

PHILOSOPHIES OF EVOLUTION

After Darwin, many efforts were made to place evolution in a larger context than that of natural selection with its Spencerian overtones. This led to the revival of *evolutionary cosmology*, which is an attempt to account for the universe as a whole in terms of the idea of evolution. "Evolution" means an unrolling or unfolding in an orderly process of development through successive stages to a more integrated whole. As used in science, it connotes little more than a mechanical change from simple to complex forms. But the term also describes developmental theories of life and consciousness, suggesting an inner potential moving toward some further result or goal. Consequently, it already carries a teleological sense that makes its application to the process of natural selection questionable. There is an ambiguity in the meaning of evolution that contributes to widespread misunderstanding of its import. Besides a purely Darwinian picture of complex speciation rising out of primordial slime, it can also suggest the cumulative descent of divinity in a succession of advancing organic forms. We will address this in greater detail later in this chapter.

Philosophically, evolution implies an energetic universe developing in time. Many cosmologies could account for this, but the scientific situation is more restricted. Biologists are primarily interested in the mechanisms responsible for the appearance of new species of living things on earth. Darwin's idea of natural selection is one kind of mechanism, but it is far from a cosmological theory. Whether or not its limited successes in biology justify the application of a non-teleological philosophy to the entire universe depends upon how committed we are to a materialistic worldview.

Darwinists find materialism a useful hypothesis for pursuing biological research. They are fascinated by the endless proliferation of life-forms that Nature seems to produce so indiscriminately. Darwin himself became lyrical over a “tangled bank” in the woods:

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us.¹³

In a materialistic worldview, “Nature” is merely a metaphor for the natural world around us. But it can also be viewed as an aspect of the Great Mother, who looms so large in mythical cosmology. In the guise of Mother Nature, she is charged specifically with the evolution of life on earth. Her manner, however, has been tentative and experimental; she evidently enjoys the play of possibilities in the proliferation of life, while caring little about the macabre consequences of the struggle for existence. The meandering ways of Nature lead into many blind alleys, which are eliminated when they can no longer adapt successfully. One would not expect to discover unambiguous evidence of an evolutionary purpose by paying exclusive attention to her whimsical play with the transformations of species.

A deeper search is necessary if we wish to find a teleological factor at work in evolution. To begin with, the scope of evolution must be broadened to include more than a biological interest in the mutability of species. Matter, Life, and Mind are the general categories of philosophical discourse about evolution. They designate the basic principles being employed in the philosophies of evolution we are about to examine. Although some philosophers maintain that they are mere abstractions from experience, this ignores their role as effective powers acting in the world. As Sri Aurobindo points out in an early essay, “Not Matter

alone, but Life and Mind working upon Matter help to determine evolution.”¹⁴ He continues:

Thus the whole view of Evolution begins to change. Instead of a mechanical, gradual, rigid evolution out of indeterminate Matter by Nature-Force we move towards the perception of a conscious, supple, flexible, intensely surprising and constantly dramatic evolution by a superconscious Knowledge which reveals things in Matter, Life and Mind out of the unfathomable Inconscient from which they rise.¹⁵

Any one of these categories can be taken as a fundamental principle in the development of evolutionary cosmology. Darwinists prefer to assume that living things evolved out of primordial Matter, but some philosophers seek to avoid the materialistic implications of Darwinism by finding cosmic roles for Life and Mind in the universe.

Speculative cosmological theories about an evolving universe can be divided into two classes. One class consists of materialistic theories that exemplify a mechanistic account of natural processes. They include Spencer’s evolutionary ideas as well as others, like those professed by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, who published an immensely popular book, *Die Welträtsel* (The Riddle of the Universe), in 1899.¹⁶ The other class is made up of various types of nonmechanistic theories that attempt to account for evolution in less materialistic terms. After reviewing several of these theories, we will consider Sri Aurobindo’s markedly different view of evolution. Nonmechanistic philosophies of evolution were developed by Henri Bergson, Samuel Alexander, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in the first half of the twentieth century. All three accept evolution as a fact, but differ in regard to its interpretation. They represent a new and more comprehensive form of cosmology based on the idea of evolution rather than the laws of physics. Although each enjoyed a brief period of popularity, none gained widespread philosophical approval. In passing, note that a comprehensive evolutionary cosmology allows the laws of physics to change with time, since they would then be

subordinate to the principle of evolution. These laws may be viewed as conditions required for maximum variety and complexity to evolve in the universe.¹⁷

Creative Evolution

The French philosopher Bergson offered a theory of *creative evolution* based on the idea of a cosmic life force, or vital impulse (*élan vital*), which is driving the universe forward in an ever-growing complexity of forms.¹⁸ It reveals itself dynamically in living things, spurring the evolution of instinct and intelligence in them. Contrary to Darwinism, he sees evolution as a creative process continually producing new forms in a spontaneous and unpredictable way. Life improvises as it goes, its action being comparable to a rocket bursting into numerous sparks whose spent cinders fall back as dead matter. In this way, matter is a product of the life force, counteracting its upward thrust with a downward inertial tendency. For Bergson, the universe is a continuous, nonrepetitive movement of life without any static background or ultimate purpose. Life is identified with pure duration and can only be known through intuitive feeling. Intuition is opposed to intellect, which cuts reality into pieces and is unable to grasp the world as a continuous whole. Only intuition, a kind of intellectual sympathy, can enter into the inexpressible heart of things and identify with the pure flow of duration.

Bergson rejects teleology as well as mechanism, because he interprets the former in a finalistic sense: the end *determines* the direction of evolution. Since both teleology and mechanism are deterministic for him, determination by the future (finalism) is just as restrictive as determination by the past (mechanism). If mechanism and teleology are both deterministic, then no scope would remain for freedom and novelty in the world. Bergson dismisses them both in favor of his idea of *creative evolution*. In his view, evolution is a continuous march toward novel creations which are not determined by either the past or the future. But, again, finalism is only one way of interpreting teleology. An end

or purpose need not be something imposed on the universe from outside. Even an internal purpose does not imply absolute necessity; on the contrary, it can suggest that some orderly non-mechanical process of development is at work in the world. Change without any ordering principle is nothing more than an indiscriminate display of energy that leads nowhere. Thus, Bergson's attempt to introduce pure freedom and spontaneity into the evolutionary process fails to offer a reasonable alternative to Darwinian mechanistic ideas. But his theory stresses that evolution is a cumulative process inherent in time itself. He sees reality as the steady advance of the *élan vital* involving perpetual novelty rather than mechanical repetition. While his universe lacks a universal purpose to guide it, ample room remains for the attainment of lesser goals in Life's blind, unquenchable thirst for fulfillment.

Emergent Evolutionism

Another attempt to develop a nonmechanistic theory of evolution was the *emergent evolutionism* of the English philosopher Samuel Alexander. He presented his ideas in a massive book entitled *Space, Time and Deity*.¹⁹ Alexander called the ultimate reality "Space-Time," arguing that space and time are interdependent and cannot exist as separate entities. This original cosmic stuff is prior to matter, being identified with pure motion. Matter is composed of motions made up of the point-instants of Space-Time. Matter, Life, and Mind are universal qualities that emerge successively from Space-Time, influenced by a creative urge (*Nisus*) that carries the universe upward through various emergent levels. Evolution is expected to continue beyond Mind to a higher level called "Deity." This is a relative term, however, since it always refers to the next level that is still to emerge. Just what quality Deity will possess is unpredictable before it appears. Each emergent quality in evolution is the result of the complexities attained at the previous level, but cannot be reduced to it. There is therefore a discontinuity among the levels that renders new qualities genuinely novel; this is the meaning of "emergent

evolution,” which stands in sharp contrast to Darwinian mechanism.

Emergence of a new quality in the universe is not the direct outcome of preceding conditions but an entirely unanticipated event that seems to render evolution inexplicable. For Alexander, the process is said to begin with Space-Time, the basic stuff of reality, though devoid of life and consciousness. How then shall we understand the emergence of higher principles like Life and Mind from it? Alexander’s conception of *Nisus* as an evolutionary urge inherent in Space-Time is also suspect. Their relationship is not clear, since an insentient reality like Space-Time could not have creative urges. Alexander thus does not account for the mysterious *Nisus* that is supposedly responsible for evolution. The failure to offer an explanation for the discontinuous jumps between successive levels seems to admit an irrational element into his philosophy of evolution. Nevertheless, he raised an important issue with the conception of an evolutionary progression that does not end with the emergence of Mind in the universe.

Evolutionary Theism

Our last example of a nonmechanistic theory is the type of *evolutionary theism* found in the writings of Teilhard de Chardin.²⁰ He was not a professional philosopher like Bergson and Alexander, but a paleontologist and Catholic priest. This dual vocation led him to a lifelong endeavor to reconcile the claims of biology and Christianity in an all-embracing evolutionary synthesis. He accepted evolution as a fundamental fact, while differing from Darwinism by claiming that everything in the universe has dual aspects, the inner psychic and the external material. Accordingly, there is an evolution of consciousness going on simultaneously with physical evolution. The entire universe, from elementary particles to man, is governed by a “law of complexification” that carries it in the direction of greater complexity and increasing consciousness.

Like Bergson, he saw a special nonmechanical agency at work in evolution, which he called “radial energy.” It is an internal psychic force that intensifies with the development of more complex forms. Radial energy causes things to become more integrated, both “within” and “without,” being responsible for the major transitions from matter to life and mind. When a physical system becomes more highly organized, its psychic interior will be more fully developed. Man is the most recent form to appear in the evolutionary progression of nature. His capacity for self-conscious thought and the formation of cultures has added a new layer to the earth’s ambience—the “noosphere,” or layer of reflective thought. The noosphere is a unique environment that sets man apart from other creatures, characterizing the “phenomenon of man.” Through the noosphere, all human societies are projected to unite in a single world culture.

Teilhard believed that evolution converges toward a point called “Omega” where it reaches its final goal. The “Omega Point” is a mystical concept, but it is not wholly unworldly, since the physical and the psychic aspects of the universe are inseparable. Omega is the focal point of their convergence, corresponding to God in so far as it determines the direction of cosmic evolution. The process is orthogenetic, though not in a finalistic sense, because Teilhard makes some allowance for chance events. The culmination will be reached when all individuals unite in a single community through love. He invests his vision with religious significance by identifying it as the “Divine Milieu,” during which the spirit of the “Cosmic Christ” becomes fully manifested in the universe. In this way, he hoped to unite his personal religious convictions with science.

Teilhard’s interpretation of evolution—a view he hoped to ground in science—fails to connect with mainstream scientific practice, which knows nothing of a psychic interior of physical matter. Ideas like “radial energy” and the “Omega Point” seem to be more fiction than science. They may have been intended to support his belief that the scientific view of evolution was not in

conflict with Catholic theology. On the religious side, however, there was some uneasiness about Teilhard's emphasis upon God as the end (Omega) of cosmic history rather than its initiator (Alpha). His ideas also conflicted with theological dogmas regarding the fall of man and original sin. As a consequence, they were not widely accepted in orthodox Catholic circles. Teilhard's vision of an evolving universe remains purely speculative without having much support from either science or theology. But his optimistic faith in the future progress of humanity is praiseworthy and still has many avid adherents.

The work of Jean Gebser, particularly in *The Ever-Present Origin*, goes even farther than Teilhard in stressing the emergence of a new type of consciousness on earth.²¹ According to Gebser, humanity advances culturally through successive stages, or "mutations," toward an arational and aperspectival integral consciousness. This is not conceived as a linear progression in which later stages replace earlier ones. Instead, the successive stages are cumulative, representing comprehensive integrations of all that preceded them. The various mutations through which humanity passes are regarded as partial manifestations of a single "ever-present origin."

Gebser was concerned with a detailed examination of the different structures of consciousness rather than with cosmology *per se*. He supported his thesis by a wealth of etymological, literary, and artistic evidence. Although his book displays remarkable originality and penetrative insight, it is only tangential to our present concern with cosmology. To recapitulate: the heart of cosmology is a distinctive mode of awareness identified by Sri Aurobindo as cosmic consciousness, which permeates all four faces of the universe.

SRI AUROBINDO

The evolutionary cosmologies just considered are the speculative philosophical theories of individual thinkers who stretched their mental powers as far as they could. We now examine a different

kind of evolutionary vision derived from spiritual resources ordinarily unavailable to philosophers. It originates with Sri Aurobindo, whose multifaceted genius makes it impossible to classify him in conventional scholarly terms. He was not a philosopher, yet in *The Life Divine* he wrote an elaborate philosophical treatise on evolution. Not a scientist, his approach to the yogic life was nonetheless scientific in spirit. He was, though, a poet of extraordinary ability who wrote a magnificent epic poem, *Savitri*, which we present in the next chapter. Cosmology was a fraction of his enormous output, but it provides a broad context for understanding his treatment of evolutionary transformation.

Sri Aurobindo saw evolution as a spiritual process having as its goal the transformation of our present existence into a divine life. In his view, earth is a unique scene for the emergence of divinity from its encasement in matter.²² It is important to emphasize at the outset that this was not the result of mere speculation. It was rather the outcome of a lifetime devoted to an intensive investigation of the nature of consciousness. Although his vision of an evolving universe holds its own as a purely philosophical theory, to reduce him to a philosopher would miss Sri Aurobindo's status as a great seer and fully accomplished yogi. His spiritual collaborator and compeer, the Mother, was instrumental in giving a practical focus to his vision. Following an earlier meeting in Pondicherry, she joined him there permanently in 1920. Subsequently, she organized the Sri Aurobindo Ashram to accommodate a growing number of aspirants from all over the world. Her collected works are a spiritual treasury and present pragmatic insights into the practice of transformative yoga.²³

Sri Aurobindo was born in India in 1872, but was sent to England as a child to be educated in English schools. He studied classical literature at Cambridge University, winning prizes in poetry and passing examinations with high honors. While in England, he familiarized himself with the cultural achievements of Western civilization. After leaving Cambridge, he returned to

India and began a serious study of Indian culture. From the moment of his arrival there, a deep peace descended upon him; a great love for India blossomed. Later, Sri Aurobindo became a leader in the nationalist movement for independence from British rule.²⁴ He took up yoga as a means of gaining inner strength for his political work. Under the direction of a teacher named Lele, he quickly realized Nirvana, the experience of the Silent Brahman of Vedanta. This established him in a transcendent consciousness that never left him thereafter. But it was only a beginning, leading ultimately to the working out of a new yoga of human and world transformation.

During a year of imprisonment by the British for his revolutionary activities, he had a powerful realization of the Cosmic Divine. This convinced him that the achievement of Indian independence was only part of a larger work to be done. Released from prison, he eventually settled in the French colony of Pondicherry on the Bay of Bengal, where he remained for the rest of his life. In Pondicherry, he originated the unique form of yoga that led him to an understanding of spiritual evolution and the writing of his major works.²⁵

In 1914, Sri Aurobindo began a monthly journal, *Arya*, in which the substance of his later books first appeared. Some of this work was concerned with the civilization of ancient India. In *Foundations of Indian Culture*, he reviewed the whole range of traditional Indian religion, art, literature, and politics from a spiritual point of view. Besides this, he wrote a brilliant exposition of the *Bhagavad Gītā* (*Essays on the Gita*), as well as translations and commentaries on several Upanishads. He made a careful study of the *Ṛg Veda*, the fountainhead of Indian culture, translating many of its hymns into English and offering an illuminative interpretation of their mystical content.²⁶ In addition, he achieved a masterful integration of the traditional yogic disciplines of India in *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Yoga was for him the practical basis for integrating spirit and matter on earth, rather than only a means for liberating the soul. Other books, such as *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*, were devoted to

an examination of the development of human society and its progress toward world unity. In *The Future Poetry*, he considered the role of poetry as an effective instrument for the evolution of the soul. Noteworthy among his shorter works are *The Mother*, describing the four powers and personalities of the Divine Mother, and *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth* (published in America as *The Mind of Light*), a series of articles exploring the possibility of a perfected humanity evolving prior to the manifestation of a supramental being.

The two books that best express his comprehensive approach to the universe are *The Life Divine* and his epic poem *Savitri*. In *The Life Divine*, he presents a synthesis of the philosophical systems of East and West based upon the idea of spiritual evolution. This he founded on an inspired vision of the divine nature of existence. The culmination of his enormous literary output was *Savitri*, which infused a sustained intensity and profound spirituality into the traditional form of the epic. The poem runs into nearly 24,000 lines of blank verse. After 1926, Sri Aurobindo gave increasing attention to its composition, revising it over and over whenever possible to match his deepening realizations. He also answered innumerable letters daily, for hours at a stretch, regarding all aspects of spiritual life. Our concern in this chapter is with the vision of evolution that he developed in *The Life Divine*.

THE LIFE DIVINE

Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus, *The Life Divine*, is an involved and complex work with a clear methodology. He presents a series of topics in the context of a developing argument, examines several viewpoints relating to each topic, and always concludes with his own position. Since he summarizes each perspective fairly and convincingly, we must distinguish his view from the others. A favorite ploy of philosophers for solving difficult problems is to offer a solution that logically eliminates possible alternatives. But rather than cut the Gordian Knot in this way, Sri

Aurobindo carefully unravels its various strands. He then integrates the partial truths they represent into a more comprehensive synthesis. His purpose was not to add one more theory to those already available but to deepen our understanding of the destiny of the soul (psychic being) and explain how we can continue to evolve. A final statement of his thought comes in the last six chapters, after a long winding development like the course of evolution he describes. In these chapters, Sri Aurobindo emphasizes that a divine life is a life lived in and for the Divine and that spiritual evolution must take place in this world.

The first chapter of *The Life Divine* sounds the keynote for everything that follows. It merits our careful attention because the general principles introduced are developed more fully later in the book. Chapter I, "The Human Aspiration," begins with a reference to the age-old longing of the human spirit for a more perfect life on earth:

The earliest preoccupation of man in his awakened thoughts and, as it seems, his inevitable and ultimate preoccupation,—for it survives the longest periods of scepticism and returns after every banishment,—is also the highest which his thought can envisage. It manifests itself in the divination of Godhead, the impulse towards perfection, the search after pure Truth and unmixed Bliss, the sense of a secret immortality.²⁷

Sri Aurobindo points out that, even though these ideals seem to contradict our normal experience, they can be realized by an evolutionary manifestation of Spirit in Matter. Nature's method is to seek harmony among opposing forces: the greater the apparent discords, the more they act as a spur toward more subtle and powerful harmonies. But if evolution is the means for achieving this, there must be something deeper that lies behind it:

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. For 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 a form of veiled

Consciousness. And then there seems to be little objection to a farther step in the series and the admission that mental consciousness may itself be only a form and a veil of higher states which are beyond Mind.²⁸

The reference to higher states beyond Mind is significant, since evolution proceeds in this direction. The text continues: “For if evolution is the progressive manifestation by Nature of that which slept or worked in her, involved, it is also the overt realisation of that which she secretly is.”²⁹ To seek the greater manifestation of divinity in this world is what Sri Aurobindo considers to be our highest and most legitimate end. Since “the secret will of the Great Mother” will not allow us as a race to reject the evolutionary struggle, it is better to accept our destiny in the clear light of reason than to be driven by blind instinct. The chapter ends with a reference to a supramental status of being, which is identified as the goal toward which we should aspire:

For it is likely that such is the next higher state of consciousness of which Mind is only a form and veil, and through the splendours of that light may lie the path of our progressive self-enlargement into whatever highest state is humanity’s ultimate resting-place.³⁰

The rest of *The Life Divine* works out the details of this vision. Our focus is on three topics comprising the essential features of Sri Aurobindo’s vision of evolution. They are creation and evolution, the principles of being, and spiritual evolution.

CREATION AND EVOLUTION

Sri Aurobindo arrived at the metaphysical principles necessary for understanding evolution by a yoga that took him deep within the so-called “unconscious” of the psychologists, which he found to be actually full of consciousness. His yogic experiences revealed the complex structure of our inner being and reaffirmed the Vedantic conception of the Self recorded in the Upanishads.³¹ The ancient seers had extended subjective knowledge of the Self to include the universe in accordance with their intuition of the

correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm.³² As we saw in Chapters II and III, this intuition was the original source of creation myths that trace the beginning of the world back to an unmanifested darkness veiling the divine source of things:

Darkness = Unmanifested Reality
Light = Manifested Universe

In Genesis, for example, God said: “Let there be light,” but he remained hidden in the darkness above. Similarly, the Stanzas of Dzyan refer to the unmanifested status of absolute Being as the “Night of the Universe.” Both of these myths imply an intangible boundary separating the darkness from the light. In reality, there is no darkness above, just as there is no darkness for the sun, which is shining even when hidden from us. This suggests that consciousness always exists everywhere, though we may not be aware of it, because in myth light represents consciousness and darkness unconsciousness.³³ Sri Aurobindo turns the relationship between light and darkness around by putting the light (identified with Consciousness) above the darkness representing Matter:

Light = Consciousness
Darkness = Matter

He also discovered (or had revealed to him) something else about this spiritual light that seems never to have been noticed before. In his view, *light is pressing down into the world in response to an aspiration from the darkness below*. The fullness of Spirit manifests gradually in an evolutionary advance with many turnings, but moves forward and upward beyond the previously attained stages.

Evolution is better represented by a spiral rather than the straightforward linear progression that is generally supposed. For there are exploratory byways that diverge from the main course, and also many returns to take up what was left behind by the upsurge of a new leap forward. Anything ready to be assimilated at a given stage will be lifted up to a higher level. In this kind of

evolution, a descent of Spirit into its apparent opposite (Matter) leaves nothing completely untransformed. A gradual unfoldment is necessary, since an immediate descent of the infinite light would shatter the material foundation in which it is to be manifested.³⁴ With the advent of life, evolution became a ruthless and bloody affair so violent that the mind recoils from it in horror. The Victorian poet Tennyson expressed it as “Nature, red in tooth and claw.”³⁵ He tried to reconcile this grim view of nature with faith in a loving Creator, but failed to penetrate into the deeper roots of the mystery:

What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil.³⁶

We are faced with a grisly spectacle of the immense struggle and untold suffering that life has undergone in the long course of its evolution on earth. In Sri Aurobindo’s view, creation is the free play of divine delight and needs no justification for its action. Still, if evolution is the unfoldment of a Divine Reality, it should not be an arbitrary movement without a goal. Mind and life are limited principles, and neither of them could be the final goal of spiritual evolution. No mental attempt to justify suffering can remove all of the problems it raises, but mind is not the ultimate arbiter of truth in these matters. Only the power of Divine Knowledge, conscious of the total truth, could remove the last vestiges of mystery underlying the world-process.

Nevertheless, we may ask how evolution is related to creation. Sri Aurobindo suggests that “a Consciousness-Force, everywhere inherent in Existence, acting even when concealed, is the creator of the worlds, the occult secret of Nature.”³⁷ Evolution must then be part of a continuous act of creation that is producing higher forms of being. Creation and evolution, far from being antagonistic, are really complementary means for fulfilling the divine purpose. Contrary to the views of contemporary “creationists” and “evolutionists,” they are not wholly different processes. Evolution continues the act of creation, for Spirit first becomes absorbed in an abysmal inconscience and then re-

emerges to discover itself in sequential fashion. All the powers of the Divine are manifested in this way. Evolution follows from the involution of higher principles into matter, instead of being the blind natural process presupposed by Darwin. The movement is not arbitrary or haphazard, since it develops in an orderly manner by reversing the path of involution. Instead of being restricted to a momentary act at the beginning of the world, creation is a continuous process of divine manifestation in which we are all taking part. Sri Aurobindo sums up the whole conception:

The manifestation of the Being in our universe takes the shape of an involution which is the starting-point of an evolution,—Matter the nethermost stage, Spirit the summit

. . . . In the descent into the material plane of which our natural life is a product, the lapse culminates in a total Inconscience out of which an involved Being and Consciousness have to emerge by a gradual evolution.³⁸

The manifestation of Spirit is being brought to a focus on earth, which is viewed as a microcosm where the evolutionary impulse is now pressing forward. But to understand this process more fully, the essential principles operating in it must be clearly identified. For this purpose, Being can be imagined as a great sphere containing them.

THE PRINCIPLES OF BEING

According to Sri Aurobindo, Being is divisible into two hemispheres, the upper hemisphere representing Spirit and the lower, Matter (Figure 6). The terms “Spirit” and “Matter” are employed as general categories to designate the major divisions of Being; they are further differentiated into a number of distinct principles. The hemispheres are separated by a “Golden Lid.”³⁹ The implied spherical image is an analogue of the linear Chain of Being found in traditional cosmology, without the suggestion implicit in the latter that the material world is an inferior form of existence. In Sri Aurobindo’s view, even Matter is implicitly divine, being an aspect of Spirit. The Golden Lid consists of

spiritual light, which is massed at the interface between the two hemispheres and effectively covers what exists above it. Consequently, there is an intensely bright boundary between the manifested universe and the transcendent realms that have yet to become organized in matter. As evolution ascends from below, the Golden Lid will gradually open to a downward flow of light into the darkness, eventually uniting the two hemispheres in a luminous sea of Consciousness. In our present condition, we cannot penetrate beyond the Lid into the upper regions without losing contact with the lower hemisphere, but evolution is bringing the light down into the material darkness in the course of time.

There is a graded series of principles, four transcendent above the Golden Lid and three cosmic levels below it. The transcendent principles are Existence, Consciousness-Force, Bliss (or Delight), and Supermind. They are essentially one infinite and eternal Consciousness, though distinguishable in the successive stages of involution. Each appears in turn, while the others are concealed behind it. *Existence* is the principle that begins the series of transformations. As Absolute Being with unlimited possibilities of existing, it is comparable to Brahman in Vedantic thought.

Consciousness-Force emerges next as the creative energy (*Śakti*) that brings forth the universe and carries evolution onward through time. This energy functions as the Divine Mother bearing and nurturing all beings. Sri Aurobindo calls the concentrated force by which Consciousness acts upon itself to create the universe *tapas* ("heat"). This corresponds exactly to the cosmic origin depicted by the big bang model, whether it is interpreted as a point-singularity or a compact nugget of vibrating energy as in string theory.

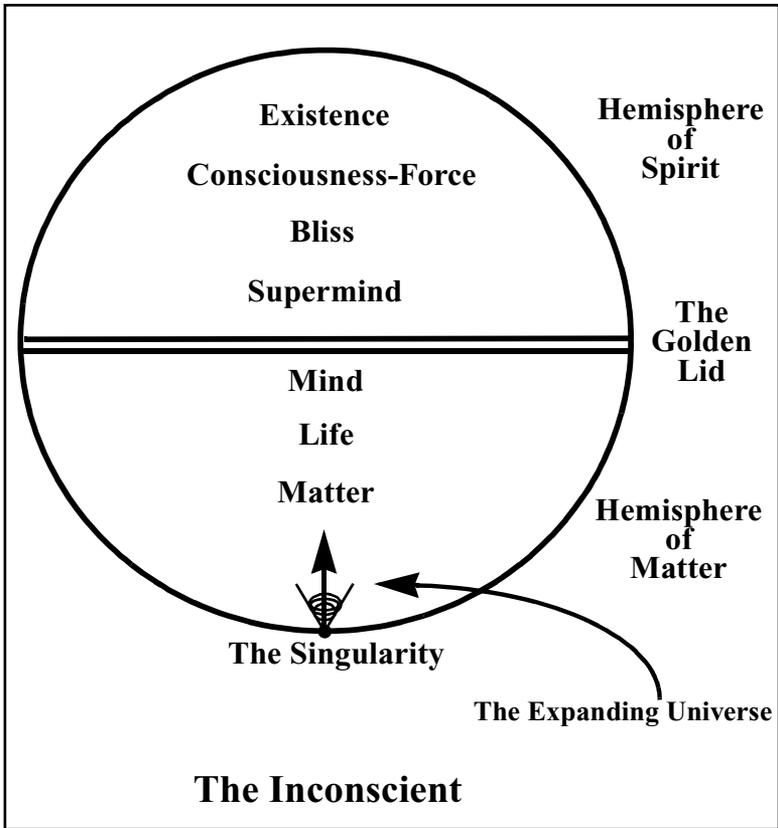


Figure 6. The Principles of Being

Delight is the third transcendent principle, sustaining the divine play of self-manifestation in a vast multitude of worlds. In our universe, the divine *Lilā* has taken an evolutionary path to cosmic fulfillment. Ordinarily, this principle is identified as the bliss that a liberated soul experiences when released from bondage to the world. Thus, the question why the universe was brought forth in the first place is left unresolved. Sri Aurobindo sees the answer to this question in the context of divine delight manifesting creatively in the world.

The last principle in the upper hemisphere, *Supermind*, is the key to Sri Aurobindo's understanding of the universe. He gave a

great deal of attention to it, because its unique status as the link between the upper and lower hemispheres had not been fully recognized before.⁴⁰ Supermind is the principal source of selection and organization in the cosmos. For example, the exquisite harmony and variety of the physical universe, from the majestic whirl of the galaxies to the minutest details of subatomic structure, are founded on its action. Without it there could not be an ordered world anywhere.

Sri Aurobindo distinguishes three poises of the Supermind. They are aspects of one transcendent Consciousness that are necessary to facilitate its deployment in space and time. There is a *comprehending consciousness* holding all things together in their potentialities, an *apprehending consciousness* by which consciousness contemplates itself from multiple centers without losing its awareness of their unity, and a *projecting consciousness* through which it becomes involved in each of them to experience the universe from a variety of different standpoints. Realization of their ultimate unity would be the fulfillment, as well as the foundation, of the cosmic process. In essence, the delight of divine play would be the object of it all. Significantly, he likens this to what takes place imaginatively in a poet's mind. The latter contains various mental images of things, sees their mutual relations with one another, and identifies with them in order to create a unified poem.

Supermind presides over the course of evolution and also represents an important stage in its consummation. It supports the appearance of multiplicity in the universe, while holding things together in an interlocking unity. Sri Aurobindo refers to Supermind as the supreme "Truth-Consciousness," or "Real-Idea," because it comprises both Divine Knowledge and Divine Will. This should not be confused with the Intellect, or Universal Mind, which was discussed previously. Intellect belongs to the level of the divisive and constructive Mind, and lies in the region below the Golden Lid. The delegated light of Supermind poised in concentration at the Golden Lid is called Overmind. From

there it turned away from its divine source, plunging in a series of descending levels into deepening darkness and ignorance.⁴¹

The three cosmic levels of Mind, Life, and Matter exist below the Golden Lid. They belong to the lower hemisphere, where Mind and Life have already entered into the evolution of material forms. These levels are related to the higher spiritual principles, since Matter is the inverse of Existence, Life of Conscious-Force, and Mind of Supermind. Mind and Life exist on their own levels prior to becoming organized in physical matter. Although these levels are not in themselves evolutionary, they play an important role in evolution because powers derived from them enter into matter at critical junctures of the process.⁴² At the opposite pole from the Divine is the Inconscient, which lies far below even Matter. It represents the total oblivion, or trance, into which Consciousness sinks prior to creation. The Inconscient (as its name implies) conceals Consciousness, just as life lies hidden in the seed of a flower; all that exists on the higher levels is latent within it. As suggested in Chapter IV, it appears in the equations of physics as the notorious singularity where the laws of physics break down.

When matter first springs into manifestation in the “big bang,” it is already imbued with a dumb, obscure impulse to evolve; though not overtly conscious, its activity is described as somnambulistic. Far from being a barren wasteland without redemptive value, as maintained in some traditions, it is viewed here as a rich soil prepared for the release of hidden potencies in response to the nurturing influences from above. This, incidentally, reveals the inner relation between the physical world and the Divine. As we saw earlier, neither mythical cosmology nor the traditional view gives a satisfactory account of the existence of matter in a world issuing from a higher spiritual principle. Scientific cosmology, on the other hand, accepts matter as real but cannot derive the psychic cosmos from it. In Sri Aurobindo’s vision, matter is a form of Spirit that plays a necessary role in the complete manifestation of the Divine.

SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION

All of these principles are implicated in the evolution of Spirit on earth. To quote from Sri Aurobindo's description of the process of involution and evolution:

The Divine descends from pure existence through the play of Consciousness-Force and Bliss and the creative medium of 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 illumining descent of the higher into the nature of the lower being and the forceful ascent of the lower being into the nature of the higher, mind can recover its divine light in the all-comprehending Supermind, the soul realise its divine self in the all-possessing all-blissful Ananda, life repossess its divine power in the play of omnipotent Conscious-Force and Matter open to its divine liberty as a form of the divine Existence.⁴³

The levels above matter are typical (not evolutionary) and each possesses powers characteristic of its own nature. As the evolutionary ascent proceeds, something from the next higher level descends into the evolving being and raises it to a new status. The process is not a mechanical one, since aspiration to evolve must also be present. This presupposes that the potential for the higher is already involved at the lower level. Life descended into fertile matter and living organisms were brought forth on earth. Later, mind descended into a few advanced organisms to engender mental beings (of whom man is now the leading representative). In *The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth*, Sri Aurobindo speaks of a "Mind of Light" that is in the process of being manifested. It is a special action of Supermind, accessing truth-consciousness but expressing this only in mental terms.

The outcome of this phase of evolution would be a perfected form of humanity intermediate between man as he now is and a

fully supramental being. For all of its promise, the Mind of Light is only a precursor of the supreme creative and ordering Intelligence behind the cosmos. Evolution has resulted in the appearance of complex forms, from plants and animals to human beings, and is projected to extend beyond man to Superman. It proceeds from above, though initiated by an aspiration from below; thus it would be fruitless to look for biological mechanisms that could account for this development. Sri Aurobindo is therefore not really concerned with the biological transformations of species, but anticipates the descent of greater powers of Spirit yet to manifest in the universe.⁴⁴

Man is viewed as a transitional form, half-animal and half-divine, on the way to a supramental or gnostic being. The key to his evolution is the soul, or psychic being, for the conventional word "soul" is too ambiguous to convey the precise meaning intended. The psychic being is the true center of a person's existence. Everything we experience is mirrored in it. Unlike the aggressive ego, it is not involved in the ordinary mix of our contacts with the world. While not overtly active, it becomes influential when clearly recognized. Its essence is divine love, which can swallow up the whole world in its vast scope. For, according to Sri Aurobindo, the world is the Divine in the act of progressive Self-manifestation. Soul is the indispensable means for this, because it is a form of the Divine enjoying its own unfolding splendor.

The psychic being is the true Immortal residing in the secret recesses of the heart. Once it has been identified, our awareness begins to widen, eventually embracing the entire universe. It is the divine seed in Nature, born into the world to evolve through many lives into a fully manifested divinity on earth.⁴⁵ The vast scale of spiritual evolution implies repeated rebirths, but the psychic being is much more than a person's temporary personality. In itself *it does not go anywhere*, though putting forward a succession of different personalities by which it evolves. Like a seed, it grows upward by assimilating the experiences of past lives. While we give something of ourselves

to it, the soul will eventually evolve beyond our human mode of existence. As evolution continues, it will outgrow the psycho-physical vehicles through which it now functions, acquiring a more supple material envelope wholly transparent to the spirit within. There are also reaches of consciousness above it that can descend like sunlight when we are prepared to receive them. Moreover, the growth experienced as the soul evolves can spark the inner potential of others as well, since everyone is linked together in an all-embracing unity.

Soul is hidden within us (though we do not “contain” it), but when its influence is felt in our lives an aspiration is awakened to evolve further. It is drawn toward the world, where it appears again and again in different guises, moved by a secret will to manifest the Divine in resistant and seemingly unconscious matter. Divine delight has infused itself into matter as the soul, which is meant to evolve *in the world* rather than leave it untransformed.⁴⁶ The convoluted march toward transcendence is propelled by cosmic love, the sustaining power of our efforts. This is the soul’s love of the universe in which the Divine is manifesting more and more of itself.⁴⁷ The link between them is love, because the soul’s love of the Divine in its multitudinous manifestation is identical with the Divine’s delight in its own cosmic form.

Love resolves the mystery of our existence in an outwardly impersonal world, where life sometimes seems doomed to endless frustration and despair. It carries us beyond all mental doubts and reservations about who we really are and why we are here. No earthly power or nervous recoil can impede its course forever. Delight in manifestation is the ultimate *raison d’être* for the existence of universes, but it is expressed in this one as a cosmic play of self-concealment and rediscovery. As for the future, we will have to wait and see what takes place, for there are many obstacles still to be worked out, individually and collectively. Whatever our destiny may be, Sri Aurobindo reaffirms his vision of spiritual evolution in the concluding paragraph of *The Life Divine*:

If there is an evolution in material Nature and if it is an evolution of being with consciousness and life as its two key-terms and powers, this fullness of being, fullness of consciousness, fullness of life must be the goal of development towards which we are tending and which will manifest at an early or later stage of our destiny. The Self, the Spirit, the Reality that is disclosing itself out of the first inconscience of life and matter, would evolve its complete truth of being and consciousness in that life and matter. It would return to itself,—or, if its end as an individual is to return into its Absolute, it could make that return also,—not through a frustration of life but through a spiritual completeness of itself in life. Our evolution in the Ignorance with its chequered joy and pain of self-discovery and world-discovery, its half-fulfilments, its constant finding and missing, is only our first state. It must lead inevitably towards an evolution in the Knowledge, a self-finding and self-unfolding of the Spirit, a self-revelation of the Divinity in things in that true power of itself in Nature which is to us still a Supernature.⁴⁸

At this point, we pass beyond cosmology as presently understood and simply note that evolution can happen only in a universe possessing properties that permit it—which is another way of stating the anthropic principle. It implies that the laws of physics are precisely those necessary at the current stage of cosmic development. This could mean either that the universe was deliberately designed to allow evolution to occur, or that the singular properties of our universe provided the opportunity for an influx of Spirit into Matter. As we saw earlier, this is not an issue that can be finally decided by the mind.