



Ontology

Aurobindonian Ontology: Salient Peculiarities

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ABSTRACT: Aurobindo envisages a cosmic salvation via an endlessly open-ended, eternally optimistic, and forward-looking ontology. The purpose of humankind is to go beyond its present form of ordinary (mental) consciousness until it attains the Supermind. Aurobindo says this can be done by a technique he calls Integral Yoga that enables humankind to purposefully cooperate with the cosmic evolutionary urge and thereby rise from the present mental stage to the supramental stage. Another peculiarity of Aurobindo's ontology is his concept of Brahman. It negates illusionism and gives his metaphysical scheme a religious dimension. There is no room in his system for any adversary, anti-Divine or Satan as an independent entity. Thus, evil and suffering also stand accounted for. Peculiarities of this order make him the very first and, so far, the only ontologist claiming a preordained divination of the universe.

Aurobindo Ghose (1872 - 1950) was extraordinary as a man of learning . His knowledge of the world was encyclopaedic. The Wisdom he derived from it was astonishing in being synthesising, comprehensive and interpretative. Hence his familiarity with the scientific - materialistic nature of the West as also with the spirituality of the East. From 1901 onwards, especially from 1908 , he turned to the study and practice of yoga after unravelling the secret of the Veda, the Upanisads, the Bhagavadgita and other sacred writings of India. Factors like this account for the distinctive nature of the Integral philosophy and Yoga and ontology he has propounded. The most outstanding peculiarity of Aurobindonian ontology is its synthesising integrality leading to holism. It harmonises the western theories of evolution and life sciences with the mystical – spiritual theories of the Absolute as revealed in the Veda. On account of this , "spiritual evolution" or the evolution of consciousness becomes the sheet anchor of Aurobindo's ontological argument.

"Consciousness" for Aurobindo, is a rich and complex term. He believes that consciousness is inherent as much in seemingly inert matter as in plant, animal, human and suprahuman life. It participates in the various levels of being in various ways. The Spirit or Sachchidananda which means the highest level of "being, consciousness, and bliss" is nothing but the Absolute. Therefore , Aurobindonian ontological argument emerges from his 'hierarchical view of consciousness or Spirit'. Accordingly Sachchidananda or the Divine is at the transcendent summit.

The Supermind mediates Sachchidananda to the multiplicity of the world. The Overmind serves as delegate of the Supermind. Intuitive Mind, the next lower level of the descent of Sachchidananda, is a kind of consciousness of the heart. It discerns the truth in momentary flashes rather than in a comprehensive grasp. Illumined Mind communicates consciousness by vision and Higher Mind through conceptual thought. Then enters Mind with its propensity to integrate reality through cognitive, intellectual and mental perceptions rather than through direct vision. Yet mind is open to the higher levels of consciousness, for it is basically oriented to Supermind in which it participates in a derivative way. In the course of this hierarchical view, Aurobindo introduces the new concept of the Psyche, the conscious form of the soul. He maintains that Psyche makes possible the evolution from Ignorance to light, from the inconscient form of consciousness with which the creation of the universe commenced to the superconscient form of consciousness which is destined to emerge. Aurobindo's Supermind is supramental in nature. According to Aurobindo, further, life which is next form of consciousness is cosmic energy through which the Divine is received and made manifest. Matter from which life has evolved is the lowest level in Aurobindo's hierarchy of consciousness manifestation. Therefore, matter is an expression of Sachchidananda in a diminished form. It is not reducible to mere material substance.

This hierarchical view of Sachchidananda indeed needs to be seen in a process perspective according to which the Supreme is both "being" and "becoming" manifest in these many levels of Being. Sachchidananda as consciousness liberates itself through an inner law that directs evolution, says Aurobindo. In his view, 'spiritual' evolution is a series of ascents from material, physical existence, to supramental existence in which human beings are able to reach their true being and fulfillment.

This perspective, however, provides only one side of Aurobindonian ontology, only one of its two poles, as it were. The other pole is the cosmic salvation he envisages in which humankind and the universe become divine as decreed by the law of evolution. This bipolarity is the second outstanding peculiarity of Aurobindonian ontology. Creation is nothing but the descent of the Absolute Spirit into Supermind, mind and matter as indicated in its hierarchical perspective of Sachchidananda's involution in the Inconscient. But involution leads to evolution. And evolution is the ascent of matter to life, mind and supermind and finally to Sachchidananda. After establishing this bipolarity of his ontology, Aurobindo points out that so far only the first three stages of evolution have emerged. But the time has come now for evolution to take the remaining ascent-oriented steps that will carry it to the Supermind and thereby to change the nature of the universe from death to deathlessness, from finite to infinite, and from imperfection to perfection and, ultimately, from gross matter to Supreme Spirit, Sachchidananda.

Aurobindonian ontology is thus purposive, affirmative and forward-looking. It invalidates the view that "becoming" is the degradation of "Being". It proclaims that "Being" undertakes the process of "becoming" solely for the purpose of re-acquiring its original status. Equating "becoming" with evolution, Aurobindo redefines "becoming" as a predetermined, inevitable, redemption-oriented divinization of the involved Absolute, its homeward journey as it were. The Absolute, for its delight initially effects its own complete involution in Inconscience. Next it goes on retracing its steps back to its primordial plenitude through the process of evolution. Its return is from inconscient to subconscious, to matter, to life, to mind, to Higher Mind, Illumined Mind, Intuition, Overmind, Supermind, Psyche and Sachchidananda. This makes Aurobindonian ontology "endlessly open-ended" since no one can tell exactly when the destined divinization of the cosmos takes place.

Meanwhile, Aurobindonian ontology argues in favour of human aspiration for a Kingdom of heaven on earth and proceeds to give a theoretical framework in which such an aspiration would be not a figment of imagination but a drive in Nature working through humankind to a higher stage of perfection. The gulf between unconscious matter and fully self-conscious Spirit is sought to be bridged by exhibiting

them as two poles of a series in which spirit continuously manifests itself. The Vedantic concept of a transcendent, all - inclusive Brahman is sought to be harmonised with a theory of emergent evolution. Illusionism is totally rejected. The purpose of humankind is to go beyond its present form of consciousness until it attains to the Supermind. Aurobindo says that humankind can do it by Yoga which is a technique not for personal liberation but for co-operating with the cosmic evolutionary urge that is carrying humankind ahead from the present mental stage to a higher, supramental stage.

According to Aurobindo's theory of cosmic salvation, thus, the paths of humankind's union with the Absolute are two way streets : Enlightenment comes to humankind from above, while the supermind of humankind strives through yogic illumination to reach upward from below. When these two forces blend in an individual, a gnostic human being is created. This Yogic illumination eventually leads to the freeing of the individual from the bonds of individuality and, by expansion, all humankind will eventually achieve mukti (liberation). Obviously, this means that Aurobindo's ontology has created a dialectic mode of salvation not only for the individual and all humankind but also for the whole cosmos. 'Energy or Sachchidananda ("existence, thought, joy") comes down from Brahman (thesis) to meet energy from the supermind of man striving upward towards spirituality (antithesis) and melts in man to create a new spiritual superman (synthesis). From these evolved divine beings, a divine universe is also evolved'. Incidentally, Aurobindo's superman is the God-man, the gnostic being. He excels humankind not in physical power but in things of the Spirit. He is not to be confused with the superman of Nietzsche.

Besides reinterpreting the Vedic concept of the Divine Being in the light of his own Western education, Aurobindo modifies traditional accounts of the relation between the world and Brahman, again by introducing the concept of evolution. Note that he rejects the doctrine that the cosmos is illusory, Brahman being the sole reality. Despite that, his ontological doctrines retain the contemplative ideal and reject the world negation. They delineate the evolutionary process as centering on the progressive manifestation of the Spirit. Aurobindo avers that the emergence of consciousness is not satisfactorily explained either as the consequence of the increased complexity of material organisms, or as the work of an extracosmic deity. Secondly, his own spiritual realisations, contemplative intuition and study of the Indian religious traditions impelled him to believe in a Divine Being. Invoking the Vedantic explication, he defines the Being as a Triune of External existence, External consciousness and External bliss. Since he is All-benevolent in addition to being Omniscient, Omnipotent and Omnipresent, the Supreme Spirit involved himself into Inconscience for the sheer delight of retracing his steps back to his Triune supremacy employing the consciousness aspect of his Being as an ever evolving modality in his slow but inevitably certain return to his native divinity by rendering all earthly life into the life divine, by bestowing emancipation (Mukti) to the cosmos at large. In view of this, in Aurobindo's belief, consciousness is somehow already concealed in living matter before its evolutionary emergence, and the Divine Being is immanent in the process. Accordingly, he argues that Brahman by a transmutation in the form of "involution" manifests itself as matter and then progressively brings about an unfolding of its powers through the evolution. Here, too, there is a hierarchy of substances appearing successively but in such a way that each higher stage includes its predecessor. For instance, rational beings are also material organisms but the animal characteristics of humankind are transformed because of the presence of his mental powers. Humankind should now consciously choose to collaborate with Nature (read as evolution) in her task of divinizing all existence by preparing the necessary circumstances for the arrival of "superman" and for the evolutionary purpose of changing the character of social, cultural and individual life.

Aurobindo's ontology is peculiar in yet another respect too. His concept of Brahman and associated ideas gives his metaphysical scheme a religious dimension. For, in one respect the Divine Being, he

maintains, is in repose : as the Absolute, it is a timeless and nonspatial being. But in its creative energy the Absolute manifests itself as the Supermind which is an intermediary between the world and the Absolute. Thus, the next stage of spiritual progress for human beings is to attain Godhood or the life divine through "Integral Yoga". It will enable them to acquire a spiritual insight which should permeate their physical, social and cultural life. Besides, God must "descend" into human experience. This is indicated in the following words of Aurobindo's yogic collaborator, The Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, addressed to the Divine: 'In all the states, in all the modes, in all things, all worlds, all the elements we must discover Thee and unite with Thee and if one element is left aside, however small it may be, the communion cannot be perfect, the realisation cannot be accomplished.' This holistic illumination of individuals will lead to the emergence of a divinized community. In this way, Aurobindo's ontology produces a synthesis between older Indian religious ideals and the world-affirming attitudes of Christian theism. According to him, religious mysticism should give a new character to ordinary life, not negate it. Significantly all this process is divine. All the human possibilities, postulated by Aurobindo, are released by the descent of God, the Absolute, the Spirit, into the world. There is no room in his system for any Adversary, Anti-Divine, or Satan as a separate, independent entity determined to work against the Divine. Everything that appears to be evil, suffering, pain or catastrophe is merely a process or part thereof. Aurobindonian ontology is original and extraordinary in yet another respect : its propounder is the first, and so far the only, ontologist unequivocally claiming an inevitable divinization (and therefore "emancipation" or "mukti") for the universe at large. What is predestined and inevitable is the cosmic emancipation through the process of a divine "involution-evolution". No doubt, evolution by itself is sure to carry on its onward march through a natural process until its predestined purpose is fulfilled. But it proceeds slowly and indirectly. In contrast, Integral Yoga functions more quickly and directly. 'Evolution seeks the divine through nature, while yoga reaches out for the divine as transcendent to nature'. Integral Yoga, besides, 'seeks an integral and total change of consciousness and nature', not for the individual alone but for humankind as a whole, for the entire cosmos. Unlike some yogas of the past, 'Integral Yoga does not seek release from the cycle of birth and death'. It 'seeks a transformation of life and existence, by, for, and through the divine. In most yogas, ascent to the divine is emphasized as the sole objective. In Integral Yoga, this ascent is but the first step. The real goal is the descent of the new consciousness that has been attained in the ascent'. Humankind has to consent to collaborate with Nature in this process of ascent-descent by resorting to Integral Yoga.

When this predetermined goal is consciously reached by humankind, the intended divine transformation commences. ' . . . the hour of the Divine draws near'. Some human beings shall be made 'the glory's receptacles/And vehicles of the Eternal's luminous power', 'The first born of a new supernal race.' Then, 'Eternal supermind' shall 'touch earthly Time / The Superman shall wake in mortal man / And manifest the hidden demi-god'. 'Then shall the earth be touched by the Supreme'. 'The superman shall reign as King of Life'. 'And lead towards God and truth man's ignorant earth / And lift towards Godhead his mortality'. 'Thus shall the earth open to divinity' and 'This earthly life' shall 'become the Life Divine'. All this is foreshadowed in a letter Aurobindo wrote to a disciple in 1934. The letter states 'that behind the appearances of the universe there is the Reality of a Being and Consciousness, a Self of all things, one and eternal. All beings are united in that One Self and Spirit but divided by a certain separativity of consciousness, an ignorance of their true Self and Reality in the mind, life and body. It is possible . . . to remove this veil of separative consciousness and become aware of the true Self, the Divinity within us and all'. 'This One Being and Consciousness is involved here in Matter. Evolution is the method by which it liberates itself; consciousness appears in what seems to be inconscient and once having appeared is self-impelled to grow higher and higher and at the same time to enlarge and develop towards a greater and greater perfection. Life is the first step of this release of consciousness; mind is the second; but the evolution does not finish with mind, it awaits a release into

something greater , a consciousness which is spiritual and supramental. The next step of the evolution must be towards the development of Supermind and Spirit'. 'Only then will the involved Divinity in things release itself entirely and it becomes possible for life to manifest perfection'. 'The former steps in evolution were taken by Nature without a conscious will'. But 'in man Nature becomes able to evolve by a conscious will'. 'It is not, however, by the mental will in man that this can be wholly done'. 'A conversion has to be made, a turning of the consciousness by which mind has to change into the higher principle. This method is to be found through the Integral Yoga'. Thus, Aurobindo teaches that 'a descent of the higher principle is possible which will not merely release the spiritual Self out of the world, but release it in the world, replace the mind's ignorance or its very limited knowledge by a supramental Truth - Consciousness which will be sufficient instrument of the inner Self and make it possible for the human being to find himself dynamically as well as inwardly and grow out of his still animal humanity into a diviner race'.

'Yoga can be used to that end by opening all the parts of the being to a conversion or transformation through the descent and working of the higher still concealed supramental principle. This, however, cannot be done ... by any rapid or miraculous transformation. Many steps have to be taken by the seeker before the supramental descent is possible. Man lives mostly in his surface mind, life and body, but there is an inner being within him with greater possibilities to which he has to awake ... and that pushes him to a constant pursuit of a greater beauty, harmony, power and knowledge'. 'He has to learn to live in his soul and purify and orientate by its drive towards the Truth the rest of the nature. There can follow afterwards an opening upward and descent of a higher principle of the Being. But even then it is not at once the full supramental Light and Force. For there are several ranges of consciousness between the ordinary human mind and supramental Truth - Consciousness. These intervening ranges have to be opened up and their power brought down into the mind, life and body. ... The process of this self - discipline or Sadhana is therefore long and difficult For the whole being has to be trained so that it can respond and be transformed when it is possible for that greater Light and Force to work in the nature'. 'The one aim of Aurobindo's teaching and Yoga is an inner self - development by which each one who follows it can in time discover the One Self in all and evolve a higher consciousness than the mental, a spiritual and supramental consciousness which will transform and divinize human nature'.

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