

Yogic ekāgratā:
The Analogical Key to Aurobindo's Philosophy¹

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Sri Aurobindo (Ghose), as probably many of you know, was a leading Indian nationalist at the beginning of this century who became a yogin and spiritual leader as well as a prolific writer (in English) on yoga and mysticism, crafting a mystic philosophy of Brahman. For this philosophy, Aurobindo draws on previous conceptions of Brahman, particularly Vedāntic theistic conceptions, but also makes one particular alteration, or elaboration, that gives his worldview a distinct shape. The alteration is the subject of this paper. Before focusing on it, I will present a few introductory remarks.

First, concerning the great man's life. Aurobindo was born in Calcutta on the 15th of August, 1872, the son of a wealthy "England-returned" physician. His father sent him to England at age seven along with two brothers for their own education. Aurobindo attended a leading

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“public”—that is, private—school in London, and then King’s College, Cambridge University, on an Indian Civil Service scholarship. However, he wanted no part of the ICS, and returned to India in 1893 to work as a secretary for the Maharaja of Baroda. Before he landed in Bombay, his father had died.

Aurobindo mastered Sanskrit at Baroda. Within a few years, he became involved in the nationalist movement. Aurobindo’s politics were not of the passivist variety later endorsed by Gandhi. After a decade at Baroda, he moved to Calcutta to become editor for the nationalist newspaper, *Bande Mataram* (‘Hail to Mother India’), whose columns he used to call rather openly for open rebellion. Arrested on charges of sedition and then “waging war,” he spent a year in prison before being acquitted in a spectacular trial in 1909. Still harassed by British authorities, he retreated to the French colony of Pondicherry in South India. He retired from politics and wrote voluminously while practicing meditation and yoga. He died, surrounded by disciples, in 1950.

Now concerning the philosophy, one must keep in mind that Aurobindo fashions an entire worldview, and a modern worldview at that. Though he was not a professional philosopher, his system is intended to reflect both science and religion and to integrate several concerns of philosophy—epistemology, ontology, psychology, ethics—into a single

vision. Of particular importance to his cosmological thinking is evolutionary biology. But Aurobindo also understands the fundamental nature of matter to include—for metaphysical reasons—an “evolutionary nisus” that insures the emergence of individuals capable of mystical experience in which the supreme reality, Brahman, is revealed. This notion of an evolutionary nisus, or urge or material drive, is the bottom side of Aurobindo’s fresh concept of Brahman.

Biological evolution, for Aurobindo, is not merely a matter of life transformations but of progress, teleological change. Our philosopher, who saw himself as a yogin, as a master and teacher of yoga, viewed yoga as attuned to evolutionary processes. Yoga is a method for life transformation in a progressive direction, in line with the telos of biological evolution, he claims. It is thus crucial to see how his view of an evolutionary nisus ties in with his Brahman concept.

To show this, I will make a detour through some well-known Western criticisms of religious metaphysics. Western empirically minded philosophers have long claimed difficulty simply in comprehending matters so remote from our experience as the nature of God (among other things). In the eighteenth century, David Hume made use of the difficulty to challenge the projects of rational theology. There may be a source of the universe, he reasoned, but it is pointless to speculate about what it

might be like. We find no evidence to guide our conceptualizations. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Immanuel Kant held that reason stretches its wings in vain in trying to fly beyond the bounds of sense. And in the positivist era of the early twentieth century, verificationist theory of meaning emerged, with the claim that all descriptive significance is tied to possible experiences. The meaning of a factual assertion would be the experiences that would verify it, and the meaning of a descriptive term the experiences that would make it applicable. Talk of God, or indeed Brahman, would seem meaningless by these standards.

The verificationist project fails, as has been often pointed out, because it is self-referentially incoherent: what are the experiences that would verify the verificationist thesis? Nevertheless, the general problem would seem to remain: since God or Brahman would in some way transcend the sphere of everyday usages, how it is possible to talk about Brahman? Though verificationism fails, it is indeed plausible that descriptive meaningfulness is tied to acquaintance with features designated by descriptive terms. The meaning of the term 'red', for example, can be learned through acquaintance with ripe apples, etc., along with appropriate pointings. Can the language of a religious metaphysics be learned similarly?

Well, no. But such terms as 'Brahman' can be learned, it seems,

analogically. Having experience of an analogue, we can grasp a new meaning. For example, we can learn the meaning of the word ‘water-buffalo’ through an analogical description comparing one to a cow and so on though we are not personally acquainted with water buffaloes. Sometimes terms learned analogically acquire a technical sense and are then used literally within a specific theoretical domain, as, for example, the term ‘wave’ used in physics. Probably I do not need to point out that there is a lot of agreement about such matters now within philosophy of language.

To return to Aurobindo’s metaphysics: my thesis is that it is the yogic phenomenon of *ekāgratā*, “exclusive concentration,” that was for Aurobindo the analogical springboard to his understanding of Brahman, and especially his understanding of Brahman as *cit*, which he renders as “consciousness-force.” It is here we find that alteration from earlier Brahman conceptions that I have said gives Aurobindo’s metaphysics its distinct shape. Admittedly, to say this is an alteration may be overstating Aurobindo’s innovation, since in Kashmiri Śaivism the notion of *cit-śakti* stands out, and in all Vedāntic theism God is viewed as having creative power. Nevertheless, ways in which Aurobindo elaborates his understanding of Brahman as “consciousness-force” are novel, providing the crucial ties to his views of matter and biological evolution which in

turn secure the modernness of his worldview and make his Brahman-centered philosophy a metaphysical contender in our day.

The Sanskrit word *ekāgratā* is an abstract noun formed from *eka*, “one,” and *agra*, “point” or “tip,” thus “one-pointedness.” It is used in yogic literature, including Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra* (c. 300 CE ?) as the mental or volitional quality of concentration of attention, as in meditation on a single object, without the mind wandering, without admitting distraction (e.g., *YS* 3.11 and 3.12). According to yogic authorities, *ekāgratā*, “one-pointed-ness of concentration,” is key to mystic accomplishment, to a psychological breakthrough called *samādhi*, where consciousness best knows itself. Conceptually Aurobindo’s philosophy may be most indebted to Vedāntic texts, the sacred texts of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, along with commentaries and extra-commentarial works of Śaṅkara and other classical Vedāntic philosophers. But his personal turn to crafting a new metaphysics of Brahman came from his practice of yoga and his sense of personal yogic accomplishment. And for Aurobindo, as presumably for other yogins, the ability to maintain “exclusive concentration,” *ekāgratā*, was, he says, existentially crucial. In this way, I think, the notion comes to impact his metaphysics.

A theme of Aurobindo’s yogic teaching is that yoga is power. He points out that our ability to concentrate one-pointedly helps us

accomplish whatever we want to do, whether it be something physical like carpentry or mental like writing a book. Further, he provides the psychological gloss on the everyday phenomenon of exclusive concentration that it involves a putting into the background other concerns of ours or other aspects of our personalities, without our ceasing to value those other things or our ceasing to be the fuller person. The baseball batter who thinks about his girlfriend strikes out, but the one who hits a homerun, not letting his concentration stray, should not *ipso facto* be accused of being uncaring. He simply cannot think about the girlfriend and bat successfully at the same time. The concentrated action requires a willed ignorance, Aurobindo would say. Now this psychological gloss may well be shaped by Aurobindo's full-blown metaphysics in that it could be that Aurobindo is moved to make the gloss only in the light of the worldview. Nevertheless, according to this understanding even everyday concentration involves *avidyā*, a not-knowing with respect to Y and Z, or a not-being-aware of Y and Z, that permits a full awareness, and power, concerning X. Thus it is that Aurobindo would connect the power of consciousness with *avidyā*, a notion that reverberates in his metaphysics, as we will see, as it does also, albeit interpreted differently, in previous Vedānta.

Aurobindo sees Brahman as “exclusively concentrating” in the

process and maintenance of creation, which he calls involution. In essence perfect Being, Consciousness-Force and Bliss or Value (so Aurobindo renders the traditional characterization, *saccidānanda*), Brahman involutes aspects of itself—that is to say, contracts or becomes purposely ignorant, assuming an *avidyā*—so that certain finite possibilities can emerge. In other words, involution, or Brahman’s own exclusive concentration, is the creative process as well as Brahman’s way of being each of us and all finite things. Involution has an outer limit in the “inconscious” energies of matter, where Brahman’s native awareness and bliss are put almost entirely behind a veil. This is the cosmic *avidyā*. But since Brahman is essentially consciousness, the inconscience of matter can be only apparent. This argument is repeated by Aurobindo dozens of times. Matter cannot remain unconscious because it is nothing but Brahman. Thus the evolutionary *nisus* and the *telos* of cosmic biological process is said to be founded in the *cit* of Brahman, which Aurobindo models on yogic *ekāgratā*.

To continue with the metaphysical picture, let me stress the point, as does Aurobindo himself, that, according to the great yogin, nothing essential to Brahman, though it be put behind the veil by Brahman’s power of exclusive concentration, can remain behind the veil forever. Another way of making this point is to say that conceivable universes that

are incompatible with Brahman's essential nature are strictly impossible. Thus conscious material beings are destined to evolve. Indeed, individual material beings are destined to know themselves as Brahman, for we are all that reality. God or Brahman works within limits, and could not, for example, make $2 + 2 = 5$. God could not create an entirely insentient world since God is constrained by the metaphysical law *ex nihilo nihil fit* ("nothing from nothing") to create out of God's own nature of Consciousness and Bliss. Thus this world is destined to evolve sentient material beings and eventually a divine life conceived as a society where many have a rather direct experience of Brahman.

In sum, creation, according to Aurobindo, is self-manifestation that proceeds through an exclusive concentration, an involution, a kind of self-contraction. Brahman is in essence infinite *saccidānanda*, "Existence-Consciousness=Force-Bliss." It requires an involution, that is, God's putting aspects or characteristics of God's essential nature behind a veil through a willed ignorance, *avidyā*—psychologically modeled on yogic *ekāgratā*—to bring our world about and to sustain it. This process reaches its outer limit in the apparently inconscient energies of matter. But the consciousness involved in matter has to evolve out of matter eventually into a "divine life."

Thus, in Aurobindo's conception, exclusive concentration has a

positive and a negative side. The positive side is power; the negative ignorance. In the title of this paper, the positive is emphasized: exclusive concentration is said to provide skill in works and, at the extreme, yogic accomplishment. The negative side of exclusive concentration is ignorance, an ignorance that Aurobindo thoroughly exploits in the explanatory projects of his metaphysics. When talking about the positive side of exclusive concentration, Aurobindo, too, tends to assimilate it to yoga. But he tends to talk about situations in everyday life in explaining the relation between exclusive concentration and ignorance.

There is in fact a chapter in Aurobindo's major work of philosophy, *The Life Divine*, entitled, "Exclusive Concentration and the Ignorance," which is placed practically in the middle of the 1000-plus-page book. I would like to read from pages 587 and 588, where our philosopher is particularly lucid with respect to the connection. I might warn, however, that Aurobindo's advice to one of his disciples who complained about not being able to sleep, was that reading *The Life Divine* was a cure for insomnia.

The actor in moments of great intensity forgets that he is an actor and becomes the part that he is playing on the stage; not that he really thinks himself Rama or Ravana, but that he identifies himself for the time being with the form of character and action which the name represents and so completely as to forget the real man who is playing it. . . . The soldier forgets himself in the act and becomes the charge and the fury and the slaying. In the same

way the man who is overcome by intense anger, forgets himself as it is commonly said, or as it has been still more aptly and forcibly put, becomes anger: and these terms express a real truth which is not the whole truth of the man's being at the time, but a practical fact of his conscious energy in action. He does forget himself, forgets all the rest of himself with its other impulses and powers of self-restraint and self-direction, so that he acts simply as the energy of the passion that preoccupies him, becomes that energy for the time being. This is as far as self-forgetfulness can go in the normal active human psychology; for it must return soon to the wider self-aware consciousness of which this self-forgetfulness is only a temporary movement.

But in the larger universal consciousness there must be a power of carrying this movement to its absolute point, to the greatest extreme possible for any relative movement to reach, and this point is reached, not in human unconsciousness which is not abiding and which always refers back to the awakened conscious being that man normally and characteristically is, but in the inconscience of material Nature.

Aurobindo then goes on to aver that the inconscience of matter is no more fundamentally real than the ignorance involved in scenes of exclusive concentration in ordinary human life. Indeed, according to Aurobindo, who echoes several Upaniṣads, it is only the immeasurably great Brahman, the supremely conscious, who could so exclusively concentrate as to have become the apparently inconscient material universe. The inconscience reflects the power of Brahman.

In this way Aurobindo would exploit the notion of ignorance issuing out of exclusive concentration. It is important to see such exploitation, I think, in the context of the difficulty of the metaphysical task, and—with all religious metaphysics that I am aware of—the markedly defensive

character of much of the project. For a religious metaphysics purports to tell us that things are much better than they seem. I have often thought in reading Aurobindo that one could not imagine things being any better than he is claiming they are in fact. Any religious or spiritual metaphysics finds as the supreme reality some gloriously loving or blissful being—or, with the Buddhists, blissful Non-being as the native state—and thus a primary difficulty is inevitably the question why things are not then better here, with us, with these appearances. There is unavoidably a problem of evil with which a religious metaphysics has to struggle, attempting to explain untoward appearances away. For Aurobindo in facing this plight, *avidyā*, ignorance, as the necessary complement of the exclusive concentration whereby Brahman self-manifests and creates our and any world of finite things, proves a useful explanatory tool. Ignorance is required for creation and maintenance of our universe, and thus Aurobindo would get a step up on the task of discounting evil. It only superficially seems that on the premise that the supremely real is Brahman, *saccidānanda*, things should be a lot better here.

Evil, says Aurobindo, is rooted in the insentience of matter and the limitations it imposes on life. These, then, are to be just the converse of valuable possibilities matter secures, namely, ourselves and the good things of life—also, I should hasten to add, significantly more, namely, the

value of future becomings. In fact, the value of ourselves and this universe as we are now are not quite, in Aurobindo's conception, valuable enough. There has to be further evolution, development of individuals with finite bodies and minds who are nonetheless aware—mystically, yogically—of Brahman, who do not cease thereby to be individuals materially embodied but who no longer suffer from the fundamental spiritual ignorance of failing to know ourselves as expressions of Brahman. As I suggested earlier, it appears that Aurobindo does not believe that a world like ours without further evolutionary development in the direction of the grand telos he envisages would even be possible. That is to say, in Aurobindo's estimation our world as it is now, fixed in all its evil, would be incompatible with the reality of Brahman and thus could not be. Thus he takes evil as a sign of future evolution. It is in considerable measure the value of future "divine life" that discounts, he reasons, the evil made possible and even necessary by the insentience of matter inasmuch as matter and involution make possible our evolutionary world.

In my exposition of Aurobindo's worldview, there are doubtless several loose ends; there are loose ends in Aurobindo's own exposition of it. There are also a few conceptual tensions. Some of you have probably

noticed that there is a problem with Aurobindo's metaphysical use of the notion of exclusive concentration. On the one hand, the very creation and maintenance of anything finite appears to require exclusive concentration and a consonant ignorance, but, on the other, the "divine life" Aurobindo envisages as the evolutionary telos is to involve a disappearance of ignorance, an awakening, at least with many, to a spiritual knowledge. Aurobindo would appear to want to have his cake of necessary ignorance and to eat it too in our overcoming ignorance. If Brahman's exclusive concentration in creating this world brings with it necessarily a bottom side of ignorance, then the evolutionary telos cannot be just the overcoming of this ignorance. For Brahman would, in relaxing the exclusive concentration of its *cit* or *cit-śakti*, bring about the disappearance of our world. The evolutionary telos would be nothing more than the *pralaya*, cosmic dissolution, of popular thought. A mere return of Brahman to its infinite and native state would not explain the evils of our existence, nor is such a view endorsed by Aurobindo. But the other horn of the dilemma is also uninviting, in that if Brahman does not relax its exclusive concentration, mystical experience would appear impossible, at least the sort of mystical experience that Aurobindo understands as integral to "divine life." And if Brahman to know itself through a human medium does not need to relax the exclusive

concentration that supposedly supports finite things, then shouldn't we be born enlightened? Or if a human being's arriving at *brahma-vidyā* involves, from the metaphysical point of view, such a relaxing of exclusive concentration only with regard to that human being and not the universe, not a *pralaya*, still it would seem that for that human being there would have to be dissolution into the Infinite and no further functioning in this life, at least not during the occurrence of the awareness of Brahman. It seems we have come to the intractable paradoxes of *jīvan-mukti*, paradoxes that Aurobindo's use of the yogic notion of *ekāgratā* in a fresh conception of Brahman do not resolve.

Above all, what Aurobindo is trying to establish is, first, that matter could not have remained inconscient. That Brahman has not remained inconscient our existences prove since we are conscious material beings. But Aurobindo tries to show that matter could not possibly have remained inconscient. And his chief reason is that matter is Brahman, the supremely conscious, who is capable of assuming an ignorance but who cannot entirely repudiate essential characteristics, and consciousness is one of these. Further, Aurobindo wants to show that matter's necessarily becoming conscious hooks up not only with biological evolution to this point but with future evolution in the direction of a divine life where many will have a mystical and direct awareness of Brahman. In practicing yoga

and becoming aware of Brahman, a person would thus become attuned to the fundamental cosmic drive of Brahman to self-knowledge within material forms, what Aurobindo calls the evolutionary nisus. One's own *ekāgratā* would mirror, or line up with, the exclusive concentration of *cit-śakti* in matter, and help to bring Brahman's work to fulfillment.

The most serious problem with these ideas seems to be that of the logic of the concept of exclusive concentration. It would seem that as metaphysically employed *ekāgratā* is a two-edged sword. If it helps Aurobindo explain how it is possible for Brahman to become matter, assuming a necessary ignorance, it hinders his articulation of the evolutionary and divine telos as involving overcoming ignorance in direct Brahman-awareness. And if it is possible for us to be materially embodied and at the same time directly Brahman-aware, it becomes difficult to understand why any ignorance is required. Aurobindo has nevertheless made a remarkable effort in thinking in such broad strokes about Brahman and material evolution. It is not easy to produce a grand metaphysical theory, and probably were more attention paid to Aurobindo's effort the difficulty I have uncovered could be patched up, the view proving resilient in the hands of future Vedāntins.