CHAPTER VI

SRI AUROBINDO AND INTEGRAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Integration is the central theme of Sri Aurobindo's entire thought structure and epistemology is no exception to it. Integralism of Sri Aurobindo's thought structure is founded upon his view that the self-consistent systems of thought must correlate the facts of life and reality. A penetrating observation of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy reveals the fact that there is a harmonious blend and filling up of the gap among the various philosophical systems of spiritualism, materialism, idealism, realism, mysticism, pragmatism, etc. We find a kind of assimilation of different faculties of human experience in a comprehensive truth vision. Sri Aurobindo's epistemology which is integrally connected with his metaphysics supports it. Our discussion on his ontology makes it clear that he does not find any Vedantic approach prior to his as philosophically satisfying. According to Sri Aurobindo, it is the integral nature of the absolute that harmonises the transcendental, the universal, and the individual aspects in itself. His integral philosophy tries to reconcile the
supersensuous mystic experience with sensuous physical world. For him, this integral view of reality must correspond to a truth of thought and a truth of supreme experience in the spiritual consciousness. To comprehend integral reality, his integral knowledge stands as a logical necessity. In other words, Sri Aurobindo's integral Advaita logically and necessarily requires an integral epistemology. But do we find such an epistemology in Sri Aurobindo's thought? My response remains affirmative.

When we have a glance at the Western epistemological traditions, we find that there are various schools, viz., rationalism, empiricism, transcendentalism, and irrationalism. These schools are one-sided in their approach since they consider one of the means of knowledge as the highest. Sri Aurobindo holds that each source of knowledge enables to have only one specific aspect of the reality and not reality in its totality. Both sense experience and reason, for Sri Aurobindo, are essential for obtaining knowledge. Kant, who was aware of the partial view of these systems, adopted critical or transcendental method in order to have a correct understanding of the process of knowledge. According to him, knowledge begins with experience, but does not arise with experience. In this regard, Sri Aurobindo agrees with Kant. Sri Aurobindo does recognize the important role played by both sense
experience and reason. It is sense experience which provides the raw materials for obtaining knowledge. Sri Aurobindo also appreciates the role of reason in apprehending various truths of life. Reason, according to him, performs a role in shaping and yielding intuitive vision. According to him, thought organises, builds, and systematises our ideas about the universe. It also prepares an environment to reach the higher stages of consciousness by receiving the ray of light from above. For Sri Aurobindo, mind in its essential nature cannot be regarded as the source of error. Mind, being the involute of supermind, is a power of supermind. But because it is a concealed form of sat-cit-ānanda, it appears to us that it is a source of ignorance. Hence, for Sri Aurobindo, ignorance is not non-knowledge, but incomplete knowledge. In other words, Sri Aurobindo, as S.K. Maitra claims, "puts ignorance itself to be knowledge, no matter how partial and fragmentary and distorted it may be."¹ Here, Sri Aurobindo radically differs from Sankara. Unlike Sankara, he does not say that all our sense and rational knowledge fall under the domain of ignorance and that ignorance is non-knowledge.

Sri Aurobindo holds that both sense experience and reason are necessary for obtaining the knowledge of the reality, but they are not adequate and sufficient. Kant is perfectly right when he says that reality in its essential
nature is inaccessible to sense experience and categories of understanding. But it does not necessarily imply that reality is essentially unknowable or that the knowledge of the noumena is impossible. For Sri Aurobindo, it is a false conclusion from a true premise. According to him, it is true that our reason and sense experience cannot give us total knowledge of the reality, but it does not mean that the knowledge of the noumena is an impossibility. He thus observes:

Unknown does not remain unknowable and it need not remain unknown forever....

He further says that, if reason is accepted as the highest source of knowledge, then agnosticism or skepticism is the final conclusion.

Sri Aurobindo regards intuition as the next highest means of knowledge. Of course, his understanding of intuition is quite different from traditional understanding of it. He makes a bifurcation between lower and higher intuition, which I have discussed in Chapter Four. Sri Aurobindo, the yogin, who, experienced the ultimate truth directly, holds that we will have to go beyond even the intuitive consciousness since it is only a few steps ahead of the mental consciousness; otherwise it will be only a partial approach. Intuition has been usually recognized as a means of knowing only the transcendental reality. But for

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Sri Aurobindo, reality which is multidimensional in nature has to be realized only by gnostic or supramental consciousness which can embrace in itself all the terms of Being without experiencing any contradiction. Integral knowledge is possible only in the supramental level. This is the state of consciousness where fundamental truths are known; and this is verily the Upanisadic approach, viz., "That being known, all will be known." Once we know the reality, nothing else remains unknown.

According to Sri Aurobindo, it is only in supramental level that we can have integral knowledge. Explaining the nature of integral knowledge, Sri Aurobindo writes:

"The integral knowledge is something that is already there is the integral Reality; it is not a new or still non-existent thing that has to be created, acquired, learned, invented or built up by the mind; it must rather be discovered or uncovered, it is a truth that is self-revealed to a spiritual endeavour: for it is there in our deeper and greater self; it is the very stuff of our own spiritual consciousness, and it is by awaking to it even in our surface that we have to possess it. There is an integral self-knowledge that we have to recover because the world-self also is our self, an integral world-knowledge.

So, it is evident to us that this integral knowledge is not of the nature of our sense experience or rational thinking. It is supramental in nature. It is the knowledge possessed by the divine Being itself. At present the human being is
not in possession of this knowledge, though the possibility of obtaining this knowledge in the course of time cannot be ruled out. This integral knowledge does not perceive any permanent barrier between spirit and matter, self and non-self. Sri Aurobindo thus says:

An integral spiritual consciousness carries in it a knowledge of all the terms of being; it links the highest to the lowest through all the mediating terms and achieves an indivisible whole. At the highest summit of things it opens to the reality, ineffable because superconscient to all but own self-awareness of the Absolute. At the lowest end of our being it perceives the Inconscience from which our evolution begins; but at the same time it is aware of the One and the All self-involved in those depths, it unveils the secret consciousness in the Inconscience. Interpretive, revelatory, moving between these two extremes, its vision discoveres the manifestation of the One in the Many, the identity of the Infinite in the eternal Time; it is this seeing that illumines for it the meaning of the universe.

Sri Aurobindo further says that this integral consciousness does not abolish the universe, but rather takes it up and transforms it by giving to it the hidden significance. It does not negate the individual existence, but in fact transforms the individual being and nature by revealing their true significance and enables them to overcome their separateness from the "Divine Reality" and "Divine Nature". In this context Sri Aurobindo brings in, for the purpose of contrasts, the one-sided views of materialism and idealism. Materialism which believes only
in physical reality accepts sense experience as the sole means of valid knowledge. Whatever does not come within the realm of sense experience cannot be given the status of reality. Sri Aurobindo thus observes:

If pushed to its extreme, it would give to a stone or a plum-pudding a greater reality and to thought, love, courage, genius, greatness, the human soul and mind facing an obscure and dangerous world and getting mastery over it an inferior dependent reality or even an unsubstantial and evanecent reality.

According to Sri Aurobindo, materialism ignores the subjective side of our existence altogether. We cannot afford to reject the truths of the subjective side of our existence simply on the ground that they do not come within the range of sense experience. Our sense experiences by their very nature depend upon the evidence of consciousness. It is the consciousness which brings unity among the manifold impressions. Sri Aurobindo writes:

The outer senses can bear a reliable evidence only when they refer their version of the object to the consciousness and that consciousness gives a significance to their report, adds to its externality its own internal intuitive interpretation and justifies it by a reasoned adherence; for the evidence of the senses is always by itself imperfect, not altogether reliable and certainly, not final because it is incomplete and constantly subject to error.

Sri Aurobindo further holds that in each case understanding, discrimination, and finally verification are necessary, but
the subjective and supraphysical must have another method of verification. Our sense experience cannot be the judge of the subjective experiences or a supraphysical realm of existence.

Idealism is of the view that every object of experience in its original nature is a content of mind. Sri Aurobindo holds that mind, whether individual or universal, cannot be regarded as the creator of the universe. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:  

It is clear that a Mind of the nature of our surface intelligence can be only a secondary power of existence. For it bears the stamp of incapacity and ignorance as a sign that it is derivative and not the original creative; we see that it does not know or understand the objects it perceives, it has no automatic control of them; it has to acquire a laboriously built knowledge and controlling power. This initial incapacity could not be there if these objects were the Mind's own structures, creations of its self-power.

So, according to Sri Aurobindo, even idealism is one-sided in its approach.

Sri Aurobindo adopts an epistemology which is integral to his metaphysics. As we have pointed out earlier, for Sri Aurobindo the world is an integral part of the Reality which is infinite in nature. Hence, knowledge, for Sri Aurobindo, is relational as well as suprarelational. Here, Sri Aurobindo differs from Saṅkara. For Saṅkara, the absolute which is of the nature of pure consciousness is
devoid of all relations. Hence, for him, knowledge is essentially and truly non-relational and suprarelational. Relational knowledge falls, according to him, under the domain of ignorance. So, while, for Sankara, relational and suprarelational knowledge are diametrically opposed to each other, for Sri Aurobindo, they are complementary to each other.

According to Rāmānuja, knowledge basically expresses itself in the form of a judgement; and every judgement is relational in nature since it expresses itself through subject-predicate relation. While, for Sankara, all knowledge is unqualified and undifferentiated, for Rāmānuja, knowledge is qualified and differentiated. So, Sankara and Rāmānuja hold two divergent views. Sri Aurobindo tries to reconcile these two extreme positions. For him, knowledge is neither simply relational and qualified nor is it simply unqualified and non-relational. Thus, one of the great Aurobindo scholars observes:

The relational and suprarelational aspects of knowledge, according to him (Aurobindo) is integral in nature. The relational and suprarelational aspects of knowledge form, according to him, the two poises of integral knowledge. Integral knowledge cannot be identified exclusively either with non-relational knowledge or with relational knowledge nor is it a sum of these two poises of knowledge.
Sri Aurobindo believes in the identity of consciousness and being. But this identity is manifested both in time and timelessness. Sri Aurobindo does hold that there is an identity between consciousness and being, but unlike Śaṅkara, he does not say that it is pure awareness or pure consciousness where it is neither aware of itself nor of beings. But for Sri Aurobindo, in knowledge by identity, there is a kind of self-awareness or self-consciousness. But this self-awareness is not conditioned by any process or operation. Sri Aurobindo observes:

In the supreme timeless status where consciousness is one with being and immobile, it is not a separate reality, but simply and purely the self-awareness inherent in existence. There is no need of knowledge nor is there any operation of knowledge. Being is self-evident to itself: it does not need to look at itself in order to know itself or learn that it is.

The identity of consciousness and being is not only revealed in timeless status, but also in the extension of space and time by being aware of all existence as itself, but not as objects. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

....spiritual self-existence is intrinsically aware of itself, so it is intrinsically aware of all that is in its being; this is not by an act of knowledge formulated in a self-regard, self-observation, but by same inherent awareness, it is intrinsically all conscious of all that is by the very fact that all is itself. Thus conscious of its timeless self-existence, the spirit, the Being is aware in the same way -- intrinsically, absolutely, totally without any need of a look or act of knowledge, because it is all of Time --
Existence and of all that is in time. This is the essential awareness by identity; if applied to cosmic an essential self-evident automatic consciousness of the universe by the spirit because it is everything and everything is its being.

Sri Aurobindo further says that it is the supermind which holds together the triple formula, i.e., "Brahman is in all things, all things are in Brahman, and all things are Brahman." Because of this triple formula, supermind is able to bring a reconciliation between both relational and suprarelational knowledge. Again, it is only by logic of the infinite, says Sri Aurobindo, we can understand the complementary nature of both relational and suprarelational forms of knowledge, which appear to be contradictory only to the finite reason.

By the term "logic of the infinite", Sri Aurobindo means the divine acts in accordance with its own law or reason. The nature and working of the higher reason can be realized only when man reaches the supramental level, but of course human beings can have a conceptual grasp of this higher logic to some extent. Sri Aurobindo aptly comments: "What is magic to the finite is logic to the Divine." In fact, Sri Aurobindo's integral knowledge can be comprehended well only through the logic of the infinite. In order to have an integral knowledge of any thing, we must look at it from three aspects, viz., the individual, the universal, and
the transcendent. We can have an integral understanding of
an individual only when it is related to both universal and
transcendent and vice versa. Sri Aurobindo further says
that we can have an exclusive realization of the
transcendent, but this kind of realization enables us to
have only an essential aspect of the reality and not of its
integral nature. Realization of the essential aspect is
fundamental, but not total. The Infinite, for Sri
Aurobindo, is a "boundless totality"; hence, in order to
have a complete knowledge, reason must be plastic enough to
see all the sides of the reality. To quote Sri Aurobindo:12

The Infinite is at once an essentiality, boundless
totality and a multitude; all these have to be
known in order to know truly the Infinite. To see
the part alone and the totality not all or only as
a sum of the parts is also a knowledge but also at
the some time an ignorance, for a part may be
greater than the whole because it belongs to the
transcendence; to see the essence alone because it
takes us back straight towards the transcendence
and negate the totality and the parts is a
penultimate knowledge but here too there is a
capital ignorance. A whole knowledge must be
there and reason must be plastic enough to look at
all sides, all aspects and seek through them for
that in which they are one.

Sri Aurobindo is of the view that the human reason
is not plastic enough to perceive the reality from different
angles. But it does not mean that Sri Aurobindo is
thoroughly against the logic of the finite which consists of
the laws of thought, viz., the law of identify, the law of
contradiction, and the law of excluded middle. He only
rejects the absolute validity of these laws in understanding the multidimensional reality. The nature of the absolute cannot be determined by our mental categories; hence, it is unjustifiable to apply the laws of the finite logic, which are essentially the erection of the human mind. So, to say that the reality cannot be both the indeterminate and the determinate, the one and the many, the finite and the infinite simultaneously, is wrong. The mystery of the reality is revealed not in the mental, but in the supramental level. We commit drastic error by holding any aspect of reality as false or illusory in order to make it consistent with our laws of thought. It is worth sacrificing our mental laws at the altar of reality rather than sacrificing reality at the altar of the mind. Sri Aurobindo observes:

The self-existent is the Infinite and its way of being and of action must be the way of the Infinite, but our consciousness is limited, our consciousness built upon things finite: it is irrational to suppose that a finite consciousness and reason can be a measure of the Infinite; this smallness cannot judge that immensity, this poverty bound to a limited use of its scanty means cannot conceive the opulent management of those riches; an ignorant half-knowledge cannot follow the motion of an All-knowledge.

So, reason, according to Sri Aurobindo, is lost in comprehending the largeness, subtlety, profundity and complexity of the suprarational. Here, intuition and inner
experience alone are the guide, and later on our guide has to be supramental vision which is the highest means for knowing the reality in its totality. Sri Aurobindo warns us against our understanding of the functioning of the infinite as arbitrary. He says that its ways of thought and action have their own definite and well-established laws. Hence, it is wrong to suppose that the ways of the infinite are a kind of magic without having any rationality in them. Sri Aurobindo thus comments:

There is a logic in it, because there are relations and connections infallibly seen and executed... what is magic to our finite is the logic of the Infinite.

He further observes:

It is a greater reason, a greater logic because it is more vast, subtle, complex in its operations; it comprehends all the data which our observations fail to seize, it deduces from them results which neither our deductions nor induction can anticipate, because our conclusions and inferences have meagre foundation and are fallible and brittle.

We can well appreciate the logic of the infinite when we compare it with the finite logic. There have been three successive movements in finite logic, viz., formal logic, transcendental logic of Kant, and dialectical logic of Hegel.
The formal logic by its very nature is abstract and discursive. Here, the whole reasoning is based upon certain principles, viz., the laws of identity, the law of contradiction, and the law of excluded middle. Certain conclusions are deduced from certain general premises in accordance with these three laws. The main objective of this formal logic is to maintain self-consistency in thinking. But it does not bother whether our reasoning tallies with the facts of the world or not. Spinoza, the adherent of formal logic, could not successfully explain how \textit{natura naturata} follows from \textit{natura naturans}. He could not successfully reconcile the contradiction between the absolute and the relative. Leibnitz, who was aware of the limitations of formal logic, introduced the law of sufficient reason in order to understand the moral, social, and religious spheres of human life. But, of course, he regards the truths governed by the principle of sufficient reason as contingent truths, and those that are governed by the law of contradiction as necessary truths.

Kant, who felt the one-sidedness of both empiricism and rationalism introduced synthetic \textit{a priori} judgement in his transcendentental logic. It is only the synthetic \textit{a priori} judgements which give us knowledge. According to Kant, synthetic \textit{a priori} judgements are the
joint product of our sensibility and understanding. While our senses provide us with the raw materials, i.e. sensations, reason supplies the different forms of categories which give unity to these scattered and isolated sensations; ultimately, our ego, which is technically termed synthetic unity of apperception by Kant gives unity to both sensations and mental categories. In this way, Kant reconciled both empiricism and rationalism. Our knowledge will remain formal and analytic without experience; similarly, it will remain accidental and contingent without reason. Kant's synthetic a priori judgements bring a radical change in the logical outlook. His transcendental logic is not like formal logic, which cares only for self-consistency. It is the logic of experience. Here, thought comes into contact with the objective world and attains fruitful and objective knowledge. But Kant's conception of knowledge is limited to phenomena alone.

Thought rises to a higher status in Hegel's system. In his system contradictions do not remain irreconcilable in nature. Even though thought is encountered with antinomies, it has the inherent capacity to overcome them. Every thought, for Hegel, has three successive movements, viz., thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Again, this synthesis is confronted with an antithesis, which is reconciled by a new synthesis. This
process repeats till the opposites reach the highest stage of synthesis, the **Absolute Idea**.

According to Hegel, contradictions are inherent in the reality itself. But, it has the capacity to overcome them. This is a challenge to formal logic which functions through the laws of thought. The law of identity says that "A is A". However, this law does not give us any new knowledge. The law of contradiction says that a thing cannot be both A and not - A at the same time. But Hegel shows us that this law is not applicable to the reality. Sri Aurobindo agrees with Hegel when he opines that the law of contradiction becomes a source of error in the case of its application to reality. One of the major defects in the Hegelian system is that reality is identified with thought. But this thought is concrete, synthetic and also dynamic. Ultimately, for Hegel, reality is confined within the limits of mental categories. We are limiting the absolute by identifying thought with reality. We cannot think of reality which is differenceless and relationless in Hegel's system. We do not find an integral view of reality in his thought.

In Sri Aurobindo's thought we find that the reality is both relational and suprarelation; and this is possible only by the logic of the infinite.
Many reject the logic of the infinite on the ground that it is no logic at all since it violates the law of contradiction. According to the law of contradiction, A cannot be both B and not-B at the same time. In order to maintain rational consistency this law is undoubtedly meaningful; but it fails when we try to apply to the things of the world. How are we to know whether two things or qualities are contradictory or not? As Bradley remarks, "there is no logical principle which tells us what qualities are really discrepant." In order to know this we have to fall back upon experience. Again, before we ascertain about the contradictory nature of the two qualities, we must first and foremost know the nature of the subject to which qualities are predicated. One of the shortcomings of the law of contradiction is that it can be applied only to the individual thing, but not to a class. For example, the attributes "civilized" and "non-civilized" cannot be applied at the same time to an individual man, but if the term "man" stands for a class, we can characterize it as both civilized and non-civilized. Sometimes it seems to us that even in an individual case the law of contradiction cannot be applied successfully. One and the same thing may appear to possess two contradictory qualities from two different angles; and it is for this reason that the Jainas advocate syād-vāda according to which a thing can be both "is" and "is not" from different points of view. In this context Ram Sankara
Misra observes: It is this simple truth that has been generally ignored by philosophers with the result that they made, sometimes, indiscriminate and unwarranted use of the law of Contradiction to determine the nature of the Absolute and the world. There is nothing wrong with the law itself, but there is certainly wrong application of the law in many cases. This wrong application of the law has led many acute thinkers to uphold extreme and arbitrary views. This law is formal and arbitrary views. This law is formal and abstract in itself. So it naturally suffers from certain limitations so far as its application to the world or reality is concerned. One has to be conscious of the strength as well as of limitation of this law before applying it to reality.¹⁸

According to Sri Aurobindo, the law of contradiction serves a useful purpose only when it is viewed against the background of the reality. In itself the law is valid and fundamental, but it becomes a source of error when it is abstracted altogether from the reality. To quote Sri Aurobindo:¹⁹

That law is necessary to us in order that we may posit partial and practical truths, think out things clearly, decisively and usefully, classify act, deal with them effectively for particular purposes in our divisions of space distinctions of form and property, moments of Time. It represents a formal and strongly dynamic truth of existence in its practical workings is strongest in most
outward term of things, the material, but becomes less and less rigidly binding as we go upward in the scale, mount on the more subtle rungs of the ladder of being.

So, the law of contradiction breaks down in the case of the absolute, because the reality is so vast and comprehensive characterized by the opposites. Here, Sri Aurobindo brings in the higher logic or the logic of the infinite, which does not perceive being and becoming, one and the many, finite and infinite as contradictory, but as complementary; and this I have discussed in Chapter Three.

This standpoint, which I have discussed elaborately in Chapter Three, provides the clue to the proper understanding of not only the epistemology of Sri Aurobindo but also his metaphysics and synthesis of yoga, which are all characterized by integralism.