CHAPTER III

*PHILOSOPHY OF SRI AUROBINDO*
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Sri Aurobindo has been hailed as one of the greatest philosophers of the modern age - a philosopher of "tremendous power with a worldview astounding in its profundity and startling in its comprehensiveness." Yet he was not a professional or academic philosopher; he was a Yogi who happened to take philosophy in his stride. In a letter he wrote to Dilip Kumar Roy, Sri Aurobindo explained the circumstances that compelled him to write philosophy in the philosophical journal, the Arya.

And philosophy! Let me tell you in confidence that I never, never, never was a philosopher - although I have written philosophy... I knew precious little about philosophy before I did the Yoga and came to Pondicherry - I was a poet and a politician, not a philosopher! How I managed to do it and why? First, because Paul Richard proposed to me to cooperate in a philosophical review - and as my theory was that a Yogi ought to be able to turn his hand to anything, I could not very well refuse, and then he had to go to war and left me in the lurch with sixty-four pages a month of philosophy all to write by me lonely self! Secondly, because I had to write down in the terms of the intellectual all that I had observed and come to know in practising yoga daily, the philosophy was there automatically.

1. Dr. Kahan Singh, *Sri Aurobindo — An Interpretation* (Madhe Joshi), Foreword.
2. *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, p. 49
Thus Aurobindo can be called a philosopher only if the term is used in its original sense — a lover of wisdom. In his magnum opus 'The Life Divine' and the other works as well he presents an exhaustive discussion of all relevant philosophical issues involved but all his philosophising is primarily aimed at presenting an intellectual exposition of his spiritual experiences. He writes philosophy not for the sake of philosophy but for presenting a rational basis of the sublime message that he had for the purblind mass of humanity. The message itself is quite simple and direct, "what is it then", asks K. R. Nivasa Iyengar and then states it in the barest minimum words:

Sri Aurobindo felt that it was possible for man to advance yet farther in the evolutionary race and reach a new dynamic status, that of the Superman. But a kind of road-block was barring the way. If that could be removed — and it could and indeed would be — the transitional being, the mental man, would give place to the future man, the supernal man; and when man changed, society and its institutions and its activities would change too, and the Life Divine would be established here on the earth.

The earthly paradise that he visualized is not a dream that cannot be realized but an actuality that is not far to seek. If properly directed, human effort can bring a new race of supermen on earth. In order to present this message,

3. **Sri Aurobindo — A Biography and A History,** p. 737
rather oversimplified in its present form, Sri Aurobindo had to undertake subtle and continuous thinking on several lines which resulted in a mass of literature inimitable in its sincerity of purpose and breadth of vision. Some of the essential facts of the Aurobindonian world-view are being presented in the sections to follow.

**Matter and Spirit**

The fundamental basis on which the whole structure of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics stands is that matter as well as spirit is real. Neither spirit nor matter is to be rejected as a mirage, an illusion. A spiritualistic philosophy that negates matter is as shortsighted as a materialistic philosophy that negates spirit. In the history of human thought matter and spirit have been separated, "either spirit has been denied as an illusion of the imagination or matter has been denied as an illusion of the senses. The result is either 'a great bankruptcy of life' or 'an equal bankruptcy in the things of the spirit'!"

The materialist's denial of the spirit rests on the belief that senses are the only means of knowledge. But the senses are actually limited in their scope and there are vast fields of knowledge which are inaccessible to our senses. The things that senses can learn are insignificant in comparison to the things that they cannot. The spiritualist's denial is equally unconvincing, for him the phenomenal world is merely an illusion or at best an appearance of spirit or Ultimate Reality. It exists only as a kind of

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reality only to the unenlightened and ignorant, he maintains.
He insists that spirit is real because it is free from
change, birth and death.

Sri Aurobindo calls these two negations as 'the
materialistic denial' and 'the refusal of the ascetic'. The
fact is that matter and spirit, according to him, are like
the two aspects of the same thing. He therefore tries to
work out an integral view in which both spirit and matter
find a proper place.

Reality

This reconciliation between spirit and matter is the
guiding principle of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics. He
conceives reality as spiritual but also assigns matter a
place in it. His version of reality consists of eight
principles or the cords of being. It does not mean that
reality is plural; reality is essentially one. The cords
of being are the expressions of reality from the point of
view of creation.

The eight principles or the cords of being as
conceived by Sri Aurobindo are: Existence, Consciousness,
force, Bliss, Supermind, Mind, Psyche, Life and Matter. The
first four belong to the upper hemisphere and the last four
to the lower hemisphere. The lower hemisphere represents
the stages that have been reached by evolution and the upper
hemisphere includes the stages yet to be reached. The two
hemispheres are not opposite to reach other; the lower
hemisphere, in fact, reflects the aspects of upper hemisphere.
Thus mind is a subordinate power of supermind, life is a
subordinate power of consciousness-force, psyche of bliss, and matter is the veiled expression of existence.

"Accordingly, we have a sort of refraction of the divine existence, consciousness-force, bliss and supermind into matter, life, psyche or soul and mind. The former terms constitute the higher hemisphere of pure Being and the latter terms the lower hemisphere of cosmic manifestation. Therefore the best way to describe reality is to describe it as a triune principle of existence (Sat) consciousness-force (Chit) and bliss (Ananda) i.e. Sachchidananda. The fourth principle of upper hemisphere supermind does not have an independent status of its own, different from the other three. It is, in a way, a link between Sachchidananda and the finite world.

In the term Sachchidananda, Sri Aurobindo presents us with the "conception of an Omnipresent Reality of which neither the Non-being at the one end nor the Universe at the other are negation that annul, they are rather different states of the reality obverse and reverse affirmation." The principle of Sachchidananda, in spite of being spiritual can accommodate the principles of matter also.

The three Vedantic terms Sat, Chit and Ananda are interpreted by Sri Aurobindo in his own inimitable way. These are the three attributes of the Absolute. The Absolute as pure existent (Sat) is the fundamental reality, consciousness-

5. Sri Aurobindo, Hinduism through the Ages, p.216
force (Shit) is inherent in Pure Existent and is the dynamic principle at the root of all creation. It is the Mother, the divine Shakti and “nothing can take shape except what she, moved by the Supreme, perceives and forms after casting it into seed in her creating Ananda.” Bliss is the key to the whole scheme of creation and sustenance of the world. World-existence is the ecstatic dance of Shiva, its sole object is the joy of dancing.

Involution and Evolution

The whole of creation, according to Sri Aurobindo can be understood in terms of descent and ascent. Creation is conceived as a double process: it is first a descent of the spirit into the worldly forms and secondly it implies the ascent of worldly forms to higher status. The descending process is called Involution. Everywhere evolution presupposes Involution. Without the descent of the spirit into the world there cannot be any ascent of the world into the spirit. Sri Aurobindo maintains:

We speak of the evolution of life in Matter, the evolution of mind in matter, but evolution is a word which merely states the phenomenon without explaining it. There seems to be no reason why life should evolve out of material elements or mind out of living form, unless we accept the Vedantic solution that life is already involved in Matter and Mind in life because in essence Matter is a form of veiled life, Life is a form of veiled consciousness.

7. Sri Aurobindo, The Mother, p.39
The evolution of matter is, therefore, possible only because there has been an involution of the Spirit into matter. The process of evolution is just the reverse of involution. According to Sri Aurobindo the order of involution is: Existence, Consciousness-force, Bliss, Supermind, Mind, Psyche, Life and Matter. The order of evolution should therefore be Matter, Life, Psyche, Mind, Supermind, Bliss, Consciousness-force, and Existence. The evolution of the world has so far reached four stages; Matter, Life, Psyche and Mind. The time has now come, claims Sri Aurobindo, when evolution must go higher to the next stage, the supermind. When this happens there will be a complete transformation of the entire world. In a beautiful passage in the Life Divine Sri Aurobindo presents in a nutshell, his concept of Creation:

"The divine descends from pure existence through the play of Consciousness-force and Bliss and the creative medium supermind into cosmic being. We ascend from matter through a developing life, soul and mind and the illuminating medium of supermind towards the divine being. The knot of the two, the higher and the lower hemisphere, is where mind and supermind meet with a veil between them. The rending of the veil is the condition of the divine life in humanity, for by that rending, by the illuminating descent of the higher into the nature of the lower being and the forceful ascent of the lower being into the nature of higher mind can recover its divine light in the all-comprehending
supermind, the soul realises its divine self in the all possessing, all blissful Ananda, life reposes its divine power in the play of omniscient Consciousness-force and matter open to its divine liberty as a form of the Divine Existence. 9

Besides the ordinary form of descent of the spirit Sri Aurobindo also mentions a special kind of descent. This is the descent of the Avatar or God taking birth in the human form. But corresponding to the birth of God in humanity there is also the birth of man into Divinity, the ascent of man to divinity. The Avatar is born, in his opinion, to show man what he is capable of becoming. He is born to demonstrate that man can also become God without leaving his body. Otherwise, he thinks, there is no need for Avatarhood.

The concept of supermind also needs some elaboration. It has already been mentioned that supermind is the connecting link between Sachchidananda and the finite world. Sri Aurobindo labels supermind as 'Real-Idea' in the sense that it is born out of real being and not a child of imagination. It is the consummation and fulfilment of mind. At the same time it retains the true nature of Sachchidananda. It is the creative idea. Mind, Life and matter are striving to move towards it. It is nothing else than God as Lord and Creator. 'The concept of supermind constitutes the special feature of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. It may be aptly said that Sri Aurobindo is the philosopher of the

9. Ibid, p.404
Kenneth Gilbert has graphically represented the process of ascent and descent as conceived by Sri Aurobindo.

When the supermind descends, according to Sri Aurobindo, a radical transformation of all existence will take place. On the other hand evolution does not stop with the supermind as there are still higher levels of bliss, consciousness, force and pure existence. The evolution, so far, has been up to the mental level and through ignorance. After the descent of the supermind evolution will proceed through knowledge. As a result of this radical change human beings will be transformed into gnostic beings who have shed all ignorance and are full of knowledge. The race of gnostic beings will be above quarrels, diseases and death. They will have no desires, no wants and nothing to strive for. For them there cannot be any discovery of the unknown; everything is already known to them. Their entire personalities will change and they will be in direct communion with the Sachchidananda.

The descent of the supermind is considered by Sri Aurobindo to be a great logical necessity which will usher in

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10. T. P. Mahadevan, Contemporary Indian Philosophy, p. 35
11. The Wisdom of the Veda, p. 17 (Psyche is not included in it)
a new age for mankind. It will lead to the transformation of human life to divine life. The supramental change, he maintains, is a thing decreed and inevitable, for the process of evolution is not yet over and the mind is not the last summit. "But that the change may arrive, take form and endure there is needed the call from below with a will to recognize and not to deny the light when it comes, and there is needed the sanction of the supreme from above."12

The Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo aims at the ascent to the supermind and at the same time bringing about the descent of the supermind. "By this Yoga", he maintains, "we not only seek the Infinite but we call upon the infinite to unfold himself in human life."13 The aim of Sri Aurobindo's life-long sadhana has been to bring down the supermind to the world of mind, life and matter whether he succeeded or not, time alone will answer.14

Knowledge & Ignorance

The concept of ignorance finds an important place in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. He believed that any attempt to determine the nature of knowledge should be preceded by an understanding of the various aspects of ignorance. Ignorance for him is not absence of knowledge. Knowledge is completely absent only in the extreme state of nescience. At the other extreme there is the state of complete knowledge. In between the two is the area of ignorance. As much it is

12. Sri Aurobindo, The Mother, p.84
13. The Synthesis of Yoga, p.6
14. R.Chandrachadha Chakrabarti, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, p.385
already moving from the absence of knowledge towards knowledge.

The world in which we live, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the result of a plunge of the spirit into ignorance. The creation of the world, therefore, can only be through ignorance and not through knowledge. "This plunge is, indeed, for the sake of giving the world an opportunity of rising out of ignorance and suffering and weakness into knowledge and bliss and strength. The diving into Ignorance is only for the sake of bringing up on the surface by slow but sure stages the rich treasures of the Superconscient". The created world, therefore, carries the promise that the present miserable state will ultimately lead to perfectibility of man and perfectibility of society.

It is generally believed that ignorance is the antithesis of knowledge, the cause of human bondage and suffering. Sri Aurobindo does not accept this view. He considers it to be similar to knowledge, though partially. Knowledge is always present to a certain degree. Sri Aurobindo agrees that the only complete knowledge is the knowledge of the Absolute. From the point of view of complete knowledge, the knowledge of cosmos or the knowledge of ourselves in the cosmos is not complete knowledge but ignorance. From the point of view of every superior knowledge every inferior knowledge is ignorance. What appears to be knowledge from one point of view is ignorance from a higher point of view.

15. Maitra, op.cit., pp.32-33
Sri Aurobindo claims ignorance to be a power of knowledge, "a power of knowledge to limit itself, to concentrate itself on the work in hand," a power to withhold itself partially. Another argument that he presents in favour of his claim is that knowledge and ignorance are the two poles of the same evolutionary process. This process has so far reached only the mental stage and is making efforts to reach the supramental state. He says that only a Divine veil is preventing it from reaching that state and "what is happening is that Ignorance is seeking and preparing to transform itself by a progressive illumination of its darkness into the knowledge that is already concealed in it." Ignorance is potential in knowledge; it is limited knowledge.

On account of the ignorance of his surface consciousness, man is ignorant of his inner Being. The components of inner being - the Physical being, the vital being and the mental being are also instruments of ignorance but their intensity is gradually reduced. When the veil of ignorance is lifted, self-knowledge is attained.

Sri Aurobindo do maintains that ignorance is of seven types. These are:

1. **The Original Ignorance**: It is the ignorance of that

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17. Ibid., p.446
18. *By consciousness*, we generally mean our waking mental awareness which is only a surface or superficial state of consciousness, below which there is a region of consciousness known as subliminal mind. The subconscious mind as a larger scope of awareness and acts behind the surface mind. The subliminal mind is a more illumined state of consciousness than the subconscious. Consciousness thus uses brain and human body for expression.

- *V. V. Ragoja, Contemporary India Philosophy*, p.173
which is really real. It is the ignorance of the supreme Reality.

2. **The Cosmic Ignorance:** It is the ignorance of the real nature of cosmos or the universe. It is the mistaken belief that the world of space and time in which we live is the real world.

3. **The Egoistic Ignorance:** It is the ignorance about the nature of our true self. When we consider our life mind and body as our true self we fall a prey to this kind of ignorance.

4. **The Temporal Ignorance:** When we believe that our short span of life on earth is the beginning and end of life, we are suffering from temporal ignorance.

5. **The Psychological Ignorance:** The superficial aspect of our life and behaviour does not constitute our real self. When we do not believe in this, we have, what is known as the psychological ignorance.

6. **The Constitutional Ignorance:** It is rooted in the very constitution of our normal existence, when we are ignorant of the deeper aspects of our constitution, we are under the influence of constitutional ignorance.

7. **The Practical Ignorance:** As a result of the six ignorances mentioned above we miss true knowledge, administration and enjoyment of our life in this world and we "wander in a maze of errors and desires, strivings and failures, pain and pleasure, sin and stumbling, follow a crooked road, grope blindly for a changing goal." This is the practical ignorance.

Aurobindo, is undivine life and the Divine Life is the life of knowledge but the essence of undivine life is also Divine.

Ethics and Aesthetics:

After determining the nature of ignorance we come to the problem of the presence of pain and pleasure in the world. Normally, we seek pleasure and avoid pain. Certain acts are pleasurable to us while others are not. Our surface mind tells us that certain experiences are either pleasurable or painful but the subliminal mind takes delight in all kinds of experiences. In such a state like sleep, anger or hypnosis there is no pain. In fact, pain ceases to be painful when we are detached mentally and emotionally. Sri Aurobindo could himself transform any painful act into pleasure. Once he broke his leg and suffered from intense pain but soon he was able to convert into ananda.20

Ignorance is the cause of all pain and suffering in this world, which in itself is caused by the descent of spirit into matter. The world, as it stands today, is smitten by the power of darkness born out of ignorance and ethics is a construction of moral standards in it. However, we need law and morality for ordinary persons. In the gnostic life where there is no ignorance, the problem of ethics will not exist and there will be no conflict of good and evil.

"The power of love, truth, of right will be there, not as a law mentally constructed but as the very substance and constitution of the nature and, by the integration of the being." 21

Morality is a peculiar feature of human life and should not be treated as ultimate characteristic of reality. The ultimate nature of reality is beyond good and evil.

Sri Aurobindo maintains that three factors are responsible for man's unhappiness - personal incapacities, interpersonal disharmony and imperfect collective life. When the race of gnostic beings emerges all these factors will disappear. There will be no need to impose any code of conduct. The principles of freedom and order which, in our ordinary life, seem to be contradictory will become one and the same "for the gnostic being order is spontaneous and freedom is the ability to follow knowledge." 22

Sri Aurobindo believes in the laws of Karma and rebirth. He maintains that one must undergo the results of one's past deeds. "The moral significance of Karma is that whatever mode of energy we put forth as cause determines the mode of energy which returns to us as effect. Karma is the universal law of cause and effect, of balance and equilibrium. Whatever one sows, that shall one reap." 23 But we can reduce our imperfections, aspire to a nobler ideal and free ourselves from the bondage of Karma.

Ethics, according to Sri Aurobindo, is only a stage in the evolution of mankind. The main thing is the urge of Sachchidananda towards self-expression. "This urge is at first non-ethical, then infra-ethical in the animal..... and just as all below is infra-ethical, so there may be

22. Dr. Joan Price Ockham, An Introduction to Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy, p.166
23. Ibd., p.128
that above us, whether we shall eventually arrive, which is supra-ethical, has no need of ethics. With regard to the problem of pain and pleasure, it must be remembered that we have these feelings in a particular situation because we are habituated to do so. And we can certainly respond in a different way, to feel pleasure when we should have felt pain and the vice versa. In fact, we can transcend this distinction of pain and pleasure and enjoy the feeling of eternal bliss — the inherent characteristic of every finite being.

Sri Aurobindo believes that work is a necessity for a finite being; even the very existence is an action. Inaction is impossible. Work should be accompanied by knowledge. To the union of knowledge and works should be added a third factor, that of devotion. This is the synthesis of mind, heart and will. This is the Gita's synthesis of knowledge, works and devotion. "Sri Aurobindo's yoga is also integral like the yoga of the Gita, but a new dimension — the bringing down of the Supramental Light and Force — is added, and this makes all the difference." 25

Sri Aurobindo believed that the Divine is Purity as well as beauty and therefore both the ethical and the aesthetic sense should be cultivated. The aesthetic sense gives us the capacity to choose and take up what is

beautiful and harmonious, simple, healthy and pure. Man should learn to appreciate and love "beautiful, lofty, healthy and noble things, whether in nature or in human creation.\(^{26}\) This refinement will bring to him a nobility and generosity and will keep him away from base and perverse movements.

According to Sri Aurobindo art is not creation but interpretation. Every thing is manifested. Art can interpret what was manifest in the past, that which is in the present and also the future manifestation. "The highest aim of the aesthetic being is to find the divine through beauty; the highest art is that which by an inspired use of significant and interpretative form unseals the doors of the spirit."\(^{27}\) Art should depict nature and life in their characteristics truth and beauty, for behind them lies the beauty of the divine. Aurobindo states that the dogma that Art must be religious or that it must be subservient to ethics, utility, scientific truth or philosophic ideas is a false dogma. It must follow its own natural lines, its own essential law. To Aurobindo, sculptor expresses in static form the idea of spirit cut out in mass and line; the painter on the other hand expresses the spirit in colour. He considers painting to be the most sensuous of the arts; the painter has to spiritize the sensuous appeal and make the outer beauty reveal the inner significance of things and life.

\(^{26}\) A Scheme of Education, p.89

\(^{27}\) Sri Aurobindo, The Human Cycle, p.256
Integral Non-dualism

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy bears the stamp of a number of influences. He had studied Western philosophers at an early age and was well-acquainted with the writings of Greek philosophers particularly Aristotle and Plato. He was also conversant with some of the modern idealistic philosophies. Hegel, Whitehead and vitalist Bergson seem to have exercised some influence on the mental make-up of Sri Aurobindo.23

He had read intensively the old Indian scriptures including the Vedas and the Upanishads and had gained an intimate knowledge of the ancient Indian philosophies and in particular the six traditional systems of Indian philosophy. In spite of all these influences he relied mainly on his own vision and contemplation. Many of these views were restated, reorganised and incorporated in a new, comprehensive and synthetic vision of reality.

It is difficult to describe Aurobindo's philosophy in accepted philosophical terminology. He may be called an idealistic philosopher for he conceives reality to be spiritual. But that would not be an apt description of his philosophy for he considers matter as also real. The most appropriate name that can be given to his philosophy is the one given by Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri29 - Integral non-dualism.

Integral non-dualism rejects all forms of illusionism including Mayavada and considers the phenomenal world of plurality as real and significant. A Divine life on earth is

23. Basant Kumar Lal, Contemporary Indian Philosophy, p.159
29. Sri Aurobindo, p.112 ff.
possible only through a complete divine transformation of man's material life. But this transformation will be meaningless if material existence is believed to be a mere illusion or a shadow of reality. It will be equally ridiculous if the world of human existence is made of undivine gross matter. Extreme dualism is as much an obstacle in the path of divine life as extreme monism. Matter is not opposed to spirit. Material universe is, in the final analysis, an objective manifestation of the spirit. Integral non-dualism has tried to vindicate "the profound utterance of the Spanish ads that matter is in its deepest, essence identical with the supreme spirit or Brahman. Integral non-dualism provides a rational justification, a philosophical basis for the ideal of integral yoga.

The concept of integral yoga is an outstanding contribution of Sri Aurobindo to the realm of thought, while making an assessment of his philosophical ideas, B.S. Barma has pointed out:

The importance of the mission of Sri Aurobindo lies not so much in the restatement of the integral spiritual ideal taught in the Rig-Veda, the early Upanishads and the Upanishads and the Veda and his clearing the air of imperfect ideals like quietism, illusionism and asceticism, as in his actual practice of Purva Yoga.

30. Ibid, p. 113
(integral yoga), by which the supramental consciousness is brought down to influence the mental, vital and physical being of man. 31

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31. Hinduism through the Ages, p. 222