
UNIT 3 EVOLUTION AND INVOLUTION

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to clarify two important concepts in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, namely Evolution and Involution. We have made some reference to the fact that the distinctiveness of Aurobindo from other vedantic thinkers is that Aurobindo follows a synthetic approach to life and reality, taking into account the complementarity of Matter and Spirit. In fact it is his evolutionary view of the nature of existence, including the Absolute, that made it possible. In and through these two concepts Aurobindo makes clear that the world is real (not mere illusion), and the nature of this world is becoming and this becoming is also true in the case of the Absolute.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Aurobindo maintains, that the reception of both spirit and matter and the thesis that matter is also Brahman can be unacceptable to a rational mind unless we admit a series of ascending terms (Life, Mind, Supermind, and the grades that link mind to Supermind) between Spirit and Matter. Without the reception of the intermediary grades in the identification of Spirit and Matter, representing each in terms of the other, will be an artificial creation of the thought.

As we have already discussed, the second presupposition, wherein one observes the originality of Aurobindo and how he transcends the theories of his predecessors, of the Integral (*purna*) Advaita is faith in the "involution" (descent) of the Absolute Reality in the material world. The Vedanta accepts that life is already involved in matter and Mind in life because in essence Matter is a form of veiled life, life a veiled form of Consciousness. Here we also have Aurobindo's novel response to the problem of the one and the many. The condition of possibility for the evolution in reality is the "involution." Aurobindo writes in the *Life Divine* that a first involutionary foundation in which originates all that has to evolve, an emergence and action of the involved powers in or upon that foundation in an ascending series, and a culminating emergence of the highest power of all as the agent of a supreme manifestation are the necessary stages of the journey of evolutionary Nature.

3.2 THE CONCEPT OF EVOLUTION: A PROCESS TOWARD INTEGRAL UNITY

It was already established previously that in Aurobindo's integral vision Reality is characterised by two poles: Spirit and Matter. For, in his vision it is the involution of the Absolute that is responsible for the whole world process. However, our common experience delineates that matter and Spirit belong to two different realms: finite and infinite, immanent and transcendental. How can we reconcile the two? Furthermore, we are still to explain the how of the involution of the Absolute. It is his theory of evolution or becoming that answers these questions. Moreover, discussion of the concept of evolution would further clarify the questions of the One and the Many and the co-existence of matter and spirit. It would still clarify how the whole problem of Indian philosophy is inter-related to the problem of the One and the Many, a claim that we made at the outset. First we have to see the role of evolution in Indian philosophy.

3.3 THE IDEA OF EVOLUTION IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

The idea of evolution is not something new or recent to the Indian tradition, though generally it is not well treated by many today. It was already in the Vedas and Upanishads, especially in *Rig Veda*. We have a clear reference to the concept of evolution in *Rig Veda*, in the tenth mandala. Here, evolution is presented in connection with involution. One can identify a number of other passages in the classics of Indian philosophy which speak of this evolutionary ascension (the Evolutionary Process—Ascent and Integration) in nature. A clear vision of evolution can be seen in Upanishadic literature. In the Upanishadic teaching, the world is the creative manifestation of Brahman which takes place in and through an involutory and evolutionary process (TU 3.1). Realisation of this Brahman in individual existence also passes through various stages. Thus, *Taittiriya* Upanishad maintains that the true seeker of Truth comes gradually to the knowledge of Brahman in successive revelations (TU 3). The Absolute, Sachchidananda is the beginning and end of evolution. The finite is one with the Infinite. "This is full, that is full from the Full, the Full is taken out and yet the Full remains" (IU Santimantram).

Furthermore, the idea of evolution was already in the teaching of *Gita* as well. From *Gita* one gets the idea of Brahman as Purushottama, who is transcendent, motionless, and calm existence, and is yet dynamic and creative. It is nothing but Purushottama who evolves into both material and spiritual world, by his own power and determination. Srivastava maintains that it is the same power that Aurobindo names as "Cit-sakti or the Consciousness-Force, or Purushottama which reveals His Supreme nature: the transcendent and originating Sakti of the Purushottama is his para-prakriti". Evolution is the transformation of the lower nature (*apara prakriti*) into the higher nature (*para prakriti*). From this general background of the concept of evolution in Indian philosophy we could enter into the discussion of the same in Aurobindo.

3.4 AUROBINDO'S VISION OF EVOLUTION

The keynote of Aurobindo's thought is evolution. It is believed that he entertained the idea of evolution from his earliest writings in 1890-1892 when he was an undergraduate in King's College, Cambridge. His unfinished work of this period entitled, *The Harmony of Virtue*, gives ample evidence for this supposition. In this work which is written in the model of Socratic dialogue - a dialogue between Keshav Ganesh Desai - who clearly stands for Aurobindo himself - and his English friends - a new theory of virtue is proposed. The key to the virtue is evolution. He also speaks of a descent into the nether regions of consciousness, of which he later spoke in *Savitri*. Thus, one could say that both the ideas of evolution and involution, which is the

condition of possibility for evolution, were already present, at least in a germ form, in his thought from the very beginning. He states, “an involution of Spirit in Matter is the beginning”. The involution is the necessary condition of evolution.

Here a question emerges as to why Aurobindo conceives existence as a process or evolution? For him, the ultimate purpose of human existence is the realisation of Sachchidananda. The attainment of this goal depends on the gradual development that the person achieves. Therefore, evolutionary process is a must for two reasons: (i) the initial stages of evolution, namely matter, life and mind, are already a matter of our own experience. What is inevitable is the experience of the center of undivided power, Sachchidananda. However, because of the separation the first three stages (matter, life and mind) have from the spiritual source, there results a lapse which culminates in a total Inconscience out of which come an involved Being and Consciousness which have to emerge by a gradual evolution. Therefore, (ii) the evolution becomes an inevitable reality in human existence. Aurobindo maintains that evolution first develops, as it is bound to develop. In Matter, Life appears and living physical beings; in Life, Mind manifests as embodied thinking and living beings; in Mind, ever increasing powers and activities in forms of Matter, the Supermind or Truth-Consciousness must appear, inevitably, by the very force of what is contained in the Inconscience and the necessity in Nature to bring it into manifestation. Supermind appearing manifests the Spirit’s self-knowledge and whole-knowledge in a supramental living being and must bring about by the same law, by an inherent necessity and inevitability, the dynamic manifestation here of the divine Existence, Consciousness and Delight of existence. Thus, Aurobindo states that “Life has begun from an involution of the spiritual truth of things in what seems to be its opposite.” Once there is involution there cannot be but evolution; the evolution is not only possible, but inevitable, in the sense that involution is in view of evolution. Only then the very purpose of involution is actualised, namely divinization of the material world.

3.5 DISTINCTIVENESS OF AUROBINDO’S CONCEPT OF EVOLUTION

It is observed that Aurobindo has combined the Eastern and the Western perspectives of evolution in his view. To facilitate a proper understanding of Aurobindonian theory, one has to see it also in contrast with that of the West. In light of the Eastern perspective, the Western perspective of evolution is not sufficiently spiritual. While the West speaks of an evolution of matter, the East concentrates on the evolution of the Spirit; while the West speaks more of a natural evolution, the East, especially Aurobindo, speaks of spiritual evolution, which is the evolution of Sachchidananda. It is basically an internal growth of Consciousness and an external development is only instrumentally applicable to it. The Spirit is “involved” in all the material realities. It is the involution of Spirit in matter and in all the evolutes of matter that spiritualises the Eastern theory of evolution in the Aurobindonian perspective. A spiritual evolution, an evolution of consciousness *in* Matter is then the keynote, the central significant motive of the terrestrial existence. Moreover, Aurobindo states that a complete involution of all that the Spirit is and its evolutionary self-unfolding are the double term of our material existence.

Thus, for Aurobindo the whole history is a movement of evolution, of a progressive self-manifestation of the Spirit in a material universe. In this context it can be observed that the fundamental flaw of Sankara when he rejected the reality of the world is that he “ignored the greatest truth that a divinised man can only emerge in a divinised cosmos.” Therefore, what is necessary is an integral evolution, rather than a partial one. “Evolution must be a cosmic Yoga”.

3.6 TELEOLOGY CENTRAL TO AUROBINDO'S CONCEPT OF EVOLUTION

Aurobindo's evolution is fundamentally teleological. For Aurobindo, a merely mobile nature would give us only the cyclic rhythm of becoming which is so common a feature of various ancient theories of the world. Such a view would be devoid of both hierarchical structure and teleology. Neither can it account for the persistent aspiration of the human consciousness to exceed itself to arrive at the integral conscious knowledge of all Being. Even the *Lila* (cosmic play) is not without its goal and object. For, it carries within itself an object to be accomplished and without the fulfilment of that object it would have no completeness of significance. As different from the Western thinkers of evolution, Aurobindo holds that if Brahman, the supreme Consciousness, is really involved in all evolution, it is but logical that the process of all evolution should finally culminate in the evolutionary manifestation of this super consciousness.

This teleological dimension is what distinguishes Aurobindo's evolution from that of Bergson (1859-1941), a western contemporary of Aurobindo. This demands further justification. Aurobindo maintains that Bergson's theory suffers from two weaknesses: firstly, Bergson maintains the *élan vital* as a pure flow, a spontaneous movement which goes on rushing. Thus, there can be no integration, no cohesion between what goes before or comes after. He feels the necessity of giving some stability to intuition, thus that purpose maybe served by the intellect. Though Bergson wanted to place intuition superior to reason, he had to resort to reason to give it stability; secondly, Bergson excluded teleology from the evolutionary process. He has taken together all the higher forms of consciousness under the title intuition. On the contrary, Aurobindo has pointed out lower and higher levels of intuition. Only in this way can one refer to any sort of teleology in the movement. It may be right to say that in Aurobindo one can see the why and how of evolution while Bergson is satisfied with the latter question alone. In Bergson's perspective, evolution should be seen as the endurance of '*élan vital*' the vital impetus that is continuously developing and generating new forms. Evolution has to be understood as creative and it is not mechanic. His basic understanding of reality was that in life, in whatever form it might appear, there is an observable '*élan vital*', a drive of life, purpose, creativity and meaning.

In Aurobindo's vision evolution is emergent, free, and purposive. The apparent mechanical progression of evolution has a spiritual nexus inherent in it. Aurobindo, like Plato, observes that thing that is made is attracted towards the thing that *is*, becoming towards being, the natural to the supernatural, the symbol towards the thing itself, nature towards God. Each stage of evolution is subtler and more complex than the previous one as the purpose of evolution is the delight of self-manifestation of Sachchidananda. This teleological vision of evolution serves also as the foundation of his philosophy of history and his speculation about the future of mankind. The unique features of the Aurobindonian theory of evolution is commendably summarised as follows: "Evolution is not simply an increasingly complex configuration of matter and motion, presided over by chance. Nor is it the rattling-off of a chain forged innumerable years ago, presided over by an extra-cosmic divine mind. Nor is it the gradual emergence, in accidental fashion, of new qualities and superior values; all out of the void The process of evolution is the infinitely diversified self-determination of the essentially indeterminable reality. ... Evolution is the creative adventure of the world spirit in the unchartered ocean of Inconscience, so that the infinite possibilities inherent in Reality maybe infinitely expressed in material conditions." (Chaudhuri 1960, 31).

Aurobindo's philosophy leaves no doubt concerning the fact that cosmic history has a definite direction and purpose. Through it and in it, the eternal spirit seeks its self-realization, beginning, as it were, from the inconscience of matter, and passing through many stages it flowers into the full consciousness of its being when it completes the cycle of evolution and involution.

To clarify this cyclic process one has to recollect what has been seen about the basic forms of existence. It has already been stated above that existence in its activity expresses itself as a Conscious-Force. The working of this force is presented to the consciousness as its own form of being. Since the force is the action of the Conscious-Being the result also is nothing but the forms of that Conscious-Being. The natural consequence of the above affirmation has its bearing on the whole of Aurobindonian philosophy. If the result of the action of the Conscious-force is Conscious-being itself the substance or matter of every existence is only a form of Spirit, the pure Existence. It is also true that life is an action of the Conscious-Force and material forms are its result. However, life is involved in these material forms appearing in them first as inconscient force and as a result of the inner dynamics of evolution brings back into it the consciousness as it is done by Mind. In fact being conscious is the form of the being of Pure Existence either in its manifested form or unmanifested form. However, involution becomes the condition of possibility for the evolution.

3.7 SACHCHIDANANDA AND THE INVOLUTION

In the previous sections we pointed out that the world is the manifestation of the Sachchidananda, the Absolute in Indian philosophy. However, this may seem an arbitrary statement unless one clarifies the how of this manifestation. Our immediate task is to analyse this dimension of the Sachchidananda-World relation. It has to be analysed in the light of two paradoxes: (i) why did Sachchidananda, the infinite and all-perfect create or manifest the universe; and (ii) the nature of Sachchidananda, which is immutable, static, eternal, self-existent, featureless, etc. is contradictory to the nature of the created world which is transient, finite, imperfect, mutable, etc. In this respect the dilemma concerns as to how are we to concur with the reality of the world and the Absoluteness of Sachchidananda? For the first paradox one can find no answer other than the following that the cosmic manifestation is for the pure Delight (*Lila*) of Sachchidananda.

With respect to the second paradox Sankara solved it by identifying the material cause of the universe in the principle of Maya, while Madhva found *Prakriti* as the material cause of the universe. In these ways, they avoided applying *parinamavada* (theory of modification) in the case of God. In other words, they advocated a sort of absolute identity and identity in difference respectively to account for God-world relation. However, Aurobindo repudiated such a perspective.

Aurobindo solves the problem of the second paradox by recognizing in Sachchidananda a double nature; *Sachchidananda in its power of manifestation and Sachchidananda in its pure unmanifested nature*. Here we see also how Aurobindo surpasses Sankara and Madhva. He writes, "All that is in the kinesis, the movement, the action, the creation, is the Brahman; the becoming is a movement of the being; Time is a manifestation of the Eternal. All is one Being, one Consciousness, one even in infinite multiplicity, and there is no need to bisect it into an opposition of transcendent Reality and unreal cosmic Maya." (LD 461).

This takes us to Aurobindo's concept of involution, the first condition to understand the above relation. In other words, the involution of the Absolute is the condition of possibility for the evolution of the world or the manifestation of the world. And in explaining this we enter here into the hardcore of Aurobindo's metaphysics of becoming.

3.8 THE INVOLUTION OF THE ABSOLUTE

In dealing with the question of "involution" our objective is to clarify what is meant by Involution or in the Western categories "Becoming" and the why of it. It would clarify as well Aurobindo's conception of the Absolute as Being and Becoming. First, we take up the question what is meant by involution? In Aurobindo's own words, Involution "is the manifestation from above of that which we have to develop from below; it is the descent of God into that divine birth of the human being into which we mortal creatures must climb ..." (EG 157). The "Involution consists in the descent of the Infinite ... into the cosmic world or reality through the medium of the Supermind. Evolution, on the other hand, is the reverse process of Involution, and it consists in the ascent of the Spirit from matter through the medium of the Supermind back to its original nature" (Susai 49). These citations explain the core of the becoming of Sachchidananda and the evolution of the universe. Moreover, it points to the great role of the Supermind as well. The law of involution is characterised as a law of unity in multiplicity" where "the different beings that emerge from Brahman's Self-manifestation have their being and origin in the Divine.

Involution can be understood as the "self-imposed veiling" of Sachchidananda. One of the differences between involution and evolution is that the descent by its very nature is self-concealing which makes the presence of the Spirit more and more obscure, and on the contrary the ascent is more and more revealing which makes the presence of the Spirit explicit. However, both involution and evolution are self-revelation of the Absolute. In no way one sees involution as self-concealing making the Absolute more obscure, rather it only makes possible the Transcendent more an Immanent one. It is a self-concealing only in the sense that it manifests itself in another mode of existence, that is, Matter.

The more the descent proceeds, the thicker, the denser, becomes the veil and as a result the apparently non-conscious and inert matter emerges. It can be said that Involution is a progressive self-limitation, or self-absorption of Sachchidananda outwards or downwards by increasingly veiling and consequently diminishing the glory of His pure Existence, Consciousness-Force, Bliss and the creative medium of Supermind. The coinage "self-imposed veiling" in fact clarifies how do the spirit and matter have one and the same source of origin. It is from the Spirit itself matter emerges. From the opposite pole what we have in matter is Sachchidananda itself subject to a self-imposed veiling. Here a relevant question emerges: why the involution at all? The temporal world demands a rational explanation. And it was to answer this demand as well that Aurobindo speaks of the involution of the Absolute. From another perspective it can be observed that Aurobindo's theory of Involution is his answer for the question of creation in Christian understanding. The world evolves on its several levels because at each level Sachchidananda has already involved itself in each of these levels. Logically prior to evolution, involution is the process whereby Brahman or Sachchidananda, seeks its own manifestation through the multileveled universe (McDermott 171). There is all probability that by his theory of involution of Sachchidananda Aurobindo wanted to repudiate the theory of the world as illusion. It is notable that rather than using the word 'creation', Aurobindo prefers to use the Indian concept

sristi, which means “the manifestation of something which is hidden and unmanifest”. For Aurobindo, creation has to be understood in the sense that the Sachchidananda “manifests what is in itself, in its own essence.” One can speak of creation only in the sense of “Being becoming in form and movement what is already is in substance and status” (LD 333). Through his concept of involution Aurobindo states that being is with becoming.

3.9 THE EFFECTS OF INVOLUTION

Aurobindo’s concept of involution has great impact on his whole metaphysics. It is one of the demarcating points of his integral advaita from that of the classical advaita. By this Aurobindo was able to incorporate the modern evolutionary theory to the understanding of world process, and precisely to the understanding of the Absolute itself. Aurobindo establishes his theory of the world in and through various ways and means. The first effect of the theory of involution is the understanding that the World is the Manifestation. The self-manifestation of Sachchidananda takes place in a threefold movement of ‘descent’, ‘emergence’, and ‘release’. In the first movement of the Spirit, it descends itself to the Inconscient. The self-absorption of the Spirit in the Inconscient is to enjoy the self-delight in the finite variation. In the second move, the Spirit assumes the form or emerges into the triple world of Matter, Life, and Mind and this process culminates in the rational animal, human being. In the third and the final move, the Spirit releases itself from the limitations of spatio-temporal dimensions and realises itself as the One and Infinite (Roy 1995, 39). It is nothing but the ‘getting home’ of the Sachchidananda. The thesis that the world is the manifestation of the Absolute points also to the fact that it is real. “What issues from the Absolute, what the Eternal supports and informs and manifests in itself must have a reality” (LD 477). Aurobindo himself states that “the philosophy of *The Life Divine* is a realistic Advaita. The world is a manifestation of the Real and therefore is itself real” (LY 44). The idea of involution also clarifies the point that Sachchidananda is the Substratum and the Cause of the Universe.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does evolution operate in human beings?

2) Explain the evolution and involution.

3.10 LET US SUM UP

The concept of Involution and evolution are not new to Indian philosophy. However the merit of Aurobindo is that he has rediscovered these concepts and presented it also in the light of contemporary understanding of evolution. Moreover, by doing so he has succeeded in finding a viable solution for the problem of matter and spirit and established his realism on a strong rational foundation.

3.11 KEY WORDS

Evolution: Evolution becomes an inevitable reality in human existence.

3.12 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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