

Sri Aurobindo's "Universal Realism" and the Doctrine of Cosmic Illusion

Marcel Kvassay

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy in its mature form first appeared in the monthly review *Arya* between 1914 and 1921. During this period, he occasionally referred to it as a "universal Realism" or a "comprehensive Adwaita." Drawing on his major philosophical work, this article contrasts his views with those of spiritual Illusionism as exemplified by Buddhism and the Mayavada of Shankara.

Sri Aurobindo's comprehensive spiritual synthesis lends itself to multiple approaches. These could be broadly classified as biographical, presented in the context of his life, and theoretical, focusing on his writings. Expanding on a review article of the first type (Kvassay, 2009), I will now delve deeper into his philosophy following the online edition of *The Life Divine (LD)*, his major philosophical work. Wherever helpful, I shall incorporate extracts from the other volumes of *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*.

The opening chapter of *The Life Divine* illustrates the drift of the exposition as well as the difficulties confronting its present-day readers:

The earliest preoccupation of man in his awakened thoughts and, as it seems, his inevitable and ultimate preoccupation,— for it survives the longest periods of scepticism and returns after every banishment,— is also the highest which his thought can envisage. It manifests itself in the divination of Godhead, the impulse towards perfection, the search after pure Truth and unmixed Bliss, the sense of a secret immortality. (*LD*, p. 3)

"These persistent ideals of the race," Sri Aurobindo admitted,

are at once the contradiction of its normal experience and the affirmation of higher and deeper experiences which are abnormal to humanity.... To the ordinary material intellect which takes its present organisation of consciousness for the limit of its possibilities, the direct contradiction of the unrealised ideals with the realised fact is a final argument against their validity. But if we take a more deliberate view of the world's workings, that direct opposition appears rather as part of Nature's profoundest method and the seal of her completest sanction. (*LD*, p. 4)

Sri Aurobindo's allusions to materialism in the opening chapters might give the impression that he was trying to convert materialists into spiritual aspirants, but his way of handling the subject disproves it. His editorials and other clues from the *Arya* (a monthly review in which *The Life Divine* first appeared) make it clear: his writings were meant for those who were already willing to consider — at least in theory — spiritual experiences as valid pointers to the orders of Reality exceeding the material formula (*Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, henceforth *EPY*, pp. 98–108).

"We have been obliged in our first year," he wrote in July 1915, "to devote the Review almost entirely to high philosophy and severe and difficult thinking." He felt in the

next year there would be less need to subject the *Arya's* readers "to the severe strain ... of such strenuous intellectual labour." The *Arya* had been conceived as a vehicle of open-ended philosophical and spiritual inquiry:

We had not in view at any time a review or magazine in the ordinary sense of the word.... Nor was it, as in some philosophical and religious magazines in India, the restatement of an existing school or position of philosophical thought.... Our idea was the thinking out of a synthetic philosophy which might be a contribution to the thought of the new age that is coming upon us.... The spiritual experience and the general truths on which such an attempt could be based, were already present to us, otherwise we should have had no right to make the endeavour at all; but the complete intellectual statement of them and their results and issues had to be found....

Our original intention was to approach the synthesis from the starting-point of the two lines of culture which divide human thought and are now meeting at its apex, the knowledge of the West and the knowledge of the East; but owing to the exigencies of the war this could not be fulfilled. The "*Arya*" except for one unfinished series has been an approach to the highest reconciling truth from the point of view of the Indian mentality and Indian spiritual experience, and Western knowledge has been viewed from that standpoint. (*EPY*, pp. 105-6)

The allusion to "the exigencies of the war" referred to the departure of Paul and Mirra Richard, Sri Aurobindo's collaborators, from India in February 1915. The Western approach to the synthesis was never completed, but it could be argued that Sri Aurobindo's major revision of *The Life Divine* in 1939-40 largely restored the balance. Among the *Arya* writings, *The Life Divine* enjoyed a privileged position:

In philosophy metaphysical truth is the nucleus of the rest, it is the statement of the last and most general truths on which all the others depend or in which they are gathered up. Therefore we gave the first place to the "Life Divine." Here we start from the Vedantic position, its ideas of the Self and mind and life, of Sachchidananda and the world, of Knowledge and Ignorance, of rebirth and the Spirit. But Vedanta is popularly supposed to be a denial of life, and this is no doubt a dominant trend it has taken. Though starting from the original truth that all is the Brahman, the Self, it has insisted in the end that the world is simply not-Brahman, not-Self; it has ended in a paradox. We have attempted on the contrary to establish from its data a comprehensive Advaita. (*EPY*, p. 107)

The first seven chapters of *The Life Divine* comprised a sort of extended introduction. Sri Aurobindo approached the basic problem of Being versus Becoming (and, consequently, of the meaning of human existence) from various perspectives and indicated how each could contribute to a synthetic solution. In later chapters he elaborated these hints more rigorously. I will therefore skip the introductory chapters and start with his overview of "the most ancient Vedanta" represented by the Upanishads:

Sad Brahman, Existence pure, indefinable, infinite, absolute, is the last concept at which Vedantic analysis arrives in its view of the universe, the fundamental Reality which Vedantic experience discovers behind all the movement and formation which constitute the apparent reality. It is obvious that when we posit this conception, we go entirely beyond what our ordinary consciousness, our normal experience contains or warrants. The senses and sense-mind know nothing whatever about any pure or absolute existence. All that our sense-experience tells us of, is form and movement. Forms exist, but with an existence that is not pure, rather always mixed, combined, aggregated, relative.

When we go within ourselves, we may get rid of precise form, but we cannot get rid of movement, of change. Motion of Matter in Space, motion of change in Time seem to be the condition of existence. We may say indeed, if we like, that this is existence and that the idea of existence in itself corresponds to no discoverable reality. (*LD, p. 73*)

It is true that when we look around “with dispassionate and curious eyes that search only for the Truth,” Sri Aurobindo conceded, “our first result is the perception of a boundless energy of infinite existence, infinite movement, infinite activity pouring itself out in limitless Space, in eternal Time”:

Those who see only this world-energy can declare indeed that there is no such thing; our idea of an eternal stability, an immutable pure existence is a fiction of our intellectual conceptions starting from a false idea of the stable: for there is nothing that is stable; all is movement and our conception of the stable is only an artifice of our mental consciousness by which we secure a standpoint for dealing practically with the movement. It is easy to show that this is true in the movement itself. There is nothing there that is stable. All that appears to be stationary is only a block of movement, a formulation of energy at work which so affects our consciousness that it seems to be still, somewhat as the earth seems to us to be still, somewhat as a train in which we are travelling seems to be still in the midst of a rushing landscape. But is it equally true that underlying this movement, supporting it, there is nothing that is moveless and immutable? Is it true that existence consists only in the action of energy? Or is it not rather that energy is an output of Existence? . . .

The very conception of movement carries with it the potentiality of repose and betrays itself as an activity of some existence; the very idea of energy in action carries with it the idea of energy abstaining from action; and an absolute energy not in action is simply and purely absolute existence. (*LD, pp. 80-2*)

“But all this,” he admitted,

is valid only so long as we accept the concepts of pure reason and remain subject to them. But the concepts of reason have no obligatory force. We must judge of existence not by what we mentally conceive, but by what we see to exist. And the purest, freest form of insight into existence as it is shows us nothing but movement. Two things alone exist, movement in Space, movement in Time, the former objective, the latter subjective. Extension is real, duration is real, Space and Time are real. Even if we can go behind extension in Space and perceive it as a psychological phenomenon, as an attempt of the mind to make existence manageable by distributing the indivisible whole in a conceptual Space, yet we cannot go behind the movement of succession and change in Time. For that is the very stuff of our consciousness. . . . Duration then, eternally successive movement and change in Time, is the sole absolute. Becoming is the only being. (*LD, pp. 83-4*)

This clash of “actual insight into being” with “the conceptual fictions of the pure Reason,” Sri Aurobindo maintained,

is fallacious. If indeed intuition in this matter were really opposed to intelligence, we could not confidently support a merely conceptual reasoning against fundamental insight. But this appeal to intuitive experience is incomplete. . . . [T]here is a supreme experience and supreme intuition by which we go back behind our surface self and find that . . . there is that in us which is not involved at all in the becoming. Not only can we have the intuition of this . . . but we can draw back into it and live in it entirely. . . . And this stability in which we can so live is precisely that which the pure Reason has already

given us, although it can be arrived at without reasoning at all, without knowing previously what it is,— it is pure existence, eternal, infinite, indefinable, not affected by the succession of Time, not involved in the extension of Space, beyond form, quantity, quality,— Self only and absolute.

The pure existent is then a fact and no mere concept; it is the fundamental reality. But, let us hasten to add, the movement, the energy, the becoming are also a fact, also a reality. The supreme intuition and its corresponding experience may correct the other, may go beyond, may suspend, but do not abolish it. We have therefore two fundamental facts of pure existence and of world existence, a fact of Being, a fact of Becoming. To deny one or the other is easy; to recognise the facts of consciousness and find out their relation is the true and fruitful wisdom. (*LD*, pp. 84-5)

The Life Divine shows Sri Aurobindo as a synthetic philosopher of spiritual experience for whom both Being and Becoming were real. This was his primary thesis; his first task, therefore, was to confront the claims of both Materialism and Illusionism:

If we assert only pure Spirit and a mechanical unintelligent substance or energy, calling one God or Soul and the other Nature, the inevitable end will be that we shall either deny God or else turn from Nature.... Purusha and Prakriti, the passively luminous Soul of the Sankhyas and their mechanically active Energy, have nothing in common, not even their opposite modes of inertia; their antinomies can only be resolved by the cessation of the inertly driven Activity into the immutable Repose.... Shankara's wordless, inactive Self and his Maya of many names and forms are equally disparate and irreconcilable entities; their rigid antagonism can terminate only by the dissolution of the multitudinous illusion into the sole Truth of an eternal Silence.

The materialist has an easier field; it is possible for him by denying Spirit to arrive at a more readily convincing simplicity of statement, a real Monism, the Monism of Matter or else of Force. But in this rigidity of statement it is impossible for him to persist permanently. He too ends by positing an unknowable as inert, as remote from the known universe as the passive Purusha or the silent Atman. It serves no purpose but to put off by a vague concession the inexorable demands of Thought or to stand as an excuse for refusing to extend the limits of inquiry. (*LD*, p. 9)

“If modern Materialism were simply an unintelligent acquiescence in the material life,” Sri Aurobindo wrote,

the advance might be indefinitely delayed. But since its very soul is the search for Knowledge, it will be unable to cry a halt; as it reaches the barriers of sense knowledge and of the reasoning from sense-knowledge, its very rush will carry it beyond....

The increasing evidences, of which only the most obvious and outward are established under the name of telepathy with its cognate phenomena, cannot long be resisted except by minds shut up in the brilliant shell of the past....

It is true that the glimpse of supraphysical realities acquired by methodical research has been imperfect and is yet ill-affirmed; for the methods used are still crude and defective. But these rediscovered subtle senses have at least been found to be true witnesses to physical facts beyond the range of the corporeal organs. There is no justification, then, for scouting them as false witnesses when they testify to supraphysical facts beyond the domain of the material organisation of consciousness. Like all evidence, like the evidence of the physical senses themselves, their testimony has to be controlled, scruti-

nised and arranged by the reason, rightly translated and rightly related, and their field, laws and processes determined. (*LD*, pp. 16–22)

The scope of this article does not allow me to go into details of Sri Aurobindo's treatment of Materialism; interested readers may find a concise overview in *Evolution* (*EPY*, pp. 169–95).

Sri Aurobindo's treatment of Vedanta was much more extensive; his goal, so to say, to "peel off" the metaphysical layer of Illusionism from the flexible Upanishadic core, then enlarge and transform it into a synthetic whole affirming both the Absolute and the Relative as real and valuable. Besides a dedicated introductory chapter (*LD*, pp. 20–28), and a number of allusions throughout *The Life Divine*, he allotted to Illusionism two full chapters (*LD*, pp. 428–98):

In India the philosophy of world-negation has been given formulations of supreme power and value by two of the greatest of her thinkers, Buddha and Shankara... [E]verywhere broods its mighty shadow, everywhere is the impress of the three great formulas, the chain of Karma, escape from the wheel of rebirth, Maya. It is necessary therefore to look afresh at ... the principal ideas which are grouped around the conception of the great cosmic Illusion, Maya, and to set against them those that are proper to our own line of thought and vision; for both proceed from the conception of the One Reality, but one line leads to a universal Illusionism, the other to a universal Realism,—an unreal or real-unreal universe reposing on a transcendent Reality or a real universe reposing on a Reality at once universal and transcendent or absolute. (*LD*, pp. 431–2)

Sri Aurobindo first examined two analogies often brought forward in support of illusionism, the analogies of dream and hallucination. "Dream is felt to be unreal," he wrote,

first, because it ceases and has no farther validity when we pass from one status of consciousness to another which is our normal status. But this is not by itself a sufficient reason: for it may well be that there are different states of consciousness each with its own realities... [T]he fact that world-existence seems unreal to us when we pass into the spiritual silence or into some Nirvana, does not of itself prove that the cosmos was all the time an illusion. The world is real to the consciousness dwelling in it, an unconditioned existence is real to the consciousness absorbed in Nirvana; that is all that is established. (*LD*, p. 436)

Another reason "for refusing credit to our sleep experience"

is that a dream is something evanescent ... without any sufficient coherence or any significance intelligible to our waking being. If our dreams wore like our waking life an aspect of coherence, each night taking up and carrying farther a past continuous and connected sleep experience as each day takes up again our waking world-experience, then dreams would assume to our mind quite another character. There is therefore no analogy between a dream and waking life; these are experiences quite different in their character, validity, order... There is no surface incoherence in life, it rather appears to our minds as a chain of firm sequences, and, if that is a mental delusion, as is sometimes alleged, if the sequence is created by our minds and does not actually exist in life, that does not remove the difference of the two states of consciousness... [T]he evanescence of a dream is radical and one dream has no connection with another; but the evanes-

cence of the waking life is of details,— there is no evidence of evanescence in the connected totality of world-experience. (*LD*, p. 437)

The dream analogy of the illusionist faltered on substantial differences between dream-experience and world-experience. But what if dreams were not so ephemeral as they seemed? Indeed, Sri Aurobindo admitted,

the new method of psycho-analysis, trying to look for the first time into our dreams with some kind of scientific understanding, has established in them a system of meanings, a key to things in us which need to be known and handled by the waking consciousness; this of itself changes the whole character and value of our dream-experience. It begins to look as if there were something real behind it and as if too that something were an element of no mean practical importance. (*LD*, p. 439)

This brought dream-experience closer to world-experience, and it could be argued that just as “our dreams are not themselves realities but only a transcript of reality, a system of symbol-images,” so “our waking experience ... is similarly not a reality but only a transcript of reality, a series ... of symbol-images.” That, however, implies a background of structured reality, with each symbol-image reflecting certain elements of that structure:

But in the theory of illusion the only reality is an indeterminable featureless pure Existence, Brahman, and there is no possibility of its being translated or mistranslated into a system of symbol-figures, for that could only be if this Existence had some determinate contents or some unmanifested truths of its being which could be transcribed.... [But] there is in it only a pure Identity, there is nothing to transcribe, nothing to symbolise, nothing to image. Therefore the dream analogy fails us altogether and is better put out of the way; it can always be used as a vivid metaphor ... but it has no value for a metaphysical inquiry. (*LD*, p. 445)

The other analogies failed for similar reasons. “There is nothing in the operations of Mind illusion that throws light upon this mystery,” Sri Aurobindo concluded. “It is, as a stupendous cosmic Illusion of this kind must be, *sui generis*, without parallel.” The problem had to be approached directly:

In the classical theory of Illusionism a sole and supreme spiritual Existence is accepted as the one Reality: it is by its essentiality the Self, yet the natural beings of which it is the Self are only temporary appearances; it is in its absoluteness the substratum of all things, but the universe erected on the substratum ... is a cosmic illusion. (*LD*, pp. 457-8)

Attempts to determine the source and the nature of this Illusion end up in paradoxes:

As only Brahman is real, only a consciousness or a power of Brahman could be a real creator and a creator of realities. But since there can be no other reality than Brahman pure and absolute, there can be no true creative power of Brahman. A Brahman-consciousness aware of real beings, forms and happenings would signify a truth of the Becoming, a spiritual and material reality of the universe, which the experience of the supreme Truth negates and nullifies and with which its sole existence is logically incompatible. Maya's creation is a presentation of beings, names, forms, happenings, things, impossible to accept as true, contradictory of the indeterminable purity of the One Existence. Maya then is not real, it is non-existent: Maya is itself an illusion, the parent of numberless illusions. (*LD*, p. 458)

Yet Maya and its products “have some kind of existence and so must in some way be real”:

The universe does not exist in a Void but stands because it is imposed on Brahman, it is based in a way on the one Reality; we ourselves in the Illusion attribute its forms, names, relations, happenings to the Brahman, become aware of all things as the Brahman, see the Reality through these unrealities. There is then a reality in Maya; it is at the same time real and unreal, existent and non-existent; or, let us say, it is neither real nor unreal: it is a paradox, a suprarational enigma. (*LD, p. 458*)

We might be tempted to conclude

that Brahman must be in some way the percipient of Maya,— for Brahman is the sole Reality, and if he is not the percipient, who then perceives the Illusion? Any other percipient is not in existence; the individual who is in us the apparent witness is himself phenomenal and unreal, a creation of Maya. But if Brahman is the percipient, how is it possible that the illusion can persist for a moment, since the true consciousness of the Percipient is consciousness of self, an awareness solely of its own pure self-existence?...

If Maya is in some way real, the conclusion imposes itself that Brahman the Reality is in that way the percipient of Maya. Maya may be his power of differentiating perception, for the power of Maya consciousness which distinguishes it from the true consciousness of sole spiritual Self is its creative perception of difference.... But since Brahman is also self-aware for ever, there must be a double status of Brahman-Consciousness, one conscious of the sole Reality, the other conscious of the unrealities to which by its creative perception of them it gives some kind of apparent existence. (*LD, p. 459*)

But this dual consciousness, even if we admit it,

cannot be explained as a dual power of Knowledge-Ignorance valid for the Supreme Existence as it is for us in the universe. For we cannot suppose that Brahman is at all subject to Maya, since that would mean a principle of Ignorance clouding the Eternal's self-awareness; it would be to impose the limitations of our own consciousness on the eternal Reality.... The dual consciousness of Brahman must be in no way an ignorance, but a self-awareness coexistent with a voluntary will to erect a universe of illusions which are held in a frontal perception aware at once of self and the illusory world, so that there is no delusion, no feeling of its reality. The delusion takes place only in the illusory world itself, and the Self or Brahman in the world either enjoys with a free participation or witnesses, itself separate and intangible, the play which lays its magical spell only upon the Nature-mind created for her action by Maya. (*LD, pp. 461-2*)

Such an admission would also “seem to signify”

that the Eternal, not content with its pure absolute existence, has the need to create, to occupy itself throughout Time with a drama of names and forms and happenings; it needs, being sole, to see itself as many, being peace and bliss and self-knowledge to observe an experience or representation of mingled knowledge and ignorance, delight and suffering, unreal existence and escape from unreal existence. For the escape is for the individual being constructed by Maya; the Eternal does not need to escape and the play continues its cycle for ever. Or if not the need, there is the will to so create, or there is the urge or the automatic action of these contraries: but, if we consider the sole eternity of pure existence attributed to the Reality, all alike, need, will, urge or automatism, are equally impossible and incomprehensible. (*LD, p. 462*)

Perhaps “we err in attributing any kind of reality” to Maya:

There is indeed a line of reasoning which gets rid of the problem by excluding it; it affirms that the question how the illusion generated, how the universe manages to be there in the pure existence of Brahman, is illegitimate: the problem does not exist, because the universe is non-existent, Maya is unreal, Brahman is the sole truth, alone and self-existent for ever. Brahman is not affected by any illusory consciousness, no universe has come into existence within its timeless reality. But this evasion of the difficulty is either a sophism which means nothing, an acrobacy of verbal logic ... refusing to see or to solve a real and baffling difficulty, or else it means too much, since in effect it gets rid of all relation of Maya to Brahman by affirming her as an independent absolute non-reality along with the universe created by her. If a real universe does not exist, a cosmic illusion exists and we are bound to inquire how it came into being or how it manages to exist, what is its relation or non-relation to the Reality, what is meant by our own existence in Maya, by our subjugation to her cycles, by our liberation from her. (*LD, p. 463*)

“There can be no solution of our existence in the universe,” Sri Aurobindo summed up, “if that existence and the universe itself have no reality — even though the reality be only partial, restricted, derivative.” He then passed on to analyse two kinds of illusionism that did not insist on the absolute unreality of the universe:

A basis can be created for a subjective illusion-consciousness which is yet part of Being, if we accept in the sense of an illusory subjective world-awareness the account of sleep and dream creation given to us in the Upanishads. For the affirmation there is that Brahman as Self is fourfold; the Self is Brahman and all that is the Brahman, but all that is is the Self seen by the Self in four states of its being. In the pure self-status neither consciousness nor unconsciousness as we conceive it can be affirmed about Brahman; it is a state of superconscience absorbed in its self-existence.... But there is also a luminous status of sleep-self, a massed consciousness which is the origin of cosmic existence; this state of deep sleep in which yet there is the presence of an omnipotent Intelligence is the seed state or causal condition from which emerges the cosmos; — this and the dream-self which is the continent of all subtle, subjective or supraphysical experience, and the self of waking which is the support of all physical experience, can be taken as the whole field of Maya. (*LD, pp. 466-7*)

In this solution, Maya could be considered real

because it is the self's experience of the Self, something of the Self enters into it, is affected by its happenings because it accepts them, believes in them, they are to it real experiences, creations out of its conscious being; but it is unreal because it is a sleep state, a dream state, an eventually transient waking state, not the true status of the superconscient Reality. Here there is no actual dichotomy of being itself, but there is a multiplicity of status of the one Being.... The One Self sees itself as many, but this multiple existence is subjective; it has a multiplicity of its states of consciousness, but this multiplicity also is subjective; there is a reality of subjective experience of a real Being, but no objective universe. (*LD, p. 467*)

But “nowhere in the Upanishads is it actually laid down,” Sri Aurobindo pointed out,

that the threefold status is a condition of illusion or the creation of an unreality; it is constantly affirmed that all this that is,— this universe we are now supposing to have been constructed by Maya,— is the Brahman, the Reality.... That emphatic asseveration

leaves no room for an illusory Maya; but still the insistent denial that there is anything other than or separate from the experiencing self, certain phrases used and the description of two of the states of consciousness as sleep and dream may be taken as if they annulled the emphasis on the universal Reality; these passages open the gates to the illusionist idea and have been made the foundation for an uncompromising system of that nature. (*LD, pp. 467-8*)

Yet the fundamental problem of Illusionism persisted even here:

The theory of the cosmic Illusion gets rid of an original contradiction, a problem and mystery which may be otherwise soluble, by erecting another contradiction, a new problem and mystery which is irreconcilable in its terms and insoluble. For we start with the conception or experience of an absolute Reality which is in its nature eternally one, supracosmic, static, immobile, immutable ... and a phenomenon of cosmos, dynamism, motion, mutability.... This phenomenon is got rid of by declaring it to be a perpetual Illusion, Maya. But this brings in, in effect, a self-contradictory dual status of consciousness of the One to annul a self-contradictory dual status of being of the One. A phenomenal truth of multiplicity of the One is annulled by setting up a conceptual falsehood in the One creating an unreal multiplicity. The One for ever self-aware of its pure existence entertains a perpetual imagination or illusory construction of itself as an infinite multiplicity of ignorant and suffering beings unaware of self who have to wake one by one to awareness of self and cease individually to be. (*LD, p. 470*)

The solution turned out to be more baffling than the original mystery. It might be worthwhile to reconsider “our original premiss” and try to

envisage the Reality as an eternal oneness, status, immutable essence of pure existence supporting an eternal dynamism, motion, infinite multiplicity and diversity of itself. The immutable status of oneness brings out of itself the dynamism, motion and multiplicity,—the dynamism, motion and multiplicity not abrogating but bringing into relief the eternal and infinite oneness. If the consciousness of Brahman can be dual in status or action or even manifold, there seems to be no reason why Brahman should be incapable of a dual status or a manifold real self-experience of its being. The cosmic consciousness would then be, not a creative Illusion, but an experience of some truth of the Absolute. This explanation, if worked out, might prove to be more comprehensive and spiritually fecund, more harmonic in its juncture of the two terms of our self-experience, and it would be at least as logically tenable as the idea of an eternal Reality supporting in perpetuity an eternal illusion. (*LD, pp. 470-1*)

Sri Aurobindo saw “a first step towards this solution” in Shankara’s philosophy of “qualified Illusionism,” which distinguished between

two orders of reality, transcendental and pragmatic, absolute and phenomenal, eternal and temporal,—the former the reality of the pure being of Brahman ... the latter the reality of Brahman in Maya.... Here we get a reality for ourselves and the universe: for the individual self is really Brahman; it is Brahman who within the field of Maya seems phenomenally to be subjected to her as the individual and in the end releases the relative and phenomenal individual into his eternal and true being. (*LD, p. 471*)

But he could not fail to see that “the question of the nature and extent of this reality at once arises”:

for the universe and ourselves may be a true reality though of a lesser order, or they may be partly real, partly unreal, or they may be an unreal reality. If they are at all a true reality, there is no place for any theory of Maya; there is no illusory creation. If they are partly real, partly unreal, the fault must lie in something wrong either in the cosmic self-awareness or in our own seeing of ourselves and the universe which produces an error of being, an error of knowledge, an error in the dynamis of existence. But that error can amount only to an ignorance ... and what needs to be explained then is not an original Cosmic Illusion but the intervention of Ignorance in the creative consciousness or in the dynamic action of the Eternal and Infinite. But if universe and ourselves are an unreal reality, if to a transcendental consciousness all this has no truth of existence and its apparent reality ceases once we step out of the field proper to Maya, then the concession accorded with one hand is taken away by the other; for what was conceded as a truth turns out to have been all the time an illusion. Maya and cosmos and ourselves are both real and unreal,— but the reality is an unreal reality, real only to our ignorance, unreal to any true knowledge. (*LD, pp. 471-2*)

“It is difficult to see why,” Sri Aurobindo continued,

once any reality is conceded to ourselves and to the universe, it should not be a true reality within its limits. It may be admitted that the manifestation must be on its surface a more restricted reality than the Manifested ... but that is not a sufficient reason for it to be set aside as unreal. It is no doubt so felt by mind withdrawing from itself and its structures: but this is only because the mind is an instrument of Ignorance and, when it withdraws from its constructions, from its ignorant and imperfect picture of the universe, it is impelled to regard them as nothing more than its own fictions and formations, unfounded, unreal; the gulf between its ignorance and the supreme Truth and Knowledge disables it from discovering the true connections of the transcendent Reality and the cosmic Reality. In a higher status of consciousness the difficulty disappears, the connection is established; the sense of unreality recedes and a theory of illusion becomes superfluous and inapplicable. (*LD, pp. 472-3*)

Shankara classified the universe as “ultimately unreal” since it was “temporary and not eternal, a perishable form of being imposed on the Formless and Imperishable”:

This relation can be illustrated by the analogy of earth and the pot made out of earth: the pot and other forms so created perish and go back to the reality, earth, they are only evanescent forms; when they disappear there is left the formless and essential earth and nothing else. But this analogy can tell more convincingly the other way; for the pot is real by right of its being made out of the substance of earth which is real; it is not an illusion and, even when it is dissolved into the original earth, its past existence cannot be thought to have been unreal or an illusion. The relation is not that of an original reality and a phenomenal unreality, but of an original ... to a resultant and dependent, a temporal and manifested reality. Moreover, the pot form is an eternal possibility of earth substance ... and while the substance exists the form can always be manifested.... The cosmic is a different order of the Real from the supracosmic Transcendence, but there is no need to take it as in any way non-existent or unreal to that Transcendence. For the purely intellectual conception that only the Eternal is real, whether we take it in the sense that reality depends on perpetual duration or that the timeless only is true, is an ideative distinction, a mental construction; it is not binding on a substantial and integral experience. Time is not necessarily cancelled out of existence by timeless Eternity; their relation is only verbally a relation of contradiction; in fact, it is more likely to be a relation of dependence. (*LD, pp. 473-4*)

Shankara also denied reality to the universe on the grounds that it was “a result of dynamis in movement” and could “thus be regarded as a contradiction ... of the static and immobile eternal Reality”:

But as a concept this position of the thought has no inevitability; there is no reason why we should not conceive of the Reality as at once static and dynamic. It is perfectly rational to suppose that the eternal status of being of the Reality contains in it an eternal force of being, and this dynamis must necessarily carry in itself a power of action and movement, a kinesis; both status of being and movement of being can be real. (*LD, pp. 474-5*)

“There is no reason either,” Sri Aurobindo continued,

why they should not be simultaneous; on the contrary, simultaneity is demanded,— for all energy, all kinetic action has to support itself on status or by status if it is to be effective or creative; otherwise there will be no solidity of anything created, only a constant whirl without any formation: status of being, form of being are necessary to kinesis of being. Even if energy be the primal reality, as it seems to be in the material world, still it has to create status of itself, lasting forms, duration of beings in order to have a support for its action: the status may be temporary, it may be only a balance or equilibrium of substance created and maintained by a constant kinesis, but while it endures it is real and, after it ceases, we still regard it as something that was real. The principle of a supporting status for action is a permanent principle, and its action is constant in Time-eternity. (*LD, p. 475*)

“When we discover the stable Reality underlying all this movement of energy,” he admitted,

we do indeed perceive that the status of created forms is only temporary; there is a stability of repetition of the kinesis in a same persistent action and figure of movement which maintains substance of being in stable form of itself: but this stability is created, and the one permanent and self-existent status is that of the eternal Being whose Energy erected the forms. But we need not therefore conclude that the temporary forms are unreal; for the energy of the being is real and the forms made by it are forms of the being. In any case the status of the being and the eternal dynamis of the being are both real, and they are simultaneous; the status admits of action of dynamis and the action does not abrogate the status. We must therefore conclude that eternal status and eternal dynamis are both true of the Reality which itself surpasses both status and dynamis; the immobile and the mobile Brahman are both the same Reality. (*LD, pp. 475-6*)

“If the Reality alone exists and all is the Reality,” he summed up,

the world also cannot be excluded from that Reality; the universe is real. If it does not reveal to us in its forms and powers the Reality that it is ... this must be not because it is unreal or because it is not at all That, but because it is a progressive self-expression, a manifestation, an evolving self-development of That in Time which our consciousness cannot yet see in its total or its essential significance.... It is contended indeed that the universe cannot be a manifestation because the Reality has no need of manifestation, since it is for ever manifest to itself; but so equally it can be said that the Reality has no need of self-illusion or illusion of any kind, no need to create a Mayic universe. (*LD, pp. 481-2*)

Granted that “the Absolute can have no need of anything,”

still there can be — not coercive of its freedom, not binding on it, but an expression of its self-force, the result of its Will to become,— an imperative of a supreme self-effectuating Force, a necessity of self-creation born of the power of the Absolute to see itself in Time. This imperative represents itself to us as a Will to create, a Will of self-expression; but it may be better represented as a force of being of the Absolute which displays itself as a power of itself in action. If the Absolute is self-evident to itself in eternal Timelessness, it can also be self-manifest to itself in eternal motion of Time. Even if the universe is only a phenomenal reality, still it is a manifestation or phenomenon of Brahman; for since all is Brahman, phenomenon and manifestation must be the same thing: the imputation of unreality is a superfluous conception, otiose and unnecessarily embarrassing, since whatever distinction is needed is already there in the concept of Time and the timeless Eternal and the concept of manifestation. (*LD*, p. 482)

And here Sri Aurobindo arrived at the logical conclusion of the doctrine of cosmic illusion:

A theory of Maya in the sense of illusion or the unreality of cosmic existence creates more difficulties than it solves; it does not really solve the problem of existence, but rather renders it for ever insoluble. For, whether Maya be an unreality or a nonreal reality, the ultimate effects of the theory carry in them a devastating simplicity of nullification. Ourselves and the universe fade away into nothingness or else keep for a time only a truth which is little better than a fiction. . . . But this nullification cannot be compelled to stop short in its devastating advance at the boundary fixed for it by a spiritual Illusionism. For if all other experiences of the individual consciousness in the universe are illusions, then what guarantee is there that its spiritual experiences are not illusions, including even its absorbed self-experience of the supreme Self which is conceded to us as utterly real? (*LD*, p. 483)

“For if cosmos is untrue,” he pointed out,

our experience of the cosmic consciousness, of the universal Self, of Brahman as all these beings or as the self of all these beings, the One in all, all in the One has no secure foundation, since it reposes in one of its terms on an illusion, on a construction of Maya. That term, the cosmic term, has to crumble, for all these beings which we saw as the Brahman were illusions; then what is our assurance of our experience of the other term, the pure Self, the silent, static or absolute Reality, since that too comes to us in a mind moulded of delusion and formed in a body created by an illusion? An overwhelming self-evident convincingness, an experience of absolute authenticity in the realisation or experience is not an unanswerable proof of sole reality or sole finality: for other spiritual experiences such as that of the omnipresent Divine Person, Lord of a real Universe, have the same convincing, authentic and final character. It is open to the intellect which has once arrived at the conviction of the unreality of all other things, to take a farther step and deny the reality of Self and of all existence. The Buddhists took this last step and refused reality to the Self on the ground that it was as much as the rest a construction of the mind; they cut not only God but the eternal Self and impersonal Brahman out of the picture. (*LD*, pp. 483-4)

But this uncompromising negation “solves no problem of our existence; it only cuts the problem out for the individual by showing him a way of exit”:

In its extreme form and effect, our being and its action become null and without sanction, its experience, aspiration, endeavour lose their significance; all, the one incommunicable relationless Truth excepted and the turning away to it, become equated with illusion of being, are part of a universal illusion and themselves illusions....

A real solution of existence can only stand upon a truth that accounts for our existence and world-existence, reconciles their truth, their right relation and the truth of their relation to whatever transcendent Reality is the source of everything. But this implies some reality of individual and cosmos, some true relation of the One Existence and all existences, of relative experience and of the Absolute. (*LD, pp. 484-5*)

“As in Science, so in metaphysical thought,” Sri Aurobindo insisted,

that general and ultimate solution is likely to be the best which includes and accounts for all so that each truth of experience takes its place in the whole.... Illusionism unifies by elimination; it deprives all knowledge and experience, except the one supreme merger, of reality and significance. (*LD, p. 485*)

He then focused on a “realistic” approach to the problem:

What our mind sees as contraries may be to the infinite consciousness not contraries but complementaries: essence and phenomenon of the essence are complementary to each other, not contradictory,— the phenomenon manifests the essence; the finite is a circumstance and not a contradiction of the infinite; the individual is a self-expression of the universal and the transcendent,— it is not a contradiction or something quite other than it, it is the universal concentrated and selective, it is one with the Transcendent in its essence of being and its essence of nature. In the view of this unitarian comprehensive seeing there is nothing contradictory in a formless Essence of being that carries a multitude of forms, or in a status of the Infinite supporting a kinesis of the Infinite, or in an infinite Oneness expressing itself in a multiplicity of beings and aspects and powers and movements, for they are beings and aspects and powers and movements of the One. (*LD, pp. 491-2*)

“A world-creation on this basis,” Sri Aurobindo maintained,

is a perfectly natural and normal and inevitable movement which in itself raises no problem, since it is exactly what one must expect in an action of the Infinite. All the intellectual problem and difficulty is raised by the finite reason cutting, separating, opposing the power of the Infinite to its being, its kinesis to its status, its natural multiplicity to its essential oneness, segmenting self, opposing Spirit to Nature. To understand truly the world-process of the Infinite and the Time-process of the Eternal, the consciousness must pass beyond this finite reason and the finite sense to a larger reason and spiritual sense in touch with the consciousness of the Infinite and responsive to the logic of the Infinite which is the very logic of being itself and arises inevitably from its self-operation of its own realities, a logic whose sequences are not the steps of thought but the steps of existence. (*LD, p. 492*)

The Absolute, according to “the logic of the Infinite,” was “indefinable by reason, ineffable to the speech,” yet accessible to direct experience:

It can be approached through an absolute negation of existence, as if it were itself a supreme Non-Existence, a mysterious infinite Nihil. It can be approached through an absolute affirmation of all the fundamentals of our own existence, through an absolute of Light and Knowledge, through an absolute of Love or Beauty, through an absolute of

Force, through an absolute of peace or silence.... This paradox of an Absolute which can be realised through an absolute negation and through an absolute affirmation, in many ways, can only be accounted for to the reason if it is a supreme Existence which is so far above our notion and experience of existence that it can correspond to our negation of it, to our notion and experience of non-existence; but also, since all that exists is That, whatever its degree of manifestation, it is itself the supreme of all things and can be approached through supreme affirmations as through supreme negations. The Absolute is the ineffable x overtopping and underlying and immanent and essential in all that we can call existence or non-existence. (*LD*, pp. 493-4)

“But still unreality is a fact of cosmic existence,” Sri Aurobindo admitted,

and if all is the Brahman, the Reality, we have to account for this element of unreality in the Real. If the unreal is not a fact of being, it must be an act or a formation of consciousness, and is there not then a status or degree of consciousness in which its acts and formations are wholly or partly unreal? If this unreality cannot be attributed to an original cosmic Illusion, to Maya, there is still in the universe itself a power of illusion of Ignorance. It is in the power of the Mind to conceive things that are not real, it is in its power even to create things that are not real or not wholly real; its very view of itself and universe is a construction that is not wholly real or wholly unreal. Where does this element of unreality begin and where does it stop, and what is its cause and what ensues on the removal of both the cause and the consequence? (*LD*, pp. 495-6)

By referring to the logic of the Infinite, Sri Aurobindo did not introduce any new element. He reconnected to a central thread that he had been gradually building right from the start. Along with Supermind (the executive agent of the logic of the Infinite), this was the backbone of his “universal Realism.” Its framework allowed him to tackle the problems of human existence from a new perspective. Instead of grappling with the theory of cosmic Illusion, he could now ask what made us “misconceive” or “misapprehend” the Real without denying reality to universal or individual existence. Related philosophical problems — most notably the problem of pain, suffering and evil — were similarly transformed. These aspects, however, require a separate and detailed study.

References:

Kvassay, M (2009). A Discerning Tribute (Review of Heehs: *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*). *AntiMatters* 3 (1), pp. 117-136; 3 (2), pp. 99-128.

(*EPY*) *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga* (The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, Volume 13).

(*LD*) *The Life Divine* (The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo, Volumes 21-22).

The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo can be downloaded in PDF format via this URL:
<http://www.sriarobindoashram.org/ashram/sriauro/writings.php>

Marcel Kvassay, a graduate of Slovak Technical University in Bratislava, worked for Oxford University Press in the area of English Language Teaching, and for Alcatel as a trainer and a software development methodologist. He spent several years in Puducherry, India, most of the time working at SABDA, a book distribution unit of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department.