

The Influence of the West on Sri Aurobindo's Vision of the Future Evolution of Humanity

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) has been acclaimed as one of the greatest of modern Indian philosophers. Even so, there is a minority opinion that he is on the margins and not in the centre of modern Indian philosophical reflection. Vishvanath S. Naravane says, for example, "The Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo is like a beautiful but somewhat inaccessible island in the river of Indian thought...The island has become separated from the main current."¹ Aurobindo is seen as "being a little cut off from the main stream of Indian thought."² The main reason for this "isolation", according to Naravane, is Aurobindo's approach to the cultural history of India. "Sri Aurobindo...emphasises only *one* element. His assumption seems to be that the highest truth of philosophy, social life and even science, are already contained in the Vedas."³ He is said to have undermined the significance of Buddhism, Islam, the composite medieval culture based on the fusion of Islam and Hinduism, ferments of modern Indian thought and even the far-reaching revolution wrought by his great contemporary, Mahatma Gandhi.⁴

Naravane's view may not be acceptable to many, particularly those who view favourably the all inclusive character of Indian thought that in modern times has been given a "synthetic" expression in the writings and *sadhana* of Sri

1. Vishvanath S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought* (Orient Longman: New Delhi, 1978), p. 193.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 194.

4. Ibid.

Aurobindo. Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that for many Aurobindo does not seem entirely to fit into the broad current of modern Indian thought. I wish to submit that one of the reasons for his "remoteness" is ironically the influence of the West on his thought and the manner he interprets it in the context of the traditional Indian wisdom. Also, his understanding of the "marginal" current of Tantrism and its integration into his vision of Integral Yoga is perhaps another reason. A study of this second factor, however, does not fall within the scope of this article.

An important preliminary remark is in order here. Religious or philosophical currents can be *influenced but not fully explained*, by the origin, early occupations, formation and studies of individuals who later became outstanding personalities or founded their own schools in them. Aurobindo is no exception to this general norm. Keeping this in mind, one can still speak of the influence of the West on Aurobindo's thought but with some qualifications. His interpretation of Western thought reflects and is often coloured by his basic philosophical positions. Western influence on his vision can be traced back to his stay in England (1879-1892).⁵ At the early age of seven he was sent to England by his father Sri Krishna Dhan Ghose and was entrusted to the care of an Anglican clergyman and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Drewetts of Manchester, under whose tuition he was well-grounded in Latin. He spent the years

5. There are several biographies of Sri Aurobindo, many by his disciples and others, though few, by critical scholars. Here are some titles: Rishabhchand, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life Unique* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1981); A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1958); Geroge Van Krekhem, *Beyond Man: The Life and Works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1997); H. J. Singh, *Sri Aurobindo: His Life and Religious Thought* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1962).

1884-1890 in St. Paul's School in London where he learnt Latin and Greek classics and spent most of the time in reading poetry, literature and fiction, French literature and the history of ancient, medieval and modern Europe. Having obtained a senior classical scholarship from St. Paul's School Aurobindo was admitted to King's College, Cambridge in 1890 and studied there until 1892. Though hardly twenty, Aurobindo had by then acquired great proficiency in English, Latin, French and Greek. He was also sufficiently well-versed in German, Italian and Spanish.

Aurobindo had his first acquaintance with the early Greek philosophers through the study of classical literature and poetry. That the classical studies fascinated him may be gathered from the fact that Aurobindo was able to win all the prizes in King's College, Cambridge, in one year for Greek and Latin verse.

While Aurobindo was in England the philosophical, scientific and religious thought of the last third of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries in the Continent as well as in Britain saw the triumph of scientific evolutionism and Idealism in some form or other. Also in the field of psychology there were remarkable developments. Aurobindo shows himself critical toward all idealistic as well as materialistic systems.

As he grew up in the family of an Anglican clergyman, his knowledge of Christianity was not insignificant. However, the main bulk of the philosophical writings of Aurobindo began to appear in the "Arya" only after his close association with the French diplomat Mr. Paul Richard and his wife Mira Alfassa. The latter, born in 1878 in Paris into a family of bankers of Egyptian origin, was French by nationality. Her encounter with Aurobindo in 1914 had far reaching consequences. In 1920 she settled down definitively at the Ashram in Pondicherry which had a

gradual growth around the person and spiritual thought of Aurobindo since 1910. She became one of the favourite disciples of Aurobindo, who gave her the title "The Mother" in 1926, chose her to succeed him in administering the Ashram and himself went into complete retirement.

"No Philosopher by vocation"

A large portion of Aurobindo's writings is philosophical in character⁶ and yet Aurobindo has pointed out that he was no philosopher by vocation.⁷ But he seems to mean by this that his "philosophy" should not be understood as an abstract system but as a vision of Knowledge.⁸ Now it is precisely this vision of Knowledge that turns out to be a

6. Aurobindo was a prolific writer. All his writings, both philosophical and other, have been collected and published as 30 Volumes in the series *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1973), henceforth 'SABCL'. His *magnum opus* containing his basic philosophical position and entitled *The Life Divine* (henceforth 'LD') was originally written as articles during the period August 1914 - January 1919 in the *Arya*. It was published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram as a revised and enlarged edition of two volumes in 1939-1940. In SABCL it comprises Vols. 18 and 19.
7. Regarding his vocation as philosopher Aurobindo writes in a letter dated July 4, 1934: "Let me tell you in confidence that I never, never, never was a philosopher - although I have written philosophy which is another story altogether. 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..." See *On Himself*, SABCL, Vol. 26, p. 374.
8. *On Himself*, SABCL., Vol. 26, p. 374: "There is very little argument in my philosophy - the elaborate metaphysical reasoning full of abstract words with which the metaphysician tries to establish his conclusions is not there. What is there is a harmonising of the different parts of a many sided knowledge so that all unites logically together. But it is not by force of logical argument that it is done, but by a clear vision of the relations and sequences of the Knowledge."

philosophy which Aurobindo considers to be his contribution toward a synthesis between the East and the West.⁹ This synthesis has been attempted by Aurobindo from the perspective of the Indian tradition. His was "an approach to the highest reconciling truth from the point of view of the Indian mentality and Indian spiritual experience, and Western knowledge has been viewed from that standpoint".¹⁰

Life and Spirit

As the dominant tendency of the West Aurobindo singles out "truth of Life" as against the "truth of Spirit" of Eastern thought. He seeks to establish that Life cannot be divorced from the Spirit and in this vision he also conceives of the aim of human existence and the meaning of the future evolution of man.¹¹

But how does Aurobindo define his thought in relation to the elements of "the truth of Life" which he finds characteristic of the West? Here we are confronted with a major difficulty in this that Aurobindo seldom mentions the sources of his thought. J. Gonda, for example, has pointed out that though he was a widely read person, Aurobindo did not have the habit of mentioning his sources and that it becomes difficult to pinpoint from where he derives a particular

9. *The Hour of God*, SABCL, Vol. 17, p. 399: "Our idea was the thinking out of a synthetic philosophy which might be a contribution to the thought of the new age that is coming upon us."

10. *Ibid.*, p. 400.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 400: "All philosophy is concerned with the relations between two things, the fundamental truth of existence and the forms in which existence presents itself to our experience...Here the West and East have followed divergent lines. The West has laid most emphasis on truth of life...The East has laid most emphasis on truth of the Spirit...Our view is that the antinomy created between them is an unreal one."

idea.¹² However, a close study of the terminology and thought-patterns employed by Aurobindo and the rare instances in which he explicitly mentions the authors and systems of Western Philosophy can help us determine with considerable certainty the basic philosophical trends of the West that have found expression in his understanding of human destiny.

It is obvious that the link we may discover between Aurobindo's thought and the influence of the West need not always and necessarily be a causal one. In fact, it is more by way of a critical confrontation with the Indian tradition than by a mere repetition that Aurobindo has attempted to integrate Western elements into his thought.

Early Greek Philosophy

Among the early Greek philosophers Aurobindo shows a marked preference toward Heraclitus and has dedicated a small treatise¹³ to the study of Heraclitus' thought in the light of Indian philosophy. Originally meant as a refutation of some views expressed by Prof. R. D. Ranade on Heraclitus' philosophy, Aurobindo's study on the aphorisms of Heraclitus may rightly be called a brief excursus into ancient Greek philosophy which he extols as "the most intellectually stimulating, the most fruitful clarities the world has yet had."¹⁴ His interpretation of Greek thought, es-

12. See his *Les Religions de l'Inde*, Vol. II (Paris, 1965), p. 404, note 1.

13. In a series of articles in the *Arya* written between December 1916 and June 1917 Aurobindo dealt with the philosophy of Heraclitus. These articles were revised and published as book, *Heraclitus*, in 1941 by Sri Aurobindo Ashram and is now incorporated in *The Supramental Manifestation*, SABCL, Vol. 16 (pp. 335-371).

14. *Ibid.*, p. 335.

pecially the philosophy of Heraclitus, echoes his own vision and the similarity is unmistakable.

Personally oriented toward mysticism and intuitive experience as is evident in his writings,¹⁵ Aurobindo was an enthusiastic admirer of the mystical vein of the early Greek philosophers.¹⁶ It is also in this perspective that he judges the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle and predictably prefers the former.¹⁷ It is known that during his stay in England Aurobindo had read Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic*.¹⁸

Yet another criterion used by Aurobindo to evaluate early Greek philosophy is whether or not it has a practical effect on human life and aspiration. If philosophy is to be of any value to a human person, it must "give him light on the nature of his being, the principles of his psychology, his relations with the world and with God, the fixed lines or the

15. *On Himself*, SABCL, Vol. 26, p. 385: "...only an obstinate mystic could still believe in a conquest of Matter by the Spirit as I had dared to think possible. But I am just such an obstinate mystic."
16. *The Supramental Manifestation*, SABCL, Vol. 16, p. 339: "To ignore the influence of the mystic thought and its methods of self-expression on the intellectual thinking of the Greeks from Pythagoras to Plato is to falsify the historical procession of the human mind."
17. *On Himself*, op. cit., p. 383: "I have found him [Aristotle] exceedingly dry. It is purely mental philosophy, not like Plato's." However, Aurobindo accepts the Aristotelian theory of aesthetics and equates the good and the beautiful relating them to the Indian conception of *ananda*, bliss. See *The Hour of God*, SABCL, Vol. 17, pp. 237-238; *The Life Divine*, SABCL, Vol. 19, pp. 730-731.
18. See Rh. P. Le Cocq, *The Radical Thinkers: Heidegger and Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1969), p. 6.

great possibilities of his destiny."¹⁹ All philosophy must serve a double purpose: it must seek Truth for its own sake without any preconceived aim; but when Truth has been found, it must show its practical effect on life. Thus Aurobindo understands philosophy in close relation to religion.²⁰ His appreciation of Greek philosophy is also inspired by this conception. However, Aurobindo maintains that philosophy itself, even independently of religion, can show humankind an ideal to strive for and that in this perspective Greek philosophy was not without a dynamic element which has found expression also in mysticism. It is thus that Aurobindo considers Heraclitus, Plato, the Neo-Platonists and the Stoics as having offered humankind an ideal to strive for.²¹

19. *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 362.

20. *Ibid*, p. 362-63 : "The Greek thinkers, Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, the Stoics and Epicureans, had also this practical aim and dynamic force, but it acted only on the cultured few. That was because Greek philosophy, losing its ancient affiliation to the Mystics, separated itself from the popular religion; but as ordinarily Philosophy alone can give light to Religion, and save it from crudeness, ignorance and superstition, so Religion alone can give, except for a few, spiritual passion and effective power to Philosophy and save it from becoming unsubstantial, abstract and sterile. It is a misfortune for both when the divine sisters part company."

21. *Ibid.*, p. 366 : "But even without religion philosophy by itself can give us at least some light on the spiritual destiny of man, some hope of the infinite, some ideal perfection after which we can strive. Plato who was influenced by Heraclitus, tried to do this for us; his thought sought after God, tried to seize the ideal, had its hope of perfect human society. We know how the Neo-platonists developed his ideas under the influence of the East and how they affected Christianity. The Stoics, still more directly the intellectual descendants of Heraclitus, arrived at very remarkable and fruitful ideas of human possibility and a powerful psychological discipline, as we should say in India, a Yoga - by which they hoped to realize their ideal."

There are striking similarities between Aurobindo's conception of the involution of the One into the Many and the evolution of the Many toward the One as explained in *The Life Divine* and the doctrine of Plotinus as found in his *Enneads*. S. K. Maitra, in his comparative study on Plotinus and Aurobindo has pointed out what he considers to be the common elements and differences between the mysticism and philosophy of the two thinkers.²² According to him, "Sri Aurobindo's conception of the Divine Descent has an outward similarity with Plotinus' theory of Emanations."²³ If, on the other hand, we ask whether Aurobindo had undergone the influence of the Neo-Platonic school in elaborating his conception of and the relation between the One and the Many,²⁴ it must be answered that according to Aurobindo's interpretation of his own thought it should be derived from Indian sources themselves.²⁵ However, he has made occasional references to neo-platonic mysticism.²⁶

22. S. K. Maitra, *The Meeting of the East and the West in the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1968 [reprint of 1956]), pp. 172-210.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

24. J. Monchanin refers to a letter he wrote in 1946 to Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, to inquire whether Aurobindo had undergone the influence of Plotinus in developing this doctrine and says that the answer he received was in the negative. See his *Mystique de l'Inde, Mystere chretien: Ecrits et Inedits* (Paris: Fayard, 1974), pp. 295-96.

25. *Supplement*, SABCL, Vol. 27, p. 307: "The Upanishads have but one subject, without a second, and yet by the very nature of that subject they take all life and being and knowledge for their portion. Their theme is the One who is the Many."

26. See for instance, *The Supramental Manifestation*, pp. 356 and 370.

Aurobindo has dedicated particular attention to Heraclitus whom he considers a mystic not so much because of his aphoristic style as his "cryptic character" by which he sought "to express the riddle of existence in the very language of the riddle." Interpreting the "pregnant and symbolic character of Heraclitus' language" Aurobindo holds that Heraclitus' philosophy rests upon the idea of the One and the Many conceived dynamically.²⁷ Now, the problem of the One and the Many and their mutual relationship forms the corner-stone of Aurobindo's own thought. As he has rightly perceived, this and other questions concerning the Absolute and the phenomenal are "no barren questions of logic, no battle of cloudy metaphysical abstractions, as the practical and sensational man would have us contemptuously believe; for on our answer to them depends our conception of God, of existence, of the world and of human life and destiny."²⁸

Though Heraclitus lays great stress upon Becoming he "does not exclude Being from the data of the problem of existence." Affirming that Heraclitus does not solve the contradiction involved in the simultaneous presence of Being as well as Becoming,²⁹ Aurobindo takes up the problem and tries to solve it by his understanding of the Absolute as indeterminable from the finite point of view, but in itself capable of free determination. If the Absolute

27. Ibid., p. 344: "The idea of the One and which is eternally becoming Many and the Many which is eternally becoming One and of that One therefore not so much as stable substance or essence as active Force, a sort of substantial Will-to-become, is the foundation of Heraclitus' philosophy."

28. Ibid., p. 341.

29. Ibid., p. 344: "The waters into which we step are and are not the same; our own existence is an eternity and an inconstant transience; we are and we are not. Heraclitus does not solve the contradiction; he states it and in his own way tries to give some account of the process."

is infinite its manifestations cannot be limited. Therefore, both Being and Becoming should belong to the One though our limited perception of things would have us accept the one or the other exclusively.

To explain the relationship between the One and the Many, Being and Becoming, Aurobindo makes constant use of the category of "involution-evolution". Interpreting Heraclitus' saying, "the road up and down is one and the same"³⁰ Aurobindo affirms that it expresses the *Parinama-vada* (theory of evolution) of the *Samkhya* school.³¹ But he adds that there are important differences between the two conceptions. Thus, while the *Samkhya* school affirms, on the one hand, the discrimination between *Prakriti* ('Nature') and her principles both subjectively and objectively and, on the other hand, the distinction between *Prakriti* and *Purusha* (Conscious-Soul), "the fire of Heraclitus has to do duty at once for the original substance of all Matter and for God and for Eternity." Besides, Aurobindo relates this ascent-descent to the Indian conception of *nivriti-pravriti* understood individually as well as cosmically.³²

But the originality of Aurobindo's interpretation is most evident in his understanding of the *Logos* concept. In fact, if "Heraclitus was regarded in ancient times, as a

30. Heraclitus, *Fragment* 60.

31. *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 352: "Heraclitus' account of the cosmos is an evolution and involution out of his one eternal principle of Fire, - at once the one substance and the one force, - which he expresses in his figurative language as the upward and downward road... We have the same idea of an evolution of successive conditions of energy out of a primal substance-force in the Indian theory of Sankhya. There indeed the system proposed is more complete and satisfying."

32. *Ibid.*, p. 353: "It corresponds to the Indian idea of *nivritti* and *pravritti*, the double movement of the Soul and Nature, - *pravritti*, the moving out and forward, *nivritti*, the moving back and in."

pessimistic thinker³³ especially because he accepts that strife and struggle are essential to the existence of the One and the Many as Identity in Difference,³⁴ and if in this understanding it might seem that "all our ideal hopes and aspirations are out of place," his concept of Logos offers, according to Aurobindo, a rather optimistic view of human existence. "What is this Logos?" asks Aurobindo and answers: "It is not an inconscient force, it is Zeus and eternity... Nor can this Logos be identical in its nature with the human reason, ... the Logos is one and universal, an absolute reason therefore combining and managing all the relativities of the many."³⁵

Aurobindo interprets Logos as "the Seer and Thinker, *kavirmanisi*, an immanent Knowledge-Will in all, *vi jnanamaya purusha*, who is Lord or Godhead, *isha, ishvara, deva*, and has ordained all things according to their nature from years sempiternal."³⁶ In this connection Aurobindo recalls the "logos spermatikos" of the Stoics, translates it as "seed Logos" present in conscious beings as a participation of the original Logos and identifies it with the "Vedic idea of Truth-Consciousness," the attainment of which is the divinization of man.³⁷ Now, Truth-Consciousness is identical with "Supermind" which is a key concept in his vision of

33. Ibid., p. 366.

34. Heraclitus, *Fragment* 80: "We must know that war is common to all, strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife."

35. *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 368.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., p. 369: "The Vedic seer called it [seed Logos] the Truth-Consciousness and believed that men also could become truth-conscious, enter into the divine Reason and Will and by the Truth become immortals, *anthropoi athanatoi*."

the future evolution of man. The aim of existence can be perfectly fulfilled only if man enters into communion with the Supermind. We may also note how the concepts of Knowledge (*vijnana*), Will, Lord (*Ishvara*) are brought together in relation to Logos on the one hand and to Truth-Consciousness on the other. The fulfillment of human life or the future evolution of man must therefore be realizable on the level of supramental existence.

It is also noteworthy how Aurobindo relates his idea of the future evolution of man - the attainment of supermanhood - to the vision of the Stoics and Nietzsche. He asks: Does Heraclitus' vision "give ground for any aspiration to some kind of a divine supermanhood such as his disciples the Stoics so sternly laboured for or as that of which Nietzsche, the modern Heraclitus, drew a too crude and violent figure?"³⁸ Heraclitus, affirms Aurobindo, had stopped with his vision of universal force and reason neglecting a third aspect which consists of "the universal delight active in divine love and joy." In this he considers Heraclitus a forerunner of "the great deficiency of later European thought, such of it at least as has not been profoundly influenced by Asiatic religions or Asiatic mysticism." But "the profoundest of all Heraclitus' utterances, the kingdom is of the child" seems to Aurobindo as indicating approximately the final goal of man. It is evidently the spiritual kingdom which consists of "the mastery to which the perfected man arrives."³⁹

However, Aurobindo holds that Heraclitus did not clearly formulate his conception of Logos as modifying and replacing war and strife and leading to "a mutual dependency of self-giving as the hidden secret of life." Herein

38. Ibid., p. 369.

39. Ibid., p. 371.

lies precisely a main element of Aurobindo's conception of the future evolution of humanity : it is transcending human life made of struggle and strife and arriving at the Oneness of Being-Consciousness-Bliss.

What, then, is the influence of Greek thought on Aurobindo? It must be noted that Aurobindo's interpretation of Greek philosophy turns out to be an exposition of some of his own concepts on human existence and its meaning in the light of the Indian tradition, as he expressly acknowledges.⁴⁰ In fact, Aurobindo has endeavoured to show how his idea of the future of man is contained in early Greek philosophy, especially in Heraclitus. From it he accepts the mystic character and also the dynamic ideal it set for man - Logos (Truth-Consciousness, *Sat-Cit*), Gnosis (Knowledge, *Vijnana*). But Aurobindo has also pointed out what he considers to be the deficiencies in Heraclitus' thought: the unresolved antinomy Being-Becoming and the meaninglessness of human existence when life is not seen as a possibility to transcend division and strife and to reach unity and love.

The Positive Sciences and the Theory of Evolution

In the course of our brief discussion on the possible influences of the scientific thought and especially of the theory of evolution upon Aurobindo's conception of human liberation it is necessary to distinguish between evolution as a purely scientific theory and as a philosophical category. Although in practice this distinction seems to disappear whenever the scientist draws a generalized philosophical conclusion in force of his theory or the philosopher bases his doctrine on the criterion of merely empirical data, the theoretical distinction, however, remains valid both in relation to their presuppositions as well as conclusions. Be-

40. Ibid., p. 370: "I have tried to show how often his [Heraclitus'] thought touches and is almost identical with the Vedic and Vedantic."

sides, as child of the Enlightenment, modernity with its radical faith in the positive sciences in the 19th and 20th centuries has claimed to offer a coherent interpretation of the entire universe and of human reality based on naturalism and materialism.

That the scientific theory of evolution has played a decisive role in the vision of Aurobindo is obvious from the spirit of his entire writings.⁴¹ Though he examines the various evolutionary theories which propose to explain the origin and destiny of the cosmos and of man, even while criticizing them, he accepts however their basic principle: "the progress of Matter to Life, from Life to Mind."⁴² Aurobindo has also recognized the influence of the theory of evolution upon the various sectors of social and religious life in the West. Being himself not a scientist, Aurobindo considers evolution a scientific hypothesis valid in its field, but not constituting a firm ground for the construction of a metaphysical doctrine. "It is true," he writes, "that Science now affirms an evolutionary terrestrial existence: but if the facts with which Science deals are reliable, the generalizations it hazards are short-lived; it holds them for some decades or some centuries, then passes to another generalization, another theory of things... No firm metaphysical building can be erected upon these shifting quicksands."⁴³

This criticism of Aurobindo sounds almost "post-modern" although much of his writing is suffused with the rational and globalizing pretensions of modernity. While Aurobindo criticizes modern science as an all encompassing enterprise that seeks to interpret human existence and

41. See for example, *Man and the Evolution*, SABCL, Vol. 19 pp. 824-47.

42. See *LD*, SABCL, Vol. 19, p. 829.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 828.

its meaning, we find that his own philosophy presents itself as a *system* which gives a privileged place to metaphysics. Aurobindo is convinced that objective truth and knowledge are possible. He believes in the progressive and emancipatory character of knowledge and that the knowing subject is self perfectible. In this perspective, Aurobindo has much in common with "modern" philosophy.

But Aurobindo does not embrace modernity in its totality. His assault on reason as adequate instrument of knowledge is well known. He doubts whether there could be a clear cut epistemological model that could allow for rational and objective knowledge. Reason cannot claim universal authority and *that* is its limit. Since there cannot be a foundation outside of a context even the "foundational" character of reason can only be *contextual*. Aurobindo argues that it is not reason but *consciousness* which is the foundation and unifying element. Entering into this consciousness is possible only through intuition and yogic *sadhana* which is a form of knowledge superior to rational knowledge. Reason belongs to the sphere of the mind and "mentality" is by no means the highest expression of consciousness in its progressive unfolding. Beyond mind there is still *supermind* to attain. Reason belongs to separative consciousness that enslaves man as an individual.

Now, the theory of evolution itself had undergone an evolution since Ch. Darwin (1809-1882) subjected it to a scientific study and E. Hackle (1824-1919) elaborated a materialistic determinism out of it. Aurobindo interprets the formula of the survival of the fittest proposed by Darwin not only as struggle to survive but also "a struggle for possession and perfection, since only by taking hold of the environment...can survival be secured, and equally it is true that only a greater and greater perfection can assure a

continuous permanence, a lasting survival."⁴⁴ He also criticizes the Darwinian formula for it extends "too largely the aggressive principle of Life, the vital selfishness of the individual, the instinct and process of self-preservation, self-assertion and aggressive living."⁴⁵ Aurobindo's remarks concerning the evolution of the species permits us to suppose that he was familiar with Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by means of natural Selection* published for the first time in 1859. He remarks that "the Science of the West has discovered evolution as the secret of Life and its processes in this material world; but it has laid more stress on the growth of form and species than on the growth of consciousness: even, consciousness has been regarded as an incident and not the whole secret of the meaning of evolution."⁴⁶

It is precisely at this point that Aurobindo draws a generalized philosophical conclusion: all evolution is evolution of Consciousness as Force.⁴⁷ Hence evolution necessarily presupposes a previous *involution*.⁴⁸ Thus he considers evolution-*involution* as philosophical categories and

44. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 199-200.

46. *On Himself*, p. 415.

47. *LD*, Vol. 19, p. 726: "All evolution is in essence a heightening of the force of consciousness in the manifest being so that it may be raised into the greater intensity of what is still unmanifest, from matter into life, from life into mind, from the mind into the spirit."

48. *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 235: "The word evolution carries with it in its intrinsic sense, in the idea at its root the necessity of a previous involution. We must, if a hidden spiritual being is the secret of all the action of Nature, give its full power to that latent value of the idea. We are bound then to suppose that all that evolves already existed involved, passive or otherwise active but in either case concealed from us in the shell of material Nature."

not merely as the progressive development of species and form.

Aurobindo's criticism of evolutionary Materialism is also based on his conception that "Matter is not unconscious without dynamism - only it is an involved force and consciousness that work in it. It is what psychologists call the unconscious from which all comes - but is not really unconscious."⁴⁹ But he also affirms that the "materialistic dogmatism" of his day had been deeply shaken. He saw that the rock on which materialism was built and which in the 19th century seemed unshakable had been shattered; the absolute rule of scientific materialism had ended.

We may conclude therefore that, though the influence of the theory of evolution on Aurobindo's thought is profound, it is not so much the scientific theory of Darwin and others as its philosophical impact that found echo in Aurobindo's evolutionary conception of man and his future.

Surprisingly, it is not Darwin but another staunch proponent of evolution, a contemporary of Aurobindo, who has profound similarities with Aurobindo. It is Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), the Jesuit paleontologist who had attempted to construct a unified scientific view on evolution. These two great thinkers had never met nor had probably undergone any mutual influence. Reacting to the *scientific* theory of evolution Aurobindo proposes a *spiritual* evolution. It is not so much a knowledge of an empirical reality as the result of a *conscious realization*. He finds a close parallel between the microcosm and the macrocosm. The practice of Integral Yoga, the method of realizing supramental consciousness and freedom, takes us into the depths of the microcosm even as it reveals the possibility of an ascent. Mind is only a middle stage. Below it there is Life and there is

49. *Letters of Sri Aurobindo*, Fourth Series (Bombay, 1951), p. 71.

Matter. If these constitute the subconscious, there is also the superconscious which leads us into the realm of the supramental. This yogic experience, unlike the limited realm of reason, shows that there is evolution *because* there is involution. The latter is the condition for the possibility of evolution and Aurobindo comes to this conclusion by *transposing* to a universal dimension the law of individual conscious growth and realization.

In fact, having probed the depths of the subconscious and the heights of the superconscious Aurobindo made an astonishing discovery. The roots of ordinary consciousness run deep down into what seemed to be wholly unconscious while unsuspected avenues were revealed beyond the mental horizon. "Mentality" therefore appeared as a midway stage in the course of conscious evolution. Aurobindo *extends this individual experience to a cosmic scale* and places the inconscient and the superconscious at both extremes of universal evolution. According to Aurobindo Consciousness involved itself in Matter to evolve through Life and Mind into Supermind and become Supreme Consciousness again. Hence, *involution, the law of evolution, is the counterpart of man's urge to conscious self-realization.*

We mentioned earlier that Aurobindo the spiritual philosopher and Teilhard de Chardin the evolutionary scientist both converge in this that they identify *consciousness* as the unifying element, running through all forms of material existence; consciousness is like the golden thread running through evolution.⁵⁰ They accord man the central place in evolution. They consider that evolution is incomplete, still heading toward a future fulfillment. While Teilhard conceives of future humanity essentially a collective reality, Aurobindo understands the realization of Supermind as individual achievement, although gradually it would be mani-

50. See Paul Leon, *The Concept of the Liberation of Man According to Sri Aurobindo* (Rome: Pontifical Lateran University, 1997).

festated at a collective scale. Aurobindo and Teilhard agree that the individual has to transcend his limitation and *universalize* himself. Through the growth of consciousness and inner experience Aurobindo perceives that the true ego is not confined to his individuality but extends beyond it so as to coincide with the universe, and beyond the latter with the supreme Self. While Aurobindo draws from the depths of *his* consciousness, Teilhard discovers the *other's* consciousness. In his view, the individual gifts his very self to others; yet far from dispossessing himself, his personality grows through this reciprocity. The closer he unites himself with the others, the more he becomes himself. Teilhard's complementarity of individuals sharply contrasts with Aurobindo's unique self, and this finally accounts for the divergence in their social outlook.

Aurobindo and Teilhard proposed the fulfillment and realization of the self. While Teilhard understood this as *man realizing or fulfilling himself in God*, Aurobindo saw this as *man realizing himself as God, God fulfilling himself in man*. Aurobindo and Teilhard lived in communion with the all, both of them shared the experience that may be called "cosmic consciousness." Aurobindo, losing himself in the all, discovered his true Self; Teilhard first lost himself, then rediscovered his self, but only when the all had revealed to him Another and greater than himself. Do we have here two different interpretations of a similar experience or two different experiences?⁵¹

The Psychological theories and the interpretation of spiritual experience

The conception of the future evolution of humanity should necessarily take into account the psychological pro-

51. Although it was published more than twenty years ago, the comparative study of Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin by Jan Feys remains an excellent work. See his *The Philosophy of Evolution in Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyaya, 1973).

cess of the same. It is particularly true of Aurobindo's thought for it has been intended by him as a philosophy of life not only in its theoretical aspect but primarily in its incidence on human attitude and conduct. It is a question of an experience and an "adventure" of consciousness. Aurobindo was undoubtedly influenced [by the various psychological and psycho-analytical theories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. That he was familiar with the *Psychology* of William James (1842-1910) is seen from a short note he wrote in 1933.⁵² James held that the unconscious reaches of the self in which so many religious experiences originate may form the link with the spiritual world. But Aurobindo's appraisal of the psychological theories is critical as well as appreciative. Thus he points out the "initial errors" of psychology⁵³ as follows: the materialistic error, the sceptical error, the error of conservative and the error of objectivity. The materialistic error consists of the bias of basing the study of the mind on the study of the body making psychology "a continuation of physiology;" the sceptical error and the error of conservative distrust prevent a daring exploration into all manifestations of consciousness; finally, the objective error tends to discover the operations of the mind purely from a merely extrinsic analysis without a preliminary personal experience.⁵⁴

52. *On Himself*, p. 384: "James' book [Psychology] is certainly a very interesting one. I read it a long time ago and do not remember it very well except that it was very interesting and not at all an ordinary book in its kind, but full of valuable suggestions."

53. See *Supramental Manifestation*, pp. 258-59.

54. *On Himself*, p. 386: "...psychology in its recent inquiries has shown that this supposed impersonal observation of pure objective facts and impartial conclusion from them, an automatic writing of truth on the blank paper of the pure mind is a myth; it has shown that the personal factor is inevitable; we think according to what we are."

Aurobindo's understanding of mind and consciousness owes much to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), who for the first time opened up the unconscious and made it accessible to scientific investigation. Freud divides mind into three sectors: *id* - the unconscious region in which the basic instincts of Eros and Thanatos co-exist; the *ego* constituting that conscious state or mind which maintains contact with the external world and aiming at self-preservation by way of selection and rejection of the *id's* demands, according to circumstances; the *super-ego* - the deposit of parental as well as childhood influences which exercise a further control by banning all socially undesirable activities. Now, Aurobindo approves of the "new psychology" which had made the discovery that "our waking and surface existence is only a small part of our being and does not yield to us the root and secret of our character, our mentality or our action."⁵⁵ Hence he rejects the "superficial" psychological statements which are limited to the considerations of the mere manifestations of mind and consciousness.

But Aurobindo adopts a critical attitude toward Freudian psycho-analysis when he affirms that it is a partial knowledge and that it deals with the subconscious of the inferior vital regions. It is necessary to illumine consciousness from above and not from below. Besides, Aurobindo modifies the concept of subconscious and inconscience by introducing the concept "superconsciousness." Thus the integration of human personality can become true, says Aurobindo, since there is in our being not only a conscious but an unconscious or subconscious concealed subliminal part and it is not impossible to become aware of both and make some kind of integration. But he adds significantly, "as there is a subconscious so there may be a superconscious part of our being." Aurobindo considered therefore the Freudian subconscious only as the lowest range of what

55. See *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 259.

he would himself call "Inconscient" or "subliminal self." But these are in their inner reality "superconscient." Though to the habitual human consciousness they may appear devoid of consciousness, they are ever conscious of it.

Thus, translated into psychological terms, the Inconscient and subliminal self of Aurobindo are identical to his Supraconscient or the Supramental, their difference consisting in this that the latter represents the stage in which the former has been made conscious to the waking mind. In this view, the Freudian subconscious or unconscious would be merely an initial, superficial and negative stage of the inferior vital range.

From the data of psycho-analysis Aurobindo draws a general conclusion which underlies his metaphysical view of human destiny. "What," he asks, "if there were no Inconscient at all, but a hidden Consciousness everywhere, perfect in power and wisdom, of which our mind is the first slow, hesitating and imperfect disclosure and into the image of which the human mentality is destined progressively to grow?"⁵⁶

The study of human mind points to an ontological reality which is man's "highest good" as Aurobindo calls it. It is none other than the fulfillment of human aspirations toward liberation. "Man, the mental being, once aware that there is this deep, great and hidden self, the real reality of his being, must necessarily seek to enter into it, to become conscious in it, to make there his centre instead of dwelling on the surface, to win and apply its diviner law and supreme nature and capacity, to make himself one with it so

56. *Ibid.*, p. 261.

that he shall become the Real instead of the Apparent Man."⁵⁷

Carl Gustav Jung (1856-1961) improved upon the Freudian theory and considers that the goal of life is individuation, the realization of one's own complete and unique selfhood, and that this is to be accomplished by bringing forth the latent potentialities of the unconscious which, according to Jung, consist not only of the personal but also of the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious contains archetypes or primordial images expressed in the language of Myths which in their turn are the expressions of the truths of life. God would be one among such archetypes.⁵⁸ Through his psychological interpretation of myths and religious experience both Western and Eastern it is rather Jung than Freud who comes closer to Aurobindo.⁵⁹ However, as against a mere psychological interpretation of religious experience Aurobindo has energetically affirmed the objective role of Transcendence.

The various psychological theories of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries attempted to explain and interpret the phenomenon of religious and spiritual experience.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 263-64.

58. See C. G. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, in : *Collected Works*, Vol. IX (London, 1957).

59. Jung affirms that "psychological research has come to realize that the unconscious is not just a 'subconscious' appendage or the dust bin of consciousness... The unconscious is not limited only to the instinctual and reflex processes of the cortical centres; it also extends beyond consciousness...and anticipates future conscious processes. It is therefore quite as much a superconsciousness." See his *Alchemical Studies* (Princeton, 1967), p. 185. Also, *Psychology and Religion : West and East*, in : *Collected Works*, Vol. XI (London 1958), especially the chapters on "Yoga and the West" (pp. 529-537) and "The Psychology of Eastern Meditation" (pp. 550-575).

But, when Aurobindo was in England "everyone had come to disbelieve as impossible non-sense" these and other manifestations which are beyond the direct reach of physical sciences. Aurobindo admits that there can be given a description in psychological terms of supra-physical and mystical experiences. But such a description would always remain a colourless translation into words of an intuition which transcends mind and speech. However, he speaks approvingly of the "remarkable trend towards mysticism" of recent thinkers among whom he makes explicit mention of H. Bergson (1859-1941), W. James (1842-1910) and R. C. Eucken (1846-1926). Thus, speaking in defence of mysticism and of spiritual experience Aurobindo writes: "What then are we to make of Bergson's intuition, James' cosmic consciousness, Eucken's superconscient, the remarkable trends towards mysticism of recent scientists, mathematicians, thinkers, the still more remarkable speculations of contemporary Russian philosophers? These men at least are not irresponsible poets or incompetent dupes of imagination, but psychologists of the first rank and the most original contemporary thinkers in the philosophical field."⁶⁰

Now, the concepts of intuition, cosmic consciousness and superconscient are among the basic notions employed by Aurobindo to describe the further evolution of humanity. These concepts acquire, however, an unique colouring in the total picture of his thought.

According to R. C. Zehner, Aurobindo derived the term "cosmic consciousness" from the Canadian doctor and psychiatrist R. M. Bucke (1837-1902). In fact, Bucke wrote a book entitled *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*⁶¹ and it deals with the lines of evolution

60. *The Hour of God*, SABCL, Vol. 17, p. 320.

61. R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (New York, 1969, first published in 1901).

from simple consciousness (animal) to self consciousness (human) evolving toward the attainment of a new faculty - cosmic consciousness - which is "a higher form of consciousness than that possessed by the ordinary man." It is a consciousness of the cosmos accompanied by an intellectual enlightenment, quickening of the moral sense and a sense of immortality.⁶² Aurobindo seems to think that William James used the expression "cosmic consciousness."⁶³ Whatever may be the origin of the term, it is certain that Aurobindo uses it to indicate a decisive step in the future evolution of man. "Cosmic consciousness," affirms Aurobindo, "is a complex matter. To begin with, there are two sides to it, the experience of the Self, free, infinite, silent, inactive, one in all and beyond all, and the direct experience of the cosmic Energy and its forces, workings and formations, this latter experience not being complete till one has the sense of being commensurate with the universe or pervading, exceeding and containing it."⁶⁴ But cosmic consciousness by itself does not exhaust the depth of humanity's future. On the other side of cosmic consciousness there is a consciousness yet more transcendent.⁶⁵

Modern Western Philosophy

When Aurobindo defines his thought as "synthetic philosophy,"⁶⁶ he does not only mean that it has a compre-

62. Ibid., p. 3.

63. in fact William James makes a reference to Buck's understanding of cosmic consciousness in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Fontana, 1975, 7th ed.), pp. 98, 384, 482. This significant work was first published in 1902.

64. *Letters on Yoga*, First Series (Bombay, 1950), pp. 111-12.

65. LD, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 17.

66. *The Hour of God*, p. 399.

hensive attitude toward the various schools of Indian philosophy but also that it embraces the basic insights of modern Western philosophy. S. K. Maitra says that Aurobindo had a profound grasp of modern Western philosophy.⁶⁷ That Aurobindo had read modern philosophers like Kant, Hegel, Hume and Berkeley is clear from one of his letters, which also suggests that his contact with Western philosophy had already taken place before he settled down at Pondicherry in 1910.⁶⁸ The basic influence is undoubtedly the spirit of Idealism. Now, if we understand by Idealism a variety of philosophies which all in one way or other regard physical reality as existing only in relation to an experiencing subject, so that reality is conceived of in terms of mind or experience, this type of Idealism flourished in Germany in the early part of the last century and underwent a remarkable revival in England when Aurobindo was still a student there. Neo-Hegelians like E. Caird (1855-1938), F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) and E. Bosanquet (1848-1923) - to mention just a few - had considerable influence in Britain. The initial contact which Aurobindo had with Idealism in England was further strengthened after his return to India.⁶⁹

67. S. K. Maitra, *The Meeting of East and West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1968), p. 67: "But if his contact with Greek philosophy is so real, no less real is his contact with modern Western thought. He is not in the habit of mentioning the names, but as one reads his books, one cannot fail to notice how thoroughly is his grasp of the great Western philosophers of the present age, such as Kant, Hegel, Spencer and Bergson. He is also very well acquainted with the latest developments of scientific thought."

68. *On Himself*, pp. 223-24.

69. Rh. P. Le Cocq, *The Radical Thinkers: Heidegger and Sri Aurobindo*, op. cit., p. 7: "Aurobindo is said to have read German philosophy during the years at Baroda."

Aurobindo shares with the German Idealism, and Hegel in particular, the fundamental thesis: the dependence in evolutionary process of Matter from Spirit and the explanation of the lower in terms of of the higher. But he holds that there has been a "quiet entry of Eastern and chiefly of Indian thought into Europe...through the veil of German metaphysics."⁷⁰ But he refuses to identify Reality with any of the principles evolved so far; the Ultimate Reality transcends its manifestations. Besides, Aurobindo is also emphatic about a certain discontinuity and emergence in evolution, particularly in the case of man.⁷¹ He is critical of the "intellectual, unspiritual and erroneous theories of the Absolute, such as have seen their course in critical and metaphysical Germany" even while accepting the teleological element in history which has obvious similarities to Hegel's idea of the emergence of the Spirit. However Aurobindo does not lose sight of the importance of the individual nor does he sacrifice individual selfhood in the interests of the State.

Following Kant, Aurobindo employs the term "phenomenon" to indicate the manifest reality which is present to the consciousness "under the condition of sense-perception and sense-relation and not directly to the consciousness itself in its pure and unconditioned embracing and totally comprehending knowledge."⁷² As against phenomenon is "essence" which is the source and foundation of manifestation. However, the knowledge of the phenomenon, limited in Time, Space and Causality could only be complementary and not contradictory of the knowledge of essence attainable in an original and ultimate consciousness,⁷³ which Aurobindo also

70. *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 310.

71. See *LD*, SABCL, Vol. 19, p. 843.

72. *LD*, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 561.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 471.

calls "noumenon". He also derives from Kant the theory of knowledge though he does not classify it as belonging to practical or pure reason but as separative knowledge and knowledge by identity, the latter being the result of intuition.⁷⁴

Aurobindo's philosophy allows ample space for a "non-rational" element and he is critical of all philosophies - both Indian and Western - that base their argumentation exclusively on reason and intellectual logic. Especially illuminating in this regard are his comments on B. Russell (1872-1970). Aurobindo recognizes that Russell has "a strong and clear and powerful logic." But he adds: "The business of logic is to give order to a thinker's ideas, to establish firm relations between them and firm distinctions from other peoples' ideas, but when that is done, we are no nearer to indisputable truth than we were before. It is vision that sees Truth, not logic - the outer vision that sees inner facts but not the inner sense of them, the total vision (not belonging to mind) that sees the whole."⁷⁵

The "Notes on Bergson" of Aurobindo offers a glimpse of the appreciation of Henri Bergson. He calls Bergson's thought "a philosophy of change"⁷⁶ and seems to approve of his ideas of *elan vital* and intuition. But basing himself on this same perspective he concludes that change necessarily involves status. When it was pointed out to him that Bergson's understanding of progress of Life as marked by tensions succeeded by flowerings resembled his own vision, Aurobindo answered cryptically, "I yearn for

73. Ibid., p. 471.

74. Ibid., pp. 524-552.

75. *On Himself*, p. 387.

76. *The Hour of God*, p. 388.

some other non-Bergsonian evolution."⁷⁷ This non-Bergsonian trait of Aurobindo's vision seems to consist of his substitution of *elan vital* with Consciousness-Force and his critical view of Bergsonian intuition.⁷⁸

Among the modern Western philosophers whose ideas on the possible future evolution of man are explicitly mentioned and criticized in Aurobindo's writings F. W. Nietzsche (1844-1900) occupies a prominent place. Aurobindo shows familiarity with three key-concepts of Nietzsche: the idea on Superman and Will-to-power and the criticism against Christian religion and morality. As is evident from his writings, Aurobindo shares with Nietzsche the vision of a future humanity, but far from arriving at the moral nihilism based on an individualistic and egoistic domination of an elite, Aurobindo anchors his vision of the future of humanity on the spiritual evolution of the individual and of the collectivity.

Evidently Aurobindo was keenly aware of the fact that his concept of Superman might lend itself to misinterpretations especially because of its similarities with the Nietzschean ideal. Even though we may suppose that Aurobindo had borrowed the term Superman from Nietzsche,⁷⁹ it is to

77. *On Himself*, p. 166. For a comparative study of Bergson and Aurobindo, see S. K. Maitra, *The Meeting of East and West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 66-110.

78. See *LD*, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 190; *On Himself*, p. 166.

79. S. K. Maitra opines that "the honour of being the first to introduce the name of Superman belongs to Nietzsche." See his *The Meeting of East and West in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 333. But historical investigation has shown that Nietzsche himself was not the first to coin the word Superman (Uebermensch). It was employed for the first time by H. Mueller in his *Geistliche Erquickungsstunden* (1664) and later on also by Herder, Goethe and Richter.

be noted that his concept of Superman is by no means identical to that of the Nietzschean *Ueberschensch*. Aurobindo has commented on what he considers to be the major differences between himself and Nietzsche in a small book titled *The Superman*.⁸⁰ Though he admits that Nietzsche had a prophetic vision for humankind, Aurobindo accuses him of ambiguity: "Nietzsche was an apostle who never entirely understood his own message. His prophetic style was that of the Delphic oracle who spoke constantly the word of Truth, but turned it into untruth in the mind of the hearer."⁸¹

Aurobindo distinguishes between two basically opposite conceptions of the nature of Superman. Supermanhood would be "nothing more important than a deification of the rare and solitary ego that has out-topped others in the force of our common human qualities" if it were to mean only "to concentrate moral and spiritual privileges and enjoy domination, powers and immunities hurtful to a diffused dignity and freedom in mankind."⁸² On the contrary, Aurobindo considers his ideal of Supermanhood as consisting of the conscious evolution of the entire humanity into a superior level of existence. "The gospel of supermanhood gives us a generous ideal for the progressive human race and should not be turned into an arrogant claim for a class of individuals. It is a call to man to do what no species has yet done, or aspired to in terrestrial history, evolve itself consciently into the next superior type."⁸³

80. Written serially in the *Arya* between March 1915 and August 1915 *The Superman* was revised and published in 1920. In SABCL it forms part of Vol. 16, *The Supramental Manifestation* (pp. 275-297).

81. *The Supramental Manifestation*, p. 275.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

83. *ibid.*, p. 275.

Nietzsche's idea of Superman is intimately linked with his concept of Will-to-power (*Wille zur Macht*). Aurobindo accuses Nietzsche of having cast "the mystic of Will-worship." He would not separate Power from Love and even Power should not be understood as "negation of the wills and lives of others." "To be a divine man," writes Aurobindo, "is to be self-ruler and world-ruler, but in another than the external sense. This is a rule that depends upon a secret sympathy and oneness which knows the law of another's being and of the world's being and helps or, if need be, compels it to realise its own greatest possibilities, but by a divine and essentially an inner compulsion."⁸⁴ The Will-to-power is seen by Aurobindo as the inordinate exaggeration of the vital and mental faculties which constitute but the lower man. In *The Life Divine* he writes: "Any attempt to heighten inordinately the mental or exaggerate inordinately the vital man, - a Nietzschean supermanhood, for example, - can only colossalise the human nature, it cannot transform or divinise it."⁸⁵

Twenty years after he wrote these words, returning on the same theme, Aurobindo expresses still more forcefully his judgment.⁸⁶ The Nietzschean Supermankind would amount to "an overtopping of the human level, not in kind but in degree of the same kind, by an exaggerated personality, a magnified and exaggerated ego, an increased power of mind, an increased power of vital force, a refined or dense and massive exaggeration of the forces of the human Ignorance; it carries also, commonly implied in it, the idea

84. Ibid., p. 277.

85. LD, SABCL, Vol 19, p. 722.

86. We refer to the second and enlarged edition of *The Life Divine* which appeared in 1940 at Pondicherry. As mentioned earlier, the first edition in book form was made of the original written serially in *Arya* between August 1914 and January 1919.

of a forceful domination over humanity by the superman. That would mean a supermadhood of the Nietzschean type."⁸⁷ The Will-to-power is not domination of an aristocracy over the masses but signifies the sublimation of one of the qualities of the human spirit, which cannot be separated nor isolated from other qualities of equal or even greater importance. "To evolve in the sense of the God is to grow in intuition, in light, in joy, in love, in happy mastery; to serve by rule and to rule by service; to be able to be bold and swift and even violent without hurt or wickedness and mild and kindly and even self-indulgent without laxity or vice or weakness."⁸⁸

As Aurobindo had rightly perceived, the Nietzschean conception of the egoistic superman is the fruit of his "hostile pre-occupation with the Christ-idea of the crucified God and its consequences" as well as his "subjection to the imperfect ideas of the Greeks."⁸⁹ Thus the Nietzschean superman "fiercely and arrogantly repels the burden of sorrow and service." While Nietzsche had seen in the crucified Christ the exaltation of humility and helplessness which become instruments for oppressing the masses, Aurobindo recognizes the indispensability of Love. He affirms: "The world's discords have to be understood, seized, transmuted. Love must call Power and Knowledge into the temple and seat them beside her in a unified equality; Power must bow its neck to the yoke of Light and Love before it can do any real good to the race."⁹⁰

87. *LD, SABCL, Vol.19, p. 1067.*

88. *The Supramental Transformation, p. 277.*

89. *Ibid., p. 276.*

90. *Ibid, p. 280.*

The Superman of Aurobindo is one "whose whole personality has been offered up into the being, nature and consciousness of the one transcendent and universal Divinity and by loss of the smaller self has found its greater self, has been divinised."⁹¹

Did Aurobindo interpret Nietzsche correctly or did he "construct" the Nietzschean view so as to drive home more forcefully his own idea of Superman? Even apart from the fact that all interpretations are conditioned by the vision of the interpreter, we may safely assume that Aurobindo only echoed the interpretation of Nietzschean thought as was commonly presented before and during World War II. It is not necessary to examine the vexed problem of the modern interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophical presuppositions and their direct impact upon his conception of the future evolution of humankind.⁹² But it is a sad truth of history that the Nietzschean idea of Superman was exploited by

91. *Essays on the Gita*, SABCL, Vol. 13, p.129 This work had appeared originally as a series of articles written in *Arya* between August 1916 and July 1918.

92. Thus, comparing Aurobindo and Nietzsche in their understanding of Superman, Rh. P. Le Cocq has attempted to bring out the aspect of "creative love" in the Nietzschean Superman and says that it serves as a corrective to the idea of Will-to-power. See her *The Radical Thinkers: Heidegger and Aurobindo*, op. cit., pp. 100-126. But, is not this "creative love" of the Superman an expression of the magnified ego? Even though we do not agree with the author's conclusion that there is no "wide gap between the concepts of superman" (p. 125), she seems to interpret rightly when she affirms that "the only major difference remaining is that Sri Aurobindo's Superman still links himself to Godhead, to a unity of powers, while Nietzsche's Zarathustra submits to no higher power but climbs by sheer 'heroic will'. Even if this will to power is reinterpreted as polarity of force or energy release and aggrandisement, this major difference remains. In his eagerness to do away with Christian dogma, Nietzsche committed the old Greek error of *hubris*" (ibid., p.121).

Nazi Germany especially after his sister Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche published posthumously his *Der Wille zur Macht* (Leipzig, 1901) which modern authors consider as a tendentious compilation of Nietzsche's notes. The common trend today is that a global examination of Nietzschean philosophy shows how concepts such as Superman and Will-to-power must be understood in light of Nietzsche's idea of freedom and his understanding of it in the perspective of a philosophy of subjectivity.

It is to be noted that Aurobindo's interpretation of Nietzsche is more an outcome of confrontation than systematic exposition. This explains his definitive attitude against Nietzschean Superman. Moreover, though both Aurobindo and Nietzsche agree in their intention of pointing out the necessity of a future evolution of man, their points of view on Reality and on man's place in the universe are based on different premises. While Nietzsche's philosophy starts from a vivid sense of the tragic character of life and its meaninglessness, Aurobindo criticizes precisely what he calls nihilism and illusionism in the Indian tradition as represented by Buddha and Shankara and affirms energetically the meaning of human existence which is destined to rise into higher levels of existence.⁹³

In the first two books of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Nietzsche presents the idea of heroism and the doctrine of 'self-overcoming'. "Man is something that shall be overcome," says Zarathustra in the Prologue. "What have you done to overcome him?" Zarathustra sets for humanity its highest task - the task of overcoming humanity itself. Aurobindo too considers man as "transitional being." Man as he is situated in the universe is not sufficient unto himself, he must evolve and exceed himself, transcend himself. What are the positive lines of this evolution? What

93. LD, SABCL, Vol. 18, pp. 439-481.

has man to transcend and what is the nature of the future reality towards which he tends individually and collectively? What are the means to achieve transcendence of the present condition? These are the issues Aurobindo analyzes in his writings. The common concern of the two thinkers is the future of humanity - a future that would lead into a "super humanity." But their views on the nature of the future stage of evolution and its goal are radically different.

Both Nietzsche and Aurobindo show great enthusiasm for Heraclitus' thought of reality as Becoming, but their point of divergence begins to appear when Nietzsche launches a virulent attack against the Western understanding of metaphysics, morality and religion which according to him must be traced back to the Platonian conception of Reality as Being and the idea of human fulfillment as a possibility which could be realized. On the contrary, Aurobindo accepts both Being and Becoming as complementary aspects in his Integral Vedanta: the reality of human existence in Becoming stands fulfilled only if it is firmly founded in the reality of Being.

That Aurobindo himself was conscious of the fundamental option of Nietzsche for Becoming may be seen in his qualification of Nietzsche as "the modern Heraclitus." According to Aurobindo, "Nietzsche denied Being, but he had to speak of a universal Will-to-be." In this Aurobindo sees a concession made by Nietzsche to the idea of Reality as permanent, though a permanence realized only through the contingency. It is this ambiguity which led Nietzsche to draw "a too crude and violent figure" of the future of man, in so far as the Will-to-be becomes Will-to-power and that totally immanent in human subjectivity.

Hence we may conclude that Aurobindo shares with Nietzsche the idea of delineating a concrete vision of the future of humankind without however accepting this vision

in its implication of a Will - to - power made immanent and realizable by an elite. Aurobindo's vision of the Superman is intelligible only in the perspective of a Transcendence which is not only the condition of its possibility but is also its goal. Aurobindo calls Nietzsche "the most vivid, concrete and suggestive of modern thinkers," but also affirms of him that "in his concept of the Superman he never cleared his mind of a preliminary confusion." Aurobindo's vision of the future evolution of man appears, in this perspective, as a clarification of this "confusion", though decidedly in the Indian tradition.

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to identify the influence of Western thought, scientific and philosophical, on Sri Aurobindo's vision of the future evolution of humanity. Early Greek philosophy, the theory of evolution, developments in psychology, and modern Western philosophy all have had their impact on his thought. There is yet another important influence in the thought of Aurobindo-Christianity as it was lived during his days. He considers Christianity as a religion of love of God and neighbour but also as a religion that does not give due place to mysticism nor offer man an integral perfection on earth⁹⁴. But, the influence

94. See Peter D. Bishop, "God and the Absolute in Vivekananda and Aurobindo - Contrasting Reactions to Contact with the West," *The Indian Journal of Theology*, 31/1 (January-March 1982): 15-34. Bishop writes: "Vivekananda and Aurobindo were both influenced by the West but represent quite different models of dialogue between Hinduism and western patterns of thought and belief. Vivekananda reacted against western philosophical and theological insights...Aurobindo, however, was more deeply influenced by western thought: and represents in his writings a more genuine meeting of East and West...The way in which he brings together varied strands of Indian tradition and weaves into his writing insights taken from western philosophy makes him an important figure for those concerned with dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism" (ibid., p. 34).

of Christianity on Aurobindo and his understanding of the christian message would require another comprehensive, in-depth study.

In spite of or, shall we say, because of these influences Aurobindo remains an *Indian* thinker in a profound way. He is deeply rooted in the philosophical *humus* of India and the synthesis he aimed at was indeed a sincere search for the integration of East and West, of *Spirit* and *Life*. A *Yogi* from the East and a *Scientist* from the West, Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin, passionately concerned about the future evolution of humanity, continue to beckon us toward a higher and deeper consciousness. As this process of bridge-building continues Aurobindo will no more remain an "island" in the mainstream of Indian thought.

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