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AN INTRODUCTION TO SRI AUROBINDO'S METAPHYSICAL COSMOLOGY:  
PART I – THE INVOLUTION

June 9, 2006

I. Introduction

- A. It is my intention in this paper to give a brief introduction to my interpretation of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical system. The ideas presented here are very close to those of Sri Aurobindo, but they are not identical. In particular, my treatment of the category of Being is very influenced by my studies of Alfred North Whitehead. Also, there may be some differences of detail where I have been somewhat crisper in my interpretation than Sri Aurobindo's texts may warrant. On the other hand, I believe that this presentation is quite consistent with the spirit of Sri Aurobindo's thought.
- B. Of course, the short paper like this, I cannot do full justice to the depth and profundity Sri Aurobindo's ideas. But I hope to provide useful introduction which can serve as a starting point for those who wish to pursue their own studies in greater depth.
- C. Before I enter into a discussion of the metaphysical system itself, I would like to say something that Sri Aurobindo's fundamental approach to the use of ideas. Sri Aurobindo, like many postmodern thinkers, is aware of the need to go beyond Aristotelian/Euclidean logic in metaphysics. He expresses this need in advocating what he calls a "logic of the infinite." He, himself, offers some general pointers towards what this logic of the infinite might look like, though he does not develop the idea systematically. I think that we can get some more fleshed out notion of what Sri Aurobindo means by looking at the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead and the French philosopher, Edgar Morin.
- D. Alfred North Whitehead points out that the universe of our experience, though shot through with plurality, is nonetheless one coherent universe. And, he says, it is the business of metaphysics to give expression to that complex unity. Whitehead suggests that a metaphysical system needs to be "coherent," by which he means that our fundamental metaphysical notions ought to be related to one another in such a way that what is unique about each of them cannot be understood in abstraction from their references to each other. This is in general contrast to the habits that come from mathematical thinking, in which we desire each of the premises of the system to be *independent* of one another. In general, we are satisfied with a mathematical system in which each of the premises seems clearly comprehensible on its own merits, and does not require reference to the other premises to make it make sense. A metaphysical system, on the other

- hand, ought to exhibit the fundamental unity of the universe by being coherent in the above sense.
- E. In *Adventures of Ideas* (p. 131), Whitehead refers to Newton's cosmology as "easy to understand and very hard to believe." And yet, obviously, millions of scientists and laypeople alike have believed it. Why is that? It is because each of Newton's basic building blocks – atoms, absolute space and time, force, and law are easy to comprehend on its own, and, therefore, the system *seems* comprehensible. It is only difficult to understand if we start looking for the *necessary interconnections* among the elements which, upon examination, we find to be entirely absent. This renders Newton's system, in Whitehead's sense, fundamentally incoherent.
- F. Now if a metaphysical system is to be coherent, there ought to be fundamental interconnections among its constituent elementary ideas. Edgar Morin, in articulating his idea of "complex thinking," has articulated some of the relations that we might find among our basic ideas. He suggests that the basic ideas of the system may be *simultaneously* concurrent, contradictory and complementary.
- G. Let me illuminate some of these ideas by a simple example. Take the notions of white and black. These two ideas are *concurrent* in that they each stand on their own as definite and distinct ideas. I can bring to mind very clearly the idea of white, and the idea of black and, when I do so, I need make no explicit reference to the other. If white and black were not each something on its own, then there could be no relationship between them. And yet, white and black are *contradictory*, in the sense that no actuality can be, at the same time and in the same precise sense, both white and black. Finally, they are *complementary* in that the full meaning of each is inseparable from its contrast to the other.
- H. These distinctions do not, of course, exhaust the richness of complex thinking. But many of Sri Aurobindo's fundamental notions are related to each other in complex ways, and it will be helpful to keep that in mind as we explore his ideas.
- I. In particular, Sri Aurobindo has a rather special way of dealing with *complementarity*. His thought depends heavily on a relationship which I call "asymmetrical complementarity." (He himself does not name this relation, but it is clear to me that he uses it. I have found that thematizing and naming this relation makes his thought more comprehensible).
- J. Asymmetrical complementarity is a relation that holds between concept pairs such as: infinite-finite, good-evil, true-false, beautiful-ugly, strong-weak. Let us look at infinite-finite. There is a sense in which these ideas are, like white-black, concurrent, contradictory and complementary. But unlike white-black, where the concepts are symmetrical, or "on the same level," infinite and finite are asymmetrical in that "infinite" is a more encompassing term. The infinite contains many finites, but no finite can contain the infinite. Thus there is a sense in which the infinite is the major term in this pair. It can, in a sense that will be clarified later, manifest the finite, in which case we have the infinite and the finite related to each other as contradictory and concurrent, but their complementarity is asymmetrical in that the infinite does not require the finite and the totality of infinite and finite is itself infinite.
- K. A rather more controversial application of asymmetrical complementarity is to the analysis of the pair good-evil. Sri Aurobindo will maintain, when he is

developing his theodicy, that the good is infinite, and the evil is finite. We have, therefore, a situation in which the apparent concurrency and contradictory relation between good and evil is “trumped” by the more encompassing nature of the good. From this point of view, both good and evil are fundamentally good.

L. We will see other applications of this relation as we delve into the system itself.

## II. The metaphysical background

### A. Brahman

1. The Western intellectual tradition has, for the past few centuries, gotten caught up in a program of materialistic reductionism. The goal of this project is to account for all of experience in terms of the assumption that the ultimately real consists of a self-existing, essentially deterministic complex of spacetime and energy which unfolds according to immutable laws that can be adequately expressed in mathematical terms. Insofar as this project is pursued, it leads inevitably to the problem of “emergence.” How can phenomena such as life, mind and consciousness have arisen out of a material matrix in which none of these phenomena are inherent?
2. Sri Aurobindo avoids this problem by starting not with something simple and abstract, but rather by starting with the ultimately full and actual, and then deriving everything else as a simplification from that. This ultimately full and concrete beginning of things he calls, in accordance with the Vedic tradition, Brahman.
3. This move, the move of starting with the full and the actual is one which has become somewhat suspect in the scientific West, and which needs some justification. The question is “where are we going to start our thinking?” In part, this is an aesthetic question. We can always decide that we are content to start in an arbitrary set of premises, as long as those premises lead to an explanation for the way that things are now. This is the procedure that is generally adopted in science. But, in the context of metaphysics, where we are asking deeper questions, when we start with an arbitrary set of premises (for example, low entropy energy singularity (Big Bang), spacetime, and mathematical laws) we can always ask “Where did that come from?” My mind, at least, rests uneasily on such a basis.
4. My mind rests more easily if I begin with the assumption of a complex unity, containing within itself unity and plurality, infinity and finitude, good and evil – indeed all possible qualities – and yet transcending the totality of qualities in a fullness unknowable by mind.
5. One way that I reason to such a totality is by considering the plurality of entities that I find in the universe of my experience. All of these entities, no matter how diverse they are, are in utter solidarity with each other. They are all part of one universe. Even if I imagine that this one universe comes into existence out of a plurality of diverse factors (say, a Good God and an Evil God, as the Manicheans might suggest, or Creativity, Eternal Objects and God, as Alfred North Whitehead suggests), it must still be the case that these primordial factors are interacting with each other – and such an interaction necessitates a larger, more embracing context. Ultimately, then, in this sense, the universe is One, and that One must be such as to contain and uphold all.

6. I cannot claim any compelling rational justification for such a way of constructing a metaphysical understanding. I can, however, at least point to the way in which the ultimate starting point of our thinking as we launch into the metaphysical enterprise is a matter of pre-philosophical choice. Do we want to begin our thinking with some factors which are abstracted out of sense experience? Or do we want to start our thinking with the all embracing Unity in which all existence is playing itself out?
7. Sri Aurobindo describes Brahman in terms of two phrases drawn from the Upanishads:
  - a) "Brahman is One without a Second"
    - 1) This phrase encapsulates the idea that I was exploring more discursively a few paragraphs back – i.e., that the plurality of entities constituting a universe must interrelate within an overarching context, and that context, as the most embracing possible context for the interaction of all entities, can have nothing outside of it.
    - 2) We can imagine that there are many universes, or many parallel or even non-parallel worlds embraced within the Brahman, but to assert the existence of more than one Brahman would be empty, since that other Brahman would either communicate with our Brahman, in which case it would not be the Brahman at all, or else it would be systematically and forever irrelevant to us.
  - b) "All this is the Brahman"
    - 1) This second phrase, which complements the first, asserts that the unity of Brahman is not something over and above the universe of experience, but is rather the very essence of all this that is.

#### B. Sachchidananda

1. When Sri Aurobindo comes to investigate more fully the properties of Brahman, he is immediately confronted with the limitations of intellect. The intellect, which is itself a limitation of the Brahman, is not in a position to cognize the Brahman in its own terms. He therefore speaks of Sachchidananda, which is the highest conception of Brahman that an embodied intellect like ourselves can form. When Sri Aurobindo declares Sachchidananda to be "the highest conception" he is, of course, betraying his religious sensibility. We could, with Alfred North Whitehead, be more modest, and say that the explication of Sachchidananda lays out a coherent body of metaphysical postulates which enables us to form an understanding of our universe as we experience it.
2. The word Sachchidananda is derived from three root words – Sat (being), Chit (consciousness) and Ananda (bliss). It is these three terms that describe the metaphysical ultimates in Sri Aurobindo's system. Let us consider them one by one:
  - a) Sat – Being
    - 1) Sri Aurobindo was not a professional philosopher, and this lack of education shows up when he is dealing with the category of Being. Sri Aurobindo wants Being to give the effect of "substance," but I believe that his understanding of substance was deficient and, in addition, he did not have the benefit of Alfred North Whitehead's

penetrating critique of that category. Accordingly, in this treatment of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical system, I am going to treat Being in a way that would have sounded a bit strange to Sri Aurobindo's ears. Nonetheless, I believe that this change merely improves the clarity of his ideas, and it does not require modification of any other elements of his system.

- 2) Being, as I understand it, is actuality. But actuality here is understood in such a way that potentiality is a dependent complementary of it. Actuality in itself comprises both the actual and the potential. It is both the actuality of potentiality and the potentiality of actuality. But potentiality is here understood to arise by a certain withholding of actuality which, as it were, makes space for specific actualizations. (This rather like the ideas of Lurianic Kabala, in which God, in order to manifest a universe, must withhold some of His fullness – an operation termed “tsimtsum”). Sachchidananda, then, insofar as it is Being, is the unconditioned ground for anything and everything that comes to exist.
  - 3) In addition, Being must comprise all of the specific possibilities for manifestation. In this sense, Being is the repository of the “forms of definiteness” – forms such as redness, hardness, bigness, spatial relations, sorrow, rage, ecstasy, and so forth – without which we could recognize no permanence in the flux of appearances. These forms of definiteness are Alfred North Whitehead's “eternal objects,” or Plato's ideal forms.
- b) Chit – Consciousness (and Force – Shakti)
- 1) Consciousness, in Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical system, is not something that needs to be proven or derived from something else. It is a metaphysical ultimate, taken as being intrinsic to existence itself. In other words, it is assumed that there is no existence which is not, as part of its very being, known to itself.
  - 2) We can point to consciousness in several ways:
    - a] Consciousness is the indefinable, transparent luminosity that illuminates all existence. This transparent luminosity is a part of all of our experiences. It is the clearing in which the various objects of our experience emerge. As such, it is inseparable from spacetime.
    - b] Consciousness is the faculty of selection, permitting the articulation of various truths of the one Truth. This, again, we experience in ourselves as the power of selective attention. Because of this power of consciousness, consciousness is, in effect, Sachchidananda's moving part. It is the dynamic factor in God, as will be explicated further in what follows.
  - 3) In addition, Consciousness has a very important dependent complementary – what Sri Aurobindo refers to as Shakti, or Force.
    - a] To understand this idea, we need to remember that Sachchidananda is as much of Brahman as we can comprehend. Thus Sachchidananda, which is Brahman, is One without a

Second. There is nothing which can oppose Sachchidananda, and there is no possibility of any obstruction of any movement on its part.

- b] Consciousness, as Sachchidananda's moving part, is capable of selective attention. It can attend to Sachchidananda a whole, or it can attend to any of the particular determinate possibilities that are inherent in Sachchidananda's Being.
  - c] Brahman, or Sachchidananda, is a complex contrast among possibility and actuality. When the Consciousness of Sachchidananda selectively attends to some particular determinate possibility or set of possibilities, that selective attention itself creates a distinction between possibility and actuality. With an act of selective attention, Consciousness realizes that to which it attends, and thrusts that to which it does not attend into the background as mere possibility.
  - d] Whatever Sachchidananda's consciousness attends to is realized, actualized, or manifested. This power of actualization is Shakti, the Force of consciousness.
  - e] Note that the Consciousness of Sachchidananda, unlike finite consciousnesses like our own, must have the ability to attend selectively to many different specific potentialities at once. Thus, there may be many different "poises" of consciousness in existence simultaneously. Consciousness may attend to the undifferentiated wholeness of Sachchidananda, while simultaneously manifesting (in a way to be explicated) as an infinity of individual beings.
- 4) Because Consciousness is also Force (Chit is also Shakti), Sri Aurobindo's metaphysics is a form of panpsychism. The category of Chit/Shakti is both consciousness (with its awareness and its choicefulness), and energy, with its dynamism and causal efficacy. Within this metaphysical framework, every movement of energy expresses an intention of consciousness, and every intention of consciousness expresses itself in a movement of energy.
- 5) This Force, which is a dependent complementary of Consciousness, is so important that Sri Aurobindo will sometimes speak of Sachchidananda as fourfold – as Being, Consciousness, Force and Bliss.
- c) Bliss – Ananda
- 1) While the Sanskrit term Ananda is translated as "Bliss," a better translation in this context might be "appreciation of value." For Sri Aurobindo, every experience, from the luminous clarity of Absolute Truth to the murky obscurity of ill intentioned lies, from the heights of virtuous pleasure to the depths of sinful revel, is a value that can be appreciated.
  - 2) Sri Aurobindo tells us that pleasure, pain, and neutral experience are all so many inflections of Ananda.

- 3) Ananda is the final reason to the question of “Why?” Whatever comes to exist does so for the sake of the experience of value that it makes possible.
3. Let us step back now, and consider the implications of this definition of Sachchidananda. What is being suggested is that the ultimate ground of reality is not something dark, unconscious, automatic and blind, but rather a Being which is absolutely self-illuminated by an intrinsic Consciousness, and which is inseparable from an infinite enjoyment of its own inherent Bliss.
  4. There is another dependent complementarity that comes into play here – that between Personal and Impersonal. While the way in which I have presented Sachchidananda here emphasizes its impersonal aspect, Sri Aurobindo places great emphasis on the personal dimension of reality. A being which is conscious, which makes choices, and which enjoys its own value is a person. We can describe Sachchidananda in impersonal terms, but these terms are abstractions. We can abstract the impersonal from the personal, but never the other way around.
  5. This vision of the Ground of Being is one which merits considerable contemplation.
  6. One way to enter into such a contemplation is to compare Sachchidananda with ourselves. If we look at what it is that the most intimate part of our own conscious being does in each moment, we will see that we arise out of a set of potentials, which we Consciously register, among which we decide, in a process which realizes Value (Bliss). In this sense, we are Sachchidananda beings.
  7. Another way we can enter into such a contemplation, however, is by contrasting Sachchidananda with our selves. We are beings that are dependent on causes and conditions. If we take away food, water, or air, we cease to exist in the form with which we are identified. Sachchidananda, on the other hand, is dependent on nothing other than itself. When we look inside, to the source of our existence, we meet darkness and unknowing. When Sachchidananda looks inside, it meets absolute knowledge of the inescapable reality of its own infinite existence. The existence of Sachchidananda is inseparable from Consciousness, it is intrinsically self-known. And while we are tossed about on uncontrollable currents of pleasure and pain, the very substance of Sachchidananda is self-appreciation of its own Value. When I am able to bring forth a vision, or an effective understanding, of reality as proceeding from this source, I find it to be both inspiring and reassuring.
  8. Modern thought tends to start with Non-Being rather than with Being. Heidegger, for example, suggests that the most fundamental question of philosophy is “Why is there something rather than nothing?” It is rather odd that we, who most certainly exist, yet nonetheless come to think that non-existence is a state of affairs which needs no justification. To modern sensibilities, if there had never been anything happening at all, that would be natural. But, since there are things happening, that needs an explanation.

9. This habit of thought is probably related to the rampant scepticism of modern times, but we ought to recognize that it is just a habit. We could just as well take the opposite position, and assume that Being is the natural state of affairs and that non-being, or the appearance of non-being is that which needs explanation.<sup>1</sup> This is the move that Sri Aurobindo makes in his metaphysical system. For most of us, this is a bit of a stretch.
10. But, even though he starts with Sachchidananda, Sri Aurobindo has still left himself a considerable explanatory problem. He is positing a Self-Illuminated Self-Appreciation of Intrinsic-Value as the Ground of Being. But we, ourselves, are finite, contingent beings living in a world only fitfully illumined by knowledge. So how is it that a finite and murky world such as ours can emerge out of the utter brilliance of Sachchidananda? To answer this question, Sri Aurobindo develops the notion of the Involution, which we will now explore.

### III. The Involution

#### A. Supermind – Vijnana

1. If Consciousness is the moving part of the Divine, then Supermind is its creative organ. It is through the instrumentality of Supermind that Sachchidananda involutes itself so that it eventually comes to function as the physical universe in which the cosmic evolution is playing itself out.
2. The doctrine of Supermind is one of the most distinctive and original features of Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical system. Most of the other systems which acknowledge an unconditioned ground of being such as Brahman do not form an adequate accounting for the existence of our relative world – rather they dismiss it as an illusion. This is very analogous to what materialistic reductionists do in the West – they avoid the hard problem of accounting for consciousness by simply labeling it an illusion. Advaita Vedantins, many schools of Buddhism, and all of those schools which Sri Aurobindo terms “mayavadan” schools, accept the reality of an absolutely conscious ground, and then avoid the problem of accounting for the existence of a finite world of material realities by simply labeling *it* as an illusion. As Sri Aurobindo would say, on one side there is the “materialist denial,” (nothing but Matter) and on the other side there is “ascetic denial” (nothing but Spirit). Sri Aurobindo, both for the sake of philosophical depth, and for the sake of a rich spiritual practice, is striving for a middle path between these two extremes. He accomplishes this by positing the Supermind as an intermediate term between the Sachchidananda, on one hand, and the phenomenal world that we inhabit, on the other.
3. Both of the “denials” have difficulty in accounting for the presence of individual consciousness in sentient beings. Materialists see one material

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<sup>1</sup> This idea of Being as self-existent and self-explanatory was characteristic of early Greek thought. Especially Parmenides, whose basic metaphysical proposition was “Being is.” However the early Greeks (Heraclites excepted) fell into misplaced concreteness, and came to privilege Being – the unchanging – as real, while reducing changing realm of the senses to a mere appearance, or even an illusion. Sri Aurobindo's ontology agrees that “Being is,” but includes becoming and process within the complex unity of Being itself.

world, governed by immutable mathematical laws, and have a hard time accounting for the emergence of individual consciousness out of that. Ascetics see one immaterial world of Consciousness, and have a hard time accounting for the emergence of individual consciousness out of *that*. And yet individuated consciousness is always the starting point for our philosophical thought. To generate a theory which denies the reality of individual consciousness is to become engaged in a performative contradiction. What Sri Aurobindo tries to demonstrate with his doctrine of Supermind and the Involution is that there is a continuum of differentiation, with the absolute complex unity of the One on one end, and the myriads of separate, absolutely minimal consciousnesses of quantum events on the other.

4. Supermind achieves the Involution through the application of three fundamental powers:
  - a) The power of self-differentiation;
  - b) the power of self-limitation;
  - c) and the power of self-absorption.
5. At the level of Supermind itself (as we trace the unfolding of the Involution, we will see that there are many levels of being), the primary power that comes into play is the power of self-differentiation. To understand this power, we need to recall that Sachchidananda is a complex unity of unity and plurality. That is, while Brahman and, thus Sachchidananda is One without a Second, the One here is not a numerical unity – a “one over against others” – but rather a “one embracing all possibility of differentiation.” The power of self-differentiation is essentially the power of *perspective*. It is the power of the One, in which knower and known are undifferentiated, to differentiate the knower from the known, and then to know itself from many different perspectives, or points of view.
6. In order to make clear the continuum of self-differentiation, Sri Aurobindo divides Supermind into three separate levels.
  - a) Comprehending Supermind
    - 1) In the poise, or status, of Sachchidananda, Consciousness and its dependent complementary, Force, are together in an undifferentiated latency. Consciousness attends to the complex unity of Sachchidananda, and Force rests in undisturbed self-existence. In the poise of Supermind, as the Divine Ground turns towards the manifestation of universes, Consciousness becomes more selective and Force becomes more actively deployed.
    - 2) At the highest level of Supermind,<sup>2</sup> the level of “Comprehending Supermind,” Consciousness steps back from its primordial latency

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<sup>2</sup> Sri Aurobindo sometimes speaks of the levels of Supermind as if they are a hierarchy, and sometimes speaks of them as if they are simultaneous and parallel. In this exposition, I will be emphasizing the hierarchical angle. Note that the three levels of Supermind serve at least two purposes. First, they are an attempt to show that there are gradations between the Complex Unity of Sachchidananda on one hand, and the differentiated individuality of mental beings on the other. Also, these three differentiations of Supermind correspond to the three main schools of Vedanta, and by showing that all three of these

and knows Being as a field of potential manifestation. In this poise, the Consciousness of Sachchidananda privileges its capacity to select determinate truths of the One Truth.

- 3) If there is to be a manifestation of some sort, it is also necessary that the various determinate possibilities of being (eternal objects) should have some order of relevance among themselves. This point requires some explaining:
  - a] If there is to be any stable and coherent manifestation of possibilities, there must be some element in the manifested system that is fixed. In modern science, for example, it is held that the “natural laws” are fixed, but that the configurations of energy are changing. In the kind of metaphysical cosmology that Sri Aurobindo is building, “natural laws” lose their fixed character, and are revealed rather as “habits of nature.” There remains, however, certain fixed elements of the system. Two of those fixed elements are the eternal objects themselves, and certain kinds of relationships among them.
  - b] To say that the eternal objects themselves are fixed is to say, for example, that a certain shade of green is always a possible experience and, whenever it is experienced, it is identical with itself. To say that certain relations among the eternal objects are fixed is to say, for example, that green is always a color, and never a sound. It is also to say that no entity can be, in precisely the same sense and at precisely the same time, both that shade of green and not that shade of green – even though it can be that shade of green and also be hard and cold.
- 4) How are we to understand the origination of these relations among the eternal objects? Alfred North Whitehead brings this order into his metaphysical system by positing a timeless concrescence of possibilities, which he calls the Primordial Mind of God. While Sri Aurobindo does not specifically discuss this issue, we can readily imagine that the Consciousness of Sachchidananda, as it comes to emphasize its own possibility for determinate choices, arranges the eternal objects inherent in the Being of Sachchidananda into some order of relevance suitable to be the framework for its myriad manifestations.
- 5) In sum, in the poise of the Comprehending Supermind, Consciousness steps back and emphasizes its own capacity for determinate choices, the determinate potentialities for being inherent in the Being of Sachchidananda are ordered so as to serve as a background for manifestation, Force upholds this arrangement, all, as always, for the sake of the value that is thus realized.

- 6) We could say that this is, in the Involution, the first separation of subject from object. The one Conscious subject (Isvara) stands back from the entire field of potential manifestation (Shakti).
- b) Apprehending Supermind
  - 1) The primordial ordering of the eternal objects which is characteristic of the Comprehending level of Supermind is not, itself, an eternal object. In other words, there is no particular finite formula which can ever capture the “logic of the infinite.” Rather, the primordial ordering must be such that an infinite number of particular orders can be abstracted from it. Each of the orders that can be abstracted from the primordial ordering is a “perspective” on the primordial order itself. Each perspective, by virtue of its relation to the primordial order, is also in a coherent relationship with all of the other perspectives that can be so derived.
  - 2) In other words, the primordial ordering of possibility which characterizes the Comprehending level of Supermind establishes an infinity of perspectives which that Consciousness can take on its own total being.
  - 3) At the level of the Apprehending Supermind, Consciousness multiplies itself so as to view its being from all of the perspectives which the Comprehending Consciousness has opened up.
  - 4) Note, however, that this is not yet an experience of differentiated selves. Rather it is as if the One Consciousness which stepped back at the Comprehending level of Supermind now complexifies itself so as to apprehend its being from a multiplicity of perspectives. From each perspective, the One knows itself as that from which all perspectives are drawn, and knows all other perspectives as no other than itself.
- c) Projecting Supermind
  - 1) At this level, the One Consciousness moves out to inhabit its various individual perspectives. Rather than holding itself back with a certain superiority, the consciousness of the One rather projects itself into the movement and becomes, in a way, involved with it.
  - 2) At this level, the fundamental unity is still available in the background of consciousness, but is somewhat overshadowed by a more prominent sense of individuality.
  - 3) This is the level of the “jivatmans,” or Spirits, - beings who operate out of a somewhat pronounced sense of individuality, but who fundamentally know themselves to be one with the others of their kind, and one with complex One of whom all are expressions.
7. What Sri Aurobindo offers us here is a way of reconciling the idea that there is one fundamental consciousness into which all individuality ultimately dissolves (whether at death or at enlightenment) with the idea that there is some element of individuality which survives not only death, but enlightenment as well. He does this by exhibiting individuality to be intrinsic to the complex unity of the One, and by making it intelligible how, in the Involution, there is, through the power of self-differentiation, a

gradual emphasis on the individual aspect leading to the habitation, by the One, of a multiplicity of perspectives on itself.

8. At the level of Supermind, Sachchidananda manifests itself as Transcendent, Universal, and Individual
  - a) At the level of Comprehending Supermind, Sachchidananda is transcendent in that contains and overflows everything that it manifests. The way that Sri Aurobindo uses the word “transcendent,” it is quite different from the way that it is used by certain Christian theologies, in which the transcendence of God is taken to mean that God is utterly other than the world, outside of the world, and unaffected by happenings in the world. What Sri Aurobindo intends is rather to point to the way in which the Divine is absolutely free to manifest whatsoever He/She/It chooses and, no matter what it has chosen to manifest, it is unbound by that choice, and free to create further. Transcendence here means absolute freedom and inexhaustible creativity.
  - b) At the level of Apprehending Supermind, Sachchidananda is universal. The existence of the manifested universe is nothing other than the existence of the One. The Divine creates, not *ex nihilo*, but rather out of itself, so that the Divine is all pervasive.
  - c) At the level of Projecting Supermind, Sachchidananda is individual. Sachchidananda inhabits each of the perspectives on itself that forms the core of an actual being. As projected, the Divine experiences Him/Her/Itself as an individual being, but at the level of Supermind that sense of individuality blends harmoniously with the sense a sense of identity with all other individuals and a sense of identity with the One that manifests them all.
9. It was suggested earlier that we can identify ourselves as Sachchidananda-like beings when we realize that our gesture of existence at each moment involves selectively realizing and enjoying determinate possibilities of being. In a similar way, we can recognize ourselves as Supermind-like beings when we realize that we, like Supermental individuals, are also transcendent, universal and individual.
  - a) We are transcendent beings in that each of us, in every moment of our existence, expresses an irreducible quantum of freedom. No matter how fully finite beings like ourselves are constrained by the environments out of which we apparently arise, nonetheless there is always some element freedom and creativity which we exercise, and by virtue of which we transcend our origins.
  - b) We are universal beings in that it takes a whole universe to produce a moment of human experience. As we know from our scientific investigations, the whole universe is one causally interconnected whole. Events in the most distant galaxies have some, however faint, effect on us on an ongoing basis. Also, if the universe had not been evolving for the last 14 billion years or so, human beings would not exist at all. Each one of us, at each moment, is the product of the entire universal evolution and, in this sense, we are universal. Our individuality is an individualization of the universe.

- c) And, of course, we are individuals, with our own unique perspective on the universe out of which we arise.

#### B. Overmind

1. As the Involution proceeds, the power of self-limitation comes into play. The power of self-limitation is the power to impose a threshold on consciousness, so that some experiences become superliminal, and some become subliminal. It is, in effect, the power of suppression. Sri Aurobindo speaks of it as the power of Consciousness to “put behind it” certain aspects of its own experience.
2. Note that this power is not yet that of repression, in which the suppressing movement, itself, becomes unconscious. That comes in with the power of self-absorption, which we will discuss presently.
3. The first application of self-limitation comes about in the Involution when Consciousness puts behind it, or suppresses, its own Transcendence.
4. At the level of Supermind, all of the differentiable factors of existence – Being (with all of the determinate possibilities that Being contains), Bliss, Consciousness and Force, know themselves as indissolubly One in the transcendent freedom that gives rise to them all. But at the Overmind level, the sense of transcendent freedom is lost, and each factor in the ultimate reality is given its own independent power to act. Each becomes, in effect, a god, knowing itself to be a truth, and knowing the others also as truths, but nonetheless working out its own independence in relation to the others. Each power, while retaining its sense of universality, has lost the sense of its own participation in the transcendent freedom which gives rise to it. Each is now a god within a universe of other gods.
5. Of particular importance for an understanding of the further levels of the Involution is the way in which Consciousness and Force come to function at the Overmind level with such a degree of independence that one can come to dominate the other. We will see how this plays out in what follows.
6. At the level of Overmind, we find the Divine Souls. At the Supermind level, each Spirit knows itself to be an individual expression of the One, and knows all of the other Spirits to be expressions of that same One. Thus, it knows all others as intimately as it knows itself. In addition, all of its experiences are illuminated by the sense that it itself, as the One that contains and pervades all, is freely choosing its own experience. When some group of Spirits chooses, then, to put behind, or to leave above the threshold, their sense of Transcendence, they retain “on the surface,” their sense of Universality, but they lose the pervading sense of freedom that they had at the Supermental level. The Overmental Soul knows itself to be one with the others, and to be, in some way, one with the whole of the universe that it inhabits, but that universe is, in some important sense, fixed and determined. There would be a sense of freedom *within* that particular

universe, but the Souls in this universe would operate as if they did not have the creative freedom to change the rules of the universe itself.<sup>3</sup>

7. A question arises here as to why Sachchidananda, an absolutely free and utterly conscious appreciation of inherent value, would indulge in this sort of self-limitation. It can only be for an amplification of appreciation, and we can get a sense of this possibility by looking at our own behavior. Within the limits of our finite existence, we human beings experience a large degree of freedom. We can, for example, organize our interactions with each other in a nearly infinite number of ways. And yet we constantly take delight in restricting our behavior so that it fits within a defined set of rules. We do this, for example, when we play games, or when we engage in business, or when we become identified with a particular set of social roles. In each of these cases, we find that limiting ourselves to a specific set of rules allows us to amplify our experience of certain values. We can imagine the Divine as engaging in self-limitation in this same spirit.
  8. Self-limitation, when looked at from within the experience of the individuals involved in it, can be described as suppression, or as the articulation of thresholds for consciousness. When looked at in terms of relations *between* individuals, it can be understood as what Alfred North Whitehead calls “abstraction in objectification.” The idea here is that each individual, by virtue of its Universality, includes in its being the being of all the other individuals. But the way in which it incorporates those other individuals (the way in which those other individuals “objectify” in it) is variable. Individuals that have suppressed their own Transcendence cannot apprehend the Transcendence of other individuals. Thus beings in an Overmental community will know each other less fully than beings in a Supermental community. They will impose *abstraction* on their mutual objectifications.
- C. General considerations regarding the threefold world of human evolution
1. As we pass from Overmind to the world of Mind, we enter the world of human evolution. The involution through the levels “below” Overmind can be characterized in a number of ways.
    - a) First, since Consciousness and Force have, at the Overmental level, been separated off as relatively independent powers, they can now enter into relations of relative dominance in respect to each other. At this level, where Consciousness and its dependent complementary, Force, are operating as relatively separate powers, they are called, respectively Purusha (the still consciousness which knows, enjoys, and sanctions the play) and Prakriti (the active force that enacts the play of energy).
    - b) As we will see, the further the involution proceeds below the Overmental level, the more fully Prakriti dominates over Purusha. The sense of freedom belongs to the Purusha, so that as the Purusha is more and more

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<sup>3</sup> Sri Aurobindo is quite vague when it comes to placing Spirit and Soul within his larger ontological framework. My location of Spirit at the Supermental level and Soul at the Overmental level is an interpretation. I base it partly on Sri Aurobindo’s regular assertion that the Soul is Universal/Individual, and also on the theosophical tradition of Alice Bailey and Dawa Kuhl, who place the Soul in the higher levels of the Mental Plane.

dominated by Prakriti, the sense of freedom diminishes. This will be more fully discussed below.

c) Second, as we enter the Mental level, the notion of system – as the ongoing interaction of relatively separate individuals – becomes relevant. The Vedic people acknowledged this by suggesting that at the mental level, we come under the sway of the “three gunas.”

1) These three gunas seem to be very much like the fundamental dynamics of self-organizing systems, as those dynamics were recognized by Jantsch:

a] The tamasic guna

i] The first guna is the tamasic guna, which is the guna of inertia, of heaviness, of drowsiness, of the tendency to disaggregation. This guna is very much like the tendency of the individual units of a system, or of any self-organizing system of such units, to remain in existence, even in defiance of its environment. It is what Jantsch calls the principle of “confirmation.”

b] The rajasic guna

i] The second guna is the rajasic guna, which is the guna of dynamism, of drive, of the pursuit of satisfaction, as the active movement towards the new and novel. This is the tendency of a system to embrace and to pursue *novelty*, which is the name that Jantsch gave to his second principle of system dynamics.

c] The sattvic guna

i] The third guna, the sattvic guna, is the guna of balance, and harmony. The sattvic guna achieves a balance of confirmation and novelty. It is what Jantsch called the principle of “self-organization.”

2) As we trace the Involution on its way from Mind to Matter and beyond that into the Inconscient, there is not only a progressive domination of Purusha by Prakriti, but also a progressive putting behind of the several gunas.

2. In this particular exposition, I am emphasizing the threefold character of the Lower Hemisphere of Being. But I want to point out that this threefold division is somewhat arbitrary. From another point of view, the Involution, particularly the involution through the subtle worlds between Overmind and the Material (Inorganic) world is a continuous process. There is gradually increasing self-limitation, with no discontinuous jumps. The threefold division of these worlds might be compared to the sevenfold division of the color spectrum.

#### D. Mind

1. As the Involutionary sequence moves “below” Supermind, there is first the emergence of an Overmental universe in which the unified functioning of Supermind is translated into a universe of distinct and interacting universal powers, and then there is the emergence of a Mental universe of individual minds, interacting with each other in mutual externality.

2. At the level of Mind, both Transcendence and Universality are put behind the veil, or above the threshold, and Divine Souls come to operate as Individual egos. This is where the Involution becomes involved in finitude.
3. Mind is that functioning of Sachchidananda which permits all division. It permits the division into the four Divine factors of Being, Consciousness, Force and Bliss, it underlies the power of self-differentiation which issues in a plurality of perspectives, and it supports the power of self-limitation whereby upper and lower thresholds of consciousness are established for individuals. But at the level of Supermind, and even at the level of Overmind, the divisions which Mind adumbrates are held within an all-embracing unity. It is Overmind, which allows each Divine principle to function independently in relation to the others, that permits Mind to divide itself off from the all-embracing unity, and thus makes possible the experience of radical finitude.
4. At the mental level of the Involution, we can, for the first time, speak of time, space, efficient cause and memory in the sense that we (who are beings living in the mental poise of consciousness) customarily use those terms.
  - a) Time
    - 1) Time, as we customarily use the term, refers to the process in which the possibilities implied by a fully determined past, along with hitherto unrealized potentialities from the Being of Sachchidananda, are reduced to actuality, thus affecting the potentialities available for a future which is only partially knowable. While we can, in high flights of scientific abstraction, imagine a block universe in which all actions are predetermined, this abstraction loses the quality of adventure that is inherent in our concrete experience of unfolding time.
    - 2) In the "Upper Hemisphere of Being (Brahman, Sachchidananda and Supermind), where all beings know each other intimately as Self, and where each being knows itself as the One who manifests all, there seems little opportunity for surprise, and thus our concept of time as the adventure of moving from known past into unknown future seems inapplicable there. This is sometimes taken to mean that for a consciousness in the Upper Hemisphere of Being, all finite events are already foreknown, or already always happening. This seems to me to be a reduction of all the parts of time (past, present and future) to one part – the past. My impression is that what is taking place in the Upper Hemisphere is not a reduction of all of time to the past, or even to a paradoxical eternal happening of predetermined events, but rather something else richer and more complex than that. It is customary to call this level of experience "timeless," but just what that means I must necessarily leave undetermined.
    - 3) Also, it seems that the Overmental experience, deprived of the Transcendent Freedom, might be a kind of temporal experience, but it would be one in which the entities, being direct expressions of their universe, would be consciously eternal.

- 4) In any case, once the Involution moves to the level of Mind, where Universality as well as Transcendence are put beyond the threshold of consciousness, Mental entities emerge for each other as objects rather than as selves of the one Self. Because I, as a mental being, cannot know the inmost self of other mental beings, I cannot know their decisions and cannot anticipate their actions. I find myself with the experience of a (partially) known past, a (largely) unknown future, and the ongoing adventure of choice in the present. This is temporal experience as we know it.
- b) Space
- 1) One of the many features of space is that it is that distance which separates us one from another. We speak of other beings as being “outside of” or “external to” us. This notion of “outsideness” or “externality,” when we attend to it closely, turns out to be rather mysterious. I want to suggest here, without fully developing the argument, that something is outside of us when we don’t know it from the inside (the way we know ourselves), and, in general, when we know less about it than it knows about itself.
  - 2) To say that we know less about something that it knows about itself is to say that there is “abstraction in objectification” between us. Part of what we mean when we saying that some other entity is “distant” from us is that we know less about it, and that it has less of an effect on us, than it would if it were in greater proximity. This strongly suggests that greater distance is a measure of greater abstraction in objectification.
  - 3) In the Upper Hemisphere, and even in Overmind where true Universality is still on the surface of consciousness, all beings are in absolute proximity with each other. No being is outside another, and distance between beings has no meaning. These upper worlds are not spatial.
  - 4) But when the Involution reaches the level of Mind, when Universality is put behind the veil and beings experience themselves under abstraction, as mutually external, then distance between entities and, with it, space become manifest.
- c) Causality and memory
- 1) Beings that experience themselves as selves of one Self cannot be said to be efficient causes for each other. An efficient cause is an interaction in time and across space. It is an interaction among mutually external beings. Thus analysis in terms of efficient causes is only relevant in the lower hemisphere of being. Also, beings who are, in the Upper Hemisphere, timeless and, at the Overmental level, eternal are now expressing themselves as sequences of finite events. These events are linked together by efficient causes, which are registered as memories.
  - 2) In this way of understanding, all efficient causes are transmissions of experience between occasions. In what follows, we will refer to these causes as being telepathic, empathic, or sensory. These three types of

causal influence are not ontologically distinct – the primary difference among them is one of concreteness. Telepathic interactions are very rich and complete, like our experiences of our own immediately past selves. Empathic interactions lose the complex refinements of telepathy, but retain the rich depths of emotion. Sensory interactions – what physicists call exchanges of energy – are very abstract, stripped of emotive tone and intellectual meaning. Nonetheless, all three of these types of interaction are direct communications among mutually external beings.

5. At the Mental level, Purusha is for the first time subject to Prakriti. In other words, Mental beings experience themselves as arising out of, and as being conditioned by, a situation. Mental beings are, in the words of the Existentialists, “thrown” into a world. The Mental experience is the sense of being a contingent and more or less frail entity arising out of a mass of other such entities each of which is external to us, and more or less alien and threatening. At the Mental level, however, the Purusha still has the experience of surveying a range of possibilities, and of consciously choosing among them.
6. Every Mind will be strictly finite – which means that it will be strictly limited within whatever spacetime that it inhabits. At this point in the Involution, Sachchidananda has manifested out of itself a creative advance of finite drops of experience. Here Sri Aurobindo’s metaphysics issues in a world which begins to seem, phenomenologically, like the world that William James and Alfred North Whitehead’s are describing. This is a point at which the two systems link up beautifully. Sri Aurobindo provides an analysis of the God and of the basic ontological ground out of which God arises that seems, to me, to be more coherent than Whitehead’s, and Whitehead provides an analysis of finite actual occasions and their interactions which is much more adequate to understanding the results of modern science and to articulating the nature of the subtle worlds which come into being in the course of the Involution. The Mental level, from this point of view, is a world of high grade actual occasions – occasions like those that make up our wakeful moments of experience – interacting directly with each other without the intermediation of emotional and physical bodies.
7. It is important to note that in an Involutionary scheme such as this one, we are not speaking of Mind as something that has evolved from Matter, or is in any way dependent on Matter. In this scheme, where we are taking as our starting point the ultimately concrete complex unity of the all-creative One, Mind, and a world of causally interacting Minds, appears logically and ontologically, perhaps even temporally, prior to a world of Matter.
8. The finite minds which appear on the involutionary arc are completely free from the limits which are imposed on minds, like ours, which are embodied in Vital and Material bodies. Because, at this level, Purusha is relatively strong in relation to Prakriti, such beings would experience a vast sense of freedom. The medium through which such minds would express

themselves would be a kind of pure thought-stuff, radically responsive to the intentions of consciousness.

9. Such beings communicate telepathically, through a direct exchange of thoughts. Since it seems probable that telepathic communication is not constrained by measurable distances, all such beings would, in effect, be immediately proximate to each other (though still mutually external). Thus their spatial sense would not involve geometrically defined distances. Nonetheless, such beings might be separated and ordered into groups by differences of shared meaning. Those mental occasions sharing, for example, a common metaphysics might, in terms of their effects on each other, be more proximate to each other than they would be to other mental occasions sharing a different metaphysics.
10. When you seem external to me then I need, in order to preserve a sense of the solidarity of the universe, to locate you within some scheme of order which relates you to myself and to the other entities with which I am in interaction. This ordering scheme allows me to point to you, to indicate you as a particular other. It is what Whitehead calls a "scheme of indication." The provision of a scheme of indication is one of the functions of that mysterious factor which we designate as "spacetime." In the mental world, the scheme of indication will be, as we have seen, one in which geometry plays a very minimal role. Distance in the Mental world will be distance in meaning, or in philosophical presuppositions, rather than distance in geometrical spacetime.
11. The lower threshold of consciousness for Mental beings is variable. Thus, there may be Mental beings for whom the functioning of the Life world and the world of Matter are below the threshold of consciousness, and there may be Mental beings, like ourselves, who are, to varying extents, conscious in the lower worlds. This same consideration applies to Vital beings.

#### E. Life

1. As the Involution proceeds, Purusha becomes more involved in Prakriti, and the Sattvic principle, the principle of self-organization goes behind the veil. What is left dominant is then the Rajasic principle, the principle of Novelty. Beings dominated by the Rajasic principle are called Vital, or Astral beings.
2. While Mental beings pursue harmony and depth of contrast, and make choices against a background of various possibilities, Vital beings compulsively pursue specific changes in their circumstances. Vital beings operate with a sense of possibility but, in general, they are fascinated by a particular possibility, and they pursue it compulsively. Our own insistent drives are expressions of the Vital part of our own beings.
3. Vital beings are driven by desire, and communicate with each other empathically. They affect each other by means of their feelings, and put behind the veil the nuanced complexities of thought. Empathic communications, while they remain incredibly rich, are more abstract than they would be if they included thought as well.

4. The spacetime of the Vital worlds, rather than being purely a play of meaning, is rather a play of symbol and image. Distance here is measured not by difference in structures of meaning, but rather by difference in symbolically mediated feeling tone.
  5. The degree of abstraction in objectification among Vital beings is greater than that among Mental beings. In the Vital worlds beings are not all proximate to each other, and so geometry, with its system of spatiotemporal ordering, becomes an important part of the scheme of indication, or system of relations, which expresses the solidarity of the Vital world.
  6. The Mental world is, literally, unimaginable – in the sense that we cannot array it before ourselves as a spatial extent. In the Vital worlds, we can picture the interacting individuals as contextualized by a visual scene. But the geometry that is at work in the Vital world is not a metrical geometry like that in the world of Matter. In the context of a non-metrical geometry, parallel lines are undefined and, thus, there are no measurable distances. In the Vital world, there is spatiotemporal extension, but distance is defined by differences in feeling tone.
  7. Like the Mental World, the Vital World is considered to be an actual place, coming into being by an involution of the Mental World, and in no way dependent on the Physical World, which emerges out of the Vital World by a still further Involutionary movement.
- F. Matter
1. Matter emerges from the Vital world by a further involutionary move in which Purusha becomes still more dominated by Prakriti, and in which even the Rajasic guna is put behind the veil. Here there is very little sense of possibility here. Beings in the material world (inorganic entities) see the actualities out of which they emerge and, in general, simply relay those actualities unchanged into the future. Mental beings operate with a sense of conscious choice among an array of possibilities. Vital beings operate with a sense of compulsive drive towards a given possibility. Material beings operate with a sense of overwhelming habit, pursuing not novelty or self-organization, but blind perpetuation of the status quo.
  2. Thus the entities in the world of Matter are, as Sri Aurobindo suggests, inert, inconscient, and show a marked tendency towards disaggregation.
    - a) Each entity in the Material, inorganic world, is almost entirely dominated by habit, and will keep on keeping on unless forced to change its behavior (inert).
    - b) It interacts with other beings in an almost entirely external way – knowing other beings only to the extent that exert coercive force upon it (inconscient).
    - c) And because it is inert and inconscient, it will pursue its own individual path even when doing so disrupts a higher unity in which it might, for a time, be playing a part (tendency to disaggregate, entropy).
  3. Because interactions in the world of Matter are so external, the system of relations, or scheme of indication which operates in the world of Matter is almost entirely geometrical. It is the realization that the system of

relations among inorganic entities is (more or less) Euclidean that underlies all of the explanatory successes of modern science.

#### G. Self-Absorption

1. We have now traced the Involutionary process through which we can envision the formation of a physical world suitable to serve as a basis for an evolutionary process. There remains, however, one feature of our existence which has not yet been accounted for – our Ignorance. We have asserted that all of the entities that are participating in this evolving universe are Sachchidananda in self-differentiation and self-limitation, but Sachchidananda could engage in self-differentiation and self-limitation without ever forgetting that He/She/It is the One that is at play.
2. By analogy, we human beings have the capacity to engage in self-limitation in an entirely playful spirit. We do this, for example, when we play games, or enter in conscious role-playing. But, quite often, we forget that we are playing a role, we identify with the game we are playing, we lose our humor, the ludic element recedes, and we become quite serious.
3. Sachchidananda, too has the ability to forget that He/She/It is playing, and to become entirely absorbed in the play of His/Her/Its own energy. This is the third of the three fundamental capacities of Supermind, self-absorption.
4. We can imagine the operation of self-absorption as the putting in place of a one-way mirror between Sachchidananda and the Individuals through which He/She/It is expressing His/Her/Itself. Sachchidananda, through Supermind, never loses its own Transcendent and Universal Knowledge and Bliss, but the Individuals at play in the cosmos put behind themselves even their own choice to self-limit, and so they come to take their finitude as an absolute, given truth. This is how Ignorance enters into the cosmic play.
5. We, ourselves, are Sachchidananda, self-differentiated, self-limited and self-absorbed. Our task, as evolution proceeds, is to recover our lost Universality and Transcendence.