose the development mind? I think it could be argued

that the higher mind presupposes the mind because higher mental cognition pertains to a network of ideas, rather than single ideas. This presupposes mental cognition which pertains to single ideas. Further, the higher mental understanding directly perceives, without inference or reasoning, the logical relationship among particular ideas and truths. This seems to me to presuppose the ability, developed in the mental stage, to perceive by means of inference or reasoning the logical relationship among ideas and truths. Unless the consciousness has been trained to perceive such relationships among ideas or truths, it cannot acquire the capacity to immediately perceive such relationships.

It is more difficult to explain the developmental relationships between the higher mind, illumined mind, and intuitive mind. Aurobindo seems to suggest that thought, conceptual understanding, is a secondary or delimited form of inner vision or direct mental perception.<sup>471</sup> This implies that thought-perception or conceptual understanding is preparatory to inner vision. It is in this sense that the illumined mind presupposes the higher mind. Further, since the illumined mind is characterised, among other things, by thought operations subordinated to inner vision, it presupposes the higher mind and mind. The intuitive mind is characterised by implicit or tacit knowledge by identity. Inner vision and higher mental conceptual understanding are secondary or



delimited forms of tacit knowledge by identity.<sup>472</sup> Hence, the intuitive mind presupposes the illumined mind and higher mind. If we accept the analogy between inner vision and visual perception and intuitive perception and tactile perception, we can somewhat understand that inner vision is preparatory to intuitive perception in just the way visual perception is preparatory to tactile perception.

The overmind is characterised by a "cosmic consciousness" constituted of global intuition, inner vision, and thought. In the overmind structure of consciousness, intuition, inner vision, and thought, are global in their range or scope of perception, and pertain not to particulars, but to totalities or aggregates. Evidently, this presupposes all the previous structures.

The supermind is characterised by an integral knowledge of reality, a knowledge of the undivided wholeness of existence. Reality, to the supramental perception, is a single, unified, indivisible, whole with diverse aspects. There are no dichotomies, oppositions, and divisions to the supramental perception. All things are one because all things are the One, Brahman. The supermind presupposes the overmind because integral knowledge presupposes global or cosmic knowledge. Global knowledge, knowledge of the totality, of the whole realm of manifestation of Brahman, is a precondition of integral knowledge or knowledge of reality as a single, indivisible whole with diverse aspects.

### Linear Progression

Another important issue is whether there is linear or stepwise progression through the sequence of stages. The linearity thesis affirms that individuals move one step or stage at a time through the sequence of stages. It excludes the possibility of regression to a previous stage and progression to a higher stage before the development in the preceding stage is complete. In other words, the linearity thesis affirms that structures develop one at a time and that there can be no development of a higher structure before the development of the preceding structure is complete.

Aurobindo rejects the linearity thesis. While he holds that an integration of the self in terms of a given structure of consciousness is necessary before there can be an integration of the self in terms of a new and higher structure of consciousness, he rejects the idea that only one structure can develop at a time and that a higher structure cannot develop before the development of the preceding structure is complete. Higher structures begin to develop even before the development of a lower structure is complete. This implies that at any given time more than one structure would be in development. Aurobindo would also allow for the possibility of regression to a previous stage. Regression is a temporary phase in development in which a previous structure which was not fully developed gets a chance to complete its development. Regression is a mode of ensuring

that the consolidation of previous structures is secure so that the integration of the self in terms of a new and higher structure can be secure. The following passages support my interpretation:

...a sufficient integration of one status has to be complete before an ascent to the next higher station can be entirely secure....But evolutionary Nature is not a logical series of separate segments...there is not actually a series of simple clear-cut and successive stages in the individual's evolution; there is instead a complexity and a partly determinate partly confused comprehensiveness of the movement. The soul may be described as a traveller and climber who presses towards his high goal step on step, each of which he has to build up as an integer but most frequently redescend in order to rebuild and make sure of the supporting stair so that it may not crumble beneath him.

...the evolution of the whole consciousness has rather the movement of an ascending ocean of Nature; it can be compared to a tide or a mounting flux, the leading fringe of which touches the higher degrees of a cliff or hill while the rest is still below. At each stage the higher parts of the nature may be provisionally but incompletely organised in the new consciousness while the lower are in a state of flux or formation, partly moving in the old way though influenced and beginning to change, partly belonging to the new kind but still imperfectly achieved and not yet firm in the change. This entails certain consequences which modify the clear successions of the evolution and prevent it from following the cleanly determined and firmly arranged course which our logical intelligence demands from Nature but seldom gets from her.

...As soon as there is a sufficient spiritual development, something of intuition,

illumination of the being, the movements of the higher spiritual grades of Consciousness begins to manifest, sometimes one, sometimes the other or all together, and they do not wait for each power in the series to complete itself before a higher power comes into action.<sup>473</sup>

The first passage affirms that the subject must achieve a sufficient development of a given structure and a sufficient integration of the being in terms of that structure in order for there to be a secure development of the succeeding higher structure. The third passage implies a rejection of the linearity thesis. Aurobindo allows for the possibility of the partial emergence or development of one or more or all of the higher structures, once certain conditions have been met, without having to wait for the complete development of each higher structure. The possibilities of structure-mixture and temporary regression to an earlier stage are also affirmed in the first and second passages.

It might appear as if Aurobindo denies any order or sequence of development of the structures of consciousness because he denies the existence of a series of "simple, clear-cut, and successive stages" in the development of the individual. Other remarks to the effect that no two individuals develop in the same series of steps<sup>474</sup>, or that the stages do not always follow each other in quite the same order<sup>475</sup> might also give the impression that Aurobindo denies any sort of fixed order of development of the structures or a fixed sequence of stages.

It is important to distinguish the invariance thesis from the linearity thesis. It is one thing to claim that the order of stages is fixed implying that no stage can be permanently skipped and another to claim that development is unilinear implying that only one structure develops at a time and that a new and higher structure cannot develop before the development of the preceding structure is completed. The denial of linearity may be misunderstood to imply the denial of invariance. This could happen in regard to some passages in Aurobindo's writings. We noted that Aurobindo explicitly affirms the invariance thesis in many of his writings. But some of his remarks could be misunderstood as denying invariance while in reality his intention is to reject linearity of development. I have in mind the following remarks:

...there is not actually a series of simple, clear-cut, and successive stages in the individual's evolution; there is instead a complexity and a partly determinate, partly confused comprehensiveness of the movement.<sup>476</sup>

(Stages)....do not always follow each other in quite the same order, for in things psychological the Spirit in the world varies his movements more freely than in things physical...he can anticipate the motives of a higher stratum of psychological development while he yet lives the life of a lower stratum, so too when he has got on to a higher level of development he may go strongly back to a past and inferior motive and see how it works out when altered by the motives and powers of the superior medium.<sup>477</sup>

...even when they walk in the same direction no two natures proceed on exactly the same lines, in the same series of steps or with quite identical stages of their progress. It may yet be said that a logical succession of the states of progress would be very much in this order.<sup>478</sup>

The first passage denies the existence of "simple, clear-cut, and successive stages". The stages are not simple and clear-cut because more than one structure may be active in a given stage of development and this results in a complex interaction or intermixture of structures. Should we construe his claim as a denial of the invariance of the order of stages? We should recall Aurobindo's reference to factors which "modify the clear successions of the evolution". From Aurobindo's reference to the partly determinate and partly confused nature of the movement or process of development, it is clear that he intends to deny that the process of development through the stages is unilinear, and not the invariance thesis.

In the second passage, Aurobindo clarifies what he means by his claim that the stages do not always follow each other in the same order by reference, again, to the nature of the process of development. He states that the subject may anticipate the tendencies of a higher stage even while functioning in a lower stage, and may go back to an earlier stage after achieving a higher stage.

The third passage affirms the existence of variations in the stages of development and in the process of development.

We should distinguish between the claim that no two individuals develop through a given sequence of stages in an identical fashion and the claim that no two individuals develop through the same sequence of stages. The first claim denies the uniformity of the process of development through a fixed order of stages. The second denies the existence of any fixed order of stages. I would ascribe to Aurobindo the first, rather than the second, claim.

### **Inevitability**

Aurobindo also maintains that the higher stages of human development are inevitable.<sup>479</sup> He argues that this is because they are determined not by factors external to humanity, as in the case of the stages of technological development, but by factors constitutive of its very nature. The essential spiritual nature of the human individual must eventually find its liberation, free expression, and development.

There is also an argument for the inevitability of the higher stages of human development based on the "logic" of the evolutionary process. Since the evolutionary process must bring about the emergence and development of the supramental consciousness, and since there are intermediate forms of consciousness between mind-consciousness and supramental consciousness, human development must go beyond its present mental stage.

### **The Spiral Of Development**

The inevitability of the higher stages does not imply that there will be a smooth transition or continuous progress from the mental stage to the higher stages of development. Although there is overall progress, there may be regression not only within a given stage, but also from a given stage to a previous stage. There may also be an arrest of development at any stage.

Aurobindo draws attention to the "coils and zigzags" in nature's course of development.<sup>480</sup> In The Foundations Of Indian Culture he writes that "Progress admittedly does not march on securely in a straight line...like an army covering an unimpeded terrain".<sup>481</sup> In another work, The Ideal Of Human Unity, he reiterates that "...our progress has not been in a straight line, but in cycles".<sup>482</sup> In Letters On Yoga he writes that

The cycles of evolution tend always upward, but they are cycles and do not ascend in a straight line. The process therefore gives the impression of a series of ascents and descents, but what is essential in the gains of the evolution is kept or, even if eclipsed for a time, re-emerges in new forms suitable to the new (stages).<sup>483</sup>

Aurobindo also uses the metaphor of a spiral to describe the developmental process. This is a more apt figure. The ascending and descending curves of a spiral correspond to the ascents and descents in development, but the process is still directional and moves towards a higher end-point. All spirals



tend upward. Hence, Aurobindo employs the phrase "spiral of progress" to describe the course of human development.<sup>484</sup>

The following passage in The Foundations of Indian Culture deserves consideration:

Nature effects her evolution through a rhythm of advance and relapse...there is a temporary pushing of certain results at the expense of others not less desirable for perfection and to a superficial eye there may seem to be a relapse even in our advance.<sup>485</sup>

The reference to "ascents and descents" and "a rhythm of advance and relapse" suggests that, for Aurobindo, the developmental process involves alternate periods or phases of growth and stagnation, stability and instability. There is an interesting parallel here in Arnold Gesell's developmental logic. Gesell affirms the principle of self-regulatory fluctuation according to which development is like a see-saw that fluctuates between periods of stability and instability. Aurobindo also claims that "there is a temporary pushing of certain results at the expense of others not less desirable". This suggests some sort of an asymmetry in development which nevertheless contributes to overall growth. There is again a parallel here in Gesell's logic of development, the principle of functional asymmetry.<sup>486</sup>

Karl Marx holds that there are no "bold leaps" over the problems posed by successive stages in development. Aurobindo also refers to "baffling obstacles" at each stage. He writes that

Human progress is very much an adventure through the unknown full of surprises and baffling obstacles; it stumbles often, it misses its way at many points, it cedes here in order to gain there, it retraces its steps frequently in order to get more widely forward.<sup>487</sup>

There is a great deal of indeterminacy in development. It is "an adventure through the unknown full of surprises". This is consistent with Aurobindo's view that the stages of development are inevitable. There may be a number of alternative routes of development to and from those stages. There may also be lines of development that lead to a dead-end and those that go backwards to a previous stage. What is certain is that a particular stage will be reached, but how it will be reached and what would be its forms of expression are indeterminate.

The "baffling obstacles" consist in the resistance of our "lower nature" to the transformative influence of the higher powers of consciousness, opposition from human society, and attacks by the hostile forces. Aurobindo has dealt with these obstacles and the means of overcoming them in great depth and detail in his two-volume Letters On Yoga.

Regressions, asymmetrical development, arrest of development, etc., are compatible with overall progress. Aurobindo remarks that "Even in failure there is a preparation for success; our nights carry in them the secret of a greater dawn". This suggests that temporary regression, stagnation, asymmetrical development, deformations etc.,

contribute in some way to overall development. There is a point to regression. Aurobindo argues that it contributes to overall progress by enabling a transformation of the structures or tendencies of past stages in the light of the structure of the achieved stage of development.<sup>488</sup> And what appears as stagnation or arrest of development might actually be Nature's way of fully assimilating experiences at a certain stage.

### Hierarchy Of Stages

According to Aurobindo's stage model, the stages of human development also constitute a hierarchy. This implies that qualitative contrasts in terms of "higher" and "lower" can be made among them. Aurobindo seems to rank these stages in terms of quality of experience, range and completeness of knowledge, power of action, quality of emotion, and intensity of aesthesis or delight in things. He also seems to rank them in terms of the degree of transformation and integration of the self.

We should first consider the three stages of mental development. Why is the vital-mental stage higher than the physical-mental? The vital-mental stage is higher than the physical-mental stage because it is more inclusive, intense, and dynamic. The vital-mental stage is more inclusive because it includes all that is part of the physical-mental stage and much more that is not included in it. In the vital mental stage one has a greater sense of the reality and significance

of the subjective or inner life, but one also retains the knowledge and the skills needed to deal with the physical world and physical life which have been developed in the physical-mental stage. There is also a greater intensity of being, consciousness, and delight of experience in the vital-mental stage.

The intellectual-mental stage is higher than the physical-mental and the vital-mental stages because there is a more inclusive understanding of life and generally a greater stability of the self in that stage. Further, in the intellectual-mental stage there is a greater capacity of understanding and regulating the different parts of the self. In the intellectual-mental stage one understands and appreciates to a greater extent the role of ideas and ideals in shaping physical and vital life. One has a better understanding of the physical world and the inner world of desires and emotions and consequently one is better able to shape and regulate both of these worlds. The capacity for critical thinking is more developed in the intellectual-mental stage. There is a greater capacity for self-reflection, self-scrutiny, and self-correction in this stage.

The higher mental stage is a superior stage of development to the mental stage because the operations and capacities of the higher mind are superior to the capacities of the mind. The higher mind works in terms of "mass ideation" in contrast to mental operations in term of single

ideas. Further, the higher mind cognition of the logical relationships between ideas and truths is immediate, whereas the mental cognition involves the labor of piecemeal inferences and step-by-step reasoning. In addition, the higher mind has a greater thought-power, it can change mental and even physiological states by means of the power of ideas and mantras. There are also other qualitatively superior changes in the higher mental stage. The restlessness of the mind, the unceasing process of thinking, are replaced by peace and silence in the consciousness.

The illumined mental stage is higher than the higher mental stage because inner vision is higher than thought. Inner vision is more direct and has a greater power of perception or comprehension. Since Aurobindo draws an analogy between inner vision and tactile perception, we could say that inner vision has a more intimate contact with reality than higher mental cognition. The qualitative difference between higher mental cognition and inner vision is the same as the difference between seeing something and touching it.

The intuitive mental stage is a higher stage of consciousness because implicit knowledge by identity is a higher form of knowledge than inner vision. In inner vision the subject is still separate from the object, but in intuitive knowledge the subject-object dichotomy is attenuated and the consciousness of the subject begins to merge, as it were, with the essence of the object. In

intuitive perception there is a tacit communion between the subject and the object.

The overmental stage is a further higher stage because thought, inner vision, and intuition are integrated into a single structure of consciousness and become global or cosmic in their scope. There is a sense of harmony or unity with the whole of the cosmos.

The supramental stage is the highest stage because it is characterised by an abolition of the subject--object dichotomy and perfect identity with all things. There is no separation of the self from the rest of existence. There is an ever-present awareness of reality as a single, indivisible whole. While the overmental consciousness is aware of Brahman as the creator of the cosmos, the supramental consciousness is aware of the cosmos as Brahman.

### **Integration**

These structures of consciousness are not static forms, but are capable of development and transformation. They can also exert a transformative influence on each other. The higher structures have a greater power of transformation. Each higher structure as it develops exerts a transformative influence on the lower structures. The higher structures do not displace or replace the lower structures but transform and integrate them as their own substructures. Thus when the higher mind develops it transforms the mental structure and its operations. Once the higher mind is fully developed the

mind continues to exist as a transformed substructure of the higher mental structure of consciousness. The extent or completeness of the transformation is determined partly by the inherent transformative power of the higher structure, partly by its stage of development, and partly by the degree of resistance offered by the lower structure. Thus according to Aurobindo transformation is a matter of degree as well as of quality.

The integration of the lower structures into the higher structures is also an essential feature of the process of development. The development of the higher structures does not imply a displacement or negation of the lower structures. The lower structures are transformed and integrated into the higher structures. The lower structures then function as the transformed substructures of the higher structures. According to Aurobindo, the lower structures can realise their full potentiality only with the help of the higher structures. The transformative action of the higher structures liberates the potentialities hidden in the lower structures.<sup>489</sup> The lower structure is not only the basis and the precursor of the higher structure, but is also an essential component of the higher structure.

### **Inclusion Sequence**

The integration of the lower structure into the higher implies that the sequence of developmental structures in Aurobindo's model is an inclusion sequence. John Flavell has

distinguished five types of sequence in development: addition, substitution, modification, inclusion, and mediation.<sup>490</sup> In an addition sequence, the lower structure and the higher structure are alternative means to the same goal. The lower structure is not replaced by the higher structure, but it is added to the repertoire. In a substitution sequence, the higher structure more or less completely replaces or substitutes the lower structure once it is acquired. In a modification sequence, there is some sort of a progressive modification of a single structure. In addition and substitution sequences, the lower and higher structures are different units, but in a modification sequence the higher structure is continuous with and derived from the lower structure, as woman from girl or man from boy.

In an inclusion sequence, the lower structure becomes coordinated with and becomes a part of a larger unit, the higher structure. According to Flavell, hierarchic integration, subordination, and coordination of the lower structure in relation to the higher structure implies an inclusion sequence. In a mediation sequence the lower structure serves as a bridge, facilitator, or mediator with respect to the subsequent development of the higher structure. But unlike the inclusion sequence, the lower structure does not become an actual part or component of the higher structure. Once the higher structure develops, it functions independently of the lower structure.



### Stages and Ages

It should also be noted that there is no strict time frame for the stages of development in Aurobindo's model. While they are all stages of adult development, it is not impossible that some spiritual prodigies may develop through these higher stages quite earlier on in their life. Further, even in the case of adults there is no age-limit on any of the stages. There are also no "critical periods" for the higher stages. The notion of a "critical period" implies that the individual is not equally capable of enhancement of his or her capacities at any time. This may hold true of the stages of child development investigated by Piaget, but not of the higher stages of adult development described by Aurobindo.

### The Piaget-Kohlberg Stage Model

The stage model which has been very influential in contemporary developmental psychology stems from the work of Piaget and Kohlberg. A comparison between Aurobindo's stage model and the Piaget-Kohlberg stage model would be interesting and fruitful.

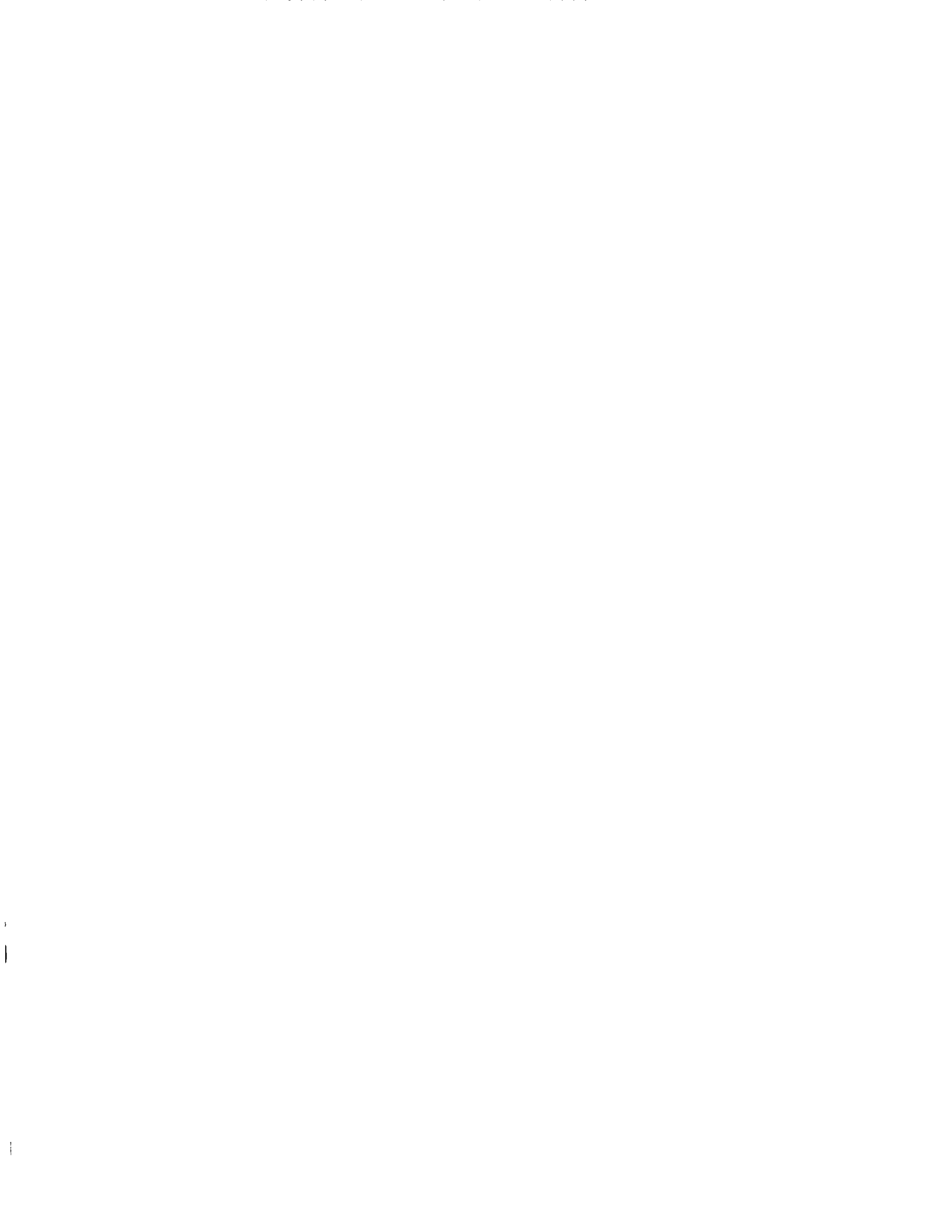
The first feature of the Piaget-Kohlberg stage model is the emphasis on purely qualitative criteria or qualitative descriptors in order to distinguish stages of development.<sup>491</sup> Only qualitative differences matter in the analysis of development. One individual can be said to be in a different stage from another individual only in a qualitative sense. It

is inappropriate to speak about amounts of stages or the degree of development in a given stage. In Kohlberg's words "Structural theory does not treat any change as a change in structural competence unless the change is evident in a qualitatively new pattern of response".<sup>492</sup>

The second feature is universality or "cross-cultural validity".<sup>493</sup> All individuals, regardless of culture, develop through the same stages. Cultural factors can only affect the rate of development through the stages.

The third feature is the "structured wholeness" of stages. A stage is a structured whole in the sense that the various aspects of a stage comprise an integrated system. According to Kohlberg, "A given stage-response on a task does not just represent a specific response determined by knowledge of and familiarity with that task or tasks similar to it. Rather it represents an underlying thought organization which determines responses to tasks which are not manifestly similar".<sup>494</sup> Each stage is constituted of concurrent and interdependent developmental changes. Thus mutual connections and reciprocal interdependencies exist among all the logical operations characteristic of a stage. This implies that the acquisition of the family of related concepts constitutive of a stage occur at about the same time.<sup>495</sup>

The fourth feature is the uniformity or invariance of the sequence of stages. Thus Piaget remarks that "...the order of



the stages is constant and sequential. Each stage is necessary for the following one. If this were not the case, one would be in no position to talk of stages".<sup>496</sup> Kohlberg also remarks that "The concept of stages implies an invariant order or sequence of development".<sup>497</sup> He also states that "A stage sequence disregarded by a single child is no sequence".<sup>498</sup>

The fifth feature is linear, step-by-step progression through the stages. According to Kohlberg "every single individual should move one step at a time through the stage sequence".<sup>499</sup> He also remarks that "...movement is always forward and always step-by-step".<sup>500</sup> Linear progression in development is the norm and reversal in the sequence of development might occur only because of traumatic experiences or regression inducing stress or damage. Rest observes that Kohlberg's metaphor of step-by-step movement suggests a staircase rather than a ramp to represent the upward movement. Movement is always forward and always step-by-step. Subjects are always in one stage at any given time. The pattern of development is as follows: subjects move from stage one to stage two. There is then a consolidation of stage two. This is then followed by the transition to stage three, and so on.

The sixth feature of stages according to the Piaget-Kohlberg model is that each stage has a predominance phase in

which it peaks at 100% usage. Subjects in that phase represent the "pure" types of the stage.<sup>501</sup>

The seventh feature is stage-mixture. Rest points out that because the Piaget-Kohlberg model affirms step-by-step development, the only kind of stage-mixture that occurs is between adjacent stages. Further, there can be mixture between only two adjacent stages. Thus, if we consider Kohlberg's stages, there can be mixture only between stages two and three, or stages three and four, but not among stages two, three, and four.<sup>502</sup>

The eighth feature is that a previous stage, the "-1" stage, falls to 0% usage before the higher stage, the "+1" stage, begins. For example, stage two falls to 0% usage before stage four begins.<sup>503</sup> In other words, the higher stage virtually displaces the lower stage. A person who has reached a higher stage virtually ceases to exhibit any of the characteristics of the previous stage. The higher structure does not include or incorporate the lower structure, but displaces it. It should be pointed out that there is a divergence between Piaget and Kohlberg on this issue. According to Piaget's model, the lower structure does not cease to be active once the higher structure develops. Concrete operational thought does not cease to be active once formal operational thought develops. But according to Kohlberg the lower structure of moral consciousness ceases to be active once the higher structure develops. This is again

implied by unilinear, step-by-step development. If individuals can only exhibit the characteristics of a single stage at any given time, they must cease to exhibit any of the characteristics of the previous stage.

The ninth feature is the symmetrical and identical rate of onset and decline of the stages. Stages are evenly spaced across development. In other words, the rate of development through the stages is constant for any given individual. It takes the same time to develop from stage two to stage three as it takes to develop from stage one to stage two.<sup>504</sup> This claim must be distinguished from the claim that the rate of development through the stages is constant for all individuals. According to Piaget and Kohlberg, the rate of development through the stages varies from one individual to another.

The tenth feature is that periods of transition alternate with periods of consolidation. The pattern of development is as follows: first the subject is in stage one, then comes the transition to stage two followed by consolidation in stage two. Then comes the transition to stage 3 followed by consolidation in it, and so on. The alternation of periods of transition and consolidation is implied by the graduality of development through the stages. Stage usage peaks at the time of consolidation of the stage.<sup>505</sup>

### **Aurobindo And Piaget**

Unitary progression implies a single tract or sequence of developmental stages. Each person necessarily progresses through the same stages in the same sequence. It restricts between-person variation to differences in the rate of development through a single sequence of stages. Multiple progression implies between-person variation in the stages and allows for alternative structures or organisations at each stage the choice of which determines the next stage. These multiple progressions may be divergent, convergent, or parallel, partially convergent, or partially divergent, symmetrical or non-symmetrical.

Simple progression restricts within-person variability. Each person is in one stage only at any given time and exhibits behavior, operations, values etc., characteristic of only one structure in any given stage. Cumulative progression allows for within-person variability and alternatives. In each stage earlier and mature structures may coexist. There is stage-mixture, subjects are not in only one stage, but may straddle two or more stages at any given time. When all previous structures are successively retained, the progression is completely cumulative. When some are retained, the progression is partially cumulative.

Conjunctive progression implies an intrinsic connection between earlier and later structures. Earlier structures are incorporated into the later stages. There is a logical relationship between the later stages and the earlier stages,

We can now compare the Piaget-Kohlberg model with Aurobindo's model. Aurobindo would agree that there are qualitative differences between one stage and another, but he would deny that being in a stage is an all-or-nothing matter. He would deny that subjects are clearly in one stage or another. According to his stage model, stages are not mutually exclusive and may be partially developed in each other. In other words, a subject is not clearly in a given stage in the sense that his or her responses are characteristic of only one structure. Since more than one structure can develop in a given stage, the responses of the subject may reflect the presence of more than one structure. The predominance of the responses characteristic of a given structure will then enable us to identify the dominant structure, and, therefore, the stage of development. It is important to note that predominance is largely a quantitative factor.

Aurobindo would thus agree with Rest's judgment that there is a need for quantitative as well as qualitative descriptors in an account of development. Aurobindo would agree that it is important also to consider the extent or degree to which a subject's experiences, cognitive abilities, attitudes etc., are representative of a structure or stage.

Stage-mixture is evidently affirmed by Aurobindo's stage model. It is important to be clear about what this means. It could mean that subjects are in more than one stage at any



given time of their development. What does this mean? It could only mean that more than one structure is active at any given time of development. In contrast to the Piaget-Kohlberg model, Aurobindo does not limit stage mixture only to any two adjacent stages. In the context of his discussion of the higher stages of development, viz., higher mental, illumined mental, intuitive mental, and overmental stages, he allows for the possibility of the partial or rudimentary development of all the higher structures once certain basic spiritual conditions have been met.<sup>506</sup> In The Human Cycle he argues for the mixture of all the three basic stages of human development, viz., infrarational, rational, and suprarational. There is no indication that there can only be mixture between the infrarational and the rational or between the rational and the suprarational.<sup>507</sup>

Aurobindo affirms that the rate of development through the stages may vary from one individual to another. Some may advance through the stages more quickly than others. Some may remain in a given stage longer than others, and so on. But he would deny that for any given individual the rate of development through the stages is constant. It is an implicit assumption of the Piaget-Kohlberg model that the nature of the developmental process itself remains unaltered while the subject progresses from one stage to another. Aurobindo does not share this assumption. He maintains that the nature of the developmental process itself undergoes transformation as

the subject progresses to higher stages. The change in the rate of development as the subject attains higher stages is an instance of this transformation in the process of development itself.

Aurobindo maintains that such changes in the rate of development have occurred in evolutionary development. The rate of development of in the vital stage, or the stage of Life, was certainly faster by any standards than the rate of development in the stage of Matter. And the rate of development in the stage of Mind was certainly faster than the rate of development in the vital stage. The rate of development of human consciousness seems incredibly quicker in comparison with the rate of development in the material and vital stages. Thus the rate of development in the higher stages of human development will be faster in comparison with the rate of development in the lower stages. How much faster? That will depend on the receptivity of the individual to the higher structures of consciousness and the intensity of effort.

Thus, although Aurobindo affirms certain general, stage-invariant features of development, e.g., integration, he also seems to allow for some stage-specific features of development, e.g., in the supramental stage, development will be rapid, completely harmonious, and free of the oppositions and conflicts that facilitate development in the lower stages.

Aurobindo's view that the rate of development through the stages is not constant and that there are periods marked by a slow and creeping development and periods marked by a rapid movement of transformation, would be endorsed by contemporary developmental psychologists such as David Feldman. Feldman remarks that "...while progressive on the whole, development does not occur at a constant rate".<sup>508</sup> He argues that the traditional notion of stage tends to make the rate of change seem more constant than it is. But the actual record of development suggests that there are periods of more or less rapid transformation. Arguably, these periods of rapid change are brought about by physiological maturation.

There is another important difference between Aurobindo's stage model and Piaget's stage model. Both Piaget and Aurobindo affirm that lower structures are not displaced by the higher structures but are included and integrated in the latter. The lower or earlier structures do not "drop out" in development, but form the foundations on which the higher structures are built. But what distinguishes Aurobindo is his normative requirement of the transformation of the self in light of the higher structure of consciousness. He also lays emphasis on the transformation of the lower structure by the higher structure in the process of the integration of the former into the latter. There is no comparable emphasis on the transformation of the self and the lower structures in Piaget's stage model. This is due to the fact that Piaget

narrowly focuses on cognitive structures whereas Aurobindo focuses on structures of consciousness which determine the nature of the self.

According to Aurobindo, integration is an actual feature of development. But integration is a matter of degree. Integration can be partial or complete. The same holds true of transformation. A total transformation of the lower structures and their complete integration is an ideal of development. Aurobindo points out that the transformation and integration of the lower structures of Matter, Life, and Mind has only been partial and incomplete. The process of transformation is a very complex one and depends on the inherent transformative power of the higher structure, its stage of development, and the degree of resistance offered by the lower structures.

Another important difference is in regard to Piaget's structures d'ensemble criterion according to which the various structures which characterize a given stage are consolidated into a uniform whole. Thus each stage is a structured whole. Aurobindo's affirmation of stage-mixture and structure-mixture implies a denial of the "structured wholeness" of the stages. Since more than one structure is active in a given stage of development, there is no complete uniformity within a stage.

Aurobindo would deny that there has to be a consolidation of a given stage before there can be a transition to a higher

stage. He would deny that the structures operative in a given stage must be consolidated into a uniform whole before higher structures can be operative. What he does insist on is that there has to be a transformation and integration of the previous structures into a given higher structure before those structures can be further transformed and integrated into a yet higher structure. In Aurobindo's words:

It is not possible...for the overmind status and integration to be complete until the Higher Mind and the Illumined Mind have been integrated and taken up into the Intuition and the Intuition itself subsequently integrated and taken up into the...overmind. The law of the gradation has to be satisfied even in the complexity of the process of evolutionary Nature.<sup>509</sup>

Aurobindo would also reject the idea central to the Piaget-Kohlberg model that subjects can only comprehend the stage higher than the one they are in and not further higher stages. As Rest observes, the problem with this idea is that it implicitly represents development as a point rather than as a range within which the subject operates. Since Aurobindo does not restrict stage-mixture to two adjacent stages, he would not rule out the possibility of understanding stages higher to the current stage. This does not imply that he is oblivious of the difficulties in the way of understanding stages higher than one's own.

We have already taken note of Aurobindo's denial of step-by-step, linear development. He allows for temporary ascents

to a higher stage and temporary regressions to a previous stage. He also allows for arrest of development in a given stage.

Recent work on cognitive and moral development indicates that Aurobindo's stage model might be a better model than the Piaget-Kohlberg model. J. Rest has pointed out a number of problems with the Piaget-Kohlberg model. Rest argues that the acquisition of a structure is not an all-or-none matter and that developmental assessment is probabilistic. We can only have a probabilistic estimate of the exhibition of a structure, particularly during the period of transition to another stage.<sup>510</sup>

Rest also emphasizes the importance of quantitative descriptors in the account of development. Quantitative descriptors are needed in order to represent the degree to which a subject is manifesting one or another of the structures. Subjects also fluctuate within a developmental range. They are not simply "in" one stage or another. Kohlberg's early scoring systems showed that stage scores for a subject were very mixed. And stage mixture of more than two stages were the rule rather than the exception.<sup>511</sup>

The structure d'ensemble criterion implies that the acquisition or development of a family of related concepts should occur at about the same time, and that solutions to tasks of related logical structure should be of equivalent difficulty. There is some dispute as to whether the structure

d'ensemble criterion requires the synchronous development of all manifestations of a structure. But research shows that synchrony is rare in the manifestations of concrete operations or formal operations. As Rest observes "Even when two different concrete operational concepts, for instance, transitivity of length and conservation of length, are tested with nearly identical stimulus materials, there is still no evidence of synchrony".<sup>512</sup> There is also evidence that conservation of mass is regularly attained before conservation of weight.<sup>513</sup>

In a more complex model of development, such as Aurobindo's model, stages would not be viewed as an all-or-nothing matter. The issue would not be what stage a person is in but to what extent and under what conditions a person manifests the various structures. And in periods of transition we can only have a probabilistic estimate of the exhibition of a given structure. The notion of linear progression or step-by-step development would also be challenged by the complex model. In the face of striking stage mixture, it is difficult to consider a subject as at a single step or stage at any given time. Rather than moving one step at a time, a subject may advance in several organizations of thinking simultaneously. For e.g., moving to advanced levels of stage three, to moderate levels of stage four, and to the earliest levels of stage five at a given time.

Further, in the complex model, because there is little evidence of the developmental synchrony of the constituent concepts of a stage, there would not be any question of movement from one stage into the next. That is, instead of the pattern of stage two consolidation followed by transition to stage three, and so on, the structure of thinking, for instance, may continue to develop much beyond the onset of the next stages of thinking. For example, the subject may be able to explain and critique stage three at the same time that he or she is able to intuitively discriminate between stage five claims and stage four claims.

Since the complex model conceives of development in terms of a range within which the subject operates rather than in terms of exclusive points, the notion that a subject cannot comprehend thinking at more than one stage above his or her own stage would not be accepted. The complex model also suggests that an earlier structure may continue to develop and operate more effectively even after newer structures have begun to develop.

Since contemporary research in developmental psychology supports the complex model rather than the standard Piaget-Kohlberg model, and since Aurobindo's model closely resembles the complex model, I conclude that Aurobindo's model is better than the standard model.

### **Van Den Daele's Typology Of Developmental Models**



The distinctive features of Aurobindo's stage model can also be better appreciated by relating it to Leland Van Den Daele's typology of developmental models.

Van Den Daele argues that there are alternatives to the standard model of development as a one-step-at-a-time, single-sequence movement which constrains development to a lockstep process. The standard single-sequence model generally stresses invariance of order and structural connection between the elements subject to developmental transformation, and ignores or minimizes variations between and within subjects. He maintains that a single-sequence, one-step-at-a-time model of development is inadequate because it cannot deal with individual differences. He writes that

Individuals, however, may attain different ways of valuing, thinking, or behaving not reducible to a single, all encompassing sequence of particular organizations. Not only may alternative progressions occur, but individuals may exhibit concurrent, independent modes of behaving, some of which are developmentally more primitive or mature.<sup>514</sup>

There is, therefore, a need for alternative developmental models which represent differences within and between persons.

Van Den Daele specifies eight developmental models which are classified according to the following properties: unitary or multiple progression, simple or cumulative progression, and conjunctive or disjunctive progression.

Unitary progression implies a single tract or sequence of developmental stages. Each person necessarily progresses through the same stages in the same sequence. It restricts between-person variation to differences in the rate of development through a single sequence of stages. Multiple progression implies between-person variation in the stages and allows for alternative structures or organisations at each stage the choice of which determines the next stage. These multiple progressions may be divergent, convergent, or parallel, partially convergent, or partially divergent, symmetrical or non-symmetrical.

Simple progression restricts within-person variability. Each person is in one stage only at any given time and exhibits behavior, operations, values etc., characteristic of only one structure in any given stage. Cumulative progression allows for within-person variability and alternatives. In each stage earlier and mature structures may coexist. There is stage-mixture, subjects are not in only one stage, but may straddle two or more stages at any given time. When all previous structures are successively retained, the progression is completely cumulative. When some are retained, the progression is partially cumulative.

Conjunctive progression implies an intrinsic connection between earlier and later structures. Earlier structures are incorporated into the later stages. There is a logical relationship between the later stages and the earlier stages,

between the later structures and the earlier structures. The later structures or stages presuppose the earlier structures or stages. Disjunctive progression does not imply any such intrinsic connection between the earlier and later structures or stages.

The combination of these properties yields a matrix of eight types of progression corresponding to eight models: 1) simple-unitary-conjunctive progression, 2) simple-multiple-conjunctive progression, 3) cumulative unitary-conjunctive progression, 4) cumulative-multiple-conjunctive progression, 5) simple-unitary-disjunctive progression, 6) simple-multiple-disjunctive progression, 7) cumulative-unitary-disjunctive progression, and 8) cumulative-multiple-disjunctive progression.

Van Den Daele illustrates the first four models by reference to some contemporary developmental theories. The simple-unitary model is the standard model of development which affirms an invariant sequence of specific stages, B always follows A, and C always follows B. Development is a simple and unitary progression. The model excludes alternative progressions and restricts alternative organizations. The only difference between individuals pertains to the rate of progression through the stages. Some individuals may develop at a faster rate than others. Piaget's model of cognitive development is an example of the simple-unitary model. His model represents cognitive

development in terms of specific logically hierarchized stages and restricts coherent alternative stages.

The simple-multiple model allows for alternative developmental sequences of particular stages. Any stage may be followed by any number of alternative stages although the subject can be in only one stage at a given time. This model is well-equipped to deal with the development of individual differences in various respects. Erikson's developmental model is an example of a simple-multiple model. Individuals are confronted by mutually exclusive alternatives at each stage and the choice of one of the alternatives affects all subsequent choices. There are differences between individuals in the development from stage to stage.

The cumulative-unitary model affirms the preservation of some earlier and later structures of a single sequence of stages, for e.g., the preservation of the structure of stage A in stage B and the preservation of the structures of stages A and B in stage C. The model implies that there is one proper developmental path or sequence, but countenances a hierarchy of alternative structures within an individual's repertoire derived from earlier stages. Van Den Daele observes that "The model is particularly appropriate to cognitive-affective contents which appear "conservative" such as preferences, values, and beliefs".<sup>515</sup> He mentions that the results of Kohlberg's research appear to be consistent with a cumulative model of development because subjects retain some

earlier orientations with later orientations, but not all of their earlier orientations.<sup>516</sup>

The cumulative-multiple model affirms the coexistence of earlier and later stages with any of the alternative stages available to the individual, and accommodates differences between and within subjects. The Freudian psychoanalytic model of development is cumulative because it affirms the preservation of earlier structures and allows for discrete modes of symbolic and drive transformation.

How does Aurobindo's developmental model fit into Van Den Daele's typology? Aurobindo's model does not conceive of development as a simple progression because it allows for stage mixture. Hence, it is a cumulative model of development. It is difficult to decide whether it is a unitary or multiple model, whether it affirms one single sequence or alternative sequences, a single tract of development or multiple progressions or sequences. It is very important to consider the following passage on the logic of spiritual development in The Life Divine in this context:

It is not to be supposed that the circumstances and the lines of transition would be the same for all, for here we enter into the domain of the Infinite: but since there is behind all of them the unity of a fundamental truth, the scrutiny of a given line of ascent may be expected to throw light on the principle of all ascending possibilities; such a scrutiny of one line is all that can be attempted. This line is, as all must be, governed by the natural configuration of the stair of ascent: there

are in it many steps, for it is an incessant gradation and there is no gap anywhere....<sup>517</sup>

Here Aurobindo seems to allow for multiple progressions by suggesting that the "lines of transition" or developmental pathways vary among individuals. But it is also important to note that he affirms that behind this variability there is a common truth and that an analysis of one line of transition may throw light on the principle governing all lines of transition. He also claims that any line of transition is governed by the "natural configuration of the stair of the ascent", or the natural order of the higher levels of consciousness, and that this order is continuous and without gaps or gulfs.

Aurobindo's model is clearly conjunctive rather than disjunctive. Later structures of consciousness develop out of earlier structures and are logically related to them. Earlier structures are delimited or primitive forms of later structures. All of the earlier structures are transformed and integrated into the later structures. This makes his model of development completely cumulative.

I think that Aurobindo's developmental model eminently meets Van Den Daele's desiderata of acknowledging and accommodating variability and difference in the development of a single subject and among developing subjects. This is another good reason in its favor.

There are, of course, criticisms of the very notions of "structure" and "stage" which constitute the core of the structuralistic stage models of Aurobindo and Piaget. There is currently a strong anti-stage movement within developmental psychology. The main criticism of opponents of stage models seems to be that the concept of stage embraces development at too broad a level and that instead attention should be directed to a more micro level. But it seems to me that there is a false dilemma here: either we should pay attention to the micro level of development or we should abandon stage models. Abandoning stage models is not the only alternative to examining the micro level of development. One could develop a stage model which also delineates what occurs at micro levels, or describes smaller processes of change. Indeed, Aurobindo, despite his concern with broader levels and processes of developmental spiritual change, also provides an account of some of the smaller processes of spiritual change.

I would agree with David Feldman's view that given the enormous usefulness of the stage concept in developmental psychology, it would be more productive to investigate the question of what kind of concept of stage, or what sort of a stage model makes sense for developmental psychology, rather than debate about whether we should employ the notion of "stage" at all.<sup>518</sup>

### Conclusion

Aurobindo rests his case for higher stages of development squarely on his metaphysics. If we accept his metaphysical theories, we are bound to accept his claim that there are higher stages of human development beyond the mental stage and formal operations. Are his metaphysical theories plausible? Here it is easy to incline towards one of two extreme alternatives. The first is generally characteristic of Aurobindo's disciples and consists in holding that his metaphysical theories are completely true because they embody "truths" perceived by Aurobindo in higher states of consciousness. The second is characteristic of academic philosophers and consists in holding that Aurobindo's theories are "merely speculative", products of the "metaphysical imagination", etc. I wish to take the middle path.

The problem with the first alternative is that Aurobindo maintains that there is no possibility of a complete understanding of reality prior to the supramental stage. All "truths" perceived at levels of consciousness below the supramental are in reality "half-truths" or incomplete. He explicitly states that only the supramental consciousness has a complete certitude of perception. And since Aurobindo does not claim that he has attained the supramental consciousness, it would follow that his metaphysical theories cannot embody



infallible or complete perceptions of the nature of reality. Further, it would not be consistent with Aurobindo's developmental approach to regard his theories as complete statements of the nature of reality requiring no further refinements or revisions in light of future spiritual progress.

The problem with the second alternative is that it ignores or belittles the experiential foundation of Aurobindo's metaphysics. And I do not have in mind only Aurobindo's spiritual and occult experiences, but of others throughout history and in all cultures or societies. All this mass of human experience cannot be reasonably brushed aside because of significant and even arresting uniformities and the credibility of most of the sources. Aurobindo emphasizes the distinction between speculative metaphysics and integral metaphysics, and regards his metaphysics as an example of the latter type. Given the far-reaching implications of his metaphysical theories for human development, their experiential core, and their links with spiritual praxis, it would be unfair to dismiss them as "merely speculative".

This does not imply that there are no serious objections concerning the degree of support religious experiences, near-death experiences, etc., lend to some of the central claims of Aurobindo's metaphysics. As I mentioned in earlier chapters, there is need for further research on these experiences and further discussion concerning the

plausibility of Aurobindo's explanations vis-a-vis alternative scientific explanations. The phenomena of religious experiences, near-death experiences, recollections of previous lives by children, etc., are interesting and significant enough to warrant critical examination of Aurobindo's theories or hypotheses, but I admit that what they imply for the truth of those theories or hypotheses is quite limited at this time.

It would be desirable to examine experientially, and not in a one-sided intellectual analytical fashion, the veracity of Aurobindo's metaphysical claims. There is a lot at stake not just in regard to our intellectual understanding of the world, but for our existence as a whole and our future development. It is to Aurobindo's credit that he also provides us with a system of spiritual praxis, integral yoga, which can enable us to experientially assess his central claims.

It could be objected that spiritual and occult experiences may lend support to Aurobindo's claims about the existence of the Supermind and supraphysical worlds and agencies, but not his claims about teleological evolution and rebirth. I do not see why these latter claims cannot, in principle, be experientially verified. The Indian Yoga tradition affirms that the practice of yoga can lead to the development of the ability to remember one's previous lives. An experience of panoramic recall, of the sort reported by

subjects of near-death experience, of one's previous lives in states of meditation could count as evidence for reincarnation. One could also have revelations about the nature and purpose of evolution, or, again, a panoramic vision of the course of evolution. These have the same logical status as experiences in which the Supermind or supraphysical agencies seem to be present.

Although Aurobindo has linked his theory of higher stages of human development to his metaphysics, it is possible to delink them. There is no necessary linkage between them. If we accept his metaphysics, then we are bound to accept his theory of higher stages of human development, but we do not have to accept his metaphysics in order to assess his theory of higher stages. His theory of higher stages can be assessed independently of his metaphysics by means of extensive historical and crosscultural research on spiritual development.

The higher faculties mentioned by Aurobindo require extensive training for their development. But without an appropriate cultural environment in which higher faculties and states of consciousness are valued and encouraged, there will always be a paucity of reliable data concerning their nature and development. We have a great deal of data concerning formal operations because these abilities have been valued and encouraged in a technological culture.

Aurobindo's theory of human development cannot be properly assessed if there is no widespread attempt to promote the development of higher faculties and states of consciousness. Education for the development of higher faculties and states of consciousness must not be viewed as the exclusive concern of special institutions, but must also be regarded as the responsibility of mainstream institutions of "higher learning". What is the value of "higher learning" if it does not lead to the development of a higher form of consciousness?

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