The Integral Cosmology of Sri Aurobindo: An Introduction from the Perspective of Consciousness Studies

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Abstract: In the contemporary philosophy of mind and consciousness studies, views such as panpsychism or theories of universal consciousness, have enjoyed a recent renaissance of metaphysical speculations in Western philosophy. Its similarities with Eastern philosophical traditions went not unnoticed. However, the potential contribution that the evolutionary cosmology of the Indian poet, mystic and philosopher Sri Aurobindo can offer to these ontologies, remains largely unknown or unexplored. Here, consciousness, mind, life, matter and evolution are interpreted in an extended metaphysical framework, uniting Western and Eastern traditions inside a modern philosophical system where materialism, panpsychism, cosmopsychism and philosophical idealism are not seen as irreconcilable exclusives, but different points of view that can be reconciled in a synthesis of knowledge, as envisioned from higher states of consciousness. This integral view of reality offers a conceptual platform that can complement and incorporate current theoretical approaches in modern philosophy, where their present internal inconsistencies do not emerge, and can be suggestive for scientists as well, especially in the fields of biology and physical sciences.

Keywords: Sri Aurobindo, consciousness studies, philosophy of mind, mysticism, metaphysics, Vedanta, science, spirituality

Introduction

Much has been written about Sri Aurobindo's whole-person-centered spiritual teachings, which are first and foremost a basis for spiritual practice. However, his integral mystics, philosophy, poetry, and vision have also become a pole of attraction for the Western academic world. Aurobindo is particularly known among psychologists (for a review of 'integral psychology,' see, e.g., Banerji, 2020 or Salmon, 2007). He is also receiving increasing attention from pedagogues in terms of an 'integral education' (e.g., Masi, 2018; Shirazi, 2011; Zulaski, 2017). Some scholars also pointed out his actuality in the field of international relations and the social development of humankind (e.g., Aurose, 2021; Shah & Jacoby, 2013). However, despite its relevance, his cosmology received much less attention in the philosophy of science until recently (with few exceptions, e.g., Banerji, 2015; Lester, 2011) The main motivation leading the author to write this paper was to compensate for this shortcoming and furnish an introduction to the metaphysical framework of Sri Aurobindo for philosophers and scientists, especially those working in the field

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of consciousness studies and evolutionary biology. These could profit from Aurobindo's vision as a source of inspiration and as an original scheme that could potentially resolve several unanswered questions.

In particular, in contemporary consciousness studies, we see a multiplication of theories and speculations trying to relate that ineffable and undefinable experiential entity we call 'consciousness' to brain mechanisms and their neural correlates. However, despite its impressive progress in mapping brain activity, after decades of research, neuroscience made no tangible progress in closing the explanatory gap dividing the third-person neuroscientific perspective and our first-person subjective experiential dimension. From a naturalistic standpoint, the question of how consciousness, sentience, subjective experience, and the perception of qualities ('qualia') come into being, supposedly because of some yet undiscovered neural machinery, remains unanswered more than ever. This also led David Chalmers to write his seminal paper on the famous 'hard problem of consciousness' (Chalmers, 1995): how and why does the seemingly immaterial phenomenal experience arise out of material brain activity? Tackling this problem, the modern philosophy of mind adopted mainly a scientific and philosophical approach founded on the Western tradition. Though it drew inspiration from the old school, such as Descartes' dualism, Berkeley's ontological idealism, Kant's transcendental idealism, and up to modernity with Husserl's phenomenology, Whitehead process philosophy, or Gebser's 'integral structure of consciousness,' to mention just a few, it only rarely admits for post-material frameworks. It did, and to a large degree still does, rely almost exclusively on a neuroscientific approach, eventually augmented by a Darwinian evolutionary paradigm, usually only inside a strictly reductionist and physicalist perspective. This resulted in a plethora of theories, conjectures, and the most diverse speculations. For example, highly rated theories of consciousness are Baars' 'Global Workspace Theory' (Baars, 1988), Tononi's 'Integrated Information Theory' (Oizumi, Albantakis, & Tononi, 2014), Penrose and Hameroff's 'Orchestrated Objective Reduction' (Penrose, 1994; Hameroff & Penrose, 2014), and Hoffman's 'User Interface Theory' (Hoffman, 2008), to mention just a very few of them (for a review, see also (Seth & Bayne, 2022) or (Wahbeh, Radin, Cannard, & Delorme, 2022). However, nothing indicates that we are getting anywhere closer to a converging understanding of what a consistent theory of consciousness might look like.

Given this lack of progress, in more recent times Western schools of thought expanded their horizons towards metaphysical speculations positing consciousness, not matter, as the fundamental primitive. Most notably, panpsychism has been resurrected by some modern leading philosophers, like Nagel, Strawson, Chalmers, and Goff (for a modern review, see Seager, 2020; Skrbina, 2017) – something reminiscent of Leibniz's monadology but recast into modern reductionist bottom-up perspective, and in the light of modern scientific findings. On the other hand, top-down holistic approaches have also been considered, inspired by Eastern philosophies such as Velmans' post-Kantian 'reflexive monism' that conceives the subject as a differentiated part of the one universe (Velmans, 2012), Shani's holistic-monistic variant of panpsychism, 'cosmopsychism' (Shani I., 2015; Shani & Keppler, 2018), Kastrup's modern version of Schopenhauer's idealism, analytic idealism (Kastrup, 2018), Taylor's idea of a pervasive spirit in all things, 'panspiritism' (Taylor, 2020), and other lines of research inspired by the Asian tradition, such as Albahari's mystical solution to the mind-body problem (Albahari, 2019) or investigations on the parallel between panpsychism or cosmopsychism and Advaita Vedanta (e.g., Gasparri, 2019; Vaidya, 2020).

While a cross-cultural opening to Eastern philosophy and mysticism among Western scholars is certainly to be welcomed, one can't fail to notice how its conceptual structures are still limited to a classic Vedantic non-dual outlook. They lack an evolutionary (and 'involutionary') perspective or, at any rate, they do not expand on the evolution of consciousness to any degree similar to that of Aurobindo. On the other hand, although Western science and philosophy placed evolution, especially in its modern neo-Darwinian incarnation, at the center of their attention, the emergence of consciousness in the evolutionary drama is an accepted datum and their substantial and temporal relation remains scarcely addressed. The most notable exceptions are Teilhard de Chardin's cosmic theology (Chardin, 1955), or Gebser's historical view of the emergence of the 'structures of consciousness' unfolding towards an 'integral consciousness' (Gebser, 1985). And noteworthy is that the seed-idea was already present, especially among the German idealists, like Fichte, Schelling, or Hegel (for an interesting historical account of what Murphy called an 'evolutionary panentheism', see (Murphy, 2015). However, these metaphysical paradigms remain lower dimensional coarse-grained models–that is, much too often one sees the tendency to consider mind and consciousness as synonymous, while the role of higher cognitive states is ignored if admitted at all. Lastly, what Aurobindo called the 'planes of consciousness and parts of being', while well known in several spiritual and mystic traditions, remains, especially in Western philosophy, an unknown or ignored ontological multidimensionality. The old dualistic school or, at best, a dual-substance ontology that doesn't go beyond the dichotomy between mind and matter (or consciousness, or spirit, and that, again, are taken as synonymous) still prevails.

Only very recently attempts have been made to connect Aurobindo's spiritual emergentism to the Western philosophy of mind, such as Medhananda's evolutionary cosmopsychism (Medhananada, 2021), (Medhananda, 2022), (Medhananada, 2024)Shani's search for a connection between cosmopsychism and non-dualism (Shani, 2022).

This paper aims at furnishing a first general introduction to Aurobindo's cosmology (for a more detailed analysis see also the author's work Masi, 2022a), and that may help to build a bridge making this connection. Aurobindo's vision and deep insights into the meanderings of our conscious, subconscious, and subliminal life, and that consciousness studies try so hard to untangle, remain largely unknown or ignored despite the fact that it appears to be the most comprehensive synthesis of knowledge. It allows for an integration between East and West, encompassing contemporary philosophical thought from an evolutionary perspective and in line with current scientific findings. What I call 'integral cosmology'–the theoretical framework emerging from Aurobindo's contemplative practice, which he called 'integral yoga'[2] (also called 'purna yoga')–has potentially interesting applications that could extend the current lines of Western metaphysics, such as panpsychism, pantheism (God is Nature and Nature is God) and panentheism (Nature is in God), or complement the above-mentioned forms of philosophical idealism based on universal consciousness.

Also, biologists, physicists, and other scientists may find, in this review, a source for contemplation as well. The evolutionary perspective of Aurobindo, inside a paradigm of spiritual emergentism, and a metaphysical vision where matter and the laws of physics are only a small subset of a much wider reality, may not appeal to the orthodox materialist mindset. Nevertheless,

[2] The terms 'integral cosmology' and 'integral Vedanta' are of the author, while 'integral yoga' is Aurobindo's terminology.

the scientist who feels inclined to explore post-material views of evolution and reality may find in him interesting suggestions.

The paper is organized as follows.

After a short biographical note, in the second part, follows an introduction to Aurobindo's spiritual ontology, his notion of evolutionary progress, from the Absolute to the universal, or cosmic consciousness and the planes and parts of being–the different levels of consciousness in its individuated and cosmic dimension. I will emphasize how, in this integral vision, our identity is not confined neither to a one-dimensional materialistic monism, nor to a two-dimensional dual-aspect or neutral monism, rather it is a multidimensional structure that transcends beyond a simple mind, body, and soul ontology. A 'concentric system' of inner, outer and inmost identities will be examined. The centrality of the 'psychic being'–the notion of an evolutionary soul–will be analyzed with particular attention because of its vast implications leading to an extended concept of evolution. An account of the diverse levels of cognition beyond mind, such as overmind, cosmic mind and supermind will be discussed.

Reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary philosophy, central is also Aurobindo's claim that the human represents only a transitional being, not the apex of evolution, and that will be surpassed by a coming future species he called the 'gnostic being'. An evolutionary vision towards higher states of consciousness, which includes a material transmutation of matter and our bodily existence by a 'supramental transformation'. A vision that can be grasped in its completeness only once the distinction between evolution and involution is made on all planes of existence.

In the third part, we will explore in-depth central concepts of Aurobindo's mystic insights. The multiplicity in unity, the coexistence of the personality and impersonality of the Divine, the transcendent and immanent, the supramental vision of space-time and the twofold identity of Nature.

This will clarify consciousness and the emergence of life from a perspective that bridges Aurobindo's cosmology with modern theories of cosmic idealism and modern evolutionary theories in a post-materialistic ontology.

An overview will follow showing how, taking the integral perspective, the monistic reductive materialism, philosophical idealism and the first-person mystical approaches are the three complementary forms of cognition that can converge in a synthesis of knowledge, both unifying and finally surpassing them all.

Few concluding remarks will complete this introductory paper.

Short Bio of Sri Aurobindo

The Indian mystic, yogi, poet and nationalist Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), more commonly known as Sri Aurobindo, was born in Kolkata (former Calcutta). At the age of seven, he was sent to Cambridge, England, to study English literature and to protect him from, what his father

considered, a backward mystic Indian culture. Ironically, Aurobindo would become one of the most influential yogis–a practitioner of yoga – of the 20th century. After having perfectly absorbed the British language and culture and returning to India 14 years later, he worked as a teacher and, in about 1906, became directly involved in nationalist politics by joining the Indian revolutionary movement against British rule.

However, it soon became evident that a matter much more interesting and urgent would determine the rest of his life. In 1908, Aurobindo was arrested for his political engagement and spent about a year in jail. During that time, he went through powerful spiritual experiences, which became the basis of a vision of human progress and spiritual evolution. In 1910, Aurobindo left politics and moved to Puducherry, in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, a place he would never leave again. Here, he developed the principles of an integral yoga, a form of ascesis that incorporated the former Indian spiritual practices and, most importantly, expanded them to a discipline aimed also at physical transformation. He founded an ashram (a spiritual hermitage for yoga practitioners), nowadays called the 'Sri Aurobindo Ashram'.

In 1926, Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973), who became his collaborator and spiritual partner, also called by their disciples "The Mother," would take over the management of the ashram. This allowed Aurobindo to dedicate himself more intensely to his sadhana (the yogic spiritual discipline) and to what would later be called the 'cell yoga' – an attempt at spiritual transmutation of the physical body–determining his seclusion for the rest of his life. He maintained, however, an intense written correspondence with his disciples and the world.

Aurobindo was an extremely prolific writer and became the author of an enormous number of texts, mainly about spiritual topics, which highlighted his spiritual vision that sees the human race ascending to increasingly higher states of consciousness within an evolutionary process that would unite spirit and matter. His three main magnum opuses are "The Synthesis of Yoga" (Aurobindo, 1914-21) – a practical guidance to integral yoga, "The Life Divine" (Aurobindo, 1914-19) – the description of his spiritual vision based on his inner experiences framed in a philosophical language – and "Savitri" (Aurobindo, 1950) – a spiritual epic poem of about 24,000 verses. Aurobindo might be described as a 'mystic empiricist'. He noted his inner spiritual experiments in a diary, the 'Record of Yoga' (Aurobindo, 2002; Banerji, 2012). The core of the vision and teachings contained in these writings were published around 1915-1920 but were also amended and revised thereafter, until his departure. An important aspect to keep in mind is that despite the philosophical relevance of his teachings, he never considered himself a philosopher. Several of his writings have been written with a philosophical style but relied exclusively on a first-person spiritual and mystic experience. It would be impossible to fully comprehend his message relaying exclusively on an analytic study.

The Integral Structure of Being

The Notion of 'Progress' in the Evolutionary Integral View of Sri Aurobindo

What differentiates Aurobindo's evolutionary spiritual vision from other paths is the concept of the existence of a spiritual evolution and progress in Nature. Not only a liberation ('moksha' or 'nirvana') from the bonds of matter of the classical Asian paths, but also an integral transformation of our mental, emotional and physical nature, culminating in the transmutation of the material body

itself into the image of the Spirit by means of a 'cellular yoga'. An 'integral Vedanta' that distances itself from the traditional Indian conception of life and the universe as the cosmic 'illusion of Maya'. Aurobindo rejects the idea common to many mystics of his time that matter is an illusion and, to the contrary, elevates it to the container of an ultimate physical and spiritual transformation.

According to Aurobindo, evolution is a form of 'yoga of Nature' and insists on a world-affirming view or, as he puts it, 'all life is yoga'. Humans are transitional beings undergoing an evolutionary process that must ultimately lead us to the next evolutionary step, which will transcend reason and the analytic sense-mind, to a form of (non-religious) gnosticism. A spiritual and material progress that should not be a privilege for just a few but that will be generalized to humanity as a whole. It is a synthesis of progressive inner and outer evolution aimed at a long-term spiritual and physical transformation, where matter and spirit are not exclusives but complementary destined to merge. An ascesis towards higher states of consciousness and forms of cognition, that distinguishes the spiritual practice of integral yoga from other spiritual paths, which, however, are not denied, but rather embraced and extended.

Furthermore, this evolutionary vision does not reject the scientific concept of Darwinian evolution but rather extends and includes it. Darwinian evolution could be integrated within Aurobindo's evolutionary cosmology. The main difference, however, is that while evolutionary biology does not accept a teleological dimension, conceiving evolution only as a change in the physical heritable characteristics and genetic mutation in time, in this integral perspective it also represents the unfoldment and the progress of a trans-physical indwelling spirit, driven by a concealed omniscience having an aim and working towards a goal.

The Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo in a Nutshell

A thorough introduction to the practical aspects of the integral yoga would exceed the scope of this paper and is not necessary to grasp the metaphysics of the integral cosmology that would be outlined here. It may only be said that this spiritual practice has a double aspect. On one side, integral yoga accepts and, to a large degree, even follows the paths of other contemplative traditions, especially those of the Eastern Hindu and Vedantic schools and yoga philosophical approaches as the Advaita Vedanta and Samkhya philosophy. Techniques of concentration and meditation, like in the classical raja yoga or jnana yoga, aimed at calming the mind is a basic requisite here too. The purpose is to reach an inner spiritual realization that transcends the ordinary states of consciousness emerging into the ultimate reality, which is the Brahman, the 'One without a second' of the Indian Vedic tradition, the non-dual teachings or the Buddhist nirvana.

However, Aurobindo claims that, while this is a necessary step along the path of self-realization, Nature also aims to achieve a much higher level of self-perfection that does not exclude the outer being. By a more integral practice of karma yoga, the 'yoga of divine works' of the Bhagavad Gita, the principles of bhakti yoga and the spiritual path of devotion, Aurobindo delineated, especially in his 'Synthesis of Yoga', that there is a larger and more encompassing form of spiritual practice aimed at an ascension and also a descension of a higher Consciousness that works on our inner and outer being. Central to this discipline is the act of surrender and self-giving to the Divine. By a constant single-mindedness of our whole being onto the Divine and by transforming our emotional and still limited mental consciousness, a divine Shakti, i.e., the universal Conscious-Force, the

'Chit-Tapas' or 'Chit-Shakti' of the Shakti-Advaita, can transform and transmute our untransformed nature. The yoga is 'integral' inasmuch that its purpose is the transmutation of our whole psychological, and also material, aspect of existence, aiming at the generalization of yoga to the whole of humanity. It is from the attained higher state of consciousness that Aurobindo was able to gain a vision which he outlined in his writings.

Planes of Consciousness and Parts of Being, the Psychic and Spiritual Transformation

If one wants to comprehend the philosophical background of Aurobindo's integral yoga and its cosmology and cosmogony, it is necessary first to get acquainted with its complex 'topography of consciousness'. But before outlining the differences from orthodox traditions, it is especially important to consider which aspects of his vision align with these traditions.

The traditional Indian yoga philosophy of the Upanishads conceives of the being made of 'vehicles', 'bodies', or 'sheaths of consciousness', called 'koshas' covering our soul like the rings of an onion. Matter is not the only substance that exists. The coarse-grained metaphysical dualistic model that reduces life to just a soul and a body is expanded. Once the consciousness of the mystic ascends beyond the material realm, more subtle forms of matter, substances and forces of different grossness, which exist beyond the physical sense, become part of the experiential reality. Our physical body appears as the outer layer of other, more subtle, 'bodies'. In descending order (according to the Upanishadic classification with the correspondent 'aurobindonian' plane, see later for more details):

Anandamaya kosha,	Satcitananda
Vijñānamaya kosha,	Supermind
Manomaya kosha,	Mental
Pranamaya kosha,	Vital
Annamaya kosha,	Physical

In integral yoga, the five kosha-structure of classical yoga was embraced and further refined, distinguishing between the 'higher hemisphere' and the 'lower hemisphere'. By heightening one's awareness ascending to higher states of consciousness through a meditative practice, Aurobindo claims that one meets planes, parts, domains and layers of existence that we are not conscious of in our ordinary cognitive state. *"Below us there are lower ranges to which we are insensible and these we call subconscience or inconscience. Above us are higher ranges which are to our inferior nature an unseizable superconscience"* (Aurobindo, 1910-1950, pp. 247, pt.II, sec.I).

One might draw an analogy in the Western tradition with Spinoza's 'modes of substance.' According to Spinoza, there is only one Substance–that is, God or Nature – which, however, can acquire infinitely many modes and attributes that express the divine essence. All is a mode of that one Substance. Similarly, here also the lower and higher 'planes' are the different expressions of one universal Consciousness on different ranges of self-awareness.

The first two universal superconscient planes, namely Satcitananda and the Supermind, make part of what Aurobindo called the 'higher hemisphere'. We will look at these in more detail later. Let us first consider the lower hemisphere.

Planes and Parts of the Lower Hemisphere

The physical plane: The annamaya kosha, the 'food-sheath', is our familiar physical body. The universal plane in which it resides is that of the physical universe made of matter, the layer of existence that science investigates.

The vital plane: The pranamaya kosha, the 'life-force sheath', what Aurobindo termed as the 'vital', is the sheath and plane responsible for our emotional consciousness. It is not made of matter, rather, its substance is of the nature of a more subtle 'vital energy' also commonly known as 'prana' or as the Chinese 'ki', which exists independently from the permanence of the physical body. Note that life is not understood as derivative from matter, contrary to what is commonly assumed in a Darwinian evolutionary paradigm. The universal vital plane–the life plane–emerges in and through matter by an evolutionary process but is distinct from it. Life is always indwelling in all matter and will always manifest, once the conditions for its emergence are realized. In fact, throughout his writings, Aurobindo uses such terms as 'vital plane,' 'Life-Force,' and 'Life-Energy.' The vital is used by the mind as an instrument to establish a contact with the physical world; for it is that by which the mind receives the sensory information through the organs of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. This seems to fly in the face of modern biology which explicitly distances itself from any form of vitalism. However, it is a common misconception that modern science has disproved vitalism or, at least, the form of vitalism this integral cosmology posits. Contrary to a physicalist doctrine, these were and remain coherent worldviews and cannot be ruled out by modern science, as I have outlined more rigorously here (Masi, 2022b).

The mental plane: The manomaya kosha, the 'mental sheath' is the plane of 'manas', more commonly named 'mind'. It is the sheath of reason and of analytic thinking that is responsible for our thoughts.

This metaphysics is obviously at odds with any physicalist conception of reality. All these planes, except the physical one, are non-physical. Mind and brain are part of the mental and physical plane, respectively, and are two parts to be distinguished.

It is not a Cartesian dualism that distinguishes only between mind and body, rather a multi-layered reality reminiscent, again, of the Spinozian God, where mind (res-cogitans) and matter (res-extensa) are only two of its infinite 'modes of Substance'. Moreover, in Eastern traditions, consciousness is the very nature of Satcitananda and not to be conflated with mind, as it is frequently in neuroscience, psychology, consciousness studies, and the philosophy of mind. Here mind is considered a mutable form of cognition and not even the highest one, it is just a 'sheath' that connects the vital with higher forms of cognition. Whereas consciousness is the transcendent and atemporal 'witness', the immutable observer.

Aurobindo enlarges the traditional Samkhya classification to subconscient and inconscient planes even below matter and the bodily consciousness. These stand as antipodal to the superconscient 'planes of Knowledge' and constitute the unenlightened 'planes of Ignorance'.

The subconscient: With similarities, but also differences, to Western psychology the subconscient is the submerged part of our being dominated by incoherent thoughts, irrational fears, impressions of traumatic experiences, habitual movements, and disorganized emotions that we are mostly unaware of in our surface waking state. The subconscient records and stores experiences, impressions, and emotions throughout our life, especially those of particular intensity or traumatic character. Aurobindo maintains that the influence of our subconscient goes down to cellular processes, viewing it in a wider evolutionary perspective than Western psychologies.

> That part of us which we can strictly call subconscient because it is below the level of mind and conscious life, inferior and obscure, covers the purely physical and vital elements of our constitution of bodily being, unmentalised, unobserved by the mind, uncontrolled by it in their action. It can be held to include the dumb occult consciousness, dynamic but not sensed by us, which operates in the cells and nerves and all the corporeal stuff and adjusts their life process and automatic responses. It covers also those lowest functionings of submerged sense-mind which are more operative in the animal and in plant life; in our evolution we have overpassed the need of any large organized action of this element, but it remains submerged and obscurely at work below our conscious nature. (Aurobindo, 1914-19, pp. 763, pt. II, ch. XIX)

The inconscient: The inconscient is a plane that is positioned even deeper than the subconscient, insofar that its movements become even more mechanical and reactive, almost impossible to change.

The nescient: At the lowest rung of the ladder of consciousness, Aurobindo sometimes mentions what he called the 'nescient'. It is the most inert, passive, obscure, mechanical and obnubilate involved consciousness, the bottom of creation, the root of matter's inertia itself. It is a substance almost completely forgetful of its original source, the characteristic trait of matter.

The Concentric System of Being, Soul and Nature

By proceeding with the psycho-physiological ascesis, on each plane, one begins to discover further inner realms of being that are concealed from the ordinary surface awareness. For example, there is further metacognitive surface mind and a whole mental domain we are not directly aware of. The same is applicable to our 'emotional body', i.e. the vital. Our surface emotions are largely driven from behind by a variety of impulses we are unaware of. The spiritual practitioner, however, can come into closer contact with what Aurobindo called the 'inner being', distinguishing it from the 'outer being'. The distinction goes as follows.

The outer being: Our outer being – our surface personality – is dominated by half-controlled mental and emotional impulses, desires, fears, and more or less reactive mental patterns, restless thoughts, the physical sensory reasoning and all those psychological traits we call our 'personality' or ego or self (lower case 's').

The *'outer mental'* is what we know well as our *'sense-mind'*–the mind that organizes and conceptualizes our sensory perceptions–closely related to the *'physical mind'*, which is the mind that believes only in the physical and cannot even comprehend anything beyond this. This sense-mind is responsible for mentalizing and organizing all the perceptions it receives in forms and

shapes, presenting it to the physical mind that is unable to conceive anything other than what the sense-mind presents – it takes the physical world and its mechanical workings for all that there is.

There is also the emotional mind, which Aurobindo termed the *'vital mind'*. It is dominated by the life-impulses; it is this irrational part of the mind that thinks instinctively and imagines emotionally, with restless thoughts in an unreflective manner. The *'outer vital'* or *'lower vital'* is the source of what we term, in our everyday parlance, 'negative emotions', such as anger, fear, selfishness and greed. However, the lower vital can eventually express somewhat nobler emotions of human love, albeit tainted by possessive tendencies or philanthropic actions driven by subconscious egoistic motives.

The *'outer physical'* is just the gross physical body.

The inner being: This inner spiritual consciousness, which Aurobindo also termed as the 'subliminal being' or simply the 'subliminal', has a different significance than in Western psychology. This 'subliminal being' is a much vaster and luminous *"place of deep peace, light, happiness, love, closeness to the Divine or the presence of the Divine.*" (Aurobindo, 1927-50, pp. 307, vol. I)

It is important to note that in integral yoga, the subliminal does *not* stand for the sub- or unconscious but, on the contrary, it is a veiled and more intuitive inner domain of consciousness compared to our metacognitive access of consciousness. It is a wider 'intelligence' behind the surface mind and opens up to higher degrees of intuition and insight. The subliminal possesses all and perhaps more than high-level functions, such as thought, problem-solving, decision-making and creativity. It is a non-metacognitive higher-level function which we fail to report.[3]

> *The subliminal self stands behind and supports the whole superficial man; it has in it a larger and more efficient mind behind the surface mind, a larger and more powerful vital behind the surface vital, a subtler and freer physical consciousness behind the surface bodily existence. And above them it opens to higher superconscient as well as below them to lower subconscient ranges.* (Aurobindo, pp. 612, vol. IV)

In contrast to the outer mental, the *'inner mental'* is a silent, calm, unbound, unattached mind free from the influences and errors of the ignorant thought and will of the outer mind, directly open to the knowledge and guidance from above. It is the analytic mind, the cherished reason of the Enlightenment, but in its detached state from any emotional impulses of the vital mind or other conditionings of the outer mind.

The *'inner vital'* or *'higher vital'* is that emotional part in us that once it comes to the front, expresses itself with finer emotions of love, beauty, peace and calm. Meanwhile, the *'inner physical'* or *'subtle physical'* is a body made by a more subtle substance that is much more plastic, having the freedom and power that the physical gross body does not possess. It is a physical existence parallel to the material one that is accessible only by developing subtle senses and rising to the highest levels of consciousness.

[3] A concept that modern science is now referring to as the 'no-report paradigm' (Tsuchiya, Wilke, Frässle, A.F., & Lamme, 2015).

In the vision outlined by Aurobindo, the inner being is open to cosmic influences. The subliminal is in contact with the mental, vital and physical environment surrounding it. Every individual receives subliminally subtle forces, thoughts, and emotions via this *'environmental consciousness'* or *'circumconscience'*. Aurobindo maintains that this environmental consciousness receives influences beyond the physical body and can catch emotions, thoughts, passions, suggestions, or forces of illness from others, which can affect our subconscient and physical beings and eventually cross to the outer being, into our outer conscious awareness.[4]

Inmost being: Our 'inmost being' is the true being and individuality in us, not to be confused with the inner mind, vital or body. Also, the noblest thoughts and emotions of the inner being are the reflection of the qualities of our inmost being, our true evolutionary soul, which Aurobindo called the *'psychic being'* (the 'chaitya purusha', as the rishis, the ancient seers of the Indian Upanishad, termed it). The psychic being requires special attention; therefore, it will be described in depth within the next section.

But each individual is a being embedded in, and subjected to, the dynamics of a cosmic environment. As in the Samkhya philosophy, Aurobindo's integral cosmology also distinguishes between Soul and Nature.

Prakriti: What distinguishes the outer and inner being from the inmost being is that the former take part in the dynamical universe and are active in the temporal manifestation, belonging to what the Samkhya yoga system called *'Prakriti'*, the cosmic universal Nature, or just Nature. However, this conception of Nature is not limited to the Western naturalistic idea of the physical natural world. As we will see in more detail later, it is not a transcendent but also not a purely material phenomenal world. Prakriti contains all the universal dynamical manifestation, which is not solely material but vital and mental as well as beyond it, into the higher and lower planes of being.

Purusha: One's true inmost being, the psychic being, supports all actions of Nature, but is beyond it and transcends the temporal manifestation, it is what the Samkhya philosophy termed as the *'Purusha'*. Purusha is the Soul or Spirit-side, as opposed to the Prakriti or Nature-side. The psychic being is the Purusha in the heart center, but besides it, the Purusha can be mental or vital, standing behind these planes as an unaffected 'soul-witness' to the activities on these planes of being. By stepping back and going inwards, one learns to distinguish the phenomenal universe (Prakriti, Nature) on its physical, vital or mental plane with a mental, vital and physical 'witness awareness' that observes, but is unaffected by any clash of forces it experiences. *"The Yogi arrives first at a sort of division in his being in which the inner Purusha fixed and calm looks at the perturbations of the outer man as one looks at the passions of an unreasonable child…"* (Aurobindo, 1927-50, pp. 658, pt. IV).

This triple system of the outer, inner, and inmost beings is called the *'concentric system of being'* and is summarized in Table 1.[5] It represents the spiritual structure of the individuated being inside a larger cosmic context.

[4] Something along the lines of the "psi-field" theory of psychologist Jim Carpenter (Carpenter, 2015).
[5] The table is inspired by (Teklinski, 2016).

Table 1. The concentric system of being according to Sri Aurobindo.

Prakriti		***Purusha***
Outer being	**Inner (subliminal) being**	**Inmost Being**
Outer mental (sense - and physical mind + emotional or vital mind)	Inner mental (reason, intellect)	Psychic being (Chaitya purusha)
Outer vital (lower vital)	Inner vital (higher vital)	
Outer physical (gross body)	Inner physical (subtle physical)	

Therefore, according to this hierarchy of metaphysical structures of integral yoga, the psychological existence of the ordinary human is a mixture, an interdependent cross-interaction of all these beings. We are many different intermixed personalities at different levels, but we are only aware of those elements that arise to our outer surface nature. Behind our waking consciousness, exists an inner subliminal consciousness, with the subconscient and inconscient below and the superconscient above. But we misinterpret our surface emotions, such as love and hate, joy and sadness, euphoria, and depression, for the true emotions which define us, as that ego or little self which makes up our 'personality', and that we take for ourselves, believing it to be our true essence and nature. *"This chaos we call our soul"*, was Aurobindo's biting conclusion (Aurobindo, 1914-21, pp. Pt. II, Ch. VIII, p. 351). But our true essence is the psychic being, which should not be confused with what we call our 'character', 'personality' or 'ego-sense'. While its distinctive trait is of a divine emotional nature, our surface emotions are determined mostly by our outer vital impulses, mechanical habits, physical and emotional preferences, mental tendencies, unaware prejudices, and convictions. In Aurobindo's integral cosmology, these are only aspects of our surface untransformed personality.

This is an aspect that the modern philosophy of mind still struggles to consider and discriminate, as is vividly exemplified when it comes to the question of whether we have free will. Tomes have been written on this topic but rarely do we question who is supposed to be free? Free from what? And what is will? Is the entity supposed to be free (or not), the inner or the outer being? Is it its vital, mental, or physical part? Or are we speaking about the freedom of a no-better-defined 'soul'? Is the freedom of the lower vital a real 'freedom'? This lack of distinction and discrimination have led, again, to endless debates marked by confusion and inconsistencies which affect Western philosophy on the issue of free will. It might, instead, find a source of inspiration in Aurobindo's less coarse-grained psychology, potentially leading to more clarity and deeper insights.

As a side consideration, it should be briefly mentioned that integral yoga naturally integrates the 'seven chakra system', the spiritual centers of the ancient yoga meditation practices, but diverges in the practice of awakening the dormant 'Kundalini' – the spiritual cosmic energy, the universal 'Shakti' – which resides at the base of the spine and once awakened by the yogic practice, runs along the spine opening the other centers above, allowing us to reach the state of 'samadhi' –

merging our subjective identity in the Absolute by coalescing it with Satcitananda. In integral yoga, the awakening of Kundalini is neither a necessary nor an encouraged practice because it relies on the purification and transformation of the being, performed by a spiritual Shakti acting from above downwards.

The Psychic Being and Psychic Transformation

Integral yoga aims to transform the outer surface consciousness to the image of the inner divinity by obtaining self-perfection and gaining higher states of consciousness that can lead us beyond our present life-mind nature. Aurobindo called his own process of ascesis, a 'triple transformation': the psychic, the spiritual and the supramental transformation.

The first transformation, 'the psychic transformation', brings the soul, our inmost spiritual individuality, our 'mystical heart' – the psychic being–to the front. It will then take the lead and determine the transformation of all other parts. The qualities of the psychic being are primarily of a higher emotional nature, such as love, beauty and a perception of truth that does not need mental inferences. It has a sense of good, harmony, emotional equanimity, sweatiness, peace, and an intimate relationship with the Divine. *"The pure psychic being is of the essence of Ananda* [Bliss]*, it comes from the delight-soul in the universe."* (Aurobindo, 1914-21, p. 737)

In our intimate nature, these qualities are always present but hidden behind the veil of our untransformed mental, emotional, and physical activities. Only once this inmost true individuality has sufficiently developed itself can it come to the surface and impose itself over our outer superficial nature. *"It is one of the decisive moments of the integral Yoga when this psychic being, liberated, brought out from the veil to the front, can pour the full flood of its divinations, seeings and impulsions on the mind, life and body of man and begins to prepare the upbuilding of divinity in the earthly nature"* (Aurobindo, 1914-21, p. 150). At this point, it can begin to govern and transform our whole being, according to higher directives, without the lower impulses acting as tyrant external rulers, working from a direct action from the inside-out, which aims to turn every plane and part of being towards the Divine. This is the psychic transformation that transforms our state of ignorance into a state of knowledge. But, as long as the psychic being remains hidden behind the veil of activities of the material existence made of bodily sensations and appetites, the gross emotional impulses and the mental activities, it is subjected mainly to a passive evolution. Therefore, all that we are (or believe to be), depends on the clash between the outer mental, vital and physical forces and the outer events that escape our control in a domain of ignorance made of alternating pains and pleasures, rest and stress, ups and downs, which are determined by the mechanical aspect of Nature.

In fact, the psychic being is behind the physical heart, residing in the heart chakra. This heart center is also described in different forms throughout many traditions, particularly in Sufism, which speaks of the 'five levels of the heart' and is not alien to the Western mystical teachings that encourage the practice of the 'Prayer of the Heart'.

Aurobindo's psychic being must not be confused with the traditional Indian notion of the '*Self*' of the eternal and immutable Brahman, and which is said to identify with the '*Atman*', or '*Jivatman*', also just '*Jiva*', and which is the individuated reflex of the Self. Non-dual mystics refrain from speaking of a 'soul' and if they do, they do not mean the personality identifying itself

with an "I", having a feeling of selfhood. Here, and in Western metaphysics and psychology as well[6], the concept of the soul, if accepted at all, is usually considered a static, passive, and immutable witness, representing an immaterial and spiritual individuality that preserves its existence after physical death. According to this Eastern philosophical tradition, it then continues its journey in a cycle of reincarnations but is never conceived of as a spiritual individuality able to change and evolve through this process of transmigration. The notion of an evolutionary soul is absent.

Whereas Aurobindo contends otherwise. His cosmology integrates this classical perspective, inasmuch that it also recognizes the existence of an evolutionary soul, the psychic being, a pure 'inner flame' that is not just a static and eternal entity; rather, it is the very evolutionary essence of each individual that evolves life after life in the process of transmigration. While both the Jiva – the 'central being' – and the psychic being are a 'spark of the Divine' and are two aspects of the same individuality, the former is non-evolutionary; it is above evolution and projects, or 'individuates' an evolutionary '*psychic entity*' into Nature by what Aurobindo called an 'exclusive concentration' or 'self-limitation' of the Self. Or, taking a bottom-up perspective, it is the Jiva that merges itself in identity with the Divine and knows itself as a center of the multiple Divine, while the psychic being is the evolutionary outgrowth of the psychic entity, our true inmost individuality, that links the impersonal Absolute with a personal identity in a material, vital and physical individuality.

It is this psychic entity which, during its life experiences and its evolutionary journey of transmigrations, forms the psychic being. It grows and gains *"strength every time there is a higher movement in us, and, finally, by the accumulation of these deeper and higher movements there is developed a psychic individuality – that which we call usually the psychic being"* (Aurobindo, 1927-50, p. 103, vol. I).

This evolutionary soul progressively develops out of the nescience of the mineral, first in the plant, then in the animal, now in the human, and finally in the future 'gnostic being'. It is in this sense that the integrality of Aurobindo's metaphysics does not abolish or contradict the past spiritual knowledge, rather, it extends, complements and integrates it.

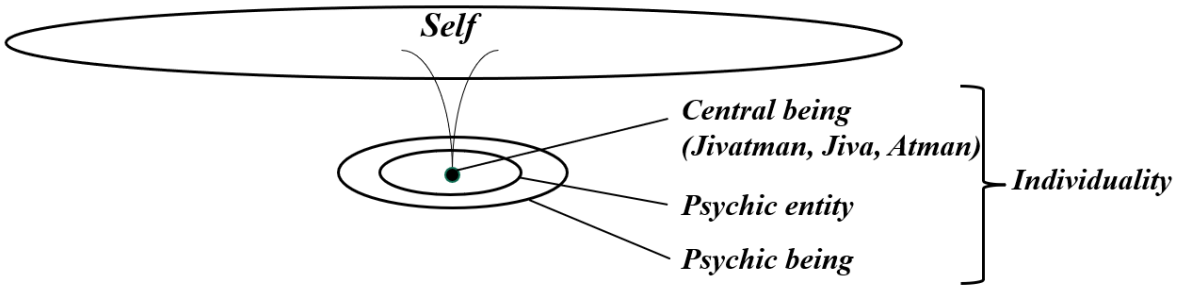

Figure 1. The evolutionary soul as a 'spark of the Divine'.

[6] Also, among those forms of Western psychology open to Eastern psychology, for example, the transpersonal psychology of Ken Wilber or the psychosynthesis of Roberto Assagioli, the tendency is to attribute little or no importance to the soul, let alone ascribe to it an evolutionary nature and purpose. For an interesting review of this aspect see the research of Teklinski (2016; 2019).

In anticipation to what we will examine in more detail later, note how here, Aurobindo's mystic cosmology begins to suggest a solution to the 'decombination' or 'individuation problem' that the cosmopsychist encounters. The soul-individuation is not a separation from its Source; rather, it emerges due to an individuation of the cosmic consciousness into itself by a process of 'exclusive concentration' leading to internal differentiations.

The Spiritual Transformation

While the psychic transformation is more of a divine emotional nature, the second transformation, which Aurobindo called the 'spiritual transformation', has as its main objective, an ascension towards higher states of cognition beyond the ordinary mental one.[7]

In the Aurobindonian integral scheme, several gradations exist between unconsciousness and supra-consciousness. Aurobindo described the gradations of the 'higher hemisphere', as those surpassing the mental consciousness as a series of sublimations. There is not just mind and a trans-rational mind, but several steps on the ladder of consciousness. He described it in the Life Divine, and named it, "The Ascend towards Supermind" (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. ch. XXVI), according to an ascending scheme that, at the bottom, places the mind, the conventional reason and analytic mind, still in the lower hemisphere. Only by going beyond the mind we enter into the trans-rational higher hemisphere where one first encounters the 'higher-mind', but also can continue beyond it, towards even higher cognitive states, namely an 'illumined mind', an 'intuitional mind', an 'overmind' and, at the summit, the 'Supermind' or 'divine Gnosis'.

Let us unpack this in more detail.

The higher mind: The first layer above mind is the 'higher-mind'. The peculiar aspects of the higher-mind (which must not be confused with intuition, which we will deal with later) is a large "*clarity of the spirit*" capable of a spontaneous inherent knowledge by a *"luminous thought-mind,"* a mind of *"spirit-born conceptual knowledge."* This kind of cognition is the first that meets us when we rise from a conceptive and rational mind and is considered the first step out of ignorance. It is a knowledge-power that tips into the first layers of a spiritual realm. It no longer proceeds by a stepwise logical process of inference and deduction, but rather, by a greater thought which does not need a seeking ratiocination because *"this limping action of our reason is a movement of ignorance searching for knowledge."* Instead, it proceeds by a *"harmony of significances put into thought-form."* However, this higher-mind is not just a passive tool of cognition. It also possesses an inherent power of action and creation that expresses itself in feelings, in life and even in the body, through the power and force of the idea it presents.

The illumined mind: The higher-mind is only one rung of the ascending ladder towards a full gnostic knowledge. The 'illumined mind' surpasses the vision of the higher-mind, transcending from the higher thought into a cognition guided by a *'spiritual light'*. It is characterized by a "*clarity of the spiritual intelligence […] and illumination of the spirit: a play of lightnings of spiritual truth"*. It is a spiritual-cognitive calm and wide enlightenment that operates not by thought, but by

[7] This is not to say that the psychic transformation isn't 'spiritual' in the ordinary sense of the term. Aurobindo distinguishes the two types of transformations as 'psychic' and 'spiritual' because of their distinct source and action: one coming from the heart center, the other from the centers above the head.

vision. In this spiritual light, there are no verbal representations; it is a consciousness that proceeds by an inner and more direct sight, way beyond any intellectual thought-conception. It is a *"spiritual sense that seizes something of the substance of Truth."* As the higher-mind, the illumined mind is not just a passive container, but brings with its spiritual vision, a light and energy into the heart. It infuses itself in the whole being and transmutes even the physical mind – enlarging it by *"replacing its narrow thought-power and its doubts by sight and pours luminosity and consciousness into the very cells of the body."*

Intuition: At a higher summit, we find the 'intuitional being'. It is *not* about an instinct or the proverbial 'gut feeling'. Intuition, in the terminology of integral yoga, refers to the step that comes close to an original knowledge by identity. 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"*. In other words, intuition is the first step from a phenomenal to a noumenal awareness, a phase towards a direct contact and 'seeing' of Kant's 'thing-in-itself'. This intuition, this 'lightning-flash' that emerges from the contact between the subject's consciousness and the object it contacts, is also a cognition of the hidden forces behind the appearances it meets, a first spark of intimate 'truth-perception', a penetrating and revealing touch beyond sight and conception. It is a light of truth, a 'truth-remembrance', so-called because it does not know by learning but, rather, creates a contact with something we already knew to be inherently true. It is an automatic certitude that does not proceed from any reasoned conclusion or verified conjecture. It is a supra-rational source of pure and native intuition, in which the lower intelligence of reason can be only an observer or registrar. Aurobindo describes it as having four powers: a power of 'revelatory truth seeing', a power of 'inspiration' or 'truth-hearing', a power of 'immediate seizing of significance' and a power of 'true and automatic discrimination'. Therefore, it can perform all the action of reason and much more than that. Also, intuition is not limited to a passive cognition of things but takes up and transforms the other parts of the being, namely the mind, the vital and the physical senses, imparting to it a deeper perception, leading us towards a divination of the body and a greater integrality and perfection. Thus, it can change and recast the whole consciousness, from a state of ignorance into the stuff of intuition transmuting our will, feelings, emotions, actions, and the very workings of the body consciousness.

The overmind: However, intuition is still not the true Knowledge by identity. Our subconscient and inconscient basis is too vast, deep and solid to be altogether penetrated and transformed. The next step in the ascent brings us to the overmind, a power of cosmic consciousness. When the overmind descends, the centralizing ego-sense is finally abolished and replaced by a *"wide cosmic perception and feeling of a boundless universal self." – "Many motions that were formerly ego-centric may still continue, but they occur as currents or ripples in the cosmic wideness".* Thoughts are no longer perceived as an individual act of cognition of a separate self but realized as 'cosmic Mind-waves'. *"Feelings, emotions, sensations are similarly felt as waves from the same cosmic immensity"* with the body being a mere point of action for a vast cosmic instrumentation. The sense of individuality, even that of our body and mind individuality, entirely disappears and reveals itself as the delightful play of cosmic forces alone.

The overmind consciousness is an unlimited consciousness of unity with the sense of the universe in oneself, or as oneself as a cosmic being. The nature of the being with all its thoughts, feelings, and bodily activities becomes more universal, all-understanding, all-embracing, cosmic, and infinite. This overmind is governed by the directions of the cosmic Self, where the body is a

physical instrument recognized as *"something instrumental to the action of a Transcendent and Universal Being"*, a cosmic center of the action of the Infinite. It is experienced as a consciousness of Light and Truth with a sensation of beauty and delight.

Here also, *"all essential experiences belonging to the mind, life, body are taken up and spiritualized, transmuted and felt as forms of the consciousness, delight, power of the infinite existence."* The other forms of cognition and active powers below, those of Intuition, illumined sight and thought, are themselves enlarged by the action of the overmind.

Of relevance for the individuation problem with which the Western philosophy of mind tackles with, is Aurobindo's observation that the overmind is not only a unitary cosmic consciousness but, conversely and complementarily, also the first principle of separate dynamism. It is by the action of the overmind that all dualities emerge from the 'One without a second' by an exclusive concentration. The overmind is a source of creative power in the manifestation of multitudes it has created, and that *"though luminous itself, keeps from us the full indivisible supramental Light, depends on it indeed, but in receiving it, divides, distributes, breaks it up into separated aspects, powers, multiplicities of all kinds"* (Aurobindo, 1927-50, pp. 138, vol. I).

This overmental transformation completes the spiritual transformation.

The Supermind

Therefore, the overmind still contains the seeds of a separative and divisive character. Despite its basis in a cosmic unity, its action is one of division and interaction in the cosmic play of the multiplicity. Whereas, at the highest step of the ascending ladder of consciousness, Aurobindo posits the Supermind.

It is the Vijñānamaya kosha of the Upanishads. Aurobindo perceived it as a divine Gnosis or 'Truth-Consciousness', the "*divine Nature in which there can be no place for the principle of division and ignorance; it is always a full light and knowledge superior to all mental substance or mental movement."* (Aurobindo, 1927-50, pp. 146, Vol. I) The state of consciousness of the future post-human species, the gnostic being.

The Supermind is *"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"* (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 989, pt. II, ch. XXVI). It is only the Supermind, the *"supreme self-determining truth-action and the direct power of manifestation of that Transcendence",* that can accomplish the final transmutation – the supramental transformation. While the overmind allows the individual consciousness to be universalized and, to some degree, transform the lower parts of the being, a basis of untransformed nescience in matter remains, which only the Supermind can transform completely. The transformation of the inert depths of the sub and inconscient is possible only by the descent of the supramental Light into matter, life, and mind, penetrating down to the material basis.

The teleological character of Aurobindo's vision is that matter will reveal itself as an instrument of the self-manifestation of Spirit. The Supermind is the highest level of consciousness, a 'Truth-

Consciousness', 'Truth-Knowledge', or 'Knowledge by identity', which would be proper to the new species, the gnostic being.

The supramental vision brings us back to our original unity in creation–a holistic unity, in which nothing is separated and where all is One. *"It sees everything from the stand-point of oneness and regards all things, even the greatest multiplicity and diversity, in the light of that oneness"* (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 1000, bk. II, ch. XXVII). The supramental sense is that of an ultimate Unity, Oneness and Wholeness of the Infinite, where everything we perceive at our ordinary mental level is like a hologram, a *"drop that is yet a concentration of the whole ocean and inseparable from the ocean"* (Aurobindo, 1914-21, p. 866, pt. IV, ch. XXIV). Not the unity of the mind, but a greater sense of Unity inherent in all things, a self-manifestation of the only true Thing.

In the supramental consciousness, one becomes aware of all phenomenal events in Nature and the cosmos as a result of a creative Idea, the 'Real-Idea' or 'Seed-Idea', a power of Consciousness expressive of the real Being, the Divinity in manifestation. The Supermind is the Truth-Consciousness that knows itself and sees the universe as a subordinate reality, resulting from an overmental creative process of differentiation of its own Real-Idea. The Real-Idea is the ultimate Archetype that the philosopher captures as the hidden, yet clearly perceptible, archetype and 'idea-form' in things and Nature.

Aurobindo subverts the conventional understanding of how the mind works. Mental processes are not only determined by a bottom-up mechanism that makes the thought, the mental construct, and the mental idea emerge as a combination and interaction of elementary neural units. It is a top-down process, in which a divine intuition percolates through the layers from the Supermind down to the mind and, thereby, is reduced, filtered, and eventually twisted into a mental image, meaning that it has lost most of its original insight and knowledge by identity, retaining only a relative truth of things.

> The fundamental nature of this Supermind is that all its knowledge is originally a knowledge by identity and oneness and even when it makes numberless apparent divisions and discriminating modifications in itself, still all the knowledge that operates in its workings, even in these divisions, is founded upon and sustained and lit and guided by this perfect knowledge by identity and oneness. The Spirit is one everywhere and it knows all things as itself and in itself, so sees them always and therefore knows them intimately, completely, in their reality as well as their appearance, in their truth, their law, the entire spirit and sense and figure of their nature and their workings. 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 of the nature, constitution and workings and have to learn about them, as the mind is at first ignorant of its object and has to learn about it because the mind is separated from its object and regards and senses and meets it as something other than itself and external to its own being. (Aurobindo, 1914-21, p. 786, pt. IV, ch. XIX).

Not a knowledge that proceeds by logical steps, inferences, or hypothesis to be tested; these are the inferior methods of reason, of an *'inflexible machinery of the rational intelligence'* that is a form of cognition, proper to the domain of an obscure ignorance and that is compelled to search for truth by an inductive process or piecewise analytic procedure, revealing the truth of things only

partially. The supramental gnosis instead directly reveals the truth of things by an immediate, direct, and inherent contact. All that is mental appears as a deformed, suppressed, pale and partial imperfect figure of that original divine cognition.

Moreover, the supramental consciousness has a completely different time perception, in which past, present and future are seen unitarily, a single continuous map of knowledge. This '*three-fold seeing*' of time (*trikaladrishti'*) that links past, present and future as an indivisible whole (more on this later).

Western philosophy, especially its modern incarnation of analytic philosophy, emphasizes analytic reasoning, rational analysis, and logical inferences, eventually augmented by mathematics, empiricism, and formal logic, as the mental tools for attaining a knowledge that is supposed to bring us closer to the truth. However, as is well known, strict adherence to this principle which the logical positivists, such as Frege, Russel, Wittgenstein, or Carnap tried to apply to its extremes, didn't succeed. The revival of phenomenological approaches, philosophical idealism, and the rediscovery of past metaphysical thought could not be stopped. Nevertheless, the Age of Enlightenment has enthroned the mind itself as the ultimate tool beyond which nothing more is and can be said. This underlying assumption is what also conditions the modern philosophy of '*mind*' (the terminology already betrays it). It is all about mind and matter, eventually the subconscious and intuition, but always studied from the frame of reference of the ordinary human consciousness, not much more. And yet, there seems to be an ineliminable aspect of reality that refuses to be cast into analytic terms alone. Aurobindo's answer is that the physical and the mental are only two aspects, the thin surfaces of a cosmic reality going far beyond them, converging towards a supramental Gnosis. If we would enlarge our perspective to this integral vision of mind, life, and matter, a different and, perhaps, much deeper understanding of reality might be possible.

Satcitananda

Finally, crown of the higher hemisphere is the Satcitananda of the Indian Vedic tradition, the Absolute, the ultimate reality that is the Brahman of the Advaita Vedanta. It is the state of consciousness in which rests the 'enlightened' and that words cannot describe other than saying that it represents a triune state of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. It is the Anandamaya kosha, the 'sheath of bliss' in which the 'seer' is established once the highest state of consciousness is attained. The practitioner realizes that, ultimately, all things are the ultimate Subject, the supreme Self, the spaceless, timeless, and unchanging impersonal Absolute, the non-dual Transcendent. It is the Buddhist 'emptiness', 'vacuity' or 'sunya'. Therefore, once realized, this leads to 'liberation', 'moksha', or 'nirvana', the release from suffering due to the absence of mind's activities. It is a common theme in the Asian tradition and Aurobindo's integral yoga makes no exception.

This is the ascending ladder of the higher hemisphere of consciousness according to Aurobindo's scheme.

The Vertical System of Being and Cosmic Consciousness

To summarize, Diagram 1 complements Table 1 by displaying the full spectrum of the vertical system of consciousness in Aurobindo's cosmology.

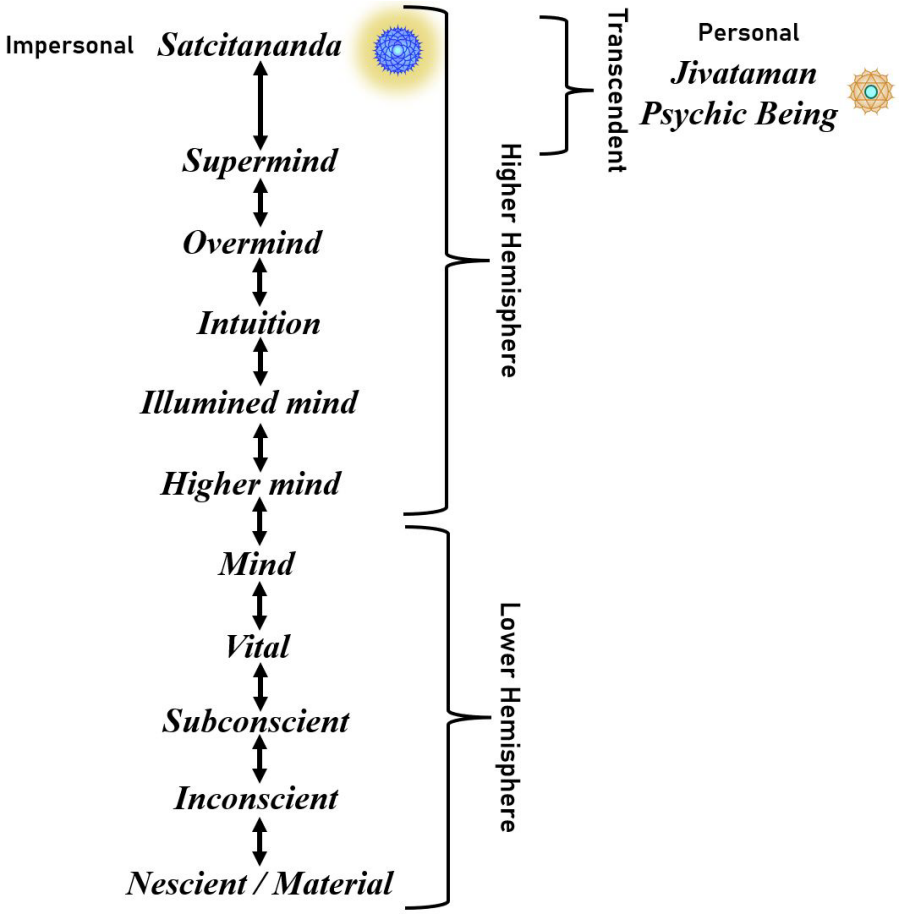

Diagram 1. The vertical system of the planes and parts of being.

Note that this is not just a structure of consciousness related to an individual being. It is a cosmology of consciousness applied to the universal planes. Like the psychic being that connects the transcendent with the individual, the Supermind links the unmanifest Divine, the Satcitananda, the Brahman or the Vedantic Absolute beyond space and time, with its immanent and dynamic cosmic universal manifestation. The Supermind is, so to speak, the delegate of this Absolute in the manifestation determined by space, time and causality. The physical universe we are aware of in our ordinary mental consciousness is only an aspect of this self-manifestation. We can generally speak of a cosmic consciousness incorporating a cosmic mental, a cosmic vital and a cosmic physical, but also a cosmic subconscient and inconscient. Thus, the Divine is both transcendent and immanent.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect to accept for some, especially the scientifically minded Neo-Darwinist, is that, for Aurobindo, all these planes of existence are *not* the creation of an evolutionary process. They preceded the creation of earthly life and even the physical universe itself. This is to say, for example, Aurobindo does *not* consider the mind a form of cognition resulting from a biological evolutionary process. Mentality and life emerge *in* the material world – the cosmic physical – but are not created by and do not originate from it. In this integral vision, the terrestrial physical life is also the outer manifestation of a life-force that pre-existed, in a more subtle form, the material universe itself. This amounts to suggesting that a cosmic life plane and a cosmic mind plane were already in existence before the Big Bang.

The planes of consciousness and parts of being according to integral yoga are more complex than the structure we presented here. However, this was intended as an overview, which will suffice for our purposes. For a more detailed description of Aurobindo's huge 'topography of consciousness', the reader will have to resort to his writings, especially (Aurobindo, 1914-19; 1914-21) and (Aurobindo, 1927-50) or, for a specialized redux, see also (Cornelissen, 2018).

Evolution, Spirit and Matter

Involution and Evolution

The word 'evolution', from Latin 'evolvere', means to 'unroll' or 'open out' or 'uncover'. Interestingly, it is etymologically more fitting to Aurobindo's metaphysics than to the modern Darwinian accepted notion of a descent with modification. Because it implies a process that makes something emerge, which is inherently contained in the thing that 'unrolls', by an ever increasing complexity of material organization. It seems to suggest that there is something already fully developed but concealed or hidden, that evolution unveils–that is, something that was previously veiled by an opposite process of evolution, namely an 'involution'.

In fact, the peculiarity of Aurobindo's spiritual emergentism is that it is complemented by an opposite 'immergentism'. In Aurobindo's cosmology all the physical manifestation is an involution of a Super-Consciousness that subjected itself to an oblivion, what he called a 'sacrifice' of the Divine, by plunging itself into a sort of 'self-absorbed' or 'self-concealed' and 'masked' still divine consciousness, but latent and 'asleep' in the inconscient matter. *"Matter is a form of veiled Life; Life a form of veiled Mind"* (Aurobindo, 1910-50, p. 502). It is the One that has self-involved itself in the depth of a descending ladder of consciousness. Thereby, matter, which is inherently still an expression of an original divinity, nevertheless manifests a slumbering but indwelling spirit as a mechanical and inconscient substance, in a gross material universe–in and as 'cosmic ignorance' – and from which it is re-emerging ('un-rolling') by an evolutionary principle.

On one hand, there is an involution of a superconscient Spirit descending from the higher planes into the planes below, now growing by a bottom-up process as an inconscient spirit in matter, and unfolding itself from a nescient state to progressively higher states of consciousness. On the other hand, the lower planes are also immanently guided by the action of a top-down process of the same superconscient Spirit from above. The mechanistic aspect of the physical universe is not something from which consciousness emerged by a combination of unconscious elements, it is itself the outer expression of an involved consciousness and which, due to this self-forgetfulness, has become mechanical and automatic. The forces that drive this evolutionary process come from below, in the form of a material process that conditions it from the outside by the laws of physics and by the known Darwinian evolutionary principles of natural selection, genetic drifts of (apparently) 'random' mutations, environmental factors, adaptation, survival and reproduction of the fittest, etc. But, at the same time, there are other types of forces that come from above and guide the process from within by an inherent consciousness–more or less directly or indirectly according to the plane of existence, in contact with that original superconscience.

In Aurobindo's vision the universe resulted from a process of individuation and fragmentation, in which matter was the last appearance, not the first basis of existence. Here, mind is not a creation

resulting from an epiphenomenon of an aggregate of matter. Rather, mind is already involved in it and re-emerges – it 'e-volves' – out of matter during the evolutionary process once the physical aggregate is ready to hold it. While the Supermind has to hide itself acting only indirectly, behind thick layers of gross substance, nevertheless, it works out our earthly conditions.

However, mind, overmind, Supermind, the vital plane, let alone the Absolute, do not evolve, they are ever-present realities on their own and are not subjected to any evolution (Aurobindo called it 'typal worlds'). These universal planes emerge in time, one by one, on the physical plane. It is their progressive emergence in and through matter that we call 'evolution'.

But what is this divine Consciousness trying to achieve in the material existence? In the emergentist vision of Aurobindo, it is the 'delight of being' that seeks to realize itself as 'delight of becoming'. Delight of being is the intimate nature of Satcitananda that is no longer superconscient, but subconscient in matter and seeks in mind and life to realize itself by emerging in the becoming. At bottom also a protozoan seeks an intimate, concealed, and subconscious aim and urge for the finding of its original supreme delight of being in the flux and cycle of life-experiences, which expresses itself in what we call the 'instinct of survival'. *"Delight of being is universal, illimitable and self-existent, not dependent on particular causes, the background of all backgrounds, from which pleasure, pain and other more neutral experiences emerge"* (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 106, pt. I, ch. XI).

We all know from first-hand experience how strong the survival instinct is. It is one of the foundations of evolutionary biology and is observed not only in the animal kingdom but in plants and even single-celled organisms. As we will see next, even a single cell has some sort of 'physical mind' and behaves–that is, reacts, swims, hunts for its prey, avoids obstacles, has a memory, and can even predict events in advance–as if driven by some form of 'basal sentience,' 'basal desire,' or 'basal will' for the delight of existence, which we call 'instinct of survival.' The materialist is tempted to naturalize this behavior, downplaying it as a complicated adaptive mechanism driven by natural selection, one that we should not anthropomorphize. However, while science remains mute regarding why this instinct of survival developed in an apparently life-less and instinct-less universe in the first place, Aurobindo's natural ontology, positing the delight of being as a universal and fundamental trait of existence that precedes life itself, might not only remain a viable option but even have a better explanatory power for the behavior of living matter. It can close the explanatory gap separating a mechanistic and apparently unconscious and purposeless cosmos from the 'miracle' of consciousness and sentient life. In Aurobindo's cosmology, the indifferent God of Spinoza, the blindly striving Will of Schopenhauer or, more recently, Kastrup's unreflective and 'instinctive Mind at large', acting only on the basis of a blind will, though capable through a long evolutionary process to grow in its self-awareness (Kastrup, 2019) are, at best, the cosmic vital subjected to the cosmic unconscious, not the ultimate universal Consciousness. They captured a particular aspect of an omniscient and omnipotent Divinity on the lowest planes where it appears to be an involved instinctive universal will. It is the finding of an absolute, eternal, infinite Self-existence, and Self-awareness, but timeless and unmanifest Self-delight of being in its self-involved temporal manifestation, what secretly supports the universe and is its hidden truth, force, motivation, aim and goal.

The Supramental Transformation

In Aurobindo's yoga the psychic and spiritual transformation are still not the final consummation of the evolution of spirit out of matter. The realization of the supramental consciousness is old as the Indian Vedic text. The ancient rishis called it the 'Sun of Truth'. But realizing the supramental consciousness is still an inner realization, not a physical transformation of the species. The ascent of the mental being who climbs up to the Supermind might realize a universalized awareness and live in a transcendent bliss, but this does not lead to a descent of the Supermind in matter, which, according to Aurobindo, is the only that can effectuate a complete transformation and will bring into matter the full dynamism of the spirit.

It is this final integral transformation where the spirit transmutes matter, without leaving aside the material existence, that can be called a 'divine materialism'. It acknowledges the fact that, not a spiritual mystic realization is the true meaning and purpose of our existence, but that matter is the basis and instrument for the full self-manifestation of the Spirit.

Aurobindo, and later also his spiritual partner Mirra Alfassa, tried this ultimate and most difficult transformation, namely, to bring down the Supermind in their bodies – a transmutation process in and of the cells – by what they called 'cell yoga'. The secret of matter relies precisely in its concreteness and stability; it is only its solidity that can hold the full power of the divine Supermind, which would transmute the physical body to its image and even convey physical immortality. The most extreme contraries, that of matter and spirit, life and death or omniscience and complete ignorance, can be reconciled only by the unitary power of the Supermind. Aurobindo and Alfassa left a huge documentation which described not only the inner states of consciousness they attained, but also the first intermediate steps towards a physical transformation. The gnostic change will also lead to the supramental transformation in the cellular structure which, in the previous evolutionary stages of Nature, was effectuated almost exclusively by the environment and the blind clash of material forces, as conceived in the frame of Darwinian evolution. This is the difference between human and animal. The appearance of mind is an intermediate necessary step in evolution because it endows the human species with the ability to participate to this process, consciously and actively.

But almost all what our body is and does is ruled by the laws of a subconscient or inconscient plane. The difficulty resides in making these obscure lower planes of existence become conscious and subject to the supramental control, light, and action. The aim is to bring the Idea and Will-Force of the divine Power of the Spirit in direct dynamic action on all levels – in our mind, emotions and down to the still subconscient, which is the cause of an ignorance dominating our existence.

Therefore, what distinguishes Aurobindo's integral yoga from other yoga or spiritual practices is that it not only effectuates a mystic awakening or a spiritual transformation to realize some extra-cosmic reality, but also aims at an integral transformation of our subconscient and inconscient parts down to the very physical. It is about the awakening of a 'body-consciousness' which, at this evolutionary stage, is still dominated by the inconscient in the cells.

> It is such a change and such a reshaping of life for which humanity is blindly beginning to seek, now more and more with a sense that its very existence depends upon finding the way. The evolution of mind working upon life has developed an organization of the activity of

> mind and use of matter which can no longer be supported by human capacity without an inner change. (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 1092, XXVIII)

Aurobindo rejects the view of the classical spiritual teachings that consider the physical transformation of secondary importance. The polarity of matter and spirit must be reconciled. The spiritual transformation also aims to an exterior and material metamorphosis, this being the real reason for the manifestation: the fusion of spirit with matter. It integrates the spiritualism of the East with the materialism of the West, completing, widening, and transcending both towards a synthesis, where both appear to have their relative significance.

Thus, from Aurobindo's perspective, the dichotomy between consciousness and matter, or mind and body, which has puzzled Western metaphysics so much, dissolves into a complementary polarity. In a sense, the panpsychist is right: Matter is a form of consciousness, but self-forgetful and nescient. While the body is not just a blind mechanistic material aggregate: It is ruled by a subconsciously awakened mind, something that, if true, could have far-reaching implications, not only for our philosophical worldview of the relationship between mind, body, and matter but for biology and medicine as well.

The Mind of the Cells

Aurobindo was not too explicit about this last aspect of the integral ascesis. What is known is that he went into seclusion for 24 years until his death. Aurobindo claimed that he was trying to attain a difficult spiritual and material transformation in his body. This cellular work was taken up by Mirra Alfassa, the "Mother". She also was largely hesitant to speak openly about something that had to yet be accomplished and which success or failure was far from clear. Nevertheless, one of her disciples, Bernard Enginger, also named Satprem, who was frequently in correspondence with her, collected a 13 volumes series from 1962 to 1973 entitled, "The Mother's Agenda" (Alfassa & Satprem, 1983), which held several accounts outlining her exploration into body consciousness.

The picture of life emerging from these last stages of integral yoga is that of a consciousness in each biological cell at work through a kind of 'mind in matter' or 'mind in the cells'. But this mind in the cell, in its still untransformed inconscient state, is mostly dependent from a reactive, unconscious, and subconscious instinct that can sicken us, cure miraculously or let us die suddenly. From the writings of Aurobindo and Alfassa, it appears that the biggest obstacle to such realization showed to be the subjugation of the lowest layer of consciousness to the supramental light. In the words of Alfassa:

> I went down into a place ... a place simply in the human consciousness, thus necessarily in my body ... I have never seen anything more timorous, fearful, feeble and mean! It's ... it must be a part of the cells, part of the consciousness, something that lives in apprehension, fear, dread, anxiety ... It was truly, truly dreadful. And we carry that within us! We aren't aware of it, it's almost subconscious – for you see, the consciousness is there to prevent us from yielding to that – it's cowardly, and it can make you fall sick in a minute. (Alfassa & Satprem, 1983, p. 484, Nov. 5, 1960).

Aurobindo's cryptic poetical verses suggest he already had similar experiences:

I have been digging deep and long
Mid a horror of filth and mire
A bed for the golden river's song,
A home for the deathless fire.
I have laboured and suffered in Matter's night
To bring the fire to man;
But the hate of hell and human spite
Are my meed since the world began.
(Aurobindo, 1930-1950)

Aurobindo contends that once the Supermind acts in the cells, even death is not inevitable but reveals itself to be a sort of subconscious cellular 'habit', an 'accident' that must not remain forever part of the eternal law of life. But immortality is not the purpose of integral yoga, it is only a consequence, an intermediary step towards a realization that should be far more reaching and decisive. This is not that kind of immortality that, maybe one day, will establish genetic engineering or medicine, nanotechnologies or transhumanism. Instead, it will be the direct consequence of a state of consciousness of an inside and outside perfection.

However, the inconscient of the cells, this nescient abyss hides a secret. While Aurobindo described *"the dumb occult consciousness ... which operates in the cells."* (Aurobindo, 1914-19, pp. 762, pt. II, ch. XIX), he added also an important note, namely that *"Almighty powers are shut in Nature's cells"* (Aurobindo, 1950, p.370, bk. IV, canto III).

Something reminiscent of Haeckel's 'biopsychism' (to distinguish from panpsychism), where all living matter, thus including unicellular organisms, has some form of sentience and mental properties (this has also been reconsidered more recently (Fermin, 2020)). Interesting to note in this regard are the several findings that have led to the current debate in biological sciences over whether we should associate, with plants and cells, a 'basal cognition.' There is now an increasing body of evidence showing that some form of 'basal cognition' is already present and working in plants and even single biological cells (for a scientific review of basal cognition, see (Gershman & al., 2021; Lyon & al., 2021; Segundo-Ortin, 2021). Plants and cells are capable of associative learning, memory, and anticipation – that is, they have some elementary form of a 'physical mind.' How so, if there is no brain, no central nervous system, and no neurons at work? We have the right to conjecture that mind is already present in some involuted and concealed form in matter (for more on this, see Masi, 2022b).

In a famous passage in her diary Alfassa explains that *"at the very bottom of the inconscience most hard and rigid and narrow and stifling, I struck upon an almighty spring that cast me up forthwith into a formless, limitless Vast, generator of all creation"* (Alfassa & Satprem, 1983, p. 246, Nov.8, 1958).

Which means that, that according to this integral cosmology, deep into the core of matter, there is the same supramental vibration below that one has realized above. The hermetic 'as above, so below' acquires its full significance: at the bottom of nescience, one finds the power of omniscience. An omniscience that lost itself in a cosmic self-forgetfulness finds back to itself. In that physical state the body experiences the formidable pulsations of the Eternal: *"all the results of the Falsehood had disappeared: Death was an illusion, sickness was an illusion, ignorance was*

an illusion – something that had no reality, no existence.... Only Love, and Love, and Love, and Love – immense, formidable, stupendous, carrying everything" (Alfassa & Satprem, 1983, Apr. 13, p.148, 1962).

It is the second evolutionary transition, no longer from matter to life, but from life to a life divine.

The Gnostic Being and the Life Divine

Thus, following Aurobindo, the final aim of the evolutionary process, or at least the most distant aim actually visible, is the realization of a superconscience in matter. A superconscience which intimate nature and character will be that of the unity in diversity, where the individual consciousness will coalesce into that of the collective. Yet, maintaining its individuality and divine personality, existing in a superhuman supramentalized form, knows through a knowledge by identity and lives in a state of 'overlife'. What Aurobindo envisaged as a new species, beyond the human, the gnostic being.

Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point is palpable here. The goal of the evolutionary impulse, guided by a spiritual energy from within, will lead the noosphere to the 'planetization' of consciousness.

It will be a species that will progressively unfold the Divine on Earth, with a complete self-knowledge, capable of a divine delight of self-expression, fully aware of its individual and cosmic personality and impersonality. Its action will not be guided by the trails and errors of mind, but by an instantaneous unfiltered divine knowledge, the divine gnosis. According to this vision, there will be no contradiction between materiality and spirituality, the inner and outer life, the universalized individuality, and the world. Because falsehood, disharmony, half-truths, or any form of ignorance, pain and suffering will be 'de-realized' by the supramental Light. Illness, sickness and physical, emotional, or mental suffering will be replaced by the supreme Love, Beauty, Harmony, and perfect effortless and flawless action of a Consciousness-Force. Death will be recognized for its service and meaning, but also for its falsehood that will have been eradicated from the cells. The gnostic being will be immortal, physically, and cognitively perfect, an image of the Spirit in physical form. It will live in the eternity of that past, present and future and the unity of this individuality, as the same unity in diversity of a gnostic collective, expressing an innumerable Oneness.

The mechanical workings of Nature will be replaced by a Truth-Knowledge, Truth-Sight, Truth-Feeling, Truth-Will, Truth-Sense and a Truth-Dynamism, as the spontaneous and normal states of consciousness and the inherent operational activity of the gnostic being. A divine Will, expressive of a free and spontaneous self-unfolding of the Spirit. A divine Life upon Earth.

> The gnostic life will exist and act for the Divine in itself and in the world, for the Divine in all; the increasing possession of the individual being and the world by the Divine Presence, Light, Power, Love, Delight, Beauty will be the sense of life to the gnostic being." – "Love will be for him the contact, meeting, union of self with self, of spirit with spirit, a unification of being, a power and joy and intimacy and closeness of soul to soul, of the One to the One, a joy of identity and the consequences of a diverse identity. It is this joy of an intimate self-

> revealing diversity of the One, the multitudinous union of the One and a happy interaction in the identity, that will be for him the full revealed sense of life. Creation aesthetic or dynamic, mental creation, life creation, material creation will have for him the same sense. It will be the creation of significant forms of the Eternal Force, Light, Beauty, Reality, – the beauty and truth of its forms and bodies, the beauty and truth of its powers and qualities, the beauty and truth of its spirit, its formless beauty of self and essence. (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 1020, pt. II, ch. XXVII)

Aurobindo contends that this will not only be possible but the inevitable destiny of life on Earth.

Towards an Integral Cosmology

The previous chapter was an introduction to the metaphysics and vision of Aurobindo. It is a cosmological and spiritual framework which, in its main traits, was outlined in the 1920s. His real work, however, came to the surface only after his departure and is best recognized in the accounts of cell yoga, which were described in the Agenda, thanks to Satprem's transcriptions, appearing only in the late 1970s. Until then, the full dimension of their vision had not come to light.

What I would like to do in this chapter is to reframe, in an integral philosophical understanding, the cosmic reality, including matter and spirit in a single and extended evolutionary vision and that is, I contend, in line with modern science and more coherent than other metaphysical frameworks based on models of a universal consciousness. Special emphasis will be on aspects of teleological nature and final causes in evolution, seeing how they might furnish an answer to longstanding questions, which previously seemed to be irreconcilable inside an exclusively material- or a mental-monistic paradigm.

From the One to the Many, the Personal and Impersonal and the Nature of Mind and Matter

One might call physicalism–material monism – and the current forms of rationalistic and materialistic reductionist naturalism, a 'one-dimensional cosmology'. Similarly, dualism, as the word suggests, can be seen as a 'two-dimensional cosmology', where mind and matter have their distinct reality. Even panpsychism, cosmopsychism and analytic idealism do not go much further than a one or two-dimensional mind-matter perspective. Also, the Vedantic non-dual tradition, even though originally inspired by a multi-layered Vedic cosmology, is perhaps the most extreme form of monism which emphasizes its one-dimensional view ('all is Brahman').[8] But, most importantly, these metaphysical paradigms still lack a coherent evolutionary cosmology, ignoring the evolutionary aspects of life. Whereas, Aurobindo integrates these previous ontologies, but extends it to an integral multidimensional cosmology articulated by the universal planes and parts and augmented by an evolutionary vision.[9]

[8] In this context, the term 'dimension' shouldn't be confused with a mathematical or physical dimension!
[9] This may sound suggestive of Gebser's multi-dimensional 'structures of consciousness'. The analogies are not completely coincidental: the late Gebser was inspired by Aurobindo's writing.

This extended and evolutionary paradigm might be helpful to see under a different light some difficulties of the contemporary philosophy of mind and potentially suggest some directions toward its resolution.

For example, as well known, panpsychism and theories of universal consciousness suffer from the infamous combination or decombination problem, respectively. If even elementary particles have experiences, as panpsychism contends, how could these microscopic subjects combine to constitute a macroscopic subject? On the other hand, in the present integral cosmology based on an ontology of universal consciousness, the latter issue arises. Namely, how did a transcendent timeless, spaceless and featureless Absolute – the Vedic nirguna-Brahman – which is supposed to be the non-dual ultimate unity, become a multifold polarity manifesting itself as an extremely fragmented and particularized cosmos, with material objects made of atoms, molecules and particles, and the appearance in the evolutionary process of an individuation of consciousness–that is, minds and bodies? Or, rephrasing this in terms of the decombination problem, how can the one Subject become many subjects with its own distinctive self, yet retain its own subjectivity?

Kastrup, who was largely inspired by Schopenhauer and his vision of the world as Will (Kastrup, 2020), submits that in his universal idealistic model, all living organisms are 'dissociated alters' of the Mind at large. These alters, or 'discrete centers of self-awareness', arise due to some dissociative process that psychiatrists know as 'dissociative identity disorder' (Kastrup, 2018).

The integral cosmology describes a similar process of universal 'self-limitation', something that was pointed out recently by Swami Medhananda's comparative analysis of Aurobindo's cosmology with cosmopsychism (Medhananda, 2022). For the details of how this process of self-limitation solves the decombination problem, I defer the reader to his paper. Also, Shani and Keppler contend that there is in principle no insurmountable individuation problem in the context of cosmopsychism (Shani, 2022).

Here I will emphasize that, in Aurobindo, this complementarity between universalization and individuation has a multi-dimensional character. The decombination or individuation–that is, the apparent fragmentation of the undifferentiated Brahman appears on all the universal planes: into 'material quanta' (particle, atoms, molecules, etc.), 'vital quanta', 'mental quanta', and 'psychic quanta'–in form of 'divine sparks', Jivatman, psychic entities, and the psychic beings, the latter resulting from evolutionary processes.

While Chalmer's notorious 'hard problem of consciousness' (Chalmers, 1995) is naturally resolved by positing consciousness as an inherent and fundamental aspect of reality; the decombination problem needs no explanation as well, because self-differentiation is already an inherent and fundamental principle of the cosmic Mind itself. With its power of division, discrimination and separation, the overmind creates particularizations, from particles to self-aware centers.

Aurobindo points out the double aspect of the overmind. On one hand it links the planes of the unitarian supramental Truth-Consciousness, which inherent nature is always that of a perfect Unity and Oneness with the planes of polarity and multiplicity. But, on the other hand, it is also the in-between mediator between Unity and division, between the supramental One-Idea and its expression in infinite possibilities, it is that which breaks down the transcendental Unity into the phenomenal multiplicity. It is the first original power of distinction which, by a self-limitation

pinpoints the Infinite into a finite object, making our universe appear in its atomized and particularized form in infinitesimal material points, and yet following a principle of unity in diversity, acting creatively with novel and diverse creations in the physical and temporal manifestation. A cosmic Mind, which dwells in its self-created atomic existence and which, by a creative process of associations of these infinitesimal points, carries out a play of forces with the Real-Idea it receives from above. Precisely in this resides the source and origin of the world of dualities, created by the primal self-demarcating act of separation, division, and atomization, from an original lost Unity, which characterizes the material domain we are accustomed with, and yet is able to put everything in its right relations, despite an enormous complexity of particularities. In Aurobindo's words: *"Thus not any eternal and original law of eternal and original Matter, but the nature of the action of cosmic Mind is the cause of atomic existence. Matter is a creation, and for its creation the infinitesimal, an extreme fragmentation of the Infinite, was needed as the starting-point or basis"* (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 252, pt. I, ch. XXV).

While, mentality is, indeed, one of the cosmic aspects that pervades the entire universe, minds are 'exclusive multiple concentrations' of the cosmic Mind, or 'universal Mind', which is a derivative power of the overmind. Or, to put it in other words, in the 'aurobindonian' cosmology, our mind is a minor, reduced and localized form of cosmic Mind in an organic embodiment, mimicking its functions by a diminished power.

The same fits also on other cosmic planes. On the physical plane, matter also is a concentration of consciousness, a 'self-limitation' or a 'self-compression' of the Spirit in 'energy-substance', but passive, absorbed and forgetful of itself and its overmental origin. It is here where there is an intersection with the mental monism of philosophical idealism. In a certain sense, the philosophical idealist who declares that all is mental has its merits. Huxley's and Kastrup's Mind at large is an intuitive perception of the existence of this cosmic Mind and the dissociated alter is, indeed, in line with the notion of integral cosmology as an 'Infinite's self-concentration'. But, in Aurobindo's cosmology, the mental aspect of reality is only a particular appearance of an immanent overmind, which goes well beyond mentality alone. In his multi-layered reality the world appears to be only physical or only mental because we are still only physical and mental beings. If we rise above the mental, its higher mental, illumined mental, intuitional, overmental and finally supramental aspects would become evident as well. It is this that makes the material universe appear to be amenable to mental cognition, as our mind is also a derivative cognitive power of the overmind.

Seeing things from this perspective, might help us to find an answer to other questions of the philosophy of science.[10] If our mind is a diminished self-limiting and involved power of the overmind, and the material universe has been organized according to overmental principles that originate from a the same cosmic Mind, it should, therefore, come as no surprise if our mental sciences are able to decipher a good amount of the cosmos' workings in terms of mental representations: when we look at the world with the mind, we see its mental aspect. The rationality and intelligibility of the world mirrors the immanent cosmic Mind that lies behind all the dynamical processes, the play of forces in space and time of the material universe, with our mind being a localized reflection of it. It is this missing link that led Einstein to say that *"the eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility"* and *"the fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle"* (Einstein, 1936). The paradox arises only if we assume the world to be soulless, purposeless, without meaning

[10] The analogy suggested in this paragraph is the author's one, it is not present in Aurobindo's writings.

and, especially, mindless. Galileo said *"the book of Nature is written in the language of mathematics."* The universe itself is an 'emanation' from overmind, and which, while maintaining a contact with the supreme formless, featureless and undivided Consciousness, its inherent nature is nevertheless that to fragment, demarcate and separate by causality in space and time–it works out quality, quantity, number, structure, space, relations, and change. Abstracting from quality, mathematics is precisely the study of quantity, number, structure, space, relations, and change; that's, ultimately, what number theory, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and calculus entail. This is the reason for the apparently *"unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences"* that physicist Wigner famously wondered about in 1959, triggering an endless debate that continues into present day (Wigner, 1959). What appears to us an 'unreasonable miracle' becomes something natural once we recognize how our minds, being an individuation of a universal self-limiting Mind, work by the same principles of division and fragmentation and through which we look back in its cosmic physical appearance, which was originated by the cosmic Mind itself.[11]

The same fits for a cosmic Life, or a universal Life, and which already contains life as an inherent cosmic reality, rather than an emergent purely material epiphenomenon of matter. As the action of cosmic Mind is the cause of atomic existence, so is the action of cosmic Life the cause of the 'life quanta', the cell, and the individual life existence. Not the other way around. Starting from this perspective, Aurobindo claims that the brain is not the origin of our mental activity, but it is the creation, instrument, and channel of a universal Mind in the particularized expression of an earthly individualized embodiment. Our brain and body are a derivative expression that reflect an original preexistent and immanent cosmic Mind and cosmic Life respectively on the cosmic physical plane: *"[...] the brain is not the creator of thought, but itself the creation, the instrument and here a necessary convenience of the cosmic Mind"* (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 252, pt. I, ch. XXIV). Huxley's idea of the brain being a 'reducing valve' of a Mind at large came close to this view. According to Huxley our mind filters reality under normal conditions because, otherwise, we would be overwhelmed by the knowledge of this universal Mind. However, psychedelic drugs can remove the filter and bring us into contact with the Mind at large, leading to the experiences that several mystics describe. In his words: *"To make survival possible biologically, Mind at large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system"* (Huxley, 1954).

Yet, Aurobindo insists, the overmind comprehends the totality of things and their integral principle, while acting in a cosmos of polarities and multiplicities, where the personal and impersonal aspects are only two facets of manifestation of the same original Consciousness, transcending the principles of personality or impersonality. For the overmind, the Divine can assume a personal or an impersonal existence. For our mind, the notion of a personal Deity, like that of the monotheistic Abrahamitic religions, the polytheistic Hindu pantheon or the pantheistic conception of a Spinozian God, are mutually exclusive and irreconcilable conceptions. The overmind recognizes them all as the different versions and appearances of the very same Entity. They appear as contradictory only to our limited mental cognition.

[11] For the more technically inclined reader in mathematical physics, we also note the curious fact that one can rewrite all the laws of physics with a local measure of information, called 'Fisher information', which can be interpreted as the ability to distinguish, differentiate and separate (Soffer, 1995). In this sense, positing an information-theoretic physical universe is in line with Aurobindo's ontology inasmuch it sees distinction as a volitional act coming from beyond the physical.

> Thus the mental reason sees Person and the Impersonal as opposites: it conceives an impersonal Existence in which person and personality are fictions of the Ignorance or temporary constructions; or, on the contrary, it can see Person as the primary reality and the impersonal as a mental abstraction or only stuff or means of manifestation. To the overmind intelligence these are separable Powers of the one Existence which can pursue their independent self-affirmation and can also unite together their different modes of action, creating both in their independence and in their union different states of consciousness and being which can be all of them valid and all capable of coexistence. A purely impersonal existence and consciousness is true and possible, but also an entirely personal consciousness and existence; the Impersonal Divine, Nirguna Brahman, and the Personal Divine, Saguna Brahman, are here equal and coexistent aspects of the Eternal. Impersonality can manifest with person subordinated to it as a mode of expression; but, equally, Person can be the reality with impersonality as a mode of its nature: both aspects of manifestation face each other in the infinite variety of conscious Existence. 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. (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 296, pt. I, ch. XXVIII)

The One and Many, form and formless, finite and infinite are not opposites or mutual exclusives, but complements of each other, two faces of the same Reality. It is the ultimate Subject that recognizes itself also as the ultimate Object. From the standpoint of the supramental vision

> the Absolute is beyond the distinction of unity and multiplicity, and yet it is the One and the innumerable Many in all the universes." These are "to the dimensional mind irreconcilable opposites, but to the constant vision and experience of the supramental Truth-consciousness they are so simply and inevitably the intrinsic nature of each other that even to think of them as contraries is an unimaginable violence. (Aurobindo, The Synthesis of Yoga, 1914-21, pp. 297, pt.II, ch.I)

> Supramental Nature sees everything from the standpoint of oneness and regards all things, even the greatest multiplicity and diversity, even what are to the mind the strongest contradictions, in the light of that oneness; its will, ideas, feelings, sense are made of the stuff of oneness, its actions proceed upon that basis. (Aurobindo, 1914-21, p. 1000, bk. IV, ch. XXVIII)

Therefore, not just a universal Mind, rather something that is much more than universal, let alone only Mind. A panentheistic vision, where the Spirit is founded upon the Knowledge by identity knows all as itself and in itself by a self-view and simultaneous self-vision, inhabiting each and all, knowing all things and beings as its individualized being of an all-containing existence, yet, without getting imprisoned in the objects and beings–that is, its own self-limitations– in which it dwells.

Conscious Force and Conscious Will

Force and energy have a precise definition in physics, but definitions, as rigorous as they might be, do not tell us much about the nature and essence of what they define. The ontology remains

obscure. From the view of a supramental consciousness, things acquire another significance. Following Aurbondo's integral metaphysics, the source of space and time is a timeless immutable Absolute that nevertheless creates the illusion of motion and mutability *in* itself, without mutability. Something which, as the apparent irreconcilability of personality and impersonality, for the human mind sounds only like wordplay, an oxymoron, a contradiction in itself, an absurd impossibility. Because what our sense-mind realizes are only mutable relations of forms and of external shocks of forces, it is unable to view all things in a multiple unity, as a whole, like the Supermind does.

In fact, in Aurobindo's integral cosmology, force is the dynamic aspect of the exclusive concentration of a separative active consciousness, a particularizing action by a separative movement of Prakriti – Nature. But there is no contradiction or competition with the modern scientific view. From the integral perspective force is a Will inherent in existence as a potentiality of rest and movement in a fundamentally immutable Absolute. Consciousness, will, and force are not seen as derivative epiphenomena emerging from a play of cosmic events in a naturalistic theoretical framework, rather, they are an expression of a self-absorbed, involved and immanent Will and Consciousness in a temporal and spatial universal plane determined by the laws of causality. In the Unmanifest beyond causality, Consciousness, Will and Force are undifferentiated. There is no distinction between these three aspects of the Absolute. It is when Satcitananda plunges into the manifestation of polarities and division that Consciousness, Will, and Force appear as three distinct qualities, seemingly independent from each other. All the processes in our cosmos are self-presentations of It in itself. The mental relations we build from the play of these forces is what we call 'form', and all the phenomenal world we experience is a cosmic multitude of sensations, resulting from a form of force which is responding to another form of force.

The supramental vision reveals the universal clash of matter and forces as the workings of a 'Consciousness-Force' and 'Consciousness-Will', a 'Force of existence', as Aurobindo called it. The identity of Force and Will arises because *"the Energy that creates the world can be nothing else than a Will, and Will is only consciousness applying itself to a work and a result"* (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 17, bk. I, ch. I) An ontology with analogies to Schopenhauer's World-Will, or Shelling's and Hegel's 'World-Soul' or the Whiteheadian process theology that unites Consciousness, Force and Will as the substrate of all processes.

And it is here where the notions of will, and the age-old philosophical question of free will, find their spiritual dimension. There is no such thing as individual will. Our personal will is only a pale reflection of a transcendent Will that – to use Huxley's words – is 'funnelled through' an individualized ego. The real Will is well beyond our will. Especially in Western culture, and not rarely in Western philosophy, free will is sometimes seen as the freedom to act without restraints according to the desires, lusts, inclinations, beliefs, and preferences of one's own character. Whereas, from the point of view of Aurobindo, this is antipodal to what freedom is, as these desires and preferences are also imposed by Prakriti onto the untransformed inner and outer beings. The psychic being remains largely a passive witness of the inner impulses and universal forces of Nature, even though we take these for our own. Real freedom is not that of the ego and the lower cravings of the untransformed vital, mental, and physical personality but is realized only when the will of the individual becomes one with the Will of the Supreme. Aurobindo's answer to the question of whether we have free will is twofold. We have no free will if the personality supposed to be free is the ego vitality and mentality; we are like leaves subjected to the winds of universal

forces that act upon us at a subconscious and subliminal level. Nevertheless, we can gradually attain free will if we change our being through a spiritual, psychic, and supramental transformation.

It is interesting to note how this standpoint, while denying free will to the ordinary human consciousness, nevertheless escapes the standard argument against free will that links physical determinism with a lack of freedom (for more thoughts on this, see my article on the relation between determinism or indeterminism and free will (Masi, 2022c; 2024) and yet promises a possibility of blissful spiritual liberation.

The Supramental Vision of Space and Time

One of Aurobindo's peculiar statements relates to time perception. Once the seer enters gnostic heights of the supramental consciousness, one no longer perceives the physical reality as an unfoldment of time-successions; all appears as the action of a timeless and changeless eternal Being. From the standpoint of Supermind everything is a pure featureless and causeless eternal nirguna-Brahman, a changeless and an 'a-temporal' Infinite that does not create but manifests itself in itself through self-determinations in time and space, and nevertheless remains above that very same time and space: an eternity in 'motion status'.

From this perspective, space and time do not appear neither as separate entities, nor as separable aspects of the Infinite, but as 'self-extensions'. Space is an 'objective self-extension' of the Brahman and time its 'subjective self-extension'. Objective in the sense that this infinite Consciousness steps back from itself, so to speak, and thereby, becomes itself object of experience of itself. Subjective in the sense of a qualitative experience of a supra-cosmic Consciousness of itself.[12]

> Space and Time are our names for this self-extension of the one Reality. Space would be Brahman extended for the holding together of forms and objects; Time would be Brahman self-extended for the deployment of the movement of self-power carrying forms and objects; the two would then be a dual aspect of one and the same self-extension of the cosmic Eternal. (Aurobindo, 1914-19, p. 375, bk. 2, ch. II)

As there exists a twofold character of the individualized mind and the cosmic Mind, also a twofold character of an individualized objectivity versus subjectivity exists in form of a cosmic objectivity versus cosmic subjectivity. The supreme real-Subject, the Divine, projects and apprehends itself as a two-fold extension of itself: It becomes a subjective extension we call 'time' but identifies itself also by a projection of itself as an objective extension that we call 'space'. Space and time are the two aspects of the same Self, extending itself in two modes or states of being, two different but complementary conditions of the Spirit.

It is the separative activity of mind which divides and distinguishes this temporal subjective self-extension into separate instants and the spatial objective self-extension into separate positions or points in a spatial coordinate system. The separation in space and the successions in time are

[12] To physicists this may be reminiscent of John Archibald's Wheeler "*it from bit*", which symbolizes the idea that all things physical are information-theoretic in origin because ultimately a physical experiment and observation is a part of the universe observing itself.

figures appearing in a non-supramental experience. Since the Spirit sees itself always as a Whole, a One without a second, as an undifferentiated and unaffected Oneness, this utmost unity must also hold spatially and temporally.

This infinite time consciousness, the 'supramental time-vision' or the 'threefold vision' ('trikaladrishti') is

> founded first on its eternal identity beyond the changes of time, secondly on a simultaneous eternity of Time in which past, present and future exists together for ever in the self-knowledge and self-power of the Eternal, thirdly, in a total view of the three times as one movement singly and indivisibly seen even in their succession of stages, periods, cycles, last– and that only in the instrumental consciousness–in the step by step evolution of the moments."– The unified infinite time consciousness of the timeless Infinite "maintains in itself at once in a vision of totalities and of particularities, of mobile succession or moment sight and of total stabilising vision or abiding whole sight what appears to us as the past of things, their present and their future. (Aurobindo, 1914-21, p. 886, pt. IV, ch. XXV)

Time, as we know it, from our limited mind-consciousness, results only as an artificial shadow of a much deeper truth of the phenomenal universe.[13] This understanding seems, to us, so counterintuitive because we identify our individualized mind as the selecting agent, while from the supramental perspective, one realizes that the 'Selector' is the universal consciousness itself.

This vision of time and space as self-extensions of the Spirit might, after all, not be so alien to contemporary scientific theories that describe the Big Bang as the beginning of a cosmological expansion. While modern quantum field theory describes all particles–that is, all matter and energy–by localized excitations and vibrations of a universal quantum field. It might also be worth pointing out how the attempt to frame a theory of quantum gravity, in which Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum mechanics are extended to a more general theory containing them both as limiting cases, has been ongoing for more than half a century. However, so far, it has met with failure. One of the reasons seems to be the fact that the conventional physical notion of space and time is inadequate. Yet, nobody knows how and with what they are supposed to be replaced. Aurobindo's supramental time-vision might suggest, or at least intuitively inspire, a solution.

The Higher and Lower Nature, and the Central Principle of Evolution

The Samkhya philosophy and the non-dual Indian tradition of Shankara's Advaita Vedanta, separate between the ultimate Reality and the so called 'illusion of Maya', between the Transcendent and Nature – between Purusha and Prakriti. This ontology sees every phenomenon, from the most material to our phenomenal perceptions, be it a sensory experience, an emotional state or a mental fleeting thought, as being all impermanent and transitory events without inherent reality, just figments or illusions. They simply happen and are projected on the screen of an immutable and undisturbed Self, which is the sole and ultimate reality. This has become the most accepted interpretation also in Western spiritual circles, inspired by this ancient Eastern doctrine.

[13] Something which seems to resonate with 'eternalism' or the four-dimensional block universe of relativity, where every moment is eternally present, and the present moment is only a selection that picks out a time-slice.

In Aurobindo's cosmology, however, this distinction between Soul and Nature is neither real nor unreal but is seen from a third position.

Since the word 'Nature' has acquired many different meanings in our contemporary culture, its deeper significance in the present context needs further clarification. With the term 'nature' (lower case 'n'), we implicitly assume a being separate from us, as if we are not making part of it as well. The Nature (capital 'N') in its integrality encompasses all manifestations, from the most material to the most subtle planes of existence, from the stone to the individualized mind, to the universal consciousness in its dynamic play, of which the human is clearly part of. Nature is conceived in a much wider sense. In Aurobindo's words:

> An active force of conscious being which realizes itself in its powers of self-experience, its powers of Knowledge, Will, self-delight, self-formation, with all their marvelous variations, inversions, conservations and conversions of, even perversions, is what we call 'Prakriti' or 'Nature', in ourselves as in the cosmos. All Nature is simply the Seer-Will, the Knowledge-Force, and the Conscious Being at work to evolve in force and form all the inevitable truth of the Idea into which it has originally thrown itself. (Aurobindo, 1994).

The central principle that appears in this integral cosmology is, therefore, the relation between the Absolute, the passive Purusha – the unmanifest aspect of the Divine or God – and Nature, the active Prakriti. On one side, we have the One, the pure and undifferentiated self-conscious and self-existent Whole, which already contains, in potentiality, all the differences that remain unexpressed. On the other side, stands the same conscious Being in the form of a universal Consciousness at work: As Nature with its manifestations in diversity and multiplicity on *all* planes of being. A Nature which seems to have lost itself by an involution in an unconscious and mechanical universe, a universal phenomenality expressed by a Will-Force or Will-Power. But also a Nature-Soul that expresses these potentialities by and through the descending ladder of planes from Supermind and overmind, downward to the involuted forms of consciousness, such as mind, life, matter, the subconscient and the inconscient.

Aurobindo sees Nature as an instrument of expression of the Divine consciousness, but not an entity separated by it, or an illusion of an unreal phenomenal world, as Shankara and his followers contended. It is as real as the Spirt it comes from, it is the power of the Spirit, its executive Consciousness-Force and cosmic Consciousness-Energy, or Shakti, which is the origin and cause of all dynamical activity in the temporal manifestation.

But the higher and lower hemispheres are not just two independent blocks. The universal planes of consciousness, from the Supermind that connects the unmanifest with the manifest, the overmind, the intuitive mind, the illumined mind and the higher-mind, capture with descending degrees the original unity of its underlying origin, the Oneness of the unlimited Satcitananda. The lower hemisphere–of mind, life, matter and the subconscious, inconscient and nescient planes–is the domain of division, separation and limitation in ignorance.

This led Aurobindo to adopt the classification of the Bhagavad Gita that distinguishes between a 'higher-Nature' ('Para-Prakrti' or 'Super-Nature', the 'Divine Maya'), which acts by unification and by a transcendence of limitation, working in and by a divine Force and Unity, and a 'lower-Nature' ('Apara-Prakrti'), acting through division and limitations. One is the supra-conscious

aspect of Nature, which upholds the other mental, living, material, subconscious or inconscient aspect of itself. The higher-Nature reconciles and unites in oneness and works on the lower-Nature life, mind and matter to uplift it into its inherent light, force and joy. The higher-Nature has a wider self-guiding knowledge-consciousness, while the lower-Nature, in its cosmic mental, cosmic vital and cosmic physical existence, has become more mechanical and deterministic, being apparently ruled by blind forces because it is an involved form of consciousness. Para-Prakriti dwells in Apara-Prakriti as a latent Super-Nature.

On the physical plane, this twofold aspect of Nature is reflected also as a twofold evolutionary process. From below by the effectuation of a spirit, in a world of multiplicities in ignorance, that ascends the vertical ladder of consciousness by a bottom-up process, in a still unconscious or only semi-conscious hemisphere. From above by a dynamic action ruled by a Spirit descending the ladder from a supraconscious higher hemisphere, by a top-down process acting in a world of multiplicities in knowledge. It is in this larger vision that we discover the central principle of evolution: a Spirit that calls Nature. A Spirit impels Nature to initiate an ascension towards it. A central and uniting principle that relates an infinite Consciousness with a finite Nature, connected by physical, mental and vital cosmic planes of varying degrees of unitarity (or fragmentation) in its individuality and cosmicity, and characterized by a two-fold bottom-up *and* top-down evolutionary process. A Spirit operating in and through a twofold-Nature that works out a divine plan and intention to accomplish an ascension of the lower Nature towards the higher Nature.

But both the Para-Prakriti and Apara-Prakriti are under the direct impulsion of the overmind and which is, in turn, the executrix of the supramental Real-Idea. The Real-Idea is an expression of a potentiality enacted in the manifestation by a supreme 'Will-Force', as an aspect of a 'Consciousness-Force' (Chit-Shakti), in form of a cosmic energy which, with its creative formative processes, manifests that archetype.

According to Aurobindo, it is ultimately this all-pervading and underlying presence of consciousness as an immanent Real-Idea, with its expressive active Will-Force, that stands behind all the workings and phenomena of an apparently unconscious and mechanical nature. He expresses this as a principle that also characterizes the yogic practice and summarizes it as follows: *"[…] the movement of Nature is twofold, higher and lower, or, as we may choose to term it, divine and undivine. The distinction exists indeed for practical purposes only; for there is nothing that is not divine, and in a larger view it is as meaningless, verbally, as the distinction between natural and supernatural, for all things that are are natural. All things are in Nature and all things are in God. But, for practical purposes, there is a real distinction. The lower Nature, that which we know and are and must remain so long as the faith in us is not changed, acts through limitation and division, is of the nature of Ignorance and culminates in the life of the ego; but the higher Nature, that to which we aspire, acts by unification and transcendence of limitation, is of the nature of Knowledge and culminates in the life divine"* (Aurobindo, 1914-21, p. 44, Introd., ch. V).

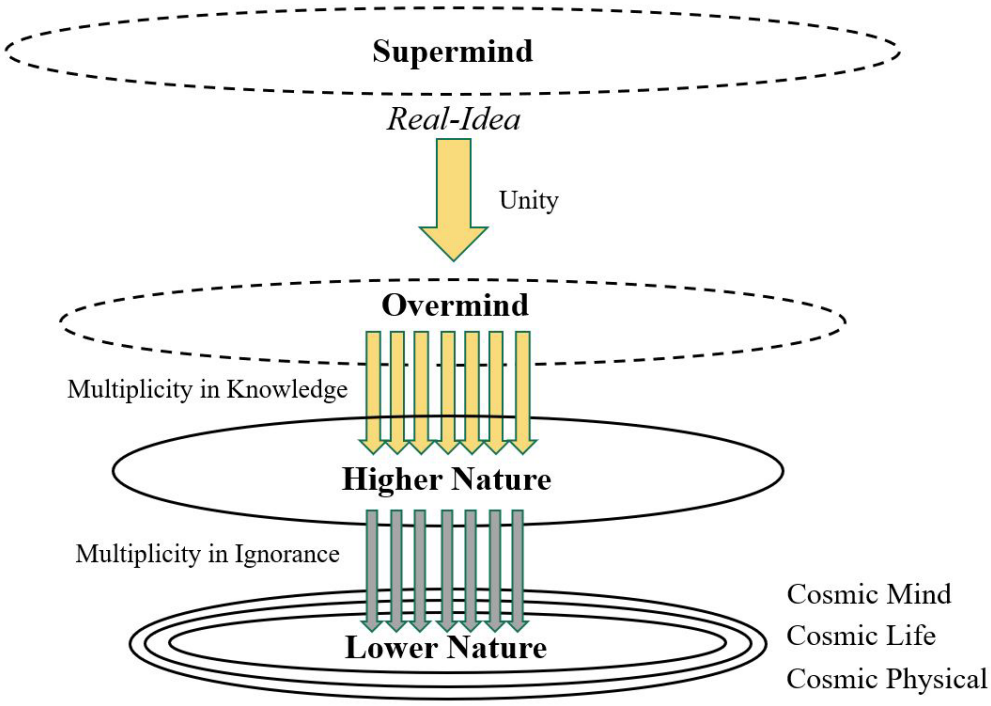

Figure 2. The Twofold structure of Nature in the integral cosmology.

This integral cosmology could suggest a different teleological perspective with which we may look upon life and evolutionary biology. On the one hand is the appearance of the difficult and extremely long development of life throughout the eons, with all its strife and pains, dominated by a seemingly blind natural selection, and apparently random genetic drifts, as described by the orthodox Darwinian evolutionary paradigm. On the other hand, it is a purposeful and planful conscious Force that determines and controls behind the veil those events that appear to be 'random' only to the limited human mind. The former is Apara-Prakriti that can't be explained as a stand-alone process but needs the latter, Para-Prakriti, to manifest anything meaningful. Otherwise, Apara-Prakriti would not be able to go much beyond a purposeless and meaningless random chaos.

The Synthesis of Knowledge

Aurobindo rarely presented his yoga and vision as in opposition to other philosophical traditions of his time (except for his sever critique to world-negating and ascetic forms of spirituality). On the contrary, he always insisted on the integrality rather than exclusivity of his doctrine. An integrality that goes beyond spirituality and embraces materialism and aims at harmonizing Eastern with Western philosophical currents.

For example, from the integral perspective, all three standpoints, the scientific monistic materialism, the Indian Vedanta school that separates Purusha from Prakriti and the view of the Western philosophical idealist, are three different windows through which the very same reality is seen. They seem irreconcilable and mutually exclusive only because of the separative tendency of mind, which admits only matter, or only spirit, or only itself. Integrality cannot be realized because, in the background, mind remains the primary cognition tool, compelling us to make an exclusive

choice. Whereas, if one looks at things from an integral perspective, one can not only look through these three windows simultaneously but, by rising above the mind, recognize it as three different entries, which can be widened and surpassed if higher forms of cognition are allowed. An integral cosmology recognizes materialism, idealism and non-duality as the three forms of cognition reflecting the three steps of the descending (or ascending) ladder of existence. The supramental vision reveals, not just these three steps, but embraces several other cognitive levels and 'modes of knowing.' It is in this sense that all three modes of cognition capture only an aspect of reality, but fail to be truly integral, they still see the relationship between Nature and the Self through the lens of the mind.

In this integral cosmology, instead, the universe appears as an indivisible and undifferentiated unity and totality, expressing itself by a top-down Para-Prakriti action, which determines the unfoldment of Apara-Prakriti through an evolutionary process characterized by infinite variety and multiplicity. The One and the infinitely many, the objective and the subjective, the personal and the impersonal, Nature and Super-Nature, are all the different aspects and modes of the same Being. All are real, none are an illusion.

Conclusion

This essay presented an integral cosmology in the light of Sri Aurobindo and which is neither a monistic nor a dualistic ontology, but rather a multidimensional description of reality, as it appears from higher states of consciousness. It results in a vision capable of integrating Eastern and Western philosophies by an evolutionary emergentism that extends Western neo-idealist models, which recently gained some attention, such as cosmopsychism, analytic idealism and theories of universal consciousness, and that could potentially become a basis for new post-materialist consciousness studies.

It is an integral cosmology that represents an articulate, fine-structured, and at times, a quite complex-layered ontology that might not always sound appealing if one demands principles of conceptual parsimony to be inexorably applied. But while it would be desirable to keep the theoretical framework as simple as possible, we must also be aware of the fact that reality is not always as simple as our theories would like it to be. If mystics are correct in stating that, our ordinary state of consciousness isn't aware of most of the phenomenal existence that escapes our sensory and cognitive means, it would be presumptuous to ignore their accounts and insist on cramming a physical and trans-physical multidimensional reality into a physical-only 'flatland theory.' One must not necessarily embrace Aurobindo's vision to its full extent. It is perfectly possible to resonate with some aspects adopting them as working hypotheses and see how far these lead us, while considering other elements of less interest. The question is if and how our background assumptions are well founded or need to be revised inside this wider perspective.

Much depends on how far one is willing to accept the first-person mystic experiential accounts as a source of information for consciousness studies, or if they should be rejected and ignored altogether as an unreliable hallucination, regarding the only permissible methods of cognizing reality the analytic mind and empiricism. But, remaining open to the idea that our conscious experience, cognitive processes, life and, in general, the universal manifestation as a whole, can be apprehended and comprehended also by other means that go beyond the ordinary intellectual and

sensory human-centric forms of cognition, then these first-person spiritual accounts should be taken more seriously and might be able to clarify aspects of consciousness and life, that otherwise remain unintelligible in the naturalistic paradigm. After all, it is in line with the orthodox evolutionary Darwinian point of view: There is no reason to doubt that during our evolutionary journey new states of consciousness that go beyond the mind will impose themselves and look upon reality from a different viewpoint. In a certain sense, the (more or less implicit) attempt of the Age of Enlightenment to enthrone the human intellect with its scientific reason as the ultimate arbiter of knowledge is a form of neo-anthropocentrism as well. The first-person reports from higher states of consciousness could improve, or at least complement and inspire science and philosophy. To the best of my knowledge, Aurobindo's account is, so far, the most comprehensive view of consciousness, mind, life, matter, and the cosmos capable of doing this. Even though one requires a fair amount of effort to get acquainted with the richness and complexity of Aurobindo's cosmology, I believe it to be the most promising theoretical framework that can accommodate science and spirituality, in a unique synthesis of knowledge between Western and Eastern materialistic and metaphysical cosmologies.

At any rate, I hope that this overview will impel the readers to know more.

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