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VISHWANATH PRASAD VARMA

Sri Aurobindo and Greek Philosophy

SRI AUROBINDO (1872-1950) was a unique personality in modern India. For fourteen years he studied European literature and history in England. He was a professor of English literature at Baroda. He became a dedicated prophet of an extremist nationalism during the days of the agitation over the partition of Bengal (1905-1910). Then he turned to *yoga* and supramental mysticism and spiritual poetry. He was a powerful force in the moral and intellectual awakening of modern India. His *The Life Divine* is regarded by many as a monumental achievement in the history of human thought. He was equally at home in the ancient Indian and the Greek classics. His thought represents a solid synthesis of the ideas of the Eastern and Western sages and philosophers. Being thoroughly conversant with Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, French, English, Bengali, etc., he was well qualified to make pronouncements upon comparative thought.

Aurobindo made a deep study of Greek literature and philosophy in the original. Furthermore, as we shall show in the course of this paper, he tried to incorporate some elements of Plato's thought in the erection of his own intellectual-spiritual structure. He gave a new and vital rendering of the ancient Perseus-Andromeda myth of Greece.¹ To Aurobindo, this legend serves as a symbol of the defeat of the unregenerate barbaric forces and the triumph of intellectual evolution. This interpretation shows Aurobindo's penetrating insight into ancient myths and legends. A similar work of reinterpretation was done by him with reference to the legend of Savitr as found in the *Mahābhārata*.

Aurobindo notes some significant distinctions between Indian thought and Greek thought. Ancient Indian thought as represented in the Vedic and Vedāntic texts is spiritually motivated to a superlative degree. It touches the inmost psychic and subliminal depths as well as the transcendent heights. It presents the vision of a transfigured human destiny and carries with it the convincing authenticity of the voice of the realized spirit, which has attained a

¹ Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems and Plays*, 2 vols. (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1942), Vol. I, pp. 171-306.

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state of spiritual poise and equanimity. If spiritual depth and profundity are characteristic of Indian thought, Greece is famous for its rational, dialectical quest of the nature of reality. The intellectual achievements of the Greeks, especially of Heraclitus, Democritus, Plato, and Aristotle, represent priceless and unique legacies of ancient Occidental civilization.

The difference in the character of the philosophic thought of the two peoples is only an illustration of their different attitudes toward life. To ancient Indians, the fundamental goal of life was emancipation from the evils of mundane existence. They sought salvation, and, in quest of spiritual redemption, they cultivated the transcendent with a passionate ardor and vigor. They sought not only the immanence of the divine spirit but also its transcendence. Hence, religion and spiritual philosophy were the supreme concern of the ancient Indians. The Greeks, on the other hand, were more mundane and terrestrial in their outlook and orientation.² They cultivated the refinements of sense and intellect. They liked to create a system of metaphysics based on pure concepts, and were not concerned primarily or especially with the question of liberation and emancipation. The seers of ancient India sought the supernal delight of the spirit, which was regarded as perfect *gnosis* and absolute bliss. The Greeks, on the other hand, could recognize only the elements of pleasure and aesthetic beauty, which are but lower formulations of the divine bliss (*ānanda*).³

The spiritual engrossments of the ancient Indians made them tolerant, kind, and compassionate. In both the Vedāntic and the Buddhistic formulations, we find ancient Indian thought to be preoccupied with the good of all living beings. Ancient Indian thought enjoined the cultivation of sentiments of identity-consciousness with the totality of existence, and this necessarily resulted in an emphasis on the growth of feelings of sameness and equality toward all living creatures. Thus, ancient Indian thought is universalistic in its orientation. On the other hand, according to Aurobindo, pity and compassion were never strong among the Mediterranean peoples.⁴ We could substantiate Aurobindo's statements. Aristotle definitely and explicitly states that animals have been created for the use of man.⁵ This anthropocentric attitude would not find support in ancient Indian literature.

Aurobindo tries to distinguish three epochs in the evolution of both Indian and Greek thought. The first was the mystic epoch. In India, Greece, and Egypt there was a stage of mystical discipline in ancient times. The

² Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree, trans. (New York: Willey Book Co., 1944), p. 239, refers to "Beautiful Individuality" as constituting the center of the Greek character.

³ Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus* (Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1947), p. 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* 1254b 10–25, Book I, chap. 5.

Vedas and the Upaniṣads are the creations of the mystic seers of this age. The Orphic,⁶ the Eleusinian, and the Dionysian Mystery sects of Greece also represent this ancient tradition. The fundamental idea of the mystics was the acceptance of divine immanence. The external universe was supposed to be permeated with an all-conscient divine presence. In the language of the *Īśa Upaniṣad*, it can be said that whatever is individual movement in the universal motion (both the microcosm and the macrocosm) is for habitation by the supreme divine being. The mystics in India and Greece and Egypt believed that there were special techniques of moral, physical, and mental purification which alone could lead to the vision of the supernal being. Hence, they insisted on initiation into the secrets of their esoteric disciplines. In the language of the Upaniṣads, this constituted a supreme secret and was not to be conveyed except to one's son or to a faithful disciple. The mystics insisted on a neutralization of the consciousness of the ego and the body, and stressed the acquisition of a cosmic consciousness. The riddle of the universe could not be conveyed in the predicative terms of logical categories and dialectical ratiocination, and hence the mystics evolved an aphoristic, epigrammatic, and cryptic language to transmit the solution of the secret of existence. Hence, according to Aurobindo, we shall be doing an injustice to the mystics if we apply the canons of a later syllogistic organon in an effort to unravel their thought. Toward the end of this first epoch of human thought, the mystics evolved a set of symbols to convey their teachings. These symbols appeared enigmatic to a later intellectual generation. They were attempts to portray through physical images the reality of the unseen invisible being. Generally, historians of Greek thought, such as Zeller, Burnet, Ueberweg, and Erdmann, trace the beginnings of Greek philosophy to the cosmological speculations of the Milesians. But Aurobindo would stress the immense significance of the cosmogonic speculations of the Orphics. The mystics, in the language of the Veda, are the pristine fathers, and it is a great disservice to ignore their contributions to the advance of human thought.

Thus we find that Aurobindo⁷ raises a question of profound significance from the standpoint of the methodology of intellectual evolution. The advance of the evolutionary theory has strengthened the notion that the early epochs of humanity were characterized by crude and inexplicit mental consciousness. Some anthropologists and sociologists, for example, Lévy-

⁶ For references to Orphism, Plato, *Republic* II. 364; *Laws* II. 669. For Greek Mysteries, see R. L. Nettleship, *Lectures on Plato's Republic* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1951), pp. 62-64.

⁷ In presenting some of the aspects of human evolution, Aurobindo himself characterized the ancient epoch as infra-rational, marked by the dominance of instinct, guesswork, and intuition of a vital type.

Bruhl, would go even to the extent of characterizing the primitive mentality as exemplifying the pre-logical stage of thought.⁸ But, whereas, according to the modern historical and evolutionary theory, the ancient mentality was primitive with the implication of being undeveloped, according to Aurobindo, the ancients had a deeper and profounder sense of the unity of existence.⁹ They might not have expressed their thought and feelings in the framework of logical categories, but that does not detract from the value of their literary remains. Ancient humanity had a more artistic vision of the world than we have. While we tend to dissect and analyze, the ancient seers tried to sense the spirit of the whole as if by some poetic effusion or extension of aesthetic apperception. Hence, we find in the oldest classics of the human race an exalted sense of inspiration which we miss in the more scientific, sophisticated, and learned treatises, which may appeal more to our logical sense. The ancient seers were nearer to Nature, and they felt a sense of comprehensive unity with the world around them, and as a result they gave expression to some noble thoughts and sentiments. Aurobindo has written a book entitled *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, wherein he interprets the hymns of the *Rg Veda* addressed to the god Agni as signifying spiritual and esoteric truth. In his book *Heraclitus* he not only stresses the legacy of the ancient mystics but also tries to interpret Heraclitus as partly a mystic. He thus agrees with Pfeleiderer's view of Heraclitus as a mystic.¹⁰

According to Aurobindo, Pythagoras also belongs in the mystic tradition. Pythagoras was a man of noble spiritual character, and his work in mathematics indicates his great intellectual insight.¹¹ Aurobindo refers not so much to the researches of Pythagoras and his school in the fields of mathematics and astronomy as to his mysticism and his theory of rebirth. He thinks that at the end of the mystic epoch there were two currents of thought in Greece: the school of Pythagoras and the school of Heraclitus. Pythagoras made some attempt to introduce new symbols and to present a philosophic restatement of the old mystic lore, but no powerful mystic renaissance could take place. Greece followed the lead, not of Pythagorean mysticism, but of the rationalism of Heraclitus. Pythagoras upheld the doctrine of reincarna-

⁸ Lucian Lévy-Bruhl: *Primitive Mentality*, Lilian A. Clare, trans. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1923); *How Natives Think* (New York, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1927); *Primitives and the Supernatural*, Lilian A. Clare, trans. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1935).

⁹ Hegel, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–248, has a low opinion of the philosophical achievements of the Greek Mysteries.

¹⁰ Heraclitus was the chief priest of the Ephesian branch of the Eleusinian Mysteries, but he resigned his position in favor of his brother; see W. T. Stace, *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946), p. 72.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 986a, 986b (Book I, chap. 5); 1087b (Book XIV, chap. 1).

tion, and it has been held that he was inspired by Indian thought.¹² It is said that once in the barking of a dog he intuitively realized the voice of a forlorn dead friend. Like the Buddha of old and Vivekananda of modern times, Pythagoras claimed to remember his previous lives. Those who believe in the doctrine of supernormal powers developed by a *yogin* hold that one who attains yogic vision remembers his previous existences, as Kṛṣṇa claims to do in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. However, one can never speak with certainty about such things, and it is always open to the skeptic to assume a mocking attitude. Aurobindo says: "Pythagoras was one of the greatest of sages, but his assertion that he fought at Troy under the name of the Antenorid and was slain by the younger son of Atreus is an assertion only and his identification of the Trojan shield will convince no one who is not already convinced."¹³ Aurobindo makes a distinction between the Pythagorean theory of transmigration and his own conception of rebirth. In Aurobindo's philosophy, the stress is on the constant evolutionary progression of the human soul, and rebirth is an essential mechanism in the realization of this spiritual teleology. Therefore he says, "If, indeed, the soul is not such a constructed personality evolved by Life, but a persistent unevolving reality with a terrestrial life and body as its necessary field, the theory of rebirth in the sense of Pythagorean transmigration would have to be admitted. But if it is a persistent evolving entity capable of passing beyond the terrestrial stage, then the Indian idea of a passage to other worlds and a return to terrestrial birth would become possible and highly probable."¹⁴

The second epoch of philosophic development in both Greece and India was of metaphysical philosophy. It was indebted partly to the mystics for some of its fundamental ideas but was intellectual in its method and aim. The later Upaniṣads and possibly the Sāṃkhya belong to this age. The third epoch in the stream of philosophic evolution was the period of rationalism. The Buddha in India and the Sophists and Socrates in Greece typify this logical approach to the problems of existence and the cosmos. There is an important difference, however, in the character of intellectual inquiries carried on in India and in Greece. When systematic philosophizing of a more rational character developed in India in the post-Buddhist period, it tended to become formal, rigid, and abstract. In its later developments,

¹² Richard Garbe and E. W. Hopkins accepted Indian influence on Pythagoras. For a different view, see A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), pp. 605–606.

¹³ Sri Aurobindo, *The Problem of Rebirth* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1952), p. 8.

¹⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: The Arya Publishing House, 1944), Vol. II, p. 558.

especially in medieval India, it tended to ossify into scholastic pedantry, as is shown, for example, in the Nyāya philosophy. On the other hand, Greek intellectual inquiry was characterized by fluidity and flexibility. The Greek Sophists, under the leadership of Protagoras, had introduced and heralded this "fluid clarity of the reasoning mind."¹⁵ From this periodizing scheme it appears that Aurobindo would probably place the Milesians and the Eleatics in the second epoch. Heraclitus does not belong to the developed period of rationalism, but he certainly marks the transition to the rational epoch.

Aurobindo correctly points out that the most momentous problem of philosophy, in both India and Greece, was the question of the relation of the one and the many. The ancients thought that the real essence was one and was the source of the origination and procession of the manifold plurality and becoming. In both India and Greece, cosmogonists traced the source of the multiplicity to some one basic and primal substance. Anaximander wanted to trace the ultimate beginning of the cosmic becoming to an illimitable infinite, *Apeiron*. Anaximenes in Greece and Sayugva Raikva, a seer whose views are recorded in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, regarded air as the source of the things and objects of the world. Aurobindo does not refer to the dialectics of Love and Hate in Empedocles; instead, he says that, according to Empedocles, the All is eternally one and many: all is one which becomes many and then again goes back to oneness. "Anaximander who like our Mayavadins denied true reality to the many"¹⁶ and "Empedocles who thought the All to be alternately one and many, believed unity and multiplicity to be both of them real and existent."¹⁷ But there is one fundamental difference between the Indian and the Greek cosmogonists. Both the author of the famous Nāsadiya Hymn in the *Ṛg Veda* and Thales believe water to have been the *arche* of the universe. But, while to the Greek thinker water connoted a physical substance, the Vedic seer regarded waters as the symbol of primeval indeterminate inconscience.¹⁸ According to Aurobindo, there are several references in the *Ṛg Veda* where waters are used in this sense of cosmic creative forces.¹⁹

Heraclitus championed the concept of becoming and mutation as against the notion of being advocated by Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Zeno. He regarded fire as the source of becoming. But fire itself is a ceaselessly changing stuff. Heraclitus used the imagery of the waters of a river to indicate the perpetual mobility of the events, phenomena, and facts of the cosmos. He has been subjected to diverse interpretations. Pfeleiderer regarded him as

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus*, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (New York: Sri Aurobindo Library, 1950), p. 181n.

a mystic who expressed his ideas in cryptic sentences.²⁰ Engels has regarded Heraclitus as a champion of the dialectical concept of motion because he (Heraclitus) was a philosopher of becoming.²¹ Aurobindo emphatically regards Heraclitus as a child of the mystics and thinks that his aphoristic statements can be rightly understood only in the general context of mysticism. According to Aurobindo, "The idea of the One which is eternally becoming many and the many which is eternally becoming one and of that one therefore not so much as stable substance or essence as active force, a sort of substantial will-to-become, is the foundation of Heraclitus' philosophy."²² The basic point in Aurobindo's interpretation of Heraclitus is that he also stresses the concept of being in the thought of this celebrated prophet of process and change. Fire is both being and becoming, and there is an upward path from becoming to being and a downward path from being to becoming. Heraclitus said: "It is wise to admit that all things are one,"²³ and, further, "Hesiod did not know day and night; for it is the One."²⁴ He identifies Zeus, eternity, and fire.²⁵ He is also reported to have said, "One out of all and all out of one."²⁶ Thus, the one is always becoming many, and this accounts for the constancy of the flux and the processual dynamism. But the multiplicity is also perpetually rushing to the principle of the oneness symbolized by the sempiternal fire. Hence, behind the processual flux there is also a constant conservation of all energies. So far, historians and interpreters had considered Heraclitus only as a champion of the concept of becoming. Aurobindo also emphasized the concept of being as a fundamental element in Heraclitus' philosophy.

Besides stressing the concept of being in Heraclitus' thought, Aurobindo also refers to the concept of conflagration.²⁷ This notion of conflagration is also found in the Indian Purāṇas. According to the Stoics, Heraclitus is supposed to have adhered to the doctrine of conflagration. Conflagration means the destruction of the world by fire at the end of a cycle of creation or manifestation. Aurobindo compares this notion of conflagration as found in

²⁰ Otto Pfeiderer, *The Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. IV, Allan Menzies, trans. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1888), p. 160. Pfeiderer says: "In its connection with a material body [according to Heraclitus] into which it entered from a higher existence, the soul is estranged from the true divine life which is its origin; only when it lays off this wrapping, which is ill-suited to its divine nature, does it return to the purer life of the gods. Hence Heraclitus calls men mortal gods, the gods immortal men, our life the death of the gods, our death their life."

²¹ Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, in Karl Marx, *Selected Works*, 2 vols. (New York: International Publishers, n.d.) Vol. I, p. 156. *Ibid.*, Herr Eugen Dühring's *Revolution in Science*, Emile Burry, trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1939), p. 27.

²² Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus*, p. 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27, 31-32, 38.

Heraclitus with the Vedāntic theory of the eternal cycles of manifestation and withdrawal from manifestation. Thus, we find that by stressing the concept of being and the doctrine of conflagration Aurobindo brings Heraclitus very near the thought of ancient Vedānta.

Heraclitus is the first thinker to interpret the world in terms of the dynamics of power and force. War, according to him, is the creator of all things. Some of his famous apothegms are: "War is the father of all and the king of all";²⁸ "All things becoming according to strife (*eris*)";²⁹ "To know that strife is justice."³⁰ There is raging an eternal tension in the world. War is not an unmitigated evil, although the justice that it dispenses is a violent justice. Heraclitus' defense of war has perhaps given inspiration to the later German apologists of war such as Hegel, Bismarck, Treitschke, Nietzsche, and Bernhardt.³¹

Heraclitus is one of the first teachers of the law of relativity. Night and day, good and evil, life and death, are only different aspects of the same reality. They are not absolutely distinct, but even their contrariness and opposition are only phenomenal modes of the same reality. But Heraclitus must not be supposed to be a mere super-moralist or an ethical relativist of the sociological school. He says, "To God all things are good and just, but men hold some things to be good, others unjust."³² He also says, "Fool are all human laws by one, the divine."³³ Aurobindo interprets these statements to mean that, although human criteria of good and justice are liable to fluctuations in the mundane stream of relativities, nonetheless, human good and justice persist in the stream of becoming.³⁴

In ancient times, Heraclitus was regarded as a pessimistic thinker, preaching the vanity of things, but, if his theory of fire not only refers to the physical element but also symbolizes a conscient Absolute, then the changes and mutations of the universe can be regarded as manifestations of the spiritual principle. Consequently the gospel of the utter uselessness of things would not be the correct interpretation to put upon his thought, because the absoluteness of the spiritual principle would run counter to an ethics of pessimism.³⁵ If, in any sense, the existence of a spiritual reality is accepted, then some hope and consolation are necessarily provided to man, and this acts as

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Heraclitus is condemnatory of Homer because the latter prayed for the elimination of war.

³² Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus*, p. 42.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

a neutralizing element of the otherwise frustrating experiences associated with a pessimistic conception of life.

Aurobindo also traces the germs of the *Logos* conception in Heraclitus. Everything comes into being by strife, but all things also come into being according to some reason, *kat'erin* (by war), but also *kata ton logon* (according to reason).³⁶ Heraclitus was an opponent of idol-worship—"He who prays to an image is chattering to a stone wall."³⁷ He condemned animal sacrifice as a fruitless attempt at purification.

Aurobindo finds traces of some profound spiritual truth in such statements of Heraclitus as "The gods are mortals, men immortals,"³⁸ "Thou canst not find the limits of the soul,"³⁹ and "The kingdom is of the child."⁴⁰ These statements indicate that he (Heraclitus) found solace in spiritual innocence, which is symbolized by the state of the child. Men are also immortal to the extent that they are representations of an immanent spiritual principle.

Thus Aurobindo tries to interpret the Heraclitus who is pre-eminently regarded as having foreshadowed in ancient times Nietzsche's concept of becoming and the will-to-become and the Bergsonian idea of creative evolution, in terms of Vedic and Vedāntic knowledge. It was a great service of Aurobindo to Indian thought that he has made us aware of the immense intellectual significance of Heraclitus. So far, in India, there has been a general tendency to study only Plato and Aristotle. It is significant that Aurobindo has pointed out the philosophical worth of Heraclitus. He says, "We see in how many directions the deep divining eye of Heraclitus anticipated the largest and profoundest generalisations of science and philosophy and how even his more superficial thoughts indicate later powerful tendencies of the occidental mind, how too some of his ideas influenced such profound and fruitful thinkers as Plato, the Stoics, the neo-Platonists."⁴¹

Aurobindo has paid tribute to Heraclitus by writing a monograph on him, but Plato's personality also had profound importance for him. He compares Plato with the venerable Hindu sage and philosopher Śaṅkara.⁴² He speaks of Plato's *Republic* and *Symposium* in terms of the highest admiration as among the finest and highest creations of the human mind in the fields of aesthetics, philosophy, and literature.⁴³ He rightly accepts the influence of Heraclitus on Plato,⁴⁴ a point also referred to by Aristotle. Plato's

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Vol. II, p. 573.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus*, p. 52.

"thought sought after God, tried to seize the ideal, had its hope of a perfect human society."⁴⁵ The central theme of Plato's philosophy is also the relation between the one and the many, and, in discussing the problem of reality and appearance, being and becoming, he takes recourse to "large streams of subtle reasoning and opulent imagery."⁴⁶

A study of the sources of *The Life Divine* indicates that at several points Aurobindo has been profoundly influenced by Plato. Aurobindo is not in the habit of mentioning those several philosophers whose thoughts he has incorporated into his own or those whose ideas he subjects to criticism. The basic theme in Plato's metaphysics is the theory of ideas. Ideas are not subjective; they are primordial, archetypal, and immutable. Things of the world are only pale reflections of the ideas. Referring to this point, Aurobindo says, "Plato brought in his eternal, ideal plane of fixed ideas, by which he seems to have meant at once an originating real-idea and an original ideal schema for all things."⁴⁷ Aurobindo interprets one of the verses in the *Īśa Upaniṣad* in this Platonic spirit. Commenting on the words "*arthān vyadadhāt*," he says, "Consciousness dwells in energy upon its self-being to produce Idea of itself and form and action inevitably corresponding to the Idea."⁴⁸ Also, in discussing the mechanism of the evolution of the world, Aurobindo brings forward the conception of the Idea. He says, "It comes out as Idea that is a reality, and it is that reality of the Idea which evolves itself, always by its own power and consciousness of itself, always self-conscious, always self-developing by the will inherent in the Idea. . . . But the idea is only the light of the reality illumining itself; it is not mental thought nor imagination. It is effective self-awareness. It is Real-Idea."⁴⁹ According to Aurobindo, the multiple ideas are held in order and harmony by the divine supermind. Hence, he claims to go further in idealism because he regards the creative idea as Real-Idea. But it is possible to say that Plato also upheld that the supreme idea—the idea of ideas, which holds all the multiple ideas as a sustaining force—is the Idea of the Good. It may be said that the creative and dynamic conception of the idea Aurobindo gets from Plato but incorporates it in the framework of his own supra-mental idealism.

In both Plato and Aurobindo, we find the philosophico-evolutionary concepts of ascent and descent. According to Plato, the ascent is from the cave,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus*, p. 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Sri Aurobindo, *Īśa Upaniṣad* (Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1941), pp. 5, 62.

⁴⁹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Vol. I, p. 156.

which is the sphere of darkness and shadows, to the objects of the world.⁵⁰ From the worldly objects there is the ascent to the objects of scientific studies, which are comprehended by the understanding (*dianoia*), and, finally, there is the ascent to the realm of ideas, which culminate in the Idea of the Good. This is the reality comprehended by dialectical reason (*nous*). According to Plato, the philosopher must not remain absorbed in meditation and contemplation but should descend to the lower spheres again and should attempt to mold the city in terms of the principles of the highest gnosis. This is the only way for the transformation of the community which is infested with ills, maladies, and corruption.⁵¹ Plato stresses graduated ascent: there should not be any attempt to jump the intermediate stages. Aurobindo also formulates a theory of ascent to the regions beyond mind—illuminated mind, higher mind, intuition, and overmind. Finally, there is the ascent to the supermind, and even in the highest stages of divine gnosis there is the ascent to the stage of the *Saccidānanda*. He also stresses that there should be no attempt to leap over any of the stages. According to him, this attempt at spiritual leaping practiced in ancient India generated the sense of the unreality of the phenomenal world and thus led to the philosophy of *māyāvāda*.⁵² The Vedic mystics attempted to reach the state of the supermind—perhaps some of them succeeded. But they did not attempt to descend to the terrestrial consciousness, and hence the work of the transfiguration of the world in terms of the spirit never became a realized actuality. Aurobindo pleads for the necessity of the descent of the supramental and spiritual powers for the remaking of the world, because mere political, social, and economic forces are utterly inadequate by themselves to solve the problems of man. Thus, in the acceptance of the theories of ascent and descent there is remarkable similarity in the thought-processes of Plato and Aurobindo. But the difference is that, while Plato speaks in terms of ascent to the highest reason, Aurobindo is throughout concerned with the splendors of the divine supermind.⁵³ In the *Republic*, Plato regards the highest regions as the region of the sun, which is considered both as the giver of vitality and the source of light. The sun, in other words, is only a symbolic representation of the Idea of the Good.⁵⁴ Aurobindo also interprets

⁵⁰ Plato, *Republic* VII. 514. Plato refers to "steep and rugged ascent" and "descent" in *Republic* VII. 516–517.

⁵¹ *Republic* VII. 540.

⁵² Sri Aurobindo, *The Riddle of This World* (Pondicherry: Arya Publishing House, 1942), *passim*.

⁵³ But I am mainly concerned now with indicating the similarity in the techniques of the thinking of the two.

⁵⁴ *Republic* VI. 508.

the Vedic deities, such as Surya, Savitā, Puṣan, in an almost Platonic way. He thinks that the Vedic sun is the symbol of knowledge and creative power.⁵⁵

According to Plato, it is essential to obtain the highest education in the sciences and dialectical philosophy to save the political community. Hence, his famous theory of the philosopher-ruler is meant as a radical technique to reform the corrupt City-States.⁵⁶ Aurobindo also stresses the growth of a spiritualized society governed not by coercive agencies but by an inner theocracy.⁵⁷ Except, again, for the difference that Plato stresses rational dialectics and Aurobindo spiritual gnosis, there is a remarkable similarity between the thought-processes of the two thinkers, because both feel that political problems cannot be solved by merely political techniques. It is essential to use meta-political techniques to transform the political community. In view of these remarkable and fundamental similarities, I venture to hazard the suggestion that Plato deeply influenced Aurobindo.

It is also possible that the concepts of absolute beauty and supra-rational beauty as used in Aurobindo's philosophy⁵⁸ are Platonic legacies. In ancient Hindu thought, existence, gnosis, and delight were conceived as absolute categories, but there had been no attempt at interpreting beauty, too, in absolute terms. In view of the immense praise showered by Aurobindo on the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, it is not far-fetched to argue that he was deeply influenced by the Platonic concept of absolute, eternal, and even supra-sensuous beauty. There are two schools of Platonic interpretation. One considers him a great rationalist. The other considers him a mystic. In the Middle Ages he was regarded as a divine figure. Aurobindo regards Plato as a mystic, and in this connection he emphasizes the Platonic concept of "recollection." (However, he does not sympathize with the censorship of poetry advocated by Plato.⁵⁹)

Heraclitus and Plato are the two writers who are most significant in the analysis of the question of Aurobindo's relation to Greek philosophy. On Heraclitus, Aurobindo writes a separate monograph. He refers to and discusses Plato in his books, and, as I have tried to indicate, there are also deep influences of Plato on Aurobindo's thought. The only other Greek school which attracts Aurobindo is Stoicism. The Stoics evolved a powerful psychological discipline and had profound ideas about the potentialities of the

⁵⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, p. 180.

⁵⁶ *Republic* V. 473.

⁵⁷ Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle* (New York: Sri Aurobindo Library, 1950), p. 258.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, "The Suprarational Beauty," pp. 150-160. In this chapter Aurobindo says, "God is beauty," and "To find highest beauty is to find God."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

human race. Aurobindo even credits the Stoics with having held the idea of some kind of divine supermanhood. He also refers to the concept of *spermatikos*, the seed *Logos*, held by the Stoics.⁶⁰ Stoicism has been a powerful current of philosophical and ethical thought, and, as interpreted by Zeno, Cicero, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus, it was a significant school of Graeco-Roman philosophy. Aurobindo is a believer in the moral and spiritual interpretation of history, and says that even in the days of imperialistic license and orgy Stoicism saved Rome.⁶¹

In his *Essays on the Gita* Aurobindo elaborately discusses the ethics of Stoicism. He says that the Stoic conception of mental equality or equanimity makes character its pivot and wants to cultivate an austere sense of discipline, self-control, and endurance. The Stoic ideal seizes upon the concepts of self-mastery and self-control and makes them the base and foundation for an entire emancipation of the human soul from subjection to the entanglements and engrossment of a lower unregenerate mentality.⁶² In the words of the Sāṃkhya philosophy he calls the Stoic ideal a *rājasika*, or heroic ideal, because "the Stoic self-discipline calls desire and passion into its embrace of the wrestler and crushes them between its arms." He believes that the spiritual ideal of equanimity (*samata*) based on divine realization, as propounded by the *Gītā*, is more comprehensive and synthetic than the Stoic ideal because it goes beyond the conception of the heroic equanimity of the school of Zeno, as also beyond the moral ideal of attaining equanimity by resignation and detached indifference.⁶³

Aurobindo is not a speculative philosopher indulging in logical flights. He is deeply interested in the upward evolutionary progression of humanity, and hence he wants philosophy to bear a vital message. He thinks that philosophy is needed to correct the dogmatism, the credal fanaticism, and the irrational supernaturalism of religion, but at the same time religion is also needed to enliven and vitalize philosophy. Religion imparts a dynamic, active, and practical orientation to philosophy.⁶⁴ According to him, at the hands of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, the Stoics, and the Epicureans, philosophy had an orientation toward the molding of life. But, as Greek philosophy severed its connection with the ancient mystics and tended to become immensely conceptual and formal, it also lost connection with popular religions. This was a factor in its devitalization. Aurobindo favors a comprehensive

⁶⁰ Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus*, p. 56.

⁶¹ Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle*, p. 108.

⁶² Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, p. 174.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 186.

⁶⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *Heraclitus*, pp. 46-47.

synthesis of religion, philosophy, and science for the onward spiritual consummation of human destiny.

Aurobindo's interpretations of Greek thought and philosophy have a two-fold significance. First, he stresses the importance of mystic disciplines in the evolution of human thought in India, Greece, and Egypt. Second, he pleads for a more careful, sober, and sympathetic handling of ancient thought. There is prevalent a general tendency to dismiss ancient thought as primitive. This is only an indication of an arrogant and sophisticated mentality. It is to the credit of Aurobindo that out of the detached aphorisms of Heraclitus he has evolved by the powers of sympathetic construction and imagination a well-knit intellectual system. He has, in a sense, recarved the rather fragmentary personality of Heraclitus into a living embodiment of profound wisdom. The second significance of Aurobindo's writings regarding Greek thought belongs to the realm of the evolution of a more comprehensive philosophy based on the insights of both the East and the West. He has made a monumental attempt requiring the sustained labor of at least forty years to create a spiritual-metaphysical system of thought. In this work of integral synthesis he has incorporated and made his own, not only some of the profound conceptions of the ancient Indian and the modern Western thinkers, but also some of the dominant ideas of the Greek teachers and philosophers. Paul Deussen was perhaps the only philosopher-scholar of his time who was equally at home in Greek, Indian, and German philosophy; he had mastered them all in the original sources.⁶⁵ The excellence of Aurobindo does not lie in the field of purely linguistic and accurate historical scholarship. On the basis of the thought of the ancient Indians and the Greeks, as also of modern science and philosophy, he attempts the erection of his own unique philosophical system. His works constitute a landmark, therefore, in the bringing together of Eastern and Western philosophy.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Paul Deussen, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Philosophie*, 2 vols. in 6 parts (Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1894-1920).

⁶⁶ V. P. Varma, *The Political Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960).