

The Playful Self-Involution of Divine Consciousness: Sri Aurobindo's Evolutionary Cosmopsychism and His Response to the Individuation Problem

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the Indian philosopher-mystic Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) espoused a sophisticated form of cosmopsychism that has great contemporary relevance. After first discussing Aurobindo's prescient reflections on the "central problem of consciousness" and his arguments against materialist reductionism, I explain how he developed a panentheistic philosophy of "realistic Advaita" on the basis of his own spiritual experiences and his intensive study of the Vedāntic scriptures. He derived from this realistic Advaita philosophy a highly original doctrine of evolutionary cosmopsychism, according to which the Divine Saccidānanda is "involved" in everything in the universe and gradually manifests itself at each stage of the evolutionary process from matter to life to mind, and ultimately, to Supermind—the final stage that is yet to come, upon the attainment of which we will attain knowledge of our true divine nature as Saccidānanda. I then reconstruct Aurobindo's novel solution to the individuation problem, according to which the Divine Saccidānanda individuates into various distinct consciousnesses by playfully limiting itself through a process of "exclusive concentration." Finally, I highlight the continued relevance of Aurobindo's evolutionary cosmopsychism by bringing him into conversation with Itay Shani, a contemporary proponent of cosmopsychism.

For in the Inconscient itself and behind the perversions of the Ignorance Divine Consciousness lies concealed and works and must more and more appear, throwing off in the end its disguises.

—Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Yoga I* (CWSA 28, 277)

The palpable inadequacy of materialist explanations of consciousness has fueled a growing interest in panpsychism among contemporary philosophers of mind. One variety of panpsychism is cosmopsychism, the view that there is a single, all-pervading universal consciousness from which human and nonhuman consciousness derive.¹ Among the potentially attractive features of cosmopsychism are its elegance

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and explanatory power: if we take universal consciousness to be the sole fundamental reality, then there is no longer any “hard problem” of explaining how consciousness arises from insentient matter, and there is also no need to deny or explain away the inescapably qualitative, “what-it-is-like” character of consciousness.

But if cosmopsychism avoids one hard problem, it gives rise to another: the problem of providing a coherent explanation of how the single universal consciousness *individuates* into the distinct conscious perspectives of various creatures. Although recent philosophers have christened this problem with different names, I follow Freya Mathews (2011, 145) in calling it the “individuation problem.”² Proponents of cosmopsychism have proposed a variety of solutions to the individuation problem.³

This article makes the case that Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), a Bengali philosopher-mystic educated at Cambridge University, has much to contribute to contemporary debates about consciousness and cosmopsychism. As far as I am aware, Matthijs Cornelissen (2008) is the only scholar who has discussed Aurobindo’s views on consciousness in detail. Cornelissen plausibly argues that “panpsychism is the Western concept of consciousness that comes closest to Aurobindo’s view” (2008, 424 n. 10), though he does not discuss cosmopsychism in particular. Building on Cornelissen’s valuable work, I will make the case that Aurobindo espouses a sophisticated form of cosmopsychism that has great contemporary relevance.

Part 1 discusses Aurobindo’s prescient reflections on the “central problem of consciousness” and his arguments against materialist reductionism. Part 2 explains how he developed a panentheistic philosophy of “realistic Advaita” on the basis of his own spiritual experiences and his intensive study of the Vedāntic scriptures. He derives from this realistic Advaita philosophy a highly original doctrine of evolutionary cosmopsychism, according to which the Divine Saccidānanda is “involved” in everything in the universe and gradually manifests itself at each stage of the evolutionary process from matter to life to mind, and ultimately, to Supermind—the final stage that is yet to come, upon the attainment of which we will attain knowledge of our true divine nature as Saccidānanda.⁴ Part 3 explains Aurobindo’s novel solution to the individuation problem, according to which the Divine Saccidānanda individuates into various distinct consciousnesses by playfully limiting itself through a process of “exclusive concentration.” Finally, Part 4 highlights the continued relevance of Aurobindo’s evolutionary cosmopsychism by bringing him into conversation with Itay Shani, a contemporary proponent of cosmopsychism.

1. AUROBINDO ON THE “CENTRAL PROBLEM” OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Over half a century before David Chalmers (1995), Aurobindo declared that “[t]he problem of consciousness is the central problem” (CWSA 12, 272) and contended that consciousness is an apparently “insoluble miracle” that eludes materialist explanation (CWSA 12, 271). After explaining why “existence itself” is the “first riddle,” he formulates the second riddle of consciousness as follows:

Consciousness of existence is a second insoluble miracle. It seems not to have been and now is and it may be that some day it will not be; yet it is a premier fact and without it being would not know of its own existence. Things might

exist, but only as a useless encumbrance of a meaningless space,—consciousness makes being self-aware, gives it a significance. But what then is consciousness? Is it something in the very grain of being or an unstable result or fortuitous accident? To whom does it belong? to the world as a whole? or is it peculiar to individual being? Or has it come from elsewhere into this inanimate and inconscient universe? To what end this entry? (CWSA 12, 271)

What makes consciousness so puzzling, Aurobindo suggests, is that it is perfectly conceivable that things could exist *without* conscious awareness—that is, “only as a useless encumbrance of a meaningless space.”⁵ This should remind us of Chalmers’s recent conceivability argument against reductionist explanations of consciousness (Chalmers 1996, 94–99). According to Chalmers, if a reductionist theory of consciousness were satisfactory, then “zombies,” creatures physically identical to us but lacking consciousness, would not be conceivable. But since zombies *are* conceivable, reductionist explanations of consciousness must be false. The pregnant questions raised by Aurobindo at the end of the passage are also highly significant, since they canvass a variety of possible solutions to the riddle of consciousness, ranging from materialism (consciousness as “an unstable result or fortuitous accident”) to panpsychism (consciousness as “something in the very grain of being”) to cosmopsychism in particular (consciousness belonging “to the world as a whole”).

Against the “materialist hypothesis” that “consciousness must be a result of energy in Matter,” Aurobindo claims that “no mere mechanism of grey stuff of brain” can explain “thought and will, the imagination of the poet, the attention of the scientist, the reasoning of the philosopher” (CWSA 12, 275). He then presents a sophisticated argument for panpsychism that resonates strongly with contemporary arguments in philosophy of mind:

There is no parity, kinship or visible equation between the alleged cause or agent on the one side and on the other the effect and its observable process. There is a gulf here that cannot be bridged by any stress of forcible affirmation or crossed by any stride of inference or violent leap of argumentative reason. Consciousness and an inconscient substance may be connected, may interpenetrate, may act on each other, but they are and remain things opposite, incommensurate with each other, fundamentally diverse. An observing and active consciousness emerging as a character of an eternal Inconscience is a self-contradictory affirmation, an unintelligible phenomenon, and the contradiction must be healed or explained before this affirmation can be accepted. But it cannot be healed unless either the Inconscient has a latent power for consciousness—and then its inconscience is phenomenal only, not fundamental,—or else is the veil of a Consciousness which emerges out of a state of involution which appears to us as an inconscience. (CWSA 12, 274–75)

According to Aurobindo, the problem with materialist theories that reduce consciousness to some physical process—such as a brain state—is that they are unable to bridge the “gulf” between the alleged physical “cause” and the “effect” (i.e., conscious experience), which “remain things opposite, incommensurate with each

other.” He thereby anticipated Joseph Levine’s well-known argument that materialist theories leave an “explanatory gap” between physical processes and conscious experience (Levine 1983).

Aurobindo then goes on to argue that emergentism—the view that consciousness emerged from nonconscious matter at a certain point in our evolutionary history—is “self-contradictory” and “unintelligible.” Since only like can emerge from like, and insentient matter is fundamentally *unlike* consciousness, the latter could not possibly have emerged from the former. Once we rule out the possibility of emergentism, Aurobindo claims, then only two possible explanations of consciousness remain: either the “Inconscient has a latent power for consciousness” (a position akin to what contemporary philosophers call “panprotopsychism”⁶) or the Inconscient is “the veil of a Consciousness which emerges out of a state of involution.” As we will see in the next section, it is the latter position—an evolutionary cosmopsychism—that Aurobindo will defend. What should be kept in mind, however, is that he motivates his general panpsychist position on the basis of rational arguments against materialist reductionism and emergentism. In doing so, Aurobindo adumbrated Galen Strawson (2008), who has recently argued for panpsychism on the basis of the principle of *ex nihilo nihil fit*. Strawson contends, very much in an Aurobindonian vein, that “there must be something about the nature of the emerged-from (and nothing else) in virtue of which the emerger emerges as it does and is what it is” (2008, 63).

2. AUROBINDO’S PHILOSOPHY OF “REALISTIC ADWAITA” AND HIS EVOLUTIONARY COSMOPSYCHISM

It is important to keep in mind that Aurobindo was first and foremost a yogi and a mystic. Accordingly, his evolutionary cosmopsychism was not an intellectual hypothesis arrived at through ratiocination but an insight he claimed to have gained through his own spiritual experience. He recorded that in January 1908, he had a “series of tremendously powerful experiences,” which made him “see with a stupendous intensity the world as a cinematographic play of vacant forms in the impersonal universality of the Absolute Brahman” (CWSA 35, 239–40). In other words, he had the advaitic experience of the nondual reality of the impersonal Ātman and the unreality of the universe (CWSA 35, 239).

Shortly thereafter, in May 1908, he was incarcerated for a year in the Alipore jail in Kolkata for his political activities as a freedom fighter. He claimed that during his imprisonment, he practiced intensely the spiritual disciplines taught in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which culminated in the ecstatic mystical realization that everything and everyone in the world—including the prisoners, the prison guard, the jail grating, and the “coarse blankets” he used—were nothing but playful disguises of Lord Kṛṣṇa Himself (CWSA 8, 6).

On the basis of these spiritual experiences and his study of the Vedāntic scriptures,⁷ he went on to write the essay “The Yoga and Its Objects” (1912; CWSA 13, 71–91), in which he distinguished three stages of spiritual realization. In the first stage, one attains advaitic *ātmajñāna*, the knowledge of the “one divine impersonal Existence,” from the perspective of which “the One may seem to be the only reality

and everything else *maya*, a purposeless and inexplicable illusion” (CWSA 13, 76). Clearly, this first stage corresponds to Aurobindo’s experience of the impersonal Ātman in January 1908. In the second stage, one exceeds the merely “impersonal realisation” of Advaita and comes to experience “that even the names and forms are Brahman” (CWSA 13, 76). In the third stage, one attains the “crowning realisation,” which is “to perceive all things as God” (CWSA 13, 76), the first glimpse of which Aurobindo seems to have experienced in the Alipore jail in 1909.

For Aurobindo, it is precisely this “crowning” spiritual realization that reveals the truth of divine cosmopsychism:

It is not only in things animate but in things inanimate also that we must see Narayana, experience Shiva, throw our arms around Shakti. When our eyes, that are now blinded by the idea of Matter, open to the supreme Light, we shall find that nothing is inanimate, but all contains, expressed or unexpressed, involved or evolved, secret or manifest or in course of manifestation, not only that state of involved consciousness which we call *annam* or Matter, but also life, mind, knowledge, bliss, divine force and being,—*prāṇa*, *manas*, *vijñāna*, *ānanda*, *cit*, *sat*. In all things the self-conscious personality of God broods and takes the delight of his *guṇas* [the qualities of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* comprising Prakṛti]. Flowers, fruits, earth, trees, metals, all things have a joy in them of which you will become aware, because in all Sri Krishna dwells, *praviśya*, having entered into them, not materially or physically . . . but by *cit*, the divine awareness in his transcendent being. (CWSA 13, 78)

According to Aurobindo’s spiritually-grounded worldview, the sole reality is Saccidānanda (Being/Consciousness-Force/Bliss), the infinite, impersonal-personal Divine Consciousness which, in its personal and dynamic aspect as Śakti, manifests as everything in the universe. In his philosophical magnum opus *The Life Divine* (1940; CWSA 21–22), he elaborates this divine cosmopsychism in great detail.

In an illuminating letter, he summarizes the core argument of *The Life Divine* by first outlining his “realistic Advaita” philosophy and then elaborating a highly original doctrine of evolutionary cosmopsychism:

There is possible a realistic as well as an illusionist Advaita. The philosophy of *The Life Divine* is such a realistic Advaita. The world is a manifestation of the Real and therefore is itself real. The reality is the infinite and eternal Divine, infinite and eternal Being, Consciousness-Force and Bliss [i.e., Saccidānanda]. This Divine by his power has created the world or rather manifested it in his own infinite Being. But here in the material world or at its basis he has hidden himself in what seem to be his opposites, Non-Being, Inconscience and Insentience The Being which is hidden in what seems to be an inconscient void emerges in the world first in Matter, then in Life, then in Mind and finally as the Spirit. The apparently inconscient Energy which creates is in fact the Consciousness-Force of the Divine and its aspect of consciousness, secret in Matter, begins to emerge in Life, finds something more of itself in Mind and

finds its true self in a spiritual consciousness and finally a supramental consciousness through which we become aware of the Reality, enter into it and unite ourselves with it. This is what we call evolution which is an evolution of consciousness and an evolution of the Spirit in things and only outwardly an evolution of species. (CWSA 29, 393)

According to Śāṅkara's "illusionist" Advaita philosophy, the sole reality is the impersonal and attributeless (*nirguṇa*) Pure Consciousness, which only *appears* to manifest as this world due to our ignorance.⁸ By contrast, according to Aurobindo's "realistic" Advaita, the Divine Saccidānanda is *both* personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*): the *Sat* aspect of Saccidānanda corresponds to the impersonal Absolute accepted by Śāṅkara, while the *Cit* aspect of Saccidānanda is "Consciousness-Force," a personal and dynamic "Cit-Śakti" which has the inherent capacity to manifest in and as the world (CWSA 21–22, 201). Hence, Aurobindo, unlike Śāṅkara, holds that everything in the world is an emphatically real manifestation of Divine Consciousness.

According to Aurobindo, evolution has both an outer and an inner dimension. Darwin's theory of physical evolution through natural selection provides a more or less accurate account of how various species have evolved in the course of the earth's history. However, what Darwin overlooked is the inner *spiritual* evolution of consciousness through the mechanism not of natural selection but of divine "involution." Divine Consciousness, Aurobindo claims, is "involved" in everything in the universe and progressively manifests itself at each stage of the evolutionary process from matter to life to mind, and ultimately, to Supermind. Up to this point, he claims, humanity has evolved to the stage of mind, which is only a transitional stage on the way to the culminating stage of Supermind, upon reaching which we will realize that we are none other than the one infinite Divine Consciousness playfully manifesting as everything and everyone in the universe. Moreover, he argues that the evolutionary transition from mind to Supermind is inevitable, since the Divine Consciousness "involved" in the human mind will necessarily press forward until it can manifest itself here on earth to the fullest extent.

3. AUROBINDO'S RESPONSE TO THE INDIVIDUATION PROBLEM:

DIVINE SELF-LIMITATION AND EXCLUSIVE CONCENTRATION

Of course, Aurobindo's evolutionary cosmopsychism raises the individuation problem in an acute form: if the sole reality is Divine Consciousness, then how is it possible for this omniscient, omnipotent, and morally perfect Divine Being to manifest as ordinary imperfect creatures who are ignorant of their divine nature? In *The Life Divine*, Aurobindo himself raises this individuation problem quite forcefully:

How could this manifold ignorance or this narrowly self-limiting and separative knowledge [of ordinary creatures] arise and come into action or maintain itself in action in an absolute Being who must be absolute consciousness and therefore cannot be subject to ignorance? How is even an apparent division effectively operated and kept in continuance in the Indivisible? The Being, integrally one, cannot be ignorant of itself; and since all things are itself, conscious

modifications, determinations of its being, it cannot either be ignorant of things, of their true nature, of their true action. But though we say that we are That, that the Jivatman or individual self is no other than the Paramatman, no other than the Absolute, yet we are certainly ignorant both of ourselves and things, from which this contradiction results that what must be in its very grain incapable of ignorance is yet capable of it, and has plunged itself into it by some will of its being or some necessity or possibility of its nature. (CWSA 21–22, 586–87)

Aurobindo points out here that his metaphysics of “realistic” Advaita raises both a “how” and a “why” question. How is it even coherently possible for a single perfect Divine Consciousness to become, or manifest as, all the various individual creatures, each with their own imperfections, limitations, and ignorant conscious perspectives? This is clearly a version of the individuation problem currently being discussed by philosophers of mind. But Aurobindo also raises a further “why” question in the final sentence of the passage. Even if it is a coherent possibility for the Divine Consciousness to manifest as ignorant creatures, why would it do so in the first place? Did the Divine Consciousness plunge into ignorance out of “necessity”? If so, then it is difficult to see how God can be truly omnipotent. And if, on the other hand, the Divine Consciousness *chose* to manifest as ignorant creatures but could have refrained from doing so, then we would need to ask why God would make such a seemingly counter-intuitive choice, which entails so much suffering for His creatures.

It would take far more space than I have here to discuss all the nuances of Aurobindo’s elaborate answers to these questions in *The Life Divine*, so I will only provide a brief summary of his answers in this section. Regarding the problem of logical coherence, Aurobindo’s solution, in brief, is that the all-knowing Divine Consciousness manifests as ignorant creatures through a special process of “self-limitation” (CWSA 21–22, 281). His account of divine self-limitation presupposes his metaphysics of a “sevenfold chord of being,” the seven planes of being or consciousness which it is possible for us to occupy (CWSA 21–22, 276–84). The higher four planes of being—namely, Sat (Being), Cit-Śakti (Consciousness-Force), Ānanda (Bliss), and Vijñāna (Supermind)—constitute the “upper hemisphere of manifestation based on the Spirit’s eternal self-knowledge” (CWSA 21–22, 689). Obviously, the first three planes, taken together, constitute the Divine Saccidānanda itself, which is the sole reality and our true nature. The fourth plane of Supermind is the “Divine Gnosis,” a mediating principle by which Saccidānanda manifests as everything in the universe (CWSA 21–22, 277). Every one of us is capable of attaining salvific knowledge of our true divine nature by raising our consciousness to one or more of these four planes of being. As Aurobindo puts it, “If we enter into these principles or into any plane of being in which there is the pure presence of the Reality, we find in them a complete freedom and knowledge” (CWSA 21–22, 689).

The remaining three planes of being—namely, Mind, Life, and Matter—constitute the “lower hemisphere of the manifestation,” which Aurobindo explains as follows:

These [i.e. Mind, Life, and Matter] are in themselves powers of the superior principles [i.e., Sat, Cit-Śakti, Ānanda, and Vijñāna]; but wherever they manifest in a separation from their spiritual sources, they undergo as a result a phenomenal lapse into a divided in place of the true undivided existence: this lapse, this separation creates a state of limited knowledge exclusively concentrated on its own limited world-order and oblivious of all that is behind it and of the underlying unity, a state therefore of cosmic and individual Ignorance. (CWSA 21–22, 689–90)

This passage contains, in a nutshell, Aurobindo's response to the individuation problem. Our various ignorant conscious perspectives result from a twofold process of divine self-limitation and exclusive concentration. First, the Divine Consciousness manifests in the world by limiting itself to the three lower planes of Matter, Life, and Mind. Second, this self-limited consciousness becomes so absorbed in—or “exclusively concentrated” on—its own limited egoistic purview, grounded in the three lower planes, that it loses its awareness of the Divine Saccidānanda at its basis. Crucially, however, Aurobindo insists that this “lapse” of Saccidānanda into a state of ignorance is merely “phenomenal,” not in the sense of being illusory but in the sense of being a superficial ignorance that belongs not to the *essence* of Saccidānanda itself but to certain aspects of its *manifestation* here on earth.

Three key elements in Aurobindo's response to the individuation problem require further clarification: (1) the notion of divine “self-limitation,” (2) the notion of “exclusive concentration,” and (3) the distinction between the essence of Saccidānanda and its various manifestations. He elaborates all three of these elements in the course of explaining how it is coherently possible for the one Divine Consciousness (hereafter DC) to manifest as various creatures—“insect and bird and beast and man”—while still remaining the same Divine Consciousness (CWSA 21–22, 355). DC, he claims, manifests as everything and everyone in the universe by means of its three fundamental “powers”: namely, the power of “self-variation,” the power of “self-limitation,” and the power of “self-absorption” or exclusive concentration (CWSA 21–22, 356–61). DC has the power of self-variation—that is, the ability to be “many things simultaneously”—since the “Maya” aspect of its Consciousness-Force “can put forth many states of consciousness at a time” (CWSA 21–22, 356).

Aurobindo then explains the power of self-limitation as follows:

A second possibility of the Infinite Consciousness that must be admitted is its power of self-limitation or secondary self-formation into a subordinate movement within the integral illimitable consciousness and knowledge; for that is a necessary consequence of the power of self-determination of the Infinite. Each self-determination of the self-being must have its own awareness of its self-truth and its self-nature; or, if we prefer so to put it, the Being in that determination must be so self-aware. Spiritual individuality means that each individual self or spirit is a centre of self-vision and all-vision; the circumference—the boundless circumference, as we may say,—of this vision may be the same for all, but the centre may be different,—not located as in a spatial point in a

spatial circle, but a psychological centre related with others through a coexistence of the diversely conscious Many in the universal being. Each being in a world will see the same world, but see it from its own self-being according to its own way of self-nature. . . . (CWSA 21–22, 357)

Unlike Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta, Aurobindo's "realistic Advaita" philosophy upholds a spiritual monism that nonetheless accommodates a real plurality of individual selves within it. Within the dynamics of its manifestation, DC has the ability to limit itself to various particular centers of consciousness simultaneously, each of which will see the same world from its own unique perspective. Aurobindo explains the process of self-limitation through an analogy. There may be many points in different parts of a circle, but all these points share one and the same circumference. Similarly, all individual souls are distinct centers of consciousness, all of which are nothing but the same DC self-limited in various ways. Aurobindo also emphasizes that divine self-limitation does not, by itself, entail ignorance: each spiritual individual remains aware of its divine source (CWSA 21–22, 357).

Ignorance becomes a possibility only when DC limits itself in such a way as to be absorbed in, or exclusively concentrated on, a superficial movement of consciousness that remains unaware of its own divine source (CWSA 21–22, 359). Aurobindo explains how ignorance arises from exclusive concentration in this passage:

[A]ll ignorance is, when examined, a superficially exclusive self-forgetful concentration of Tapas, of the conscious energy of being in a particular line or section of its movement of which alone it is aware or which alone it seems to be on the surface. The ignorance is effective within the bounds of that movement and valid for its purposes, but phenomenal, partial, superficial, not essentially real, not integral. We have to use the word "real" necessarily in a quite limited and not in its absolute sense; for the ignorance is real enough, but it is not the whole truth of our being and by regarding it by itself even its truth is misrepresented to our outer awareness. In that true truth of itself it is an involved Consciousness and Knowledge evolving back to itself, but it is dynamically effective as an Inconscience and an Ignorance. (CWSA 21–22, 611)

"Tapas," in Aurobindo's technical sense, is the "energy of being" of the divine Consciousness-Force that can be channeled or concentrated in various ways. Ignorance arises when this Tapas becomes so exclusively concentrated on a particular superficial level of consciousness that it "loses" its awareness of its own divine nature. I put "loses" in scare-quotes because Aurobindo insists that the perfect and all-knowing DC, *in its essence*, can never really forget itself. Nonetheless, through a process of exclusive concentration, DC manifests as various centers of consciousness that *are* ignorant of their source in DC. Unlike Śāṅkara, Sri Aurobindo maintains that this ignorance is "perfectly real," but only "phenomenal" and "superficial," since it does not inhere in DC itself but obtains only within the dynamics of the world-manifestation. He then reminds us of his evolutionary cosmopsychism: in reality, the ignorant state of consciousness is nothing but an involved form of DC itself.

Ignorance, as he puts it elsewhere, is nothing but “the superficial and apparent self-forgetfulness of the One in its play of division and multiplicity” (CWSA 21–22, 278).

It is crucial to recognize that Aurobindo does not hold that DC merely *pretends* to be ignorant creatures. In fact, he explicitly contrasts his own view with such a pretense model of manifestation:

It may be aware of the rest all the time, yet act as if it were not aware of it; that would not be a state or act of Ignorance: but if the consciousness erects by the concentration a wall of exclusion limiting itself to a single field, domain or habitation in the movement so that it is aware only of that or aware of all the rest as outside itself, then we have a principle of self-limiting knowledge which can result in a separative knowledge and culminate in a positive and effective ignorance. (CWSA 21–22, 604)

If DC’s manifestation as ignorant creatures were a mere act or pretense, then there would *be* no ignorant conscious perspectives at all—which would amount to a form of eliminativism vis-à-vis human-level consciousness. As a “realistic” Advaitin, Aurobindo emphatically rejects such an eliminativist solution to the individuation problem—the kind favored by followers of Śaṅkara’s “illusionistic” Advaita Vedānta like Miri Albahari (2020)—since human-level consciousness would thereby not be explained but explained *away*. Instead, Aurobindo holds that DC, through self-limitation and exclusive concentration, erects a “wall of exclusion” that *actually* separates ignorant human-level consciousness from its divine source. Since DC’s divine conscious perspective is excluded from ignorant human-level conscious perspectives, Aurobindo sidesteps the individuation problem, since he is not committed to the logically incoherent position that DC’s divine perspective is somehow present within any given ignorant conscious perspective.

Aurobindo further elaborates the process of exclusive concentration by means of an analogy of a sea and the various streams and waves on its surface:

We can get some glimpse of what this means, to what it amounts in action, when we look at the nature of exclusive concentration in mental man, in our own consciousness. First of all, we must note that what we mean ordinarily by the man is not his inner self, but only a sum of apparent continuous movement of consciousness and energy in past, present and future to which we give this name. It is this that in appearance does all the works of the man, thinks all his thoughts, feels all his emotions. This energy is a movement of Consciousness-Force concentrated on a temporal stream of inward and outward workings. But we know that behind this stream of energy there is a whole sea of consciousness which is aware of the stream, but of which the stream is unaware; for this sum of surface energy is a selection, an outcome from all the rest that is invisible. That sea is the subliminal self, the superconscient, the subconscient, the intraconscient and circumconscient being, and holding it all together the soul, the psychic entity. The stream is the natural, the superficial man. In this superficial man Tapas, the being’s dynamic force of consciousness,

is concentrated on the surface in a certain mass of superficial workings; all the rest of itself it has put behind and may be vaguely aware of it there in the unformulated back of its conscious existence, but is not aware of it in this superficial absorbed movement in front. It is not precisely, at any rate in that back or in the depths, ignorant of itself in any essential sense of the word, but for the purposes of its superficial movement and within that movement only it is oblivious of its real, its greater self, by absorption, by exclusive concentration on what it is superficially doing. Yet it is really the hidden sea and not the superficial stream which is doing all the action: it is the sea that is the source of this movement, not the conscious wave it throws up, whatever the consciousness of the wave, absorbed in its movement, living in that, seeing nothing else but that, may think about the matter. And that sea, the real self, the integral conscious being, the integral force of being, is not ignorant; even the wave is not essentially ignorant,—for it contains within itself all the consciousness it has forgotten and but for that it could not act or endure at all,—but it is self-oblivious, absorbed in its own movement, too absorbed to note anything else than the movement while that continues to preoccupy it. A limited practical self-oblivion, not an essential and binding self-ignorance, is the nature of this exclusive concentration which is yet the root of that which works as the Ignorance. (CWSA 21–22, 604–606)

In this important passage, Aurobindo likens ignorant egoistic consciousness to a little stream or wave that is unaware that it belongs to the vast sea. DC, in its particular manifestation as the “stream” of egoistic consciousness, is so “absorbed in its own movement” that it forgets its own divine essence. However, according to Aurobindo’s evolutionary cosmopsychism, there will come a time—either in this embodiment or in a future embodiment—when this individual “stream” of consciousness will break free from its egoic confines and realize that it was nothing but DC all along, playfully manifesting as ignorant consciousness.

We are now in a position to summarize Aurobindo’s response to the individuation problem. According to his “realistic Advaita” philosophy, the sole reality is the infinite, impersonal-personal DC, but DC, in its personal-dynamic aspect as Consciousness-Force, playfully manifests as all our various ignorant conscious perspectives through a threefold process of self-variation, self-limitation, and exclusive concentration. By conceiving ignorance in terms of attentional absorption, Aurobindo is able to uphold a radical monism of Divine Consciousness while avoiding the incoherent position that the divine conscious perspective is somehow part of our own ignorant perspectives. When, say, I am totally absorbed in watching an exciting football game on TV, I might be ignorant of my dog sleeping on the couch next to me, even though my dozing dog lies in the periphery of my visual field. Similarly, Divine Consciousness, in its self-limited manifestation as a given ignorant center of consciousness, becomes so attentionally absorbed in the superficial workings of that particular egoistic consciousness that it is not aware of its own divine nature. The threat of logical incoherence is thereby averted, since the divine conscious perspective of DC in its essence is never part of our own ignorant perspectives. Rather, superficial egoistic consciousness

remains ignorant of its divine source, just as a stream or a wave is unaware of its source in the sea. However, since all individual centers of consciousness are nothing but involved, self-limited forms of DC itself, each of us will eventually realize our true nature as DC when we evolve from mental to supramental consciousness.

Apart from the question of logical coherence, there is a further “why” question: Why did Saccidānanda choose to manifest as ignorant, suffering creatures in the first place?¹⁰ In response to this question, Aurobindo appeals to what could be described as a “spiritual Hegelianism”: the Divine Saccidānanda freely chooses to “plunge” into Inconscience and to manifest itself gradually in the course of evolution for the sake of the unique delight of achieving “a new affirmation of Sachchidananda in its apparent opposite” (CWSA 21–22, 427). As he puts it, “It is to find himself in the apparent opposites of his being and his nature that Sachchidananda descends into the material Nescience and puts on its phenomenal ignorance as a superficial mask in which he hides himself from his own conscious energy, leaving it self-forgetful and absorbed in its works and forms” (CWSA 21–22, 612–13). From Aurobindo’s perspective, only the Divine Saccidānanda is so daring, so powerful, so self-assured that it would freely choose among its infinite possibilities of manifestation the one that involves such a deep and perilous plunge into apparent Inconscience, with all its attendant imperfection and suffering.¹¹

4. DIVINE SELF-LIMITATION AS PARTIAL GROUNDING: BRINGING AUROBINDO INTO CONVERSATION WITH ITAY SHANI

I will conclude this essay by making a case for Aurobindo’s relevance to contemporary debates about cosmopsychism. Among the various recent cosmopsychist theories on offer, Itay Shani’s (2015) sophisticated form of cosmopsychism lends itself especially well to cross-cultural engagement with Aurobindo’s evolutionary cosmopsychism. According to Shani’s cosmopsychist theory, the sole ontological ultimate is “cosmic consciousness” (2015, 389), which *partially* grounds all the various individual conscious perspectives. Partial grounding, in Shani’s account, means that “there is a certain aspect under which the perspectives of relative subjects are anchored in the perspective of the absolute, and another aspect under which they assert their independence” (Shani 2015, 422–23). He goes on to clarify partial grounding by appealing to a distinction between “specific character” and “generic character”:

Each concrete perspective of each relative subject has what I call a *specific character*, namely, a unique individual profile which cannot be derived from any other perspective (or combination thereof); but, at the same time, all of these perspectives share a *generic character*, or a basic template, which is, in turn, derived from the subjective, perspectival nature of the absolute. Thus, in respect of its generic character, each conscious perspective of each relative subject is grounded in the fact that the absolute is itself a subject and, as such, the owner of a first-person point of view, but in respect of its specific character it is an independent entity which neither grounds any other perspective, nor being grounded by any. (Shani 2015, 423)

According to Shani, each individual conscious perspective inherits its generic character—consisting in the two key features of sentience and “I-ness” or a first-personal point of view (2015, 426)—from cosmic consciousness, which is itself perspectival and sentient. At the same time, each individual perspective also has a specific character that is *not* grounded in cosmic consciousness—namely, its “unique *outlook*” on the world, its “singular” way of perceiving, feeling, and so on (Shani 2015, 423).

Shani elaborates the specific character of each individual perspective as “a spatio-temporally bounded meshwork of regimented mental activity with a crystallized ego-structure and a unique perspective” (Shani 2015, 426). It is precisely our egoistic preoccupation with our own feelings, interests, and desires that prevents us from recognizing our “connection to the cosmic consciousness that grounds all relative subjects and binds them together” (Shani 2015, 427). Following Freya Mathews (2011), Shani likens cosmic consciousness to an ocean and relative conscious perspectives to “vortices” surging from this ocean (Shani 2015, 414). Developing this aquatic analogy, he addresses the individuation problem as follows:

This localization process consists, then, in the intensification and ordering of experience, as well as in the concentration of focus, within limited and relatively well-defined boundaries—creating a knot, or bulge of consciousness with an appearance of self-containment, which serves to separate the system’s inner reality from the inner reality of the ocean surrounding it. While the two experiential realities remain connected deep down the connection is obscured by the crystallized ego-structure, the self-centred mental occupation of the individual “vortex.” The result is an individual self (however primitive) engulfed in its own experiences and concerns while being ignorant of the deeper layers which bind it to the ground of all things. (Shani 2015, 418)

Since each egoistic “vortex” emerges from the ocean of cosmic consciousness, the individual vortex inherits the generic features of sentience and perspectivality from cosmic consciousness. At the same time, each egoistic vortex also has a *specific* character that is unique to that vortex alone—one that differentiates it not only from other egoistic vortices but also from cosmic consciousness, which is obviously not confined within egoic boundaries of any sort. Shani thinks that the dreaded individuation problem is thereby averted, since “no perspective is literally a part of any other perspective” (2015, 423). He also suggestively adds that it may be possible for certain individuals to break through the “epistemic barrier” separating them from cosmic consciousness through meditative practice (Shani 2015, 427 n. 40).

In a more recent article, Shani and Keppler (2018) have tried to clarify the process of cosmic individuation by appealing to a conceptual framework based on stochastic electrodynamics. They also rightly note that “much depends on how we choose to characterize the cosmic consciousness” (Shani and Keppler 2018, 395). However, with respect to the nature of cosmic consciousness, Shani and Keppler (2018) actually make a notable departure from Shani’s 2015 position. Essential to Shani’s 2015 position was a commitment to “the subjective, perspectival nature of the absolute” (Shani 2015, 423), since it was precisely on this basis that he claimed

that relative perspectives inherited their generic character—their sentience and first-person perspectivity—from cosmic consciousness. By contrast, Shani and Keppler (2018, 403) conceive cosmic consciousness as an “aperspectival” Pure Consciousness. Hence, they face the new challenge of explaining how perspectival subjects emerge from an *aperspectival* cosmic consciousness.

Bringing Shani into cross-cultural dialogue with Aurobindo, I will make the case that Shani was too quick to abandon his promising 2015 position. It is important to note, first, the striking similarities between the cosmopsychist theories of Shani (2015) and Aurobindo. Just as Shani (2015) conceives cosmic consciousness as fundamentally perspectival, Aurobindo conceives “Consciousness-Force” or *Cit-Śakti* as the personal, dynamic aspect of the Divine *Saccidānanda*, which manifests as various conscious creatures. Moreover, with the help of Shani, we can see Aurobindo’s account of divine individuation through self-limitation and exclusive concentration as a specific form of partial grounding. For Aurobindo, while our sentience and “I”-ness derive from the sentience and “I”-ness of Consciousness-Force itself, each individual conscious perspective also has what Shani calls a “specific character,” a “unique outlook” on the world stemming from the particular way that Divine Consciousness limits itself. As Aurobindo puts it, “Each being in a world will see the same world, but see it from its own self-being according to its own way of self-nature” (CWSA 21–22, 357). Also like Shani, Aurobindo likens Divine Consciousness to a “sea” and each relative egoistic perspective to a “wave” or “stream” that is so preoccupied with itself that it forgets its source in the sea. According to Aurobindo, “the nature of the ego is a self-limitation of consciousness by a willed ignorance of the rest of its play and its exclusive absorption in one form, one combination of tendencies, one field of the movement of energies” (CWSA 21–22, 63). Like Aurobindo, Shani explains the specific character of individual perspectives in terms of a “concentration of focus” and a “crystallized ego-structure” (Shani 2015, 418). Hence, both Shani and Aurobindo respond to the individuation problem by appealing to a partial grounding model.

A number of philosophers have complained that Shani (2015) does not provide a sufficiently clear and precise account of *how* cosmic consciousness partially grounds individual conscious perspectives. David Chalmers, for instance, finds “obscure” Shani’s explanation of how “macrosubjects are ‘vortices’ in the consciousness of a cosmic subject” (Chalmers 2020, 367). Bernardo Kastrup complains that Shani addresses “only in a vague, tangential manner” how “private fields form within the ocean of cosmic consciousness” (2018, 138). Likewise, Joanna Leidenhag claims that the cosmopsychist theories of Shani and Freya Mathews are “highly speculative and often phrased metaphorically” (2020, 76).

This charge of vagueness may not be entirely fair to Shani (2015), since he does take pains to explain the formation of a “crystallized ego-structure” in nonmetaphorical terms. Nonetheless, I do agree with Shani’s critics that his account of partial grounding remains too vague at certain points to constitute a fully adequate response to the individuation problem. And I think it is precisely here that Aurobindo can lend Shani a helping hand, since Aurobindo not only specifies the precise nature of cosmic consciousness as Divine *Saccidānanda* but also clarifies how Divine Consciousness partially grounds various relative perspectives through the dual processes of self-

limitation and exclusive concentration. Since relative perspectives are nothing but self-limited manifestations of Divine Consciousness, the omniscient and perfect perspective of Divine Consciousness never coexists with relative perspectives. Hence, the individuation problem is averted.

Moreover, while [Shani \(2015, 427\)](#) fleetingly acknowledges the possibility of breaking through the “epistemic barriers” that make us think that we are “self-contained egos,” Aurobindo goes much further than Shani in claiming that his evolutionary cosmopsychism is no intellectual hypothesis but a vision of the world grounded in his own spiritual experience. As Stephen Phillips has shown, Aurobindo defends the evidential value of mystical experience on the basis of a “parallelism thesis”—the thesis that sense-perceptual testimony and mystical testimony are parallel ([Phillips 1986, 5–53](#)). According to Aurobindo, just as the “world of Matter is affirmed by the experience of the physical senses,” the existence of *supraphysical* realities is affirmed by the experience of “senses which are supraphysical” (CWSA 21–22, 21). Hence, he argues that “the truth of great ranges of experience whose objects exist in a more subtle substance and are perceived by more subtle instruments than those of gross physical Matter, claims in the end the same validity as the truth of the material universe” (CWSA 21–22, 22). For Aurobindo, then, just as ordinary people are typically justified in taking their perception of a putative sense-object—say, a piece of paper—as evidence for believing that the sense-object exists, credible mystics are equally justified in taking their perception of supersensory objects—such as God or the Self—as evidence for believing that supersensory objects exist.

Contemporary philosophers of mind have only very recently begun to catch up with Aurobindo in exploring the possibility that mystical experience provides substantial evidential support for theories of consciousness.¹² In fact, I myself have defended the evidential value of mystical experience elsewhere¹³ by engaging the extensive literature on this issue in recent analytic philosophy of religion. Numerous philosophers of religion have followed Aurobindo in attempting to justify the epistemic value of mystical experience on the basis of a parallelism between mystical experience and sensory experience.¹⁴ Central to their arguments is some form of what Richard Swinburne has called the “principle of credulity.” Swinburne formulates this principle as follows: “(in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present (and has some characteristic), then probably x is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so” ([Swinburne 2004, 303](#)).¹⁵ Swinburne argues that it is a mark of rational behavior to accept the principle of credulity in our day-to-day life; otherwise, we would land in a “skeptical bog,” since we would have no basis for accepting our sensory experiences as veridical ([Swinburne 2004, 304 n. 10](#)). And if we *do* accept the principle of credulity, then credible mystics are also justified in accepting their mystical experiences as veridical, since the principle of credulity applies to mystical perceptions as much as it does to sensory perceptions.

Aurobindo, then, is our philosophical contemporary in a number of respects. His reflections on the “insoluble miracle” of consciousness, his critique of materialist theories of consciousness, and his arguments in favor of panpsychism anticipated the arguments of philosophers like Chalmers, Levine, and Strawson. Aurobindo’s

Vedāntic doctrine of evolutionary cosmopsychism—in light of its distinctiveness and its philosophical sophistication—also deserves a prominent place in current debates about cosmopsychism. By bringing Aurobindo into dialogue with Shani, I have begun to make the case that Aurobindo’s account of divine self-limitation provides a new way of tackling the notorious individuation problem in contemporary philosophy of mind. Finally, Aurobindo’s mystical justification of his evolutionary cosmopsychism—grounded in a parallelism between mystical experience and sensory experience—should encourage philosophers of consciousness to take seriously kindred arguments in contemporary philosophy of religion and epistemology.

ABBREVIATIONS

CWSA 8: Aurobindo, Sri 1997. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 8: *Karmayogin: Political Writings and Speeches 1909–1910*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

CWSA 12: Aurobindo, Sri 1997. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 12: *Essays Divine and Human: Writings from Manuscripts 1910–1950*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

CWSA 13: Aurobindo, Sri 1998. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 13: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga: Shorter Works 1910–1950*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

CWSA 21–22: Aurobindo, Sri 2005. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vols. 21–22: *The Life Divine*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

CWSA 28: Aurobindo, Sri 2012. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 28: *Letters on Yoga I: Foundations of the Integral Yoga*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

CWSA 29: Aurobindo, Sri 2013. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 29: *Letters on Yoga II*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

CWSA 35: Aurobindo, Sri 2011. *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 35: *Letters on Himself and the Ashram*. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Mathews (2011), Shani (2015, 2018), Nagasawa and Wager (2017), Goff (2017), and Medhananda (forthcoming-a, chs. 9–10).
2. Albahari (2020, 121) calls it the “decombination problem,” but I agree with Chalmers (2020, 365) that her term is “misleading in suggesting that the universal mind must be a combination of the macro minds.” The term I prefer—“individuation”—does not have the misleadingly mereological connotations of “decombination.”
3. See, for instance, Goff (2017, 220–54), Shani (2015, 2018), Mathews (2011), Nagasawa and Wager (2017), Vaidya (2020), Medhananda (forthcoming-a, chs. 9–10).
4. In chapters 9 and 10 of Medhananda (forthcoming-a), I have discussed in detail the panentheistic cosmopsychism of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda. Since both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda strongly influenced the thought of Sri Aurobindo (Maharaj 2018, 119–24), it is likely that Aurobindo’s panentheistic cosmopsychism was shaped in part by their views.
5. Aurobindo provides a similar but more detailed conceivability argument against materialism in CWSA (12, 272–73).
6. On the distinction between panpsychism and panprotopsyism, see, for instance, Chalmers (2016).
7. I discuss Aurobindo’s original interpretation of the *Isā Upaniṣad* in Maharaj (2020) and Medhananda (2021) and his interpretation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* in Maharaj (2015).

8. Recently, Miri Albahari (2019-a, 2020) has argued against cosmopsychism in favor of a “Perennial Idealist” theory of consciousness grounded in a Śāṅkaran metaphysics of Advaita. Anand Vaidya (2020), in turn, has convincingly shown that traditional Advaitic approaches to consciousness such as Albahari’s entail an undesirable eliminativism about human-level consciousness. I also critically engage Albahari’s Perennial Idealism in chapter 10 of my new book (Medhananda forthcoming-a).
9. While followers of Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta tend to conceive *māyā* as a principle of illusion, Aurobindo understands *māyā* as a principle of divine manifestation.
10. On the related issue of Aurobindo’s theodicy, see Medhananda (forthcoming-b).
11. Betty (1976) discusses this aspect of Aurobindo’s theodicy well.
12. See, for instance, Shear (1997, 372–73), Albahari (2019-b), and Vaidya (2020).
13. See Maharaj (2018, ch. 6) and Medhananda (forthcoming-a, chs. 5–6).
14. See, for instance, Swinburne (2004, 293–327), Davis (1989), Gellman (1997), Wainwright (1981), Yandell (1993), Alston (1991), and Kwan (2009).
15. Other philosophers who have defended similar epistemic principles include Gellman (1997, 46–50), Kwan (2009), and Pryor (2000).

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