

HUMANITY'S SPIRITUAL FUTURE: THE EVOLUTIONARY IDEALS OF

AUROBINDO GHOSE *By Eric R. Dorman*

Abstract. The superhuman concept within the integral thought of Aurobindo Ghose offers an evolutionary model for a possible synthesis of humanity's desire for importance and our scientific realization that we are merely a part of a vast universe. Allowing significance for both the material and the spiritual elements of reality, Aurobindo sets forth a worldview wherein humanity takes the reins of its own evolution and guides it toward a monistic ideal. This essay introduces the philosophy of Aurobindo, analyzes his superhuman concept within the context of biological evolutionary theory, and suggests two contemporary uses for Aurobindo's superhuman concept. First, it allows for a healthy anthropocentrism wherein humanity maintains its unique importance while progressing collectively toward both material and spiritual improvement. And second, it jars humanity into a sincere reappraisal of our foundational assumptions of reality, i.e. in contrast to matter as the base of reality, it makes a strong case for a non-material foundation while preserving a this-worldly worldview.

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As humanity looks forward it faces a conflict between a desired sense of human uniqueness and the scientific realization that humans are merely just another organism subject to the evolutionary forces of nature. One possible resolution to this conflict is embodied within the thought of Aurobindo Ghose. This twentieth century thinker's integral philosophy proposes a future wherein a population of superhumans evolves from current humanity and ushers in a spiritual age that reunites humanity, along with all elements of the universe, with a monistic Absolute.

Aurobindo offers an alternative view of evolution in which not only do humans exhibit existential import, but do so in a manner that fully integrates the material *and* spiritual components of reality. Though Aurobindo's metaphysical context may be a bridge too far for many operating under a Western worldview, the superhuman concept envisioned by Aurobindo is a valuable ideological and philosophical tool for contemporary discussions of spirituality and its place within evolutionary progress. The superhuman concept allows for a healthy kind of anthropocentrism and offers a robust reevaluation of the foundation of reality.

Aurobindo Ghose defies simple categorization. Born in 1872, he was a Cambridge educated scholar of classics, a poet, a political activist, a playwright, an editorialist, a yogin, a professor, and a nationalistic provocateur all by the age of thirty-six, at which point he was arrested in connection with a bombing aimed at a British official (Heehs 2008, 159ff). Though Aurobindo was eventually acquitted, spiritual experiences in jail led him to fully shift his life toward that of a mystic philosopher and yogi, for which he is most well-known today. Aurobindo held a unique perspective on the world; having spent

the majority of his youth in England and only in his twenties returning to India to teach, he was constantly aware of the ideological tension between East and West and continually sought for a synthesis. Over the course of his life, he framed this synthesis in terms of an integration between the material success of the West and the spiritual success of the East. Only through such an integral process could the global community progress.

Aurobindo's philosophy derives directly from the Vedanta school. Like the Advaita (non-dual) Vedantins before him, he conceived of a monistic reality wherein all apparent differentiation is due to some level of ignorance. He referred to his own system as “realistic Advaita”, affirming the reality of the world and its use in the grand scheme of the universe. Having both a real differentiated world and a monistic Absolute – not necessarily a paradox in Indian thought – Aurobindo sought to equally dismiss renunciation of the world and embrace the larger evolutionary goals of humanity (Gier 2000, 140).

These goals are of the utmost importance. Because reality is monistic, humanity must somehow overcome the apparent differentiation and return to its unity, defined as *sat-cit-ananda* (Being, Consciousness, and Bliss). We must evolve ourselves toward reunion with the Absolute, but we must recognize that the only reason humans can evolve is because we have been involved from the Absolute. In terms of a monistic metaphysics, everything is a manifestation of the Absolute; the Divine is already within everything. The goal is to realize it.

In Aurobindo's terminology, the Spirit in which everything exists is referred to as the Supermind. The word *mind* makes this term troublesome for scholars steeped in

Western thought, where *mind* connotes an intentional and sentient consciousness. In Indian thought this need not be the case. Playing off the Vedantic notion of a universal spirit, or universal consciousness in particular, the concept of Supermind does not imply a personal, intentional mind at work, but instead an ultimate dynamism wherein literally everything resides. This understanding of consciousness pervades Indian thought in general and that of Aurobindo in particular; thus he comments that consciousness as such “could not be limited by the ordinary physical human-animal consciousness, it must have other ranges” (Quoted in Heehs 2008, 85).

The majority of Aurobindo's writings relate on some level to a practice of Integral Yoga, a system wherein one realizes the divinity of one's own life and one's surroundings. Though Aurobindo devotes entire volumes to the practice, the steps can be summarized as 1) increasing control of one's own nature, 2) conscious obedience and surrender to the forces of truth, i.e. recognition of the true nature of reality, and 3) unification of one's whole being and an opening of oneself to the cosmic consciousness (Saint-Hilaire [1963] 1990, 79-84). He spoke of stages of development and as his description ascends to the higher levels he comes eventually to a new race of gnostic beings who have attained spiritual enlightenment to such an extent that they are omnipotent, omniscient, and have direct influence on the evolution of the physical world (Gier 2000, 150; Ghose [1914-1920] 1990, 1017). This race of superhumans forms the link between material Nature and the Supermind and it is only because the Supermind has involved in Nature that matter can manifest the Divine through evolution (Ghose [1914-1920] 1990, 6).

Aurobindo's evolutionary plan allows for fluidity from humanity to a race of

superhumans. Since the Divine is already inherent within us, the transformation is not necessarily toward a new species but instead is a honing of the spiritual and mental capabilities of humanity. He asserts that the transformation from human to superhuman “will act not by the discovery of the unknown, but by the bringing out of the known; all will be the finding 'of the self by the self in the self’” (Ibid., 1020). Superhumanhood is already present within humanity, just as humanity was present within animals, just as animals were present within plants, etc. Aurobindo refers to a living being as a “living laboratory” in which Nature manifests itself upwards (Ibid., 8).

Aurobindo's superhuman would experience the dynamism of *sat-cit-ananda* with every thought or action and “would feel the presence of the Divine in every centre of his consciousness, in every vibration of his life-force, in every cell of his body” (Ibid., 1009). However, Aurobindo cautions against conflating the highest form of spirituality with a lesser notion of a materially powerful individual. He warns, “[t]he gospel of true supermanhood gives us a generous ideal for the progressive human race and should not be turned into an arrogant claim for a class or individuals” (Ghose [1920] 1960, 1). To complete the evolution to superhumanhood, one must “take all that is essential in the human being and uplift it to its most absolute term so that it may become an element of light, joy, power for oneself *and others...*” (Ibid., 6, emphasis added). Aurobindo's system does not call on the individual to aspire to superhumanhood for the individual's sake, but for the sake of all manifestations of the Divine. He writes, “[t]his teleology does not bring in any factor which does not belong to the totality; it proposes only the realization of the totality in the part” (Quoted in Gier 2000, 155). Nicholas Gier

accentuates this element of Aurobindo's thought, correctly pointing out that the self for Aurobindo is social and relational, and that any sort of individualistic or autonomous action is by its nature divisive and therefore counterproductive to the unifying goal of evolution (Ibid., 153). Individuals attaining divine status means very little if the rest of Nature remains in ignorance. Aurobindo writes, “the liberated soul extends its perception of unity horizontally as well as vertically. Its unity with the transcendent One is incomplete without its unity with the cosmic Many” (Ghose [1914-1920] 1990, 47).

If Nietzsche embraced Will to Power, it can be said that Aurobindo taught Will to Spirit. Aurobindo's entire system of thought centers on the involution and evolution of Spirit, and thus the goals he sets forth in humanity's evolution toward superhumans are of a spiritual nature. He writes that humanity's “urge towards spirituality is the inner driving of the spirit within him towards emergence...” (Ibid., 881). Finally, spiritual evolution is inevitable. Reunion with *sat-cit-ananda* will happen eventually because by its nature the Spirit cannot work any other way (Ghose [1953] 1971, 81). The pull between Spirit and Nature, themselves ontologically a unity, is too strong to overcome. Thus Aurobindo's goal is to speed along the spiritual ascent of humanity, to catalyze reunion by means of an enlightened race of superhumans.

Stepping outside the speculative realm and into a scientific point of view, theories of superhumans may sound a little odd. But in general terms Aurobindo's concept is not entirely out of bounds. Though he greatly respected Western science and found its accumulation of knowledge of the material world to be invaluable to human progress, he criticized it for leading to a static and non-holistic view of reality (Raju 2008, 99). In

particular he lamented the dismissal of both free will and an active dimension of the soul implied within an overly mechanical conception of nature. He viewed contemporary theories on heredity as reductionist, causing humanity to focus on only rigid genetics and not on the overall process involved in Nature's action toward the Divine (Ghose [1920] 1960, 16). Yet, he was fully aware of some sort of evolutionary process, noting progress from plant to animal to human and eventually to superhuman, though in his terms these are the progressively complex manifestations of Spirit in Nature (McDermott 2001, 67).

However, a problem emerges in light of modern evolutionary theory. The “modern synthesis” of evolutionary biology describes with robust experimental and observational evidence what occurs in biological evolution – Darwin's natural selection – and how it occurs – Mendel's genetics. The key element from this synthesis is that genotypes – certain gene sequencing – are passed down through strict rules to the next generation, which may or may not express a given genotype into a particular phenotype – observable characteristic in an organism. Genotypes within a particular organism are set from conception and cannot be altered during the lifetime of the organism. This seems to cause problems for Aurobindo's superhuman concept. Aurobindo speaks of human beings bettering themselves during their lifetimes with the aspiration of moving themselves and future generations toward superhumanhood. Within the restrictions of genetics, though, an individual's acquired attributes would not be transferred to their offspring. Thus Aurobindo's vision appears more closely aligned with the evolutionary theory of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, who argued that efforts made during one's lifetime would result in a similar trait in their offspring. However, Lamarck's theory of evolution has been

thoroughly disproved. Yet we cannot attribute an apparent allegiance to a Lamarckian system to ignorance of Darwin. Aurobindo was aware of Darwin's theory and had his reasons to reject it at least in part.

For Aurobindo, Darwin's theory was not necessarily incorrect, but incomplete. He writes, "[t]he struggle for life is not only a struggle to survive, it is also a struggle for...perfection" (Ghose [1914-1920] 1990, 213). The modern synthesis of biological evolution answered the *what* and *how* of evolution, but failed to address the *why*, specifically why evolution takes place in this particular trajectory (Ghose 1972, 232). In Aurobindo's terms, Darwin's theory is valid, but it only operates inside the material world and therefore only seems to be random, haphazard, and unconscious. In reality, though, that evolution is merely a shadow of the real evolutionary forces at play.

As Aurobindo's evolutionary thought is centered on the human being, there is an inherent notion of human uniqueness among other beings. While the ultimate goal of the superhuman will far surpass our current capabilities, there is something special about humanity that adds a slight caveat to the modern synthesis of biological evolution. Human beings are the only known species capable of abstract consciousness, which Aurobindo viewed as a catalytic feature that allowed humanity to directly influence evolution. He writes, "[f]or man is Nature's great term of transition in which she grows conscious of her aim; in him she looks up from the animal with open eyes towards her divine ideal" (Ghose [1920] 1960, 9). He adds that the human "is a spiritual and a thinking being who is set here to shape and use the animal mould for higher purposes, by higher motives, with a more divine instrumentation" (Ghose 1972, 308). Aurobindo felt

that the idea of evolution itself must evolve upon the emergence of fully conscious human beings (Ghose [1953] 1971, 93). Unlike Lamarck, Aurobindo is not arguing for some sort of physically manipulated trait that will then pass on to later generations; he is suggesting that humans have a unique place in the universe and a unique ability to manipulate ideas, concepts and other non-material, yet this-worldly elements of reality toward something greater than our current selves by means of gleaning that which is already within us via the involution of Spirit, ultimate consciousness (Raju 2008, 100f). Thus Aurobindo's concept of evolution is a self-organizing system, independent of any perceived transcendental power (Mikes 2008, 130f). He writes, “[t]here can be...an evolution in the light and no longer in the darkness, in which the evolving being is a conscious participant and cooperator”(Ghose [1953] 1971, 82). Humans are unparalleled as far as we know when it comes to exhibiting control of not only our environment, but of ourselves, our fellow humans, and our ideas. Clearly this is an unsettling claim and one that has been misused by obvious examples in our history, yet those unfortunate misuses do not hide the possibility that we could, and maybe already have altered the evolutionary course of humanity toward a desired spiritual ideal.

What use does the notion of a superhuman have for contemporary humanity? Is it still a valid thought experiment or has the time for such speculation passed with the settling of borders and the global ostracizing of anything resembling intentional social engineering? I argue that it is still valid for two reasons: it offers a healthy kind of anthropocentrism that promotes progress and implies higher importance for ideas over matter.

Aurobindo's aspiration toward a superhuman implies a heavily anthropocentric worldview. Anthropocentrism tends to carry a negative connotation, one weighted with baggage of a laissez-faire approach to the environment and a limited conception of the vastness of the universe. However, anthropocentrism need not be looked upon as selfish or narrow; to completely abandon the self-praise of humanity is insincere to our unique reality and detrimental to the positive effects of self-improvement and world-improvement. There can be a healthy anthropocentrism.

Humans are unique and special on earth, a fact that can hardly be doubted given the sheer amount of physical and ideological impact. Humans are not just another animal. We have developed a level of consciousness that for the first time in the known history of life is capable of controlling its own evolutionary trajectory. We created our own truths within the larger picture of the universe and developing those truths does nothing to diminish the importance of everything non-human. Our unique reality is a reality of names and ideas, of concepts unavailable to any other form of known life. Of course the sun, for example, would still exist were humans nowhere to be found, but it would not be *the sun*, it would not be the *great star* that illumines our everyday life. Concepts, ideas, and relationships are abstracted by humanity for humanity.

Humans should celebrate the fact that they are even capable of a superhuman concept, a prospective view of reality. Aurobindo's superhuman is a call to become more self-aware for the purpose of self-improvement and ultimately world-improvement. Nothing about this call is selfish or detrimental to other humans or other living beings in itself; it is life-affirming, yea-saying to human life and human potential. It is an aspiration

for the furthering of uniquely human abilities. Thus the value of the superhuman concept is for an enhanced focus on the human being as such with aspirations for improvement within the bounds of this-worldly abilities. To focus elsewhere, on some transcendent being or strictly on non-human material entities, creates a stagnation for humanity. To live non-anthropocentrically within this worldview suggests human infallibility, human completion, and the lack of any need for development.

Finally, Aurobindo's superhuman concept promotes a worldview wherein the importance of ideas and qualities outweighs that of matter and quantitative information. I echo the words of Aurobindo when I express my own view that the ideals of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment caused significant collateral damage on their path to technological advancement. I am by no means suggesting that humanity go back to a time before modern medicine and the computer processor; scientific advances have made unquestionable improvements to human life. However, I am calling for an affirmation of the value and foundational character of ideas, mind, and consciousness.

According to Aurobindo, humanity, particularly in the West, is mired in ignorance believing that the foundation of all reality is matter when in fact it is Spirit, that cosmic consciousness from which everything emerges. Spirit is within matter, having manifested during involution and concretizing over time. In his words, “[i]f it be true that Spirit is involved in Matter and apparent Nature is secret God, then the manifestation of the divine in himself and the realisation of God within and without are the highest and most legitimate aim possible to man upon earth” (Ghose [1914-1920] 1990, 8). Thus instead of the superhuman replacing God, as in Nietzsche's ideal of the *Übermensch*, Aurobindo's

superhuman is the Divine as conscious of itself, bringing about a reunion with itself. He writes, “[t]o fulfil [sic] God in life is man's manhood....a divine existence is his objective” (Ibid., 43).

Aurobindo's superhuman concept relies on a certain recognition of a spiritual dimension of reality that tended to dim next to the shining light of modern science. Spirit, the dynamic force underlying Aurobindo's universe, was obscured behind the materiality of modern science and his call for Integral Yoga was in direct reaction to a perceived loss of wholeness. The material is certainly a part of Aurobindo's worldview; it is that through which manifested nature must act. But it is not the foundation of reality; it is only a partial picture. The superhuman realizes the holistic picture, and thus maintaining this aspirational concept promotes a deeper recognition and appreciation of the non-material realm of this world and its integral relation to material reality.

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