

Introducing the 8th Issue

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The date of release of our 8th issue — the 6th of May 2009 — marks the 100th Anniversary of Sri Aurobindo's release from Alipore Central Jail, where he spent a full year as an under-trial prisoner while the British Government tried to implicate him (unsuccessfully) in various revolutionary activities.

On Friday, May 1, 1908, Sri Aurobindo received a telegram informing him of a bomb outrage in which two European ladies had been killed. At that time he had no idea that he was the main target of suspicion. "I did not know," he later wrote, "that that day would mean the end of a chapter of my life, and that there stretched before me a year's imprisonment during which period all my human relations would cease, that for a whole year I would have to live, beyond the pale of society, like an animal in a cage. And when I would re-enter the world of activity it would not be the old familiar Aurobindo Ghose. Rather it would be a new being, a new character, intellect, life, mind, embarking upon a new course of action that would come out of the ashram at Alipore." The series of articles in which Sri Aurobindo described his life in prison and the courtroom, is reproduced at the end of this issue.

At the beginning of this issue there are four short pieces each containing a question and an answer in its title. In the first, **Simon Conway Morris** asks: Does evolution explain human nature? Since by "evolution" he means the by now dated "new" synthesis, according to which evolution is the result of random mutations and natural selection, his answer is an unsurprising "except where it matters." In the two pieces that follow, **Paul Davies** and **John Haught** pose the question: Does the Universe have a purpose? Their respective answers are "perhaps" and "yes." The title of the fourth piece, by **Carolyn Baker**, is "Economic recovery? No thank you."

Marcel Kvassay is next, with a topical piece presenting research by Peter Heehs on Sri Aurobindo's relation to communalism (politicized religious conflict). India's current national elections, whose last round of voting will take place on May 13th, have again demonstrated the Hindu nationalists' penchant for quoting Sri Aurobindo out of context and without regard to his actual views. As Heehs wrote in *Nationalism, Terrorism, Communalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), the similarities between the freedom-movement-era religious nationalism and contemporary Hindu right wing nationalism "are superficial while the points of difference are deep." According to Heehs,

Aurobindo favored an eclectic, basically Vedantic Hinduism, which he believed to be universal and "the basis of the future world-religion." But this "wider Hinduism" was something that embraced "Science and faith, Theism, Christianity, Mahomedanism and Buddhism and yet is none of these."

“The Hindu nation-builder,” Bipinchandra Pal wrote, “shall not seek to superimpose his own ideals and methods on his Mohamedan brother, nor shall the Mohamedan, the Buddhist, or the Christian, seek to obliterate the essential characteristics of the Hindu culture and Hindu race.” Like Pal, who had been the first politician to propose complete political autonomy as the goal of the national movement, Sri Aurobindo saw the interaction of Hindu and Muslim culture in India as an opportunity for the development of “a greater spiritual principle and formation which could reconcile the two or a political patriotism surmounting the religious struggle and uniting the two communities.” The following letter, written in 1932 and quoted by Heehs in *Nationalism, Religion, and Beyond* (pp. 354-5), should dispel all remaining doubts concerning Sri Aurobindo’s attitude towards Hinduism:

It is news to me that I have excluded Mahomedans from the Yoga. I have not done it any more than I have excluded Europeans or Christians. As for giving up one’s past, if that means giving up the outer forms of the old religions, it is done as much by the Hindus here [in his Ashram in Pondicherry] as by the Mahomedans. . . . What is kept of Hinduism is Vedanta and Yoga in which Hinduism is one with Sufism of Islam and with the Christian mystics. But even here it is not Vedanta and Yoga in their traditional limits (their past), but widened and rid of many ideas that are peculiar to the Hindus. If I have used Sanskrit terms and figures, it is because I know them and do not know Persian and Arabic. I have not the slightest objection to anyone here drawing inspiration from Islamic sources if they agree with the Truth as Sufism agrees with it. On the other hand I have not the slightest objection to Hinduism being broken to pieces and disappearing from the face of the earth, if that is the Divine Will. I have no attachment to past forms; what is Truth will always remain; the Truth alone matters.

In “Deconstruction and Consciousness,” **William S. Haney II** makes the following point: since pure consciousness — the “I” of awareness (Deikman ♠) — accompanies every deconstruction, it is itself immune to it. While Derrida claims that “there is nothing outside of the text,” Haney’s conclusion that “nothing is outside of consciousness” appears to be closer to the truth. Mysticism and deconstruction point in opposite directions. As Forman observed, “the key process in mysticism is not like the horse of language pulling the cart of experience, but more like *unhitching* the experience-cart from the language horse.”

In “Cybernetics is an Antihumanism,” **Jean-Pierre Dupuy** asks: Was cybernetics the height of metaphysical humanism, as Heidegger maintained, or was it the height of its deconstruction, as certain of Heidegger’s followers believe? He holds that it was both things at once, and that this is what made it not only the root of cognitive science, which finds itself faced with the same paradox as cybernetics, but also a turning point in the history of human conceptions of humanity. The paradox is that we now have two minds: the one that carries out its mechanization, and the one that gets mechanized.

In mechanizing the mind, in treating it as an artifact, the mind presumes to exercise power over this artifact to a degree that no psychology claiming to be scientific has ever dreamed of attaining. The mind can now hope not only to manipulate this mechanized version of itself at will, but even to reproduce and manufacture it in accordance with its own wishes and intentions. Accordingly, the technologies of the mind, present and future, open up a vast continent upon which man now has to impose norms if he wishes to

give them meaning and purpose. The human subject will therefore need to have recourse to a supplementary endowment of will and conscience in order to determine, not what he can do, but what he ought to do — or, rather, what he ought not to do. These new technologies will require a whole ethics to be elaborated, an ethics not less demanding than the one that is slowly being devised today in order to control the rapid development and unforeseen consequences of new biotechnologies. But to speak of ethics, conscience, the will — is this not to speak of the triumph of the subject? ...

The paradox of the naturalization of the mind attempted by cybernetics, and today by cognitive science, then, is that the mind has been raised up as a demigod in relation to itself. Many of the criticisms brought against the materialism of cognitive science from the point of view either of a philosophy of consciousness or a defense of humanism miss this paradox. Concentrating their (often justified) attacks on the weaknesses and naiveté of such a mechanist materialism, they fail to see that it invalidates itself by placing the human subject outside of the very world to which he is said to belong. The recent interest shown by cognitive science in what it regards as the “mystery” of consciousness seems bound to accentuate this blindness.

The potential consequences may be dire but the message, just like Haney’s, is liberating. Deconstruct to your heart’s content — there will always be the self of pure consciousness capable of picking up the pieces to rebuild existence at a higher level. The difference is that while the damage done by deconstruction appears to be harmlessly theoretical, the damage that can be done by cybernetics’ new avatar — nanobiotechnology — seems frighteningly practical. Moreover, the potential loss seems to far outweigh the potential gain. Who will in this case pick up the pieces?

But in the name of what, or of whom, will man, thus artificialized, exercise his increased power over himself? In the name of this very blind mechanism with which he is identified? In the name of a meaning that he claims is mere appearance or phenomenon? ...

[O]nly things are what they are; only things coincide with themselves. Freedom, on the other hand, is a mode of being that never coincides with itself since it ceaselessly projects itself into the future, desiring to be what it is not. Self-coincidence is what freedom aspires to and cannot attain, just as a moth is irresistibly attracted to the flame that will consume it. A *metaphysical self-made man*, were such a being possible, would paradoxically have lost his freedom, and indeed would no longer be a man at all, since freedom necessarily entails the impossibility of transforming itself into a thing.

As things, we *could* be immortal. But are we ready to pay the price for this kind of immortality? If one day we succeed in making men immortal, Hannah Arendt noted half a century ago, everything we had ever thought concerning death and its profundity would become simply laughable. “Some may think,” she concluded, “that this is too high a price to pay for the suppression of death.”

But what makes it all the more intractable is that, whereas our capacity to act into the world is increasing without limit, with the consequence that we now find ourselves faced with new and unprecedented responsibilities, the ethical resources at our disposal are diminishing at the same pace. Why should this be? Because the same technological ambition that gives mankind such power to act upon the world also reduces mankind to the status of an object that can be fashioned and shaped at will; the conception of the mind as a machine — the very conception that allows us to imagine the possibility of

(re)fabricating ourselves — prevents us from fulfilling these new responsibilities. Hence my profound pessimism.

Is Dupuy's pessimism truly warranted?

In his final section he recounts a story concerning the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, the author of the celebrated book *Man's Search for Meaning* ♣. Frankl had just returned to Vienna, having miraculously survived the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp; in the meantime he had learned that his wife, his parents, his brother, and other members of his family had all been exterminated. He nevertheless decided to resume his practice. One of his patients was a man who like him had returned from a concentration camp, and who had rather miraculously been reunited with his wife, who had returned from a different camp. They were together for about six months, and then the wife died of an illness she had contracted in the camp. At this her husband lost heart completely, and fell into the deepest despair. Eventually he sought the help of Viktor Frankl.

They met several times, conversed for many hours, and eventually one day Frankl said: "Let us assume God granted me the power to create a woman just like your wife: she would remember all your conversations, she would remember the jokes, she would remember every detail: you could not distinguish this woman from the wife you lost. Would you like me to do it?" The man kept silent for a while, then stood up and said, "No thank you, doctor!" They shook hands; the man left and started a new life.

The thought experiment that Frankl invited his patient to perform echoes one of the most famous Greek myths, that of Amphitryon. In order to seduce Amphitryon's wife, Alcmena, and to pass a night of love with her, Zeus assumes the form of Amphitryon. Yet although Zeus and Amphitryon can only be distinguished numerically, it is Amphitryon whom Alcmena loves and not the god who has taken on his form. What rational explanation can be given for that "something" which Amphitryon possesses, but that Zeus does not, and which explains why Alcmena loves only Amphitryon, and not Zeus?

When we love somebody, we do not love a list of characteristics, even one that is sufficiently exhaustive to distinguish the person in question from anyone else. The most perfect *simulation* still fails to capture something, and it is this something that is the essence of love — this poor word that says everything and explains nothing. I very much fear that the spontaneous ontology of those who wish to set themselves up as the makers or re-creators of the world know nothing of the beings who inhabit it, only lists of characteristics. If the nanobiotechnological dream were ever to come true, what still today we call love would become incomprehensible.

But this, precisely, is the good news. That which matters most, *is* incomprehensible, and therefore it is safe from mechanization. And it is enough that it *is*.

But many-visaged is the cosmic Soul;
A touch can alter the fixed front of Fate.
A sudden turn can come, a road appear.
A greater Mind may see a greater Truth,
Or we may find when all the rest has failed
Hid in ourselves the key of perfect change.
(Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri* ♣, p. 256)

The last article in this issue, by **Andrew Clifton**, makes a strong empirical case against materialism.

Four book reviews follow. The first is the second installment of a two-part review by Marcel Kvassay of *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* by Peter Heehs. This is followed by a review of *Extraordinary Knowing – Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind* by Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, the first part of a two-part review of *The Two Sides of Being: A Reassessment of Psycho-Physical Dualism* by Uwe Meixner, and a review of *Finding Heaven Here* by John C. Robinson.

The issue concludes with the following excerpts: Chapter 3, titled “The Melancholy Dilemma,” of *Nature and Self: Reframing the Human Predicament* by Mait Edey; “The Gospel of Heracles: A Mediterranean legend,” from *Immortal Wisdom* by Medhananda; and Sri Aurobindo’s *Tales of Prison Life*.

Enjoy!