
UNIT 3 KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

- To see the role of knowledge in Aurobindo's Philosophy.
- To see the relationship between knowledge and ignorance in Aurobindo.
- To try to understand ignorance in the scheme of things of Aurobindo.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

How is knowledge related to ignorance? Why is there evil in this world of goodness? These are some questions that Aurobindo has been engaging in. In the chapter “The Eternal and the Individual” from *“The Life Divine,”* Sri Aurobindo indicates that we can move out of our essential ignorance, expressed through limitations of rational mind and supported by ego, by coming into touch with our True Self and Soul. As a result, we realize that we are not only an individual being, but a world being; an eternal individual capable of transcending all limitations of unconsciousness, ego, division, and ignorance.

Sri Aurobindo refers to this evolved, universalized person as a “True Individual.” He is in touch with an individuality that includes a wider, universal and eternal existence. This true Individual lives through oneself, as well as others. He also perceives the deepest being, the Soul and experience of Transcendence not just in himself but in others. Moreover, because the individual is Eternal in essence, he has the potential to evolve his being to its ultimate potential, including his material being, even becoming immortal. In this unit, we want to understand Aurobindo's concept of knowledge and its relationship to ignorance. We also try to seek the remedy for falsehood and evil.

3.2 AUROBINDO ON KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE

The main insights of Aurobindo on knowledge and ignorance, as presented in *“The Life Divine”* may be summed up as follows: Our Essential Ignorance vs. Integral Knowledge: Sri Aurobindo begins by describing the difference between

our essential Ignorance and the Integral Knowledge we can move towards. He says we need to discover the nature of our essential Ignorance, and the Knowledge that must replace it. That through our inward and upward self-unfolding of consciousness, we discover that Knowledge (Ghose 1949).

Utility and Limits of Logical Mind and Our Ignorance: He then focuses on the fact that the logical mind is helpful in breaking the Ignorance, but is limited. He says that it is helpful for overcoming the essential Ignorance by the partial understanding, intellectualization, et al of normal mind, but itself cannot arrive at the Knowledge we are seeking. He says that it is more a guardian against error than a discoverer of truth; that its propensities to make distinctions are stumbling blocks on the road to Integral Knowledge.

Limits of Reason Caused by Ego, Preventing Integral Knowledge: Sri Aurobindo then addresses why the reason of Logical Mind is so limited. He says that the main problem is that the reason identifies the individual self with the ego, and the exclusions of consciousness that arise when we are absorbed in ego. He then explains what the problems of ego are. In particular, that our ego tends to centralize the activities of Nature in ourselves. That we have experiences that distinguish ourselves from the rest of being, and that is what we think of as our nature, but is really ego in action. Thus, this sense of individualization, this ego-sense is the crux of the problem (Ghose 1949).

Thus, if we are to move out of the Ignorance and towards Integral Knowledge, we need to somehow move out of ego. To do that, we have to see beyond this individualization of ego to our greater self and world being. We have to come to see that this self of our individuality is not only an ego self, but one that embraces the whole world and all other beings.

Moving out of Ego and Ignorance through Soul Connection: Now we come to the crux of the chapter. How do we move towards this wider self, this individuality that embraces the whole of existence beyond ego. He says when we move to the soul and Self, we move towards this wider existence. He says that this Self and Soul connects us to other souls, individuals, and the cosmic. This is the unity of being in Self. Thus there are two becomings of the Self, our individualization and the world, the individual and the cosmic. Moreover, these two becomings are always related to one another and are mutually dependent. For the liberated soul who comes in contact with the transcendent perceives that all is in each and each is in all and all is in God and God is all (Ghose 1949).

Perceiving our True Individuality as Both Individual and World Being Key: Thus we must consider we can move from our individual status to becoming the True Individual. This person is not the ego, and yet who has a relationship with other individuals. The true individual is a conscious power of the being of the Eternal in his power of individualizing self experience; living in unity and mutuality with others. The true Individual is contained in the world-being and dwells in the Transcendent. This is the key point of the chapter. He enjoys the transcendence through himself and in others.

Utility and Power of the Negative: Now Sri Aurobindo focuses on several particular ways it expresses its Ignorance. One has to do with how we see the positives and negatives of life. He says that rather than look at the negatives as

we normally do, we should understand that they are packed with force, teeming with power of existence, full of actual or potential contents. He says that the negatives bring in the rest of the possibilities of the Absolute that the positive does not allow. E.g. A great war may seem negative from one view, but from another may clear the way to great possibilities it may not have had before. From here Sri Aurobindo goes on to say that that everything has the Eternal in it, including the negative. I.e. the Absolute includes all and everything. That it is not bound to the limits of the positive.

Seeing Contradictions as Complements through Higher Consciousness: Sri Aurobindo then says that all dualities, contradictions in life can be seen for what they really are, as complements, complementary pairs when we rise to our highest consciousness. On the other hand, the human reason sees contradictions. Sri Aurobindo concludes that from this highest consciousness we perceive that all meets and all principles, all persistent realities of existence stand in a primary relationship to each other in a free, not an exclusive unity of the Absolute (Ghose 1949).

3.3 SEVEN TYPES OF IGNORANCE

Given this background, we are in a position to understand the seven types of ignorance, as elaborated by our author. Sri Aurobindo's systematic approach has us first examining the extent and nature of the Ignorance as a prelude to our search for Knowledge. The first ignorance is a self-ignorance. "We are ignorant of the Absolute which is the source of all being and becoming; we take partial facts of being, temporal relations of the becoming for the whole truth of existence,—that is the first, the original ignorance." (SAS 2011)

The cosmic ignorance is next: "We are ignorant of the spaceless, timeless, immobile and immutable Self; we take the constant mobility and mutation of the cosmic becoming in Time and Space for the whole truth of existence..." (Ghose 1949).

The third ignorance is the egoistic ignorance: "We are ignorant of our universal self, the cosmic existence, the cosmic consciousness, our infinite unity with all being and becoming; we take our limited egoistic mentality, vitality, corporeality for our true self and regard everything other than that as not-self..." The temporal ignorance is fourth: "We are ignorant of our eternal becoming in Time; we take this little life in a small span of Time, in a petty field of Space, for our beginning, our middle and our end..." The fifth ignorance is our psychological ignorance: "Even within this brief temporal becoming we are ignorant of our large and complex being, of that in us which is superconscient, subconscious, intraconscient, circumconscient to our surface becoming; we take that surface becoming with its small selection of overtly mentalised experiences for our whole existence..."

The constitutional ignorance is sixth: "We are ignorant of the true constitution of our becoming; we take the mind or life or body or any two of these or all three for our true principle or the whole account of what we are, losing sight of that which constitutes them and determines by its occult presence and is meant to determine sovereignly by its emergence their operations..." Finally, there is the practical ignorance: "As a result of all these ignorances, we miss the true knowledge, government and enjoyment of our life in the world; we are ignorant

in our thought, will, sensations, actions, return wrong or imperfect responses at every point to the questionings of the world, wander in a maze of errors and desires, strivings and failures, pain and pleasure, sin and stumbling, follow a crooked road, grope blindly for a changing goal...

3.4 INTEGRAL KNOWLEDGE

Sri Aurobindo avoids the temptation to define knowledge as a specific limited formulation based on one aspect or tendency which we can recognise in our conscious awareness. He accepts that each major line of development, each major philosophical statement of truth is in fact speaking to one part or focus of our being, but needs to be reconciled, balanced, harmonised and related to the others. Truth is not opposed to truth; rather truth expands to include all aspects of truth. His goal is not to achieve a victory in a battle of ideas, but to find how to reconcile seemingly opposite formulations of truth in an all-encompassing, all-embracing view.

“An integral knowledge then must be a knowledge of the truth of all sides of existence both separately and in the relation of each to all and the relation of all to the truth of the Spirit. Our present state is an Ignorance and a many-sided seeking; it seeks the truth of all things but, – as is evident from the insistence and the variety of the human mind’s speculations as to the fundamental Truth which explains all others, the Reality at the basis of all things, – the fundamental truth of things, their basic reality must be found in some at once fundamental and universal Real; it is that which, once discovered, must embrace and explain all, – for “That being known all will be known”: the fundamental Real must necessarily be and contain the truth of all existence, the truth of the individual, the truth of the universe, the truth of all that is beyond the universe.” (Ghose 1949) The mind’s seeking in each individual direction has its value and becomes a basis for a more comprehensive knowledge when we can finally fit together each of these “truths” into that one all-comprehending Truth that forms the Integral Knowledge.

3.5 THE ORIGIN AND REMEDY OF FALSEHOOD, ERROR, WRONG AND EVIL

[The following extract is Sri Aurobindo’s own words and taken from *The Life Divine*. Some comments are given in square bracket]

The Lord accepts the sin and the virtue of none; because knowledge is veiled by Ignorance, mortal men are deluded. *Gita*. V. 15.

They live according to another idea of self than the reality, deluded, attached, expressing a falsehood, - as if by an enchantment they see the false as the true. *Maitrayani Upanishad*. VII. 10.

They live and move in the Ignorance and go round and round, battered and stumbling, like blind men led by one who is blind. *Mundaka Upanishad*. I. 2. 8.

One whose intelligence has attained to Unity, casts away from him both sin and virtue. *Gita*. II. 50.

He who has found the bliss of the Eternal is afflicted no more by the thought, "Why have I not done the good? Why have I done evil?" One who knows the self extricates himself from both these things. *Taittiriya Upanishad*. II. 9.

These are they who are conscious of the much falsehood in the world; they grow in the house of Truth, they are the strong and invincible sons of Infinity. *Rig Veda*. VII. 60. 5.

The first and the highest are truth; in the middle there is falsehood, but it is taken between the truth on both sides of it and it draws its being from the truth. [Sri Aurobindo's Note: The truth of the physical reality and the truth of the spiritual and superconscious reality. Into the intermediate subjective and mental realities which stand between them, falsehood can enter, but it takes either truth from above or truth from below as the substance out of which it builds itself and both are pressing upon it to turn its misconstructions into truth of life and truth of spirit.] *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. V. 5. 1.

If Ignorance is in its nature a self-limiting knowledge oblivious of the integral self-awareness and confined to an exclusive concentration in a single field or upon a concealing surface of cosmic movement, what, in this view, are we to make of the problem which most poignantly preoccupies the mind of man when it is turned on the mystery of his own existence and of cosmic existence, the problem of evil? A limited knowledge supported by a secret All-Wisdom as an instrument for working out within the necessary limitations a restricted world-order may be admitted as an intelligible process of the universal Consciousness and Energy; but the necessity of falsehood and error, the necessity of wrong and evil or their utility in the workings of the omnipresent Divine Reality is less easily admissible.

And yet if that Reality is what we have supposed it to be, there must be some necessity for the appearance of these contrary phenomena, some significance, some function that they had to serve in the economy of the universe. For in the complete and inalienable self-knowledge of the Brahman which is necessarily all-knowledge, since all this that is is the Brahman, such phenomena cannot have come in as a chance, an intervening accident, an involuntary forgetfulness or confusion of the Consciousness-Force of the All-Wise in the cosmos or an ugly contretemps for which the indwelling Spirit was not prepared and of which it is the prisoner erring in a labyrinth with the utmost difficulty of escape. Nor can it be an inexplicable mystery of being, original and eternal, of which the divine All-Teacher is incapable of giving an account to himself or to us. There must be behind it a significance of the All-Wisdom itself, a power of the All-Consciousness which permits and uses it for some indispensable function in the present workings of our self-experience and world-experience. This aspect of existence needs now to be examined more directly and determined in its origins and the limits of its reality and its place in Nature.

This problem may be taken up from three points of view, - its relation to the Absolute, the supreme Reality, its origin and place in the cosmic workings, its action and point of hold in the individual being. It is evident that these contrary phenomena have no direct root in the supreme Reality itself, there is nothing there that has this character; they are creations of the Ignorance and Inconscience, not fundamental or primary aspects of the Being, not native to the Transcendence

or to the infinite power of the Cosmic Spirit. It is sometimes reasoned that as Truth and Good have their absolutes, so Falsehood and Evil must also have their absolutes, or, if it is not so, then both must belong to the relativity only; Knowledge and Ignorance, Truth and Falsehood, Good and Evil exist only in relation to each other and beyond the dualities here they have no existence. But this is not the fundamental truth of the relation of these opposites; for, in the first place, Falsehood and Evil are, unlike Truth and Good, very clearly results of the Ignorance and cannot exist where there is no Ignorance: they can have no self-existence in the Divine Being, they cannot be native elements of the Supreme Nature. If, then, the limited Knowledge which is the nature of Ignorance renounces its limitations, if Ignorance disappears into Knowledge, evil and falsehood can no longer endure: for both are fruits of unconsciousness and wrong consciousness and, if true or whole consciousness is there replacing Ignorance, they have no longer any basis for their existence. There can therefore be no absolute of falsehood, no absolute of evil; these things are a by-product of the world-movement: the sombre flowers of falsehood and suffering and evil have their root in the black soil of the Inconscient. On the other hand, there is no such intrinsic obstacle to the absoluteness of Truth and Good: the relativity of truth and error, good and evil is a fact of our experience, but it is similarly a by-product, it is not a permanent factor native to existence; for it is true only of the valuations made by the human consciousness, true only of our partial knowledge and partial ignorance.

Truth is relative to us because our knowledge is surrounded by ignorance. Our exact vision stops short at outside appearances which are not the complete truth of things, and, if we go deeper, the illuminations we arrive at are guesses or inferences or intimations, not a sight of indubitable realities: our conclusions are partial, speculative or constructed, our statement of them, which is the expression of our indirect contact with the reality, has the nature of representations or figures, word-images of thought-perceptions that are themselves images, not embodiments of Truth itself, not directly real and authentic. These figures or representations are imperfect and opaque and carry with them their shadow of nescience or error; for they seem to deny or shut out other truths and even the truth they express does not get its full value: it is an end or edge of it that projects into form and the rest is left in the shadow unseen or disfigured or uncertainly visible. It might almost be said that no mental statement of things can be altogether true; it is not Truth bodied, pure and nude, but a draped figure, - often it is only the drapery that is visible. But this character does not apply to truth perceived by a direct action of consciousness or to the truth of knowledge by identity; our seeing there may be limited, but so far as it extends, it is authentic, and authenticity is a first step towards absoluteness: error may attach itself to a direct or identical vision of things by a mental accretion, by a mistaken or illegitimate extension or by the mind's misinterpretation, but it does not enter into the substance. This authentic or identical vision or experience of things is the true nature of knowledge and it is self-existent within the being, although rendered in our minds by a secondary formation that is unauthentic and derivative. Ignorance in its origin has not this self-existence or this authenticity; it exists by a limitation or absence or abeyance of knowledge, error by a deviation from truth, falsehood by a distortion of truth or its contradiction and denial. But it cannot be similarly said of knowledge that in its very nature it exists only by a limitation or absence or abeyance of ignorance: it may indeed emerge in the human mind partly by a

process of such limitation or abeyance, by the receding of darkness from a partial light, or it may have the aspect of ignorance turning into knowledge; but in fact, it rises by an independent birth from our depths where it has a native existence.

Again, of good and evil it can be said that one exists by true consciousness, the other survives only by wrong consciousness: if there is an unmixed true consciousness, good alone can exist; it is no longer mixed with evil or formed in its presence. Human values of good and evil, as of truth and error, are indeed uncertain and relative: what is held as truth in one place or time is held in another place or time to be error; what is regarded as good is elsewhere or in other times regarded as evil. We find too that what we call evil results in good, what we call good results in evil. But this untoward outcome of good producing evil is due to the confusion and mixture of knowledge and ignorance, to the penetration of true consciousness by wrong consciousness, so that there is an ignorant or mistaken application of our good, or it is due to the intervention of afflicting forces. In the opposite case of evil producing good, the happier and contradictory result is due to the intervention of some true consciousness and force acting behind and in spite of wrong consciousness and wrong will or it is due to the intervention of redressing forces. This relativity, this mixture is a circumstance of human mentality and the workings of the Cosmic Force in human life; it is not the fundamental truth of good and evil. It might be objected that physical evil, such as pain and most bodily suffering, is independent of knowledge and ignorance, of right and wrong consciousness, inherent in physical Nature: but, fundamentally, all pain and suffering are the result of an insufficient consciousness-force in the surface being which makes it unable to deal rightly with self and Nature or unable to assimilate and to harmonise itself with the contacts of the universal Energy; they would not exist if in us there were an integral presence of the luminous Consciousness and the divine Force of an integral Being. Therefore the relation of truth to falsehood, of good to evil is not a mutual dependence, but is in the nature of a contradiction as of light and shadow; a shadow depends on light for its existence, but light does not depend for its existence on the shadow. The relation between the Absolute and these contraries of some of its fundamental aspects is not that they are opposite fundamental aspects of the Absolute; falsehood and evil have no fundamentality, no power of infinity or eternal being, no self-existence even by latency in the Self-Existent, no authenticity of an original inherence.

It is no doubt a fact that once truth or good manifests, the conception of falsehood and evil becomes a possibility; for whenever there is an affirmation, its negation becomes conceivable. As the manifestation of existence, consciousness and delight made the manifestation of non-existence, inconscience, insensibility conceivable and, because conceivable, therefore in a way inevitable, for all possibilities push towards actuality until they reach it, so is it with these contraries of the aspects of the Divine Existence. It may be said on this ground that these opposites, since they must be immediately perceivable by the manifesting Consciousness on the very threshold of manifestation, can take rank as implied absolutes and are inseparable from all cosmic existence. But it must first be noted that it is only in cosmic manifestation that they become possible; they cannot pre-exist in the timeless being, for they are incompatible with the unity and bliss that are its substance.

The true solution can intervene only when by our spiritual growth we can become one self with all beings, know them as part of our self, deal with them as if they were our other selves; for then the division is healed, the law of separate self-affirmation leading by itself to affirmation against or at the expense of others is enlarged and liberated by adding to it the law of our self-affirmation for others and our self-finding in their self-finding and self-realisation. It has been made a rule of religious ethics to act in a spirit of universal compassion, to love one's neighbour as oneself, to do to others as one would have them do to us, to feel the joy and grief of others as one's own; but no man living in his ego is able truly and perfectly to do these things, he can only accept them as a demand of his mind, an aspiration of his heart, an effort of his will to live by a high standard and modify by a sincere endeavour his crude ego-nature. It is when others are known and felt intimately as oneself that this ideal can become a natural and spontaneous rule of our living and be realised in practice as in principle.

But even oneness with others is not enough by itself, if it is a oneness with their ignorance; for then the law of ignorance will work and error of action and wrong action will survive even if diminished in degree and mellowed in incidence and character. Our oneness with others must be fundamental, not a oneness with their minds, hearts, vital selves, egos, - even though these come to be included in our universalised consciousness, - but a oneness in the soul and spirit, and that can only come by our liberation into soul-awareness and self-knowledge. To be ourselves liberated from ego and realise our true selves is the first necessity; all else can be achieved as a luminous result, a necessary consequence.

That is one reason why a spiritual call must be accepted as imperative and take precedence over all other claims, intellectual, ethical, social, that belong to the domain of the Ignorance. For the mental law of good abides in that domain and can only modify and palliate; nothing can be a sufficient substitute for the spiritual change that can realise the true and integral good because through the spirit we come to the root of action and existence.

In the spiritual knowledge of self there are three steps which are at the same time three parts of the one knowledge. The first is the discovery of the soul, not the outer soul of thought and emotion and desire, but the secret psychic entity, the divine element within us. When that becomes dominant over the nature, the soul becomes conscious and the mind, life and body take their true place as its instruments; we are aware of a guide within that knows the truth, the good, the true delight and beauty of existence, controls heart and intellect by its luminous law and leads our life and being towards spiritual completeness. Even within the obscure workings of the Ignorance we have then a witness who discerns, a living light that illumines, a will that refuses to be misled and separates the mind's truth from its error, the heart's intimate response from its vibrations to a wrong call and wrong demand upon it, the life's true ardour and plenitude of movement from vital passion and the turbid falsehoods of our vital nature and its dark self-seeking. This is the first step of self-realisation, to enthrone the soul, the divine psychic individual in the place of the ego.

The next step is to become aware of the eternal self in us unborn and one with the self of all beings. This self-realisation liberates and universalises; even if our action still proceeds in the dynamics of the Ignorance, it no longer binds or misleads because our inner being is seated in the light of self-knowledge. The

third step is to know the Divine Being who is at once our supreme transcendent Self, the Cosmic Being, foundation of our universality, and the Divinity within of which our psychic being, the true evolving individual in our nature, is a portion, a spark, a flame growing into the eternal Fire from which it was lit and of which it is the witness ever living within us and the conscious instrument of its light and power and joy and beauty. Aware of the Divine as the Master of our being and action, we can learn to become channels of his Shakti, the Divine Puissance, and act according to her dictates or her rule of light and power within us. Our action will not then be mastered by our vital impulse or governed by a mental standard, for she acts according to the permanent yet plastic truth of things, - not that which the mind constructs, but the higher, deeper and subtler truth of each movement and circumstance as it is known to the supreme knowledge and demanded by the supreme will in the universe.

The liberation of the will follows upon the liberation in knowledge and is its dynamic consequence; it is knowledge that purifies, it is truth that liberates: evil is the fruit of a spiritual ignorance and it will disappear only by the growth of a spiritual consciousness and the light of spiritual knowledge. The division of our being from the being of others can only be healed by removing the divorce of our nature from the inner soul-reality, by abolishing the veil between our becoming and our self-being, by bridging the remoteness of our individuality in Nature from the Divine Being who is the omnipresent Reality in Nature and above Nature. But the last division to be removed is the scission between this Nature and the Supernatural which is the Self-Power of the Divine Existence.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How do you describe ignorance?
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2) Explain integral knowledge.
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3.6 LET US SUM UP

The paradox of knowledge and ignorance, along with goodness and evil, has challenged humans. In this unit we see Aurobindo’s understanding of ignorance as leading to integral knowledge..

3.7 KEY WORDS

- Circumconscient** : The subliminal self is the true mental being and in relation to our waking mind is rather secretly circumconscient; for it envelops as well as supports. Of all this larger part of our being we are ignorant. The term “Intraconscient” and “Circumconscient” of Sri Aurobindo were explained to differentiate the subtle states from grosser states.
- Superconscient** : We are ignorant also of the superconscient, that which we ordinarily call spirit or soul.

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