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The Experiential Standpoint in Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy

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PHILOSOPHY has been generally understood as an attempt at an enquiry or rather determination regarding the 'ultimately Real'—with an implicit or explicit belief that such an attempt can be successfully concluded by an appeal to pure reason itself. It is not contended that philosophers do not appeal to experience or that they do not often declare it all to be ultimately unknowable—but that they always do it on grounds of pure reason and thus have a tinge of finality about their sayings derived from their supposedly final analyses of the structures of experience or knowledge or reason itself. The Essentials of this thought had been laid long ago by Eleatics—and Philosophy since then has been nothing but a variation of the same theme. Hegel was the acme of this thought-current—whose identification of the 'real' with the 'rational' was, in fact, the explanation of the pre-supposition dominating the whole philosophic movement. His attempts to escape from the usual static consequences of this view through his Dialectic miserably fail—for, a logical dialectic can give you no novelty and even if the real be rational, it can only be the unrolling of a film that is already pre-determined, pre-visionsed. This belief in 'pure reason'—which had dominated philosophy for more than two thousand years—got its first rude shock from Schopenhauer who roundly declared intellect not to be an 'organon of reality' at all. Intellect became an instrument of the Will—evolved in the course of Evolution for the fulfilment of certain biological needs—and thus essentially unfit for the knowledge of the Real. Nietzsche in his famous phrase 'Umwertung alles Werte' turned the tables, asked credentials of Truth and exclaimed with an insight that was prophetic, 'Is not false something Divine?' Philosophy, for the first time in two thousand years, felt freed from the obsessional argument of that ancient Eleatic who declared, 'How could that be real which involved contradictions' and thus found the whole world unreal. Nietzsche's impact—particularly on the continent—was tremendous and Philosophy since then has been tainted with irrationalism over which the 'professors of philosophy' continue shaking their heads and pulling their

faces. James and Bergson have spread the disease all round and to be saved from the infection one must read only Kant and Hegel and then close one's eyes—and perhaps ears too. Or one might become a mathematical logician and go about beating his own trumpet, declaring Aristotle to be a fool and an ignoramus, only to find that what one is talking is nothing but 'tautologies' and that logic has got nothing to do with either Existence or Reality. If the mathematical logician has proved anything, he has proved his own irrelevance to the whole problem of Reality and Existence. The thinker of today can range over the whole realm of experience and attempt to articulate it without, in the least, being troubled by any fear of contrary or contradictory formulation—and all this with the sanction of the present-day logician. In fact, contradiction is always a problem within formulation or definition of concepts and can always be avoided by a suitable re-formulation or re-definition of concepts. 'Articulation and interpretation of Experience without any undue influence from the formal law of Contradictions' seems to be the key of present-day philosophic thought. The first powerful result of this obsessional release has been the giving up of the static view of Reality which had so dominated the thinkers of the past. From Schopenhauer to Whitehead the ultimate characterisations of Reality have had one common characteristic—they have always been Dynamic and Creative instead of being Static and Absolute. Whether in Nietzsche or Bergson, in Alexander or Whitehead, in James or Dewey—the characterisation is always the same.

Even the Idealists have not remained uncorrupted—Croce and Collingwood have made history their God. The second great characteristic, also set by Schopenhauer, has been the unconsciousness of this creativity in the ordinary sense of the term. The ideational, analytic, reasoning type of consciousness of which man is usually aware is merely an elastic and complicated instrument to fulfil the unconscious, instinctual impulses from the unconscious. This concept of the Unconscious drawn on a metaphysical scale has today got a firm founding in the work of Freud and his school. Freud's greatest theoretical contribution has been the dissolution of the identity of mind and consciousness, an identity that had warped the imagination and vision of whole ages. One other great result of all this has been the non-acceptance of the present level of human experience as final and thus the acceptance of every attempt at 'Überwindung' of the present limitations as a deep impulsion from the Unconscious to realize new possibilities. Alexander talks of a *nisus* towards the Deity, Whitehead of the impact of an eternal realm of Possibility on that of Actuality within a 'Cosmic Epoch' and Bergson of an intuitional identification with the '*creative élan*' itself.

Schopenhauer himself talked about an absolute cessation of Will on Buddhist lines and Nietzsche of the acceptance of 'Wille zur Macht' in his conception of aristocratic morality. This acceptance of the non-finality of human experience has been strengthened by biological evolution in particular and the idea of evolution in general. "Complete articulation of experience on the multiple facets that it has reached and a continuous attempt at 'Überwindung' of every present limitation in form and level of experience" seems to be the essence of philosophic enterprise as seen through the multi-form confusions of present-day thought. Of course, back-water philosophers are still there—and also those that go on assuring the pseudo-character of all philosophical problems for neither logic nor experience can decide anything. And there are those as well who go on describing some particular aspect of experience with which they are familiar or they have specialized in. Yet in the greatest creative thinkers of today the main trend seems to be held, however halting the grasp, however fitful the vision. And the greatest among these—one whose vision has never faltered, whose grasp has never wavered—is Sri Aurobindo.

Simultaneously a philosopher, a poet and a Yogi, he commands ranges of experience which are accessible to few, yet combines in himself that urge for eternal Überwindung of every level that is attained, of every range that is reached. With a pen and an imagination—nothing short of sublime—he has articulated both the experience and the urge—in words that glow with the sharpened insight of a subtle psychologist or the plumbing imagination of a mystic vision. He is the Future into the Present and the Present full blown—the Present bearing the Past and throbbing with the Future. He stands on the frontiers of the Future—a 'Lover of the Remote', in the terms of Nicolai Hartmann, a 'Prehension of Possibility' in that of Whitehead.

The ordinary thinker of the West—or, for that matter, even of the East—finds this 'Überwindung' difficult to understand and still more difficult to follow. Even his greatest thinkers when they have talked of a 'nisus' or of an 'impact of possibility' or of 'intutional identification'—he has found difficult to understand—while the talk of 'Super-man' has, in his mind, been identified with the two world-wars that he has suffered. How difficult then to understand 'the conscious attempt at integral transmutation'—seen in the background of stupendous inertia of human mind in even believing the possibility of something new. After all, it was only a few decades ago that people could not believe in the aeroplane and the radio, and only a century has passed when people believed that the world was created five thousand years ago and nothing had changed ever since then. As for scientists,

it was only a decade ago that the breaking of the atom was granted a theoretical possibility—but only a theoretical one at that. Yet it is surprising, how could 'philosophers of Experience' miss this essential aspect of it—that it is an eternal 'Überwindung', an eternal 'over-coming' of all that has become, all that has happened? Sri Aurobindo's firm grasp of this 'essential intrinsicity' is revealed in his very first chapter of 'The Life Divine'. 'The Human Aspiration' becomes the central point for Sri Aurobindo's departure whether in the realms of experiential articulation or experiential transmutation. Both 'The Life Divine' and 'The Synthesis of Yoga'—radiate from this central centre—and one, who has not grasped the central importance of this, would never understand Sri Aurobindo. The experiential standpoint—so firmly grasped by the Upanishadic seers of the past and the foremost thinkers of the present—he firmly holds, both in its stasis and dynamis.

The western thinker of today, while he has mostly given up the logical prejudices of his past—at least, as far as his conscious mind is concerned—seems so far to have accepted the experiential standpoint in its stasis only. Husserl's 'phenomenological methodology'—whose power is eternally witnessed by Nicolai Hartmann's master-work on Ethics—is primarily concerned with a detailed delineation of the 'Transcendental eidetic Structures' of Thought without any reference to Volition or Feeling. In fact, the methodology is superbly suited for the articulation of transcendental, static thought-structures—and, yet, possesses no inkling of the Dynamis that lies within all experience. The existential Heidegger, deriving his inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche and Soren Kierkegaard, finds the ultimate category to be 'Nothing' and thus destroys the very possibility of 'Überwindung' if possible. This has become clear in the literary variety of Existentialism—prevalent in the France of today, in the writings of Camus and Sartre. These 'philosophers of the Absurd' find the ultimate freedom and dignity of man—in living while knowing it all to be absurd. The answer to these—as to all other such persons—is given by Jaspers, one of their own camp,—that one has either to believe in the reality and value of one's own experience or one must commit suicide. The dynamic character has been well grasped by the pragmatists in the realm of Truth or Epistemology, by Whitehead and Bergson in the realm of ultimate Reality and by idealist philosophers like Croce and Collingwood in their conception of History. But the pragmatists' criterion of success has somehow deteriorated into American notions of success and Bergson seems to have left the whole world static to have his élan more dynamic. Whitehead alone perceives 'the fallacy of simple location' and makes his 'objects' 'centres of creativity'

radiating into the whole universe, 'prehending possibilities' and thus having the centre of change within themselves. Both Croce and Collingwood fall into a type of Historical Relativism or Historical Absolutism where every judgment becomes either always true or always false. The whole trouble with all these thinkers is that intellectual pre-suppositions of a discarded past still govern their unconscious. A full-fledged acceptance of the experiential standpoint would treat intellectual difficulties and contradictions as experiential contradictions and difficulties unless they were problems in formulation. This contradiction is never to be feared by the philosopher who accepts the articulation of experience and its 'überwindung' as the task of his philosophy. Philosophers have generally held their own mode of mentality to be the only way or at least the most superior way of the functioning of human mind. Yet who would say that the Moore of 'Principia Ethica' or 'Defence of common-sense', the Blake of those terrifying yet entrancing visions thrown on the canvas and the Shakespeare of 'Lear' had the same functioning mode of human mind or even that the analytical philosopher was superior to the painter and the poet? Sri Aurobindo—from the experiential standpoint—has, therefore, given only a very limited and partial validity to the analytical and analytico-synthetical modes of functioning of the human mind. Intuition and Imagination have been given a greater power of penetration into the depths of experience—though they too have their limitations. There is simultaneously the attempt to plumb the deep Inconscient below and to rise into the rarified Super-conscient above. Both are not completely unknown to the human mind—yet the Dive and the Ascent are so rare and so fleeting that one usually doubts whether they were real at all. The Unconscious, today, is soundly established by modern psychology, while the Super-conscient is ever witnessed in the experiences of the great Mystics—and fitfully in those of great poets and artists. Sri Aurobindo has gone even further and tried to find dynamic descriptions and unities in the vital and physical planes of the Inconscient on the one hand and the Higher, Intuitive, Illumined and Over-mind ranges of the Super-conscient on the other.

Mind in its ordinary functioning stands in between these two ranges, but it must not be forgotten that it is not closed on either side. In fact, the general quality of '*discriminating, responsive awareness*' he calls—in the usual Indian tradition —*cit*. This is almost completely identical with Whitehead's 'prehension' which is devoid of any specific mode of human mentality—and yet connotes the essence underlying it. The two other characterizations, '*sat*' and '*anand*', merely state that the last category is not an absolute 'Nihil'

—and that somehow or other it is complete and intrinsic to itself. Yet to Sri Aurobindo—as to every true thinker—this does not exhaust or even completely describe the ultimate ‘Creativity’ that reigns through the whole universe. The characterizations are positive, for a ‘philosopher of experience’ can never deny its ultimate reality and value without destroying the very basis of philosophy itself. Yet in characterizing the dynamis of experience—he has not forgotten, like Bergson, the stasis which it itself vouchsafes. The Eternal Absolute which remains ever unaffected by any change whatsoever is merely a transcription of the subjective experience that a certain part of the Self remains even unaffected whatever may happen to the Psyche. To grasp both the stasis and the dynamis—features equally revealed within experience and equally held however difficult to reconcile on the intellectual plane—to describe the dynamic unities reached and the static structures revealed and continuously to transcend the levels reached, the ranges attained and the heights ascended—is the task of Sri Aurobindo. Not to deny any experience, whether in articulation or transmutation, is his unique achievement among thinkers who have done nothing but either denied or ignored. His is the philosophy of Affirmation—the true philosophy of ‘Experience’—for ‘Experience’ can never deny anything excepting the universalisation, the absolutization of any one of its aspects at the expense of others. Philosophy since its inception—whether in the East or in the West—has known nothing but ‘Denial’. This age-old habit still persists among the thinkers of the present, and few have realized that to deny a thing is merely to ‘disown’ and not to ‘annihilate’ it. The ‘denial’ merely means that you are interested in ‘something else’—that you are considering the thing from some other point outside itself—that, in short, you are viewing the thing ‘instrumentally’ and not ‘intrinsically’. Sri Aurobindo, in this sense, not only goes beyond the thinkers of the past but also beyond most of the spiritual masters that have walked the Orient or the Occident. In the very second and third chapters of his ‘The Life Divine’—he opposes his ‘double affirmation’ to the ascetic’s negation of Matter and the materialist’s denial of Spirit. Both Matter and Spirit, however difficult their intellectual relations, is the call of Sri Aurobindo, for Experience declares it to be so.

The difficulty in understanding Sri Aurobindo is the difficulty in understanding anything except ‘tautologies’. To a Russell the whole world is ultimately ununderstandable, for the world is not a ‘tautology’. The second great difficulty is the intrinsic incapacity of most philosophers to believe that the Shakespearean mind could ever penetrate to truth better than the Moorean mind. Further the philosopher finds it difficult—almost impossible—

to conceive of any other mode of human experiencing and, after all, he too, like most other beings, loves Finality. Further, Logic like a ghost pursues him still and makes impossible the simultaneous assertion of experiential contrarities. Recently a reviewer of S. K. Maitra's 'The philosophy of Sri Aurobindo' in the pages of 'Philosophical Review' found both Mr. Maitra and Sri Aurobindo not yet independent of the usual Indian belief that all Dualisms are but half-way houses to monism. We do not deny that most of the Indian thinkers treat Dualism and Pluralism as inferior stopping places on the royal road to monism, but we are surprised that the critic has not yet found his independence of such a silly controversy as that of monism and pluralism. The source of this can only be the unconscious acceptance of logic that treats them as contradictions and then raises all the age-long objections if one decides to call oneself a monist or a pluralist. Of course, it lessens the problem of the critic, for he can always raise the classical objections against monism, if the author be a monist or those against pluralism, if the author be a pluralist. This continuous re-formulation of the usual objections against any position is a vestigial survival of those days when logic was supposed to provide a clue to reality. But today when the 'experiential standpoint' has been fully accepted, they should be treated as habit survivals from a past when they were supposed to have value. This denial of logic is feared by most thinkers as opening the doors to all sorts of superstitions, irrationalisms, emotionalisms and the giving up of that scientific habit of thought which has been so laboriously acquired in the past. The West has not yet forgotten the Inquisition or the emotional aberrations of the East—and the 'radar' and the 'atom bomb' seem so concrete as to dispel the lure of the 'abstract mirage'. But these people have mistaken the nature of their logic. Logic cannot say one word about existence; in fact, the very existence of any thing is non-logical. It is concerned only with 'hypothetical implications' and as for the scientific standpoint what else can it be excepting the 'experiential' one? As for irrationalism—Gandhi was as much an irrational as Hitler—but who would equate the two? Really speaking, it is a question of value and not of logic, and any confusion between the two would spell nothing but disaster.

These are the difficulties—and many others—that stand in the way of appreciation of this great Master. He combines in himself the foremost trends of the most creative thinkers of today and goes beyond them. Like a shaft of Light he has penetrated into the Future and shown the possibilities that stagger the boldest Imagination. Not a facet of experience has he left untouched, not a corner unexplored. The artist in him meets the philosopher, and the philosopher rises into the Prophet. With one

foot firm in the nether worlds of the Inconscient and the other in the lofty heavens of the Super-conscient above, he stalks this Earth like gods of yore. His is the 'Call of the Infinite' and only the bravest and the mightiest can hear and respond. Not the Everest, or the Pole, or the Ocean does he seek.....but the God that time is in labour to produce. 'To the fathomless Depths and spaceless infinities' does he call and thou, O Adventurer, have thy heart of steel and wings of granite.....for there shall only be thy wings and shoreless infinities.