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"A Great Adventure of the Soul": Sri Aurobindo's Vedāntic Theodicy of Spiritual Evolution

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Abstract This article reexamines Sri Aurobindo's multifaceted response to the problem of evil in *The Life Divine*. According to my reconstruction, his response has three key dimensions: first, a skeptical theist refutation of arguments from evil against God's existence; second, a theodicy of "spiritual evolution," according to which the experience of suffering is necessary for the soul's spiritual growth; and third, a panentheistic conception of the Divine Saccidānanda as the sole reality which playfully manifests as everything and everyone in the universe. While a number of scholars have already discussed Aurobindo's theodicy, I highlight the significance of three aspects of his theodicy that have been largely neglected. First, I emphasize the crucial theodical role of the "psychic entity," Aurobindo's term for the evolving, reincarnating soul within each of us. Second, I elucidate the skeptical theist dimension of his theodicy, which previous scholars have overlooked. Third, I argue that Aurobindo's approach to the problem of evil may have been shaped, in part, by the teachings of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa. Along the way, I also reconstruct the subtle chain of reasoning underlying Aurobindo's various theodical arguments. In the concluding section, I suggest that there are conceptual resources within Aurobindo's thought for responding to some of the most serious objections scholars have leveled against his theodicy.

Keywords Sri Aurobindo · Theodicy · Problem of evil · Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa · Panentheism · Rebirth · Psychic entity

Swami Medhananda: From 2010 to 2019, I published under the name "Ayon Maharaj." In February 2020, I became a *sannyāsin* of the Ramakrishna Order and received the name "Swami Medhananda."

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Among modern Indian thinkers, the Bengali philosopher-mystic Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) stands out as one of the most brilliant, original, and systematic. In major works such as *The Life Divine* (*CWSA* 21–22), *The Synthesis of Yoga* (*CWSA* 23–24), and *Savitri* (*CWSA* 33–34), Aurobindo articulates a new life-affirming spiritual philosophy grounded in his own mystical experiences as well as in the Vedic and Vedāntic traditions.[1] On the basis of his self-described "integral Vedantic" worldview (*CWSA* 21–22: 118), Aurobindo provides a fresh perspective on the problem of evil, the age-old question of why a loving and omniscient God would permit so much evil and suffering in the world. In *The Life Divine*, he presents a sophisticated and highly original theodicy which aims to explain why God allows us to suffer and to commit and experience evil.

Aurobindo's theodicy has attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention. Some scholars—most prominently, S. K. Maitra (1945: 85–123) and Haridas Chaudhuri (1974: 144–69)—have championed Aurobindo's theodicy, highlighting its philosophical advantages over existing theodicies in both India and the West. However, the majority of scholars—including Beatrice Bruteau (1971: 270), L. Stafford Betty (1976), Robert Nozick (1981: 606), Stephen H. Phillips (1985), Michael McDonald (1995: 251–67), and Thomas Padiyath (2014: 323)—have adopted a more critical stance toward Aurobindo's theodicy, arguing that in spite of its sophistication and promise, it is ultimately unconvincing or, at best, incomplete.

Before we are in a position to determine how cogent and convincing Aurobindo's theodicy is, we need to have a sufficiently nuanced and comprehensive understanding of all the key elements of his theodicy as well as their interrelation. I would argue that the scholars mentioned above have focused on some central aspects of Aurobindo's theodicy at the expense of other equally important aspects. Maitra and Betty, for instance, emphasize the theodical implications of Aurobindo's panentheistic metaphysics, while Bruteau, Phillips, and McDonald focus on his doctrine of spiritual evolution.

My aim here is to provide a more comprehensive examination of Aurobindo's theodicy that takes into account all of its key elements. Hence, in addition to discussing the panentheistic and "soul-making" elements in Aurobindo's theodicy, I will also discuss three other elements that previous scholars have largely neglected. First, I will argue that scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the theodical role of the "psychic entity," Aurobindo's term for the evolving individual soul which reincarnates from birth to birth. As we will see, a crucial aspect of his theodicy is his claim that the psychic entity within each of us actually consents to participate in God's suffering-filled world-*līlā*. Second, I will suggest that another important, but generally neglected, aspect of Aurobindo's theodicy is his appeal to what contemporary philosophers call "skeptical theism," the view that our human

[1] Throughout this article, I cite from the 37-volume edition of *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* using the abbreviation "*CWSA*," followed by the volume number and page number. Many of Aurobindo's texts have complicated publication histories, which are explained in detail in the relevant *CWSA* volume. For the publication history of *The Life Divine*, see *CWSA* 21–22: 1109–1115. In short, the first edition of *The Life Divine* was published in monthly instalments in the journal *Arya* between August 1914 and January 1919. Aurobindo substantially revised *The Life Divine* between 1921 and 1939, and he made further minor revisions to the text in the 1940s.

cognitive limitations make it unreasonable for us to infer from our inability to understand why God permits a particular instance of suffering to the conclusion that God had no good reason to permit this suffering. Third, I will make the case that Aurobindo's approach to the problem of evil may have been shaped, in part, by the teachings of the Bengali mystic Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa (1836–1886), whom Aurobindo explicitly acknowledged as a formative influence in his early development. I suggest that Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on evil provide a helpful hermeneutic lens through which we can identify some of the key elements in Aurobindo's theodicy as well as their interrelation.

Part One of this article summarizes Rāmakṛṣṇa's world-affirming Advaitic worldview and his multidimensional response to the problem of evil. Part Two outlines Aurobindo's own philosophy of "realistic Adwaita" (*CWSA* 29: 393), which bears striking similarities with Rāmakṛṣṇa's worldview. Part Three offers a detailed reconstruction of Aurobindo's theodicy in *The Life Divine* as well as the subtle argumentative chain of reasoning by which he develops, and defends, his theodicy. In the course of the section, I will also attempt to clarify the interrelation of the various elements in Aurobindo's theodicy by tracing them to Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings on the problem of evil. Finally, Part Four argues that there are resources within Aurobindo's theodicy to defuse many of the most serious objections that scholars have leveled against it.

Rāmakṛṣṇa's Philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta and His Saint-Making Theodicy

Aurobindo repeatedly acknowledged Rāmakṛṣṇa as a formative influence during his early intellectual and spiritual development. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Aurobindo studied carefully Rāmakṛṣṇa's Bengali teachings as recorded by his disciple Mahendranath Gupta.[2] In his 1908 essay "Spirituality and Nationalism," Aurobindo affirmed that Rāmakṛṣṇa was the "last and greatest" of all the *avatāra*s, "for while others felt God in a single or limited aspect, he felt Him in His illimitable unity as the sum of an illimitable variety" (*CWSA* 6–7: 979). More remarkably, in a 1912 diary entry, Aurobindo noted that he had received three messages on a mystical plane from Rāmakṛṣṇa, who had of course passed away in 1886 (*CWSA* 10–11: 128). In a 1913 letter to a disciple, he revealed the extent of his debt to Rāmakṛṣṇa: "Remember also that we derive from Ramakrishna. For myself it was Ramakrishna who personally came & first turned me to this Yoga" (*CWSA* 36: 179).[3]

[2] Gupta's diary containing Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings was later compiled into the now-famous text *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta* (Gupta 2010). In all subsequent references to this text, I refer to it as "*K*," followed by the page number, and then I refer to Svāmī Nikhilānanda's English translation of the text, *The Gospel of Ramakrishna* (Gupta 1992), abbreviated as "*G*," followed by the page number. Quotations from Nikhilānanda's English translation have been faithfully transcribed with very minor modifications and Indic words transliterated using standard diacritical convention.

[3] In a letter written in the last decade of his life, he again acknowledged the "strong intellectual influence" of the "sayings of Ramakrishna and the writings and speeches of Vivekananda" on his early development (*CWSA* 36: 113).

In spite of Aurobindo's explicit avowal of his debts to Rāmakṛṣṇa, scholars have not yet explored how Rāmakṛṣṇa might have influenced Aurobindo's theodicy and the broader philosophico-spiritual worldview in which his theodicy is embedded. One aim of this article is to begin to fill this lacuna in scholarship on Aurobindo, since I believe we can gain a deeper understanding of Aurobindo's theodicy by considering it in the light of Rāmakṛṣṇa's teachings. To set the stage, I will briefly outline in this section Rāmakṛṣṇa's world-affirming philosophy of "Vijñāna Vedānta"[4] as well as his multidimensional theodicy. For a more detailed exposition of Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy, the reader should consult my recently published book, *Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality: Sri Ramakrishna and Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (Maharaj 2018, especially Chapters 1, 3, 7, and 8).

Rāmakṛṣṇa frequently distinguishes two stages of spiritual realization which he calls "*jñāna*" and "*vijñāna*":

> The *jñānī* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, "Not this, not this." Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijñānī*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized as Brahman through the eliminating process of "Not this, not this" is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is impersonal (*nirguṇa*) is also personal (*saguṇa*). A man cannot live on the roof for a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in *samādhi* come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings. …This is known as *vijñāna* (*K* 50–51/*G* 103–4).

According to Rāmakṛṣṇa, the *jñānī*—a follower of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta—realizes that *nirguṇa* Brahman alone is real and that the world is unreal, a mere "framework of illusion" (*K* 479/*G* 478). By contrast, the *vijñānī*—such as Rāmakṛṣṇa himself—first attains the Advaitic realization of *nirguṇa* Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi* but then goes on to attain the even greater and more expansive realization that the Infinite Divine Reality is not only *nirguṇa* Brahman, but also Śakti, the personal God who has become everything in the world. Hence, the *vijñānī* sees this world not as unreal, but as a "mansion of mirth," as a real manifestation of Śakti (*K* 479/*G* 478). In stark contrast to Śaṅkara's world-negating Advaita Vedānta, Rāmakṛṣṇa's Vijñāna Vedānta is a world-affirming Advaitic philosophy. For Rāmakṛṣṇa, the sole reality is the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality which is both immanent in the universe and beyond it.

Rāmakṛṣṇa's response to the problem of evil has three main dimensions: skeptical theism, a "saint-making" theodicy, and an ultimate theodical appeal to the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna* (Maharaj 2018: 241–80). Several of Rāmakṛṣṇa's visitors argued that instances of apparently pointless evil—such as Genghis Khan's act of mass slaughter—make it reasonable to believe that either God does not exist or that God is omnipotent and omniscient but not perfectly good. On one

[4] "Vijñāna Vedānta" is a term I coined to characterize Rāmakṛṣṇa's philosophy (Maharaj 2018: 13–50).

such occasion, Rāmakṛṣṇa remarked as follows: "Is it possible to understand God's action and Her motives for acting? She creates, She preserves, and She destroys. Can we ever understand why She destroys?" (*K* 127/*G* 161). For Rāmakṛṣṇa, since there is an enormous cognitive gulf between our finite intellects and the omniscient and omnipotent mind of God, our inability to fathom why God permits certain particularly egregious instances of evil does not justify the inference that God had no good reason to permit these evils. In the seventh chapter of my book *Infinite Paths* (Maharaj 2018: 249–55), I argue in detail that Rāmakṛṣṇa's first-line response to the problem of evil is best understood as what contemporary philosophers of religion refer to as "skeptical theism," the view that in light of human cognitive limitations, we are never rationally justified in believing that God has no morally sufficient reason for permitting a given instance of evil.[5]

Rāmakṛṣṇa's skeptical theist position dovetails with a full-blown theodicy. When a visitor asks him why God has created "wicked people," Rāmakṛṣṇa replies as follows:

> In Her *māyā* there exists ignorance (*avidyā*) as well as knowledge (*vidyā*). Darkness is needed too. It reveals all the more the glory of light. There is no doubt that anger, lust, and greed are evils. Why, then, has God created them? In order to create saints (*mahat lok toyer korben bole*). One becomes a saint by conquering the senses (*K* 36–37/*G* 97–98).

This passage contains in a nutshell Rāmakṛṣṇa's saint-making theodicy. According to Rāmakṛṣṇa, God permits evil in Her creation in a spirit of sportive play (*līlā*). Crucially, however, he also notes that God's *līlā* is teleologically oriented: since God has created this world as an environment for saint-making, evil is as necessary as good. Through the experience of both good and evil, we gradually learn to combat our own evil tendencies and cultivate ethical and spiritual virtues that bring us closer to God. Rāmakṛṣṇa's saint-making theodicy also presupposes the doctrines of *karma*, rebirth, and universal salvation. Each one of us, in the course of our saint-making journey through many lives, will gradually become more and more ethical and spiritual until we finally attain the goal of liberation. As Rāmakṛṣṇa puts it, "Everybody will surely be liberated.…It takes a long time to achieve liberation. A man may fail to obtain it in this life. Perhaps he will realize God only after many births" (*K* 37/*G* 98).

However, some of Rāmakṛṣṇa's interlocutors were not entirely satisfied with his saint-making theodicy. On one occasion, the visitor Hari raised an especially poignant objection: "But this play of God is our death" (*K* 437/*G* 436). In other words, even if we will all eventually attain liberation, why did God choose to play this particular "game" which involves so much suffering for us? Couldn't God have devised a better *līlā* with much less, if any, suffering? Tellingly, in his response to Hari, Rāmakṛṣṇa appeals to the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*: "Please tell me who you are. God alone has become all this—*māyā*, *jīva*s, the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles" (*K* 437/*G* 436). On the mystical basis of *vijñāna*, Rāmakṛṣṇa affirms that God Herself sports in the guise of both evildoers and their

[5] For a concise overview of skeptical theism, see McBrayer (2019).

victims. He thereby cuts at the very root of the problem of evil, which usually presupposes a difference between God and Her suffering creatures. From the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*, then, Rāmakṛṣṇa does not so much solve as *dissolve* the problem of evil: since there is nothing but God, God has devised a suffering-filled "game" of saint-making in which all the "players"—the individual souls—in Her cosmic game are actually different forms of God Herself.

Aurobindo's Philosophy of "Realistic Adwaita"

In 1908, Aurobindo had several spiritual experiences that correspond quite closely to what Rāmakṛṣṇa called "*jñāna*" and "*vijñāna.*" In January 1908, under the spiritual guidance of the *yogī* Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, Aurobindo had (in his own words) a "series of tremendously powerful experiences," which made him "see with a stupendous intensity the world as a cinematographic play of vacant forms in the impersonal universality of the Absolute Brahman" (*CWSA* 35: 239–40). As Aurobindo himself confirmed, this early experience was none other than Advaitic *brahmajñāna*, which led him—like Rāmakṛṣṇa's *jñānī*—to look upon the world as an illusion (*CWSA* 35: 239). Only a few months later, Aurobindo was incarcerated for a year in Calcutta for his political activities, and after intensively practicing the *sādhana* of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, he had a panentheistic mystical realization of "Vasudeva" as everything and everyone—including the prisoners, guards, the prison cell, and even the "coarse blankets" that covered him (*CWSA* 8: 6–7). Like Rāmakṛṣṇa's *vijñānī*, Aurobindo now looked upon the world not as unreal, but as a real manifestation of God Himself.

Inspired by these overwhelming spiritual experiences as well as the life and teachings of Rāmakṛṣṇa and Svāmī Vivekānanda, Aurobindo soon went on to reinterpret some of the key Vedāntic scriptures and to develop a "realistic Adwaita" philosophy which he contrasted with Śaṅkara's "illusionist Adwaita" (*CWSA* 29: 392–93). Like Rāmakṛṣṇa, Aurobindo affirms the sole reality of an impersonal-personal Infinite Divine Reality which has the capacity to manifest as the universe and all the individual souls inhabiting it. For Aurobindo, then, the personal God—understood as Cit-Śakti, or "Consciousness-Force"—is an eternally real aspect of the Divine Saccidānanda, and this universe, as well as all individual souls, are fully real manifestations of this Cit-Śakti (*CWSA* 21–22: 196). In his full-scale interpretations of the *Īśā Upaniṣad* (*CWSA* 17: 1–91) and *Kena Upaniṣad* (18: 3-98), as well as the *Bhagavad Gītā* (19), he argues that these Vedāntic scriptures propound precisely such a realistic Advaita.[6] Tellingly, in his 1909 essay "Karmayoga," Aurobindo explicitly credited Rāmakṛṣṇa and Vivekānanda with paving the way for such a new, life-affirming interpretive "synthesis" of the Vedāntic scriptures:

> The word Vedanta is usually identified with the strict Monism and the peculiar theory of Maya established by the lofty and ascetic intellect of Shankara. But

[6] I discuss in detail Aurobindo's commentaries on the *Gītā* and the *Īśā Upaniṣad* respectively in Maharaj 2015 and 2020.

> it is the Upanishads themselves and not Shankara's writings, the text and not the commentary, that are the authoritative Scripture of the Vedantin. Shankara's, great and temporarily satisfying as it was, is still only one synthesis and interpretation of the Upanishads. There have been others in the past which have powerfully influenced the national mind and there is no reason why there should not be a yet more perfect synthesis in the future. It is such a synthesis, embracing all life and action in its scope, that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have been preparing (*CWSA* 13: 10).

One of the most unique aspects of Aurobindo's philosophy is his doctrine of the "psychic entity," the reincarnating and evolving soul at the deepest core of our being which is a "portion" of the Divine Saccidānanda itself (*CWSA* 21–22: 238–40). As a result of ignorance, we identify ourselves not with the divine psychic entity within, but with the superficial "desire-soul," the egoic self that is the seat of all worldly desires and attachments (*CWSA* 21–22: 238). Through various experiences—both pleasurable and unpleasurable—in the course of many embodiments, the psychic entity within us assimilates the essence of all our experiences, eventually forming a full-fledged "psychic being" which is able to use the body and mind as its instruments, thereby purifying and ultimately divinizing them (*CWSA* 21–22: 239–40).

At an individual level, since moral evil usually stems from the self-affirming "vital ego,"[7] we can eliminate the evil qualities and tendencies within us by engaging in spiritual practice, which leads us gradually to break our identification with the egoistic desire-soul and to identify instead with the true psychic entity within (*CWSA* 21–22: 552–54). For Aurobindo, the ideal spiritual practice is an "integral Yoga" that combines the disciplines of *bhakti* (devotion), *jñāna* (knowledge), and *karma* (works) (*CWSA* 23–24: 609–15). Through the sincere practice of integral Yoga and the grace of the Divine, we should eventually pass through three stages of spiritual realization (*CWSA* 21–22: 653–54). In the first stage of "psychic awakening," we realize our identity with the psychic being within, which becomes the dominant force in our personality, controlling and disciplining the body and mind (*CWSA* 23–24: 184; 21–22: 239–40). In the second stage, we attain the liberative realization that, on a higher plane of consciousness, we are also the impersonal nondual Ātman, the transcendent Witness that remains unaffected by the world (*CWSA* 21–22: 240–41). In the third stage, we ascend to the level of "supramental" consciousness, realizing the impersonal-personal Divine Being, or "Purushottama,"[8] one aspect of which is the eternal Ātman and a portion of which is the psychic entity within each individual soul (*CWSA* 21–22: 654). This "supramental Truth-Consciousness" then descends into our nature, transforming our life here on earth by divinizing us at every level of our being (*CWSA* 21–22: 242).

[7] The "vital ego" is Aurobindo's term for the egoic self at the *prāṇamaya* level of our being (to use the terminology of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*).

[8] In his discussion of chapter 15 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Aurobindo argues that the term "Puruṣottama" in 15.19 denotes the impersonal-personal Divine Reality (*CWSA* 19: 435–49). For an extended discussion of Aurobindo's interpretation of the *Gītā*'s doctrine of the Puruṣottama, see Maharaj (2015).

At the collective level, all life on earth is the progressive self-manifestation of the Divine. The world has very slowly evolved from apparently insentient matter to plant, animal, and human life precisely because the Divine Consciousness-Force was always secretly "involved" in every form of earthly existence from the beginning (*CWSA* 21–22: 309–921). According to Aurobindo, just as nature has evolved from matter to mind, nature will in the future evolve from mind to Supermind. Hence, vital egoism—and the moral evil stemming from it—is a necessary but transitional phase in the cosmic evolution, one that will eventually be superseded once we evolve from mind to Supermind, an inconceivably blissful divine state of being in which evil and suffering have no place. Although the evolution from mind to Supermind is inevitable, we can accelerate the process of this natural cosmic evolution through the individual and collective practice of integral Yoga (*CWSA* 23–24: 6–7).

Aurobindo's Theodicy of Spiritual Evolution

Aurobindo addresses the problem of evil at length in two works, *The Riddle of this World* (*CWSA* 28: 253–64) and *The Life Divine* (*CWSA* 21–22). Since all the key elements of the theodicy first presented in *The Riddle of this World* were developed with greater detail and rigor in *The Life Divine*, I will focus here on the latter text. Aurobindo presents his theodicy primarily in four chapters of *The Life Divine*: Chapters 11 and 12 of Book One, respectively entitled "Delight of Existence: The Problem" and "Delight of Existence: The Solution"; Chapter 4 of Book Two, entitled "The Divine and the Undivine"; and Chapter 14 of Book Two, entitled "The Origin and Remedy of Falsehood, Error, Wrong and Evil." In these chapters, he articulates and defends the various dimensions of his theodicy by means of a subtle argumentative dialectic which I will attempt to reconstruct here.

Aurobindo motivates his own theodicy by arguing, from a very high altitude, that any theodicy that presupposes an ultimate ontological difference between the personal God and His creatures is doomed to fail. Most traditional theodicies, especially in Abrahamic traditions, presuppose the existence of "an extra-cosmic personal God, not Himself the universe, one who has created good and evil, pain and suffering for His creatures, but Himself stands above and unaffected by them" (*CWSA* 21–22: 102). He then goes on to launch a bold metacritique of all such theodicies:

> On no theory of an extra-cosmic moral God, can evil and suffering be explained, —the creation of evil and suffering,—except by an unsatisfactory subterfuge which avoids the question at issue instead of answering it or a plain or implied Manicheanism which practically annuls the Godhead in attempting to justify its ways or excuse its works (*CWSA* 21–22: 102).

This passage should remind us of Rāmakṛṣṇa's ultimate theodical appeal to the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*: since both evildoers and victims of evil are different guises of God Himself, the question of why God permits His creatures to suffer turns out to be based on the false presupposition that God is different from

His creatures. Starting from this premise, Aurobindo mounts a provocative metacritique of traditional theodicies: any nonpanentheistic attempt to explain why God permits His creatures to suffer is bound to fail, because it inevitably falls into one of two errors.

On the one hand, there are theodicies that provide a divine rationale for permitting suffering. Some Christian theodicists argue, for instance, that God has given us the invaluable gift of freedom, which necessitates the possibility of evil and suffering, since we can misuse our freedom toward evil ends.[9] The Christian philosopher John Hick (2010) has argued that God has created this world as an environment for "soul-making" in which evil is inevitable: through our encounter with both good and evil, we grow ethically and spiritually until we become perfect children of God and attain salvation. Aurobindo seems to have this kind of soul-making theodicy in mind when he refers to the view that pain is "a trial and an ordeal" (*CWSA* 21–22: 101). From Aurobindo's perspective, all such theodicies amount to nothing more than an "unsatisfactory subterfuge" (*CWSA* 21–22: 102), since they cannot answer the ultimate question: if God is both omnipotent and perfectly loving, why did He devise a cosmic scheme that entails so much suffering for us? For instance, in the context of Hick's soul-making theodicy, we can ask: why didn't God just create us as perfect children of God in the first place? In that case, there would have been no need—indeed, no possibility—of moral evil in this world. In the context of theodicies that appeal to the intrinsic value of human freedom, we can ask: couldn't God have created us as free creatures whose naturally good propensities nonetheless outweighed our evil propensities, so that we would have been far less inclined to commit evil deeds, if at all?[10]

It should be noted that Aurobindo's metacritique is so far-reaching that it applies not only to soul-making and freedom-based theodicies, but to any theodicy that presupposes a fundamental difference between God and His suffering creatures. It seems to me that theologians and philosophers have not yet paid sufficient attention to Aurobindo's bold challenge to the traditional theodical enterprise. Indeed, the very fact that thinkers in the past two millennia, particularly in Abrahamic traditions, have proposed such a dizzying array of theodicies—none of which has become authoritative or has come anywhere close to finding universal acceptance—may reflect our lingering sense that all such theodicies are ultimately unconvincing "subterfuges" that evade the ultimate question: even if we can somehow manage to explain why evil is necessary in this world, why couldn't the omnipotent God have created a different, better world in which there was much less evil or no evil at all?

On the other hand, any theodicy that attempts to get God off the hook by positing a superhuman evil agency—such as Satan or Ahriman—ends up being nothing more than "a plain or implied Manicheanism which practically annuls the Godhead in attempting to justify its ways or excuse its works" (*CWSA* 21–22: 102). That is, any theodicy that grants as much, or more, power to the superhuman agency responsible for evil as it does to God is able, at best, to save God's omnibenevolence at the

[9] See, for instance, Swinburne (1998).

[10] For a more detailed critique of Hick's soul-making theodicy from an Indic standpoint, see Maharaj (2018: 281–309).

expense of His omnipotence. After all, God's omnipotence, by definition, entails that there is no power equal to, or greater than, His own. And if the evil superhuman agency is granted less power than God, then the problem of evil reappears in another form: if God is more powerful than the evil agency, why didn't God subdue or destroy this evil agency that is responsible for so much suffering in this world? In short, then, Aurobindo argues that any theodicy that presupposes a difference between God and His creatures faces an aporia: it turns out to be, in the final analysis, either a subterfuge that fails to justify God's ways or a Manicheanism that ends up curtailing God's omnipotence.

After rejecting all theodicies that presuppose an "extra-cosmic" God, Aurobindo goes on to reformulate the problem of evil in the context of his own panentheistic Vedāntic framework:

> Sachchidananda of the Vedanta is one existence without a second; all that is, is He. If then evil and suffering exist, it is He that bears the evil and suffering in the creature in whom He has embodied Himself. The problem then changes entirely. The question is no longer how came God to create for His creatures a suffering and evil of which He is Himself incapable and therefore immune, but how came the sole and infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss to admit into itself that which is not bliss, that which seems to be its positive negation (*CWSA* 21–22: 102).

If theodicies presupposing an extra-cosmic God strive to defend God against the charge of "cruelty to others," Aurobindo's panentheistic theodicy has to explain why God inflicts pain and suffering on Himself (*CWSA* 21–22: 102). Why does the ever-blissful Saccidānanda choose to admit suffering into itself? One might argue that while Aurobindo's God is not a sadist delighting in the suffering of His creatures, He does seem to be a masochist delighting in His own suffering. The problem of evil, then, morphs into the problem of divine masochism.

Aurobindo, like Rāmakṛṣṇa, initially responds to this reformulated problem of evil by appealing to skeptical theism:

> If to us things appear undivine, if we hasten to condemn this or that phenomenon as inconsistent with the nature of a divine being, it is because we are ignorant of the sense and purpose of the Divine in the world in its entirety. Because we see only parts and fragments, we judge of each by itself as if it were the whole, judge also the external phenomena without knowing their secret sense; but by doing so we vitiate our valuation of things, put on it the stamp of an initial and fundamental error (*CWSA* 21–22: 409).

Aurobindo emphasizes here the unfathomable gulf between our finite human minds and the omniscient mind of God. When we are confronted with a particularly egregious instance of evil, we are often tempted to assume that God could not possibly have had a good reason for permitting that evil. However, might it not be possible—in light of human cognitive limitations—that the omniscient and omnipotent God may have reasons for permitting a given instance of evil that lie beyond our ken? As a skeptical theist, Aurobindo argues that just because we are

unable to think of a good reason for God to permit an evil, we are not justified in inferring that God had no good reason for permitting that evil.[11]

At the same time, Aurobindo insists that this skeptical theist position, while "true up to a certain point," is nonetheless "incomplete" (*CWSA* 21–22: 409). In a single dense sentence, he provides three arguments for why skeptical theism, on its own, is not adequate to defuse the problem of evil:

> It takes insufficient account of the human consciousness and the human view from which we have to start; it does not give us the vision of the harmony it alleges, and so it cannot meet our demand or convince, but only contradicts by a cold intellectual conception our acute human sense of the reality of evil and imperfection; it gives too no lead to the psychic element in our nature, the soul's aspiration towards light and truth and towards a spiritual conquest, a victory over imperfection and evil (*CWSA* 21–22: 409–10).

First, the skeptical theist position fails to take sufficiently into account the fact that the problem of evil is a problem that arises from our limited human standpoint. For instance, even if we concede the skeptical theistic argument that God may have reasons for acting that lie beyond our ken, the problem of evil reemerges in another form, since we can still ask why a loving God would hide from us his reasons for acting. Why would a perfectly loving God leave us in the dark on these matters? Second, skeptical theism "does not give us the vision of the harmony it alleges." In other words, Aurobindo argues that skeptical theism is incomplete without theodicy: a fully adequate response to the problem of evil must not only appeal to the skeptical theist argument that God may have reasons for permitting evil that we cannot fathom, but also provide a plausible positive explanation of why God permits evil. Third, and perhaps most interestingly, he argues that skeptical theism, by itself, gives "no lead" to our soul, the psychic entity that strives to overcome evil and to help divinize this world. Put another way, the skeptical theist position dismisses the problem of evil too swiftly, thereby failing to recognize that there is, in fact, a deep spiritual truth at the core of the problem of evil itself—namely, our soul's "divine dissatisfaction" with our present imperfect state of being and its "divine aspiration" to grow into a divine state of being in which imperfection and evil no longer have a place (*CWSA* 21–22: 411).

In light of Aurobindo's criticisms of skeptical theism as a self-sufficient response to the problem of evil, we might ask: what precise role does skeptical theism play in his overall response to the problem of evil? Although answering this question requires speculating somewhat beyond what Aurobindo explicitly states in *The Life Divine*, I will provide an answer that I see as a plausible extension or development of Aurobindo's complex stance toward skeptical theism. The key, I think, is to recognize that Aurobindo acknowledges not a single problem of evil, but several different forms of the problem of evil. For instance, many people have formulated the problem of evil as an argument from evil against God's existence. Let us call this POE_s, with the "s" standing for "skeptics" who think that the problem of evil

[11] Obviously, Aurobindo did not use the term "skeptical theism" to characterize his position, since the term was coined decades after his death.

should lead us to question or deny God's existence. Aurobindo is clearly aware of POE_s, since he cites the Buddha as an example of someone who "denied the existence" of a personal God by arguing that an all-loving God would never have devised a law of *karma* that entails so much suffering for His creatures (*CWSA* 21–22: 101). One standard form of POE_s—which contemporary philosophers call the "evidential argument from evil"—usually runs roughly as follows:

(1) There exist instances of horrendous moral evil.
(2) An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being would prevent the occurrence of any horrendous moral evil.
(3) Therefore, there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.[12]

While (1) seems uncontroversially true, (2) can be questioned. A number of recent philosophers, including William P. Alston (1991) and Daniel Howard-Snyder (2009), have attempted to refute (2) by defending the skeptical theist view that in light of human cognitive limitations, we are never in a position to know, or even to have good reason to believe, that an omnipotent, omniscient, and all-loving God would prevent all instances of horrendous evil.[13] Skeptical theists argue that (2) is based on the unjustified inference from "I cannot think of a good reason for God to have permitted horrendous evil *E*" to "There is no good reason for God to have permitted *E*." I believe Aurobindo would agree with contemporary philosophers like Alston that skeptical theism is sufficient on its own to refute arguments from evil against God's existence (that is, POE_s).

However, Aurobindo was well aware that a different form of the problem of evil arises for religious believers. Let us call this POE_b, with the "b" standing for religious "believers" who do not so much question God's existence as attempt to strengthen and deepen their religious faith by gaining a better understanding of why God permits the evils they see in the world.[14] Accordingly, he formulates the "ethical problem of evil" in terms of POE_b: "For if the world be an expression of Sachchidananda, not only of existence that is conscious-force,—for that can easily be admitted,—but of existence that is also infinite self-delight, how are we to account for the universal presence of grief, of suffering, of pain?" (*CWSA* 21–22: 100). Notice that he poses the ethical problem of evil from within his integral Vedāntic framework: even those who accept that the world is a manifestation of Saccidānanda usually will—and, indeed, should—raise the question of why there is so much suffering in this supposedly divine world. For Aurobindo, while skeptical theism is sufficient on its own to resolve POE_s, a fully adequate response to POE_b must combine skeptical theism with theodicy. It is in this sense, I think, that he

[12] For a classic formulation of this type of evidential argument from evil, see Rowe (1979).

[13] See also Dougherty and McBrayer's (2014) edited volume on skeptical theism.

[14] Numerous recent philosophers have distinguished POE_b from POE_s. See, for instance, Howard-Snyder (1999).

claims that skeptical theism is "incomplete" without a theodical "vision of the harmony it alleges" (*CWSA* 21–22: 409).

As we will see, Aurobindo follows Rāmakṛṣṇa in combining skeptical theism with a theodicy of spiritual evolution grounded ultimately in a panentheistic metaphysics. Aurobindo motivates his theodicy by asking, "Why should Brahman, perfect, absolute, infinite, needing nothing, desiring nothing, at all throw out force of consciousness to create in itself these worlds of forms?" (*CWSA* 21–22: 98). Aurobindo answers this question by appealing to the traditional Vedāntic doctrine of *līlā*.[15] Since God is absolutely free and desireless, we cannot impute any ordinary motives to God, since any such motive would imply a lack or need in God, thereby contradicting God's perfection and freedom (*CWSA* 21–22: 98). Therefore, Saccidānanda can only manifest as this universe in a spirit of sportive play. As Aurobindo puts it, the world is the "Lila" of God, who is "creating and re-creating Himself in Himself for the sheer bliss of that self-creation, of that self-representation,—Himself the play, Himself the player, Himself the playground" (*CWSA* 21–22: 111). Notice that Aurobindo follows Rāmakṛṣṇa in explaining God's cosmic *līlā* from a panentheistic standpoint, according to which everything and everyone involved in the *līlā*—indeed, the *līlā* itself—is God alone.

Also like Rāmakṛṣṇa, Aurobindo argues that this world-*līlā* is teleologically oriented. As he puts it, there is "a reason in the All-Wisdom that makes the play significant and intelligible" (*CWSA* 21–22: 425). According to Aurobindo, the Divine Saccidānanda has playfully created this world as an arena for the gradual evolutionary manifestation of the Divine. Saccidānanda, which is first "involved" in apparently insentient matter, manifests in progressively higher forms from plant life to animal life. The current human stage of evolution represents a marked advance from previous stages, since human beings have developed their mental, moral, aesthetic, and spiritual capacities to a much greater extent than lower animals have. Nonetheless, the "mental consciousness of man," which is "part knowledge, part ignorance," is not the pinnacle of cosmic evolution, but only a transitional phase that will eventually culminate in the evolutionary telos of Supermind (*CWSA* 21–22: 425). He elaborates the far-reaching theodical implications of this evolutionary doctrine in the following passage:

> Imperfection becomes then a necessary term of the manifestation: for, since all the divine nature is concealed but present in the Inconscient, it must be gradually delivered out of it; this graduation necessitates a partial unfolding, and this partial character or incompleteness of the unfolding necessitates imperfection. An evolutionary manifestation demands a mid-stage with gradations above and under it,—precisely such a stage as the mental consciousness of man, part knowledge, part ignorance, a middle power of being still leaning on the Inconscient but slowly rising towards the all-conscious Divine Nature. A partial unfolding implying imperfection and ignorance may take as its inevitable companion, perhaps its basis for certain

[15] The locus classicus for traditional Vedāntic discussions of the problem of evil is *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.32–34, which emphasize the doctrines of *līlā* and *karma*. For discussions of the Vedāntic theodicies of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, see Clooney (1989); Matilal (1992); and Maharaj (2018: 245–49).

> movements, an apparent perversion of the original truth of being. For the ignorance or imperfection to endure there must be a seeming contrary of all that characterises the divine nature, its unity, its all-consciousness, its all-power, its all-harmony, its all-good, its all-delight; there must appear limitation, discord, unconsciousness, disharmony, incapacity, insensibility and suffering, evil (*CWSA* 21–22: 425).

Through an elaborate chain of reasoning, Aurobindo infers the necessity of evil from the "graduation" of the cosmic evolution. In the course of his subtle theodical argument, he exploits the semantic bivalence of the crucial term "graduation." For Aurobindo, the cosmic evolution is "graduated," both in the sense that it is a stadial one and in the sense that it is a gradual one. In the first step of his argument, he claims that the "graduation" of the cosmic evolution "necessitates a partial unfolding." Here, I think he means primarily that the evolutionary process is a stadial one which requires that the Divine Saccidānanda is only partially manifested in all the intermediate stages of evolution. This partial character of the divine "unfolding" at the intermediate stages of evolution, in turn, necessitates imperfection, since absolute perfection is only achieved at the endpoint of the evolutionary process. At our current mental stage of evolution, imperfection is inevitable, since human consciousness is a mixture of knowledge and ignorance. But why does imperfection entail evil and suffering? Aurobindo answers this key theodical question by emphasizing the fact that God has freely chosen to make this evolutionary process a slow and gradual one. A slow evolution from ignorance to divine knowledge requires that imperfection "endure" for some time in the intermediate evolutionary stages, and it is precisely the apparently "undivine" qualities—such as limitation, suffering, and evil—which serve as a kind of strong, albeit ultimately transient, counterpressure to the immanent Divine, which would otherwise unfold much too rapidly in the evolutionary process.

At this point, Aurobindo anticipates another serious objection to his theodicy: why did the free and omnipotent Saccidānanda choose to devise such a slow evolutionary scheme in the first place, if He knew that it would entail so much evil and suffering? He responds to this objection by appealing to what could be described as a "spiritual Hegelianism": the Divine Saccidānanda freely chooses to "plunge" into Inconscience and to manifest itself very slowly in the course of evolution for the sake of the unique delight of achieving "a new affirmation of Sachchidananda in its apparent opposite" (*CWSA* 21–22: 427). From Aurobindo's perspective, only the Divine Saccidānanda is so daring, so powerful, so self-assured that it would freely choose among its infinite possibilities for manifestation the one that involves such a deep and perilous plunge into apparent Inconscience, with all its attendant imperfection and suffering.[16]

However, one could still object that Aurobindo's theodicy is so high altitude, so cosmic that while it might explain why Saccidānanda chooses to permit so much evil in His cosmic *līlā*, it has not yet been able to account for suffering individuals. Put another way, even if nothing exists but God, most of us have not yet attained

[16] Betty (1976) discusses this aspect of Aurobindo's theodicy very persuasively.

this panentheistic spiritual realization, so we still feel that we are individuals subject to pain and suffering of all kinds. As Aurobindo himself acknowledges, even a theodicy based on a panentheistic metaphysics must account for the apparent suffering of the individual: "we cannot and ought not to dismiss as entirely and radically false and unreal the values that are given to it [the universe] by our own limited human consciousness" (*CWSA* 21–22: 421).

Aurobindo begins to explain how the "individual utility" of evil is related to its "cosmic" utility in the following passage:

> For without experience of pain we would not get all the infinite value of the divine delight of which pain is in travail; all ignorance is a penumbra which environs an orb of knowledge, every error is significant of the possibility and the effort of a discovery of truth; every weakness and failure is a first sounding of gulfs of power and potentiality; all division is intended to enrich by an experience of various sweetness of unification the joy of realised unity. All this imperfection is to us evil, but all evil is in travail of the eternal good; for all is an imperfection which is the first condition—in the law of life evolving out of Inconscience—of a greater perfection in the manifesting of the hidden divinity (*CWSA* 21–22: 421–22).

This passage should remind us of Rāmakṛṣṇa's crucial theodical claim that God permits us to experience evil and suffering "in order to create saints" (*K* 36–37/ *G* 97–98). Like Rāmakṛṣṇa, Aurobindo claims that we grow morally and spiritually through our experiences of both good and evil, strength and weakness, truth and error.

In order to explain how apparently adverse experiences can help us evolve morally and spiritually, Aurobindo appeals to his key doctrine of the psychic entity. For Aurobindo, the gradualness of the evolutionary process at the cosmic level is mirrored, at the individual level, in the gradual evolution of individual souls through the course of many embodiments. Accordingly, at various points in *The Life Divine*, he makes clear that his evolutionary theodicy presupposes the traditional Hindu doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. As he puts it, the cosmic evolution runs in parallel with "an invisible process of soul evolution with rebirth into ascending grades of form and consciousness as its machinery" (*CWSA* 21–22: 858). If there were no rebirth, the individual would simply disappear at death and only the species to which that individual belonged would continue to live on, until it evolved into a higher species. However, beneath the superficial and ephemeral body-mind complex lies the reincarnating soul—the eternal psychic entity within us—which evolves from life to life and assumes bodies in higher and higher species. For Aurobindo, then, "each grade of cosmic manifestation, each type of form that can house the indwelling Spirit, is turned by rebirth into a means for the individual soul, the psychic entity, to manifest more and more of its concealed consciousness" (*CWSA* 21–22: 858). For instance, as the psychic entity evolves, it may assume the body of a dog in one life, an ape in another, and then many different human bodies until it is finally able to manifest the Divine fully.

Aurobindo explains the theodical significance of his doctrine of the evolving soul as follows: "the psychic being in us takes its account even of its most perverse or

contrary as well as its more benign experiences and grows by the rejection of them or acceptance; it extracts a divine meaning and use from our most poignant sufferings, difficulties, misfortunes" (*CWSA* 21–22: 420–21). In the early stages of its development, the psychic entity—even though it only seeks that which is true, good, and divine—is not sufficiently powerful and evolved to control and discipline the body, life, and mind of the individual.[17] As a result, less psychically evolved individuals tend to be unaware of, or unreceptive to, the higher promptings of the psychic entity within them, obeying instead the superficial ego, which usually prompts them to engage in wrong thought and action, inevitably leading to suffering and evil. However, in the course of each embodiment, the psychic entity in each of us evolves and grows stronger by discerning the divine sense and purpose of all our experiences of both happiness and suffering. The psychic entity, as a spark of the Divine, aids in the divine purpose of turning to "our spiritual profit" even our experiences of utmost suffering and our worst acts of evil and cruelty (*CWSA* 21–22: 421).

Although Aurobindo's theodical account of the spiritual value of evil and suffering is generally quite abstract, he does helpfully indicate, at one point, the specific process by which the psychic entity learns from our experiences of evil and suffering: "the soul must learn the results of the Ignorance, must begin to feel their reactions as a spur to its endeavour of mastery and conquest and finally to a greater endeavour of transformation and transcendence" (*CWSA* 21–22: 422). For instance, when we commit a selfish or evil deed as a result of ignorance, the soul within us develops and grows stronger as it becomes aware of the unwholesome consequences of the deed—in the form of negative emotional reactions, such as unhappiness, guilt, anger, and so on. In the early stages of spiritual development, the psychic entity is still too weak to intervene directly in such cases, so it generally cannot prevent us from committing the evil or selfish acts themselves. Nonetheless, the psychic entity always learns from such negative experiences and is increasingly able to influence or guide the body, life, and mind in at least a covert and partial manner. Conversely, whenever we do something good or spiritually beneficial, the psychic entity also grows in stature and power, since it thrives on goodness, truth, beauty, and devotion. Eventually, through undergoing a variety of positive and negative experiences, the psychic entity becomes sufficiently developed to begin to control the body, life, and mind in a more direct manner. When the psychic entity grows sufficiently strong, it forms a "psychic being," a full-blown psychic personality that directly governs the psychophysical organism and begins to unfold all of its latent divine possibilities. At this stage, the psychic being is able to transform the body, life, and mind into conscious instruments of God which aid in actualizing God's purpose on earth.

Significantly, Aurobindo also takes pains to connect his account of the evolving psychic entity to the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. For Aurobindo, rebirth is "the

[17] In describing the soul in the context of his theodicy, Aurobindo uses the terms "psychic entity" and "psychic being" almost interchangeably, even though he is careful to distinguish the concepts in other contexts. However, since the psychic being is nothing but the fully developed psychic personality of the psychic entity itself, Aurobindo's vacillation between these two terms does not affect his theodical argument, as far as I can tell.

machinery of an evolutionary process" (*CWSA* 21–22: 833). In order to evolve spiritually, the psychic entity assumes new bodies until it is finally able to express fully the divinity within. Moreover, while Aurobindo claims that *karma* governs the circumstances of our present and future births, he nuances and refines the traditional doctrine of *karma* from his evolutionary standpoint. He emphatically rejects the common but simplistic idea of *karma* as a primarily retributive principle, a "system of rewards and punishments" (*CWSA* 21–22: 844). According to Aurobindo, *karma* should be understood, most fundamentally, as a principle of spiritual evolution:

> Nor can good fortune and evil fortune, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery and suffering be taken as if they existed merely as incentives and deterrents to the natural being in its choice of good and evil. It is for experience, for growth of the individual being that the soul enters into rebirth; joy and grief, pain and suffering, fortune and misfortune are parts of that experience, means of that growth: even, the soul may of itself accept or choose poverty, misfortune and suffering as helpful to its growth, stimulants of a rapid development, and reject riches and prosperity and success as dangerous and conducive to a relaxation of its spiritual effort....All the secret of the circumstances of rebirth centres around the one capital need of the soul, the need of growth, the need of experience; that governs the line of its evolution and all the rest is accessory. Cosmic existence is not a vast administrative system of universal justice with a cosmic Law of recompense and retribution as its machinery or a divine Legislator and Judge at its centre (*CWSA* 21–22: 846–47).

According to the popular view of *karma*, we are rewarded for our good deeds with fortunate or pleasurable circumstances in a future birth, while we are punished for our evil deeds with unfortunate or unpleasant circumstances. While Aurobindo does not reject outright this popular conception of *karma*, he argues that it is an overly mechanical and simplistic understanding of the complex workings of *karma*. Since the primary function of *karma* is to foster the soul's spiritual evolution, the soul may even, in certain cases, choose to experience poverty and suffering in a future birth as a means of spiritual growth.

We can further clarify the precise role that the doctrine of *karma* plays in Aurobindo's theodicy by comparing his understanding of *karma* with Śaṅkara's. In his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34, Śaṅkara addresses a form of the problem of evil: if God is all-loving, why does He treat us so unequally and apparently whimsically, placing some of us in extremely pleasant circumstances and others in miserable or only moderately pleasant circumstances? Śaṅkara refutes this objection by arguing that God places us in our varying circumstances in strict accordance with the law of *karma*: "No fault attaches to God, since this unequal creation is brought about in conformity with the virtues and vices of the creatures that are about to be born" (Śaṅkarācārya 2006: 363). Arguably, Śaṅkara's conception of *karma* comes close to the retributive and mechanical view of *karma* that Aurobindo criticizes.

Moreover, as several scholars have argued, Śaṅkara is in danger of curtailing God's omnipotence by making Him entirely dependent on the law of *karma*.[18]

While Aurobindo agrees with Śaṅkara and other traditional Vedāntins that the doctrine of *karma* plays a crucial role in theodicy, Aurobindo differs from Śaṅkara in two key respects. First, while Śaṅkara adopts a retributive view of *karma*, Aurobindo argues that the primary purpose of *karma* is to foster each soul's spiritual evolution. Second, while Śaṅkara makes God entirely dependent on *karma*, Aurobindo claims that God—and, accordingly, the psychic entity within us which is a portion of God—is superior to the law of *karma*. As he puts it, "it must be ourself, our soul that fundamentally determines its own evolution, and the law of Karma can only be one of the processes it uses for that purpose: our Spirit, our Self must be greater than its Karma. There is Law, but there is also spiritual freedom" (*CWSA* 21–22: 839). In contrast to Śaṅkara, Aurobindo claims that the soul, far from being entirely bound by *karma*, actively employs *karma* as an instrument for its own spiritual evolution by undergoing the necessary experiences in present and future births—both pleasant and unpleasant—that are most conducive to its spiritual growth.

Crucially, Aurobindo also follows Rāmakṛṣṇa in accepting the doctrine of universal salvation. For Aurobindo, every soul will continue to evolve—and assume new bodies on earth—until it finally attains the goal of realizing its oneness with the Divine Saccidānanda. The very fact that the soul within each of us is a portion of the Divine necessitates that every soul will eventually realize and manifest fully its true divine nature. As Aurobindo puts it, the "individual must wake" into "the delight of the eternal superconscient self-possession…and there become one with the indivisible Sachchidananda" (*CWSA* 21–22: 119). It is important not to miss the force of the word "must" here: the evolutionary process of each soul must culminate in its salvific realization of oneness with the Divine.[19]

Some contemporary Western philosophers and theologians are beginning to recognize the theodical necessity of universal salvation. Hick (2010), for instance, argues that the doctrine of eternal damnation for even a single soul is fatal to theodicy. On the one hand, if God wishes to save everyone but is unable to, then He is not omnipotent; on the other hand, if God is able to save everyone but unwilling to, then He is not perfectly good. Therefore, Hick concludes that "the needs of Christian theodicy compel us to repudiate the idea of eternal punishment" (2010: 342).[20] I believe Aurobindo would have agreed with Hick that any theodicy that

[18] See Matilal (1992); Bilimoria (2013); and Maharaj (2018: 245–47).

[19] Werner claims that Aurobindo does not take "universal salvation" to be inevitable. However, he defines universal salvation as "the spiritualisation of the Earth" (2012: 15). While Werner may be right that Aurobindo does not view the universal divinization of life on earth as an inevitability, he overlooks the fact that Aurobindo does uphold a weaker form of universal salvation—namely, the view that everyone will eventually attain spiritual liberation at some point. Throughout this article, I understand "universal salvation" in this weaker sense. It should also be noted that Phillips (1985), in contrast to Werner, argues that Aurobindo does take the life divine to be an inevitable outcome of the evolutionary process, though Phillips believes that Aurobindo's arguments in support of this view are unsuccessful. For the purposes of this article, I will not take a stand on this complex interpretive issue.

[20] For a detailed discussion of the role of universal salvation in the theodicies of Hick and Rāmakṛṣṇa, see Maharaj (2018: 297–305).

does not accept the doctrine of universal salvation is doomed to fail. Arguably, the fact that Aurobindo's theodicy of spiritual evolution—like Rāmakṛṣṇa's—explicitly embraces universal salvation constitutes a distinct advantage over the majority of traditional Abrahamic theodicies, which presuppose that at least some souls will not be saved.

At this point, we might still protest, on behalf of suffering individuals everywhere, that even if we accept Aurobindo's claims that our suffering is ultimately for our own spiritual benefit and that all of us will eventually attain the blissful state of salvation, is there not still an element of coercion or even cruelty in the fact that God apparently forces us to participate in His cosmic "play" of spiritual evolution? After all, a child who chooses to go to the amusement park Six Flags and voluntarily goes on a stomach-churning roller coaster ride may very well enjoy the ride. But would it not be cruel for a friend or parent to force a child to go on this roller coaster ride against the child's will? The same roller coaster ride which is a joy and thrill for someone who chooses to go on it may be a horrifying, vomit-inducing experience for someone else who is forced to go on it against her will. Similarly, would not God's perfect goodness be vitiated if He forced souls to go on His cosmic, suffering-filled "roller coaster ride" of spiritual evolution—stretched out over many lives—even against their will?

Aurobindo forthrightly answers this question in the affirmative but claims that every individual soul involved in this slow evolutionary journey actually *consents* to participating in it:

> A manifestation of this kind, self-creation or Lila, would not seem justifiable if it were imposed on the unwilling creature; but it will be evident that the assent of the embodied spirit must be there already, for Prakriti cannot act without the assent of the Purusha. There must have been not only the will of the Divine Purusha to make the cosmic creation possible, but the assent of the individual Purusha to make the individual manifestation possible (*CWSA* 21–22: 426).

According to Aurobindo, all of us are participating in this "great adventure of the soul" (*CWSA* 21–22: 427) because we have chosen to be adventurers. It is crucial to recognize, however, that the "we" here is not the superficial ego, but the deeper psychic entity within us that assents to participating in this divine *līlā* of spiritual evolution.

At several points in *The Life Divine*, Aurobindo observes that apart from this evolutionary terrestrial world in which we currently find ourselves, there exist unchanging, nonevolving "typal" worlds in which souls also reside:

> There is a possibility of self-expression by an always unveiled luminous development of the being, a possibility also of various expression in perfect types fixed and complete in their own nature: that is the principle of becoming in the higher worlds; they are typal and not evolutionary in their life principle; they exist each in its own perfection, but within the limits of a stationary world-formula (*CWSA* 21–22: 708).

I believe Aurobindo's distinction between this evolving terrestrial world and higher nonevolving typal worlds is a crucial one for understanding the theodical role of the

individual soul's "assent" to participating in God's cosmic *līlā* of spiritual evolution. It is plausible to assume that at least some of the souls residing in these higher typal worlds are precisely those who have not consented to participate in this evolutionary adventure here on earth. From Aurobindo's standpoint, then, every single one of us here on earth is here because our souls have chosen to participate in this suffering-filled terrestrial *līlā*.

Aurobindo then raises one final question: wouldn't it have been more sensible for our souls to have chosen to remain in blissful, nonevolving higher worlds? Is it not foolhardy or perverse—or at the very least counterintuitive—for souls to prefer this arduous, long-drawn-out evolutionary "play" here on earth to the higher typal worlds in which ignorance and suffering are entirely absent? In response to this question, Aurobindo claims that individual souls, like the Divine Saccidānanda itself, choose to participate in this evolutionary adventure for the sake of the "play of self-concealing and self-finding," which is "one of the most strenuous joys that conscious being can give to itself, a play of extreme attractiveness" (*CWSA* 21–22: 426). To make this rather unusual delight more understandable to us, he points out that it is not entirely different from the joy ordinary people often derive from achieving victory and success in the face of various obstacles and difficulties. As he puts it, "There is no greater pleasure for man himself than a victory which is in its very principle a conquest over difficulties, a victory in knowledge, a victory in power, a victory in creation over the impossibilities of creation, a delight in the conquest over an anguished toil and a hard ordeal of suffering" (*CWSA* 21–22: 426). For instance, those who choose to spend months or years training to run in a marathon obviously find a joy in all the arduous struggle and effort, particularly when the effort pays off in the end—say, when they beat their personal best. Similarly, from Aurobindo's perspective, the psychic entity finds a distinct joy in participating in this unique terrestrial adventure in which it "forgets" its divine nature, slowly evolves and develops through its experience of all the various hardships and evils that stem from spiritual ignorance, and finally manifests its true divine nature.

Aurobindo's response to the problem of evil, then, has three basic dimensions, each of which is also found in the teachings of Rāmakṛṣṇa: skeptical theism, a panentheistic metaphysics, and a theodicy of spiritual evolution. In order to refute arguments from evil against God's existence (POE_s), Aurobindo defends the skeptical theist view that in light of human cognitive limitations, *our* inability to understand why an omnipotent and all-loving God would permit certain particularly horrendous evils gives us no good reason to believe that *God* had no good reason for permitting these evils. However, Aurobindo also insists that skeptical theism, on its own, is not an adequate response to POE_b, the other form of the problem of evil that arises for those who believe in God but who struggle to reconcile their faith with the existence of all the evil in the world. In response to POE_b, he combines skeptical theism with a theodicy of spiritual evolution, which is itself grounded in a panentheistic metaphysics. He motivates his own panentheistic theodicy by arguing that any theodicy that presupposes an ultimate ontological difference between God and His creatures is bound to fail. From Aurobindo's panentheistic standpoint of "realistic Adwaita," the problem of evil takes a rather different form: why does the

perfect and omnipotent God choose to inflict "suffering"—or, at least, apparent suffering—on Himself by manifesting in the form of this universe and the ignorant individual souls inhabiting it? His answer is that the Divine Saccidānanda takes special delight in the cosmic play of "self-concealing and self-finding"—a play in which the Divine conceals Himself in apparently insentient matter, progressively manifests in the course of a slow evolution through higher and higher species, and eventually unfolds Himself completely once mind evolves into Supermind.

However, Aurobindo is quick to point out that this panentheistic worldview is not one that denies or overlooks all difference and individuality, so a fully adequate theodicy must take into account not only the divine standpoint, but also the standpoint of the ignorant individual souls for whom suffering and evil remain all too real and pressing. Crucially, the psychic entity within each of us consents to participating in the Divine's cosmic play of spiritual evolution for the sake of the heightened joy of achieving spiritual victory through adversity and struggle. In the course of countless embodiments, the psychic entity slowly evolves and grows stronger as it encounters both good and evil, until it finally forms a psychic being that is able to use the body, life, and mind as instruments of the Divine. Moreover, every soul without exception is destined to attain the salvific realization that it is one with the Divine Saccidānanda. For Aurobindo, then, evil and suffering belong to a necessary but transitional stage in each soul's self-chosen journey of spiritual evolution from ignorance to divine knowledge.

Even if we concede that the theodical picture Aurobindo presents may provide a promising and novel response to the problem of evil, we can still ask: why should we believe that his theodical worldview is true or even remotely plausible? Significantly, Aurobindo provides a mystical justification of his theodicy and his broader spiritual philosophy. He insists that his theodicy is not an intellectual hypothesis, but a discursive articulation of the theodical implications of his own spiritual experiences. In *The Riddle of This World*, he makes this point explicitly:

> But still what is the purpose and origin of the disharmony—why came this division and ego, this world of a painful evolution? Why must this evil and sorrow enter into the divine Good, Bliss and Peace? It is hard to answer to the human intelligence on its own level, for the consciousness to which the origin of this phenomenon belongs and to which it stands as it were automatically justified in a supra-intellectual knowledge, is a cosmic and not an individualised human intelligence; it sees in larger spaces, it has another vision and cognition, other terms of consciousness than human reason and feeling (*CWSA* 28: 257).

For Aurobindo, since the discursive intellect is inherently limited, his rationally articulated theodicy finds its ultimate validation in the direct "supra-intellectual knowledge" of its truth. Moreover, he invites us to test and verify his theodicy and his broader spiritual worldview by engaging in the spiritual practices of integral Yoga and determining whether we are able to attain the promised mystical knowledge for ourselves. For Aurobindo, as we saw in Part Two of this article, the proper practice of integral Yoga should lead us through three stages of spiritual realization: one, the realization of our eternal soul, the psychic entity within us,

which consents to participating in God's cosmic *līlā*; two, the realization of the impersonal nondual Ātman; and three, the supramental realization of the impersonal-personal Divine Saccidānanda. For Aurobindo, then, the numerous rational arguments he presents in favor of his theodicy are meant to allay doubts, to defuse objections, and to convince us of the *possibility* of the truth of his theodicy. Ultimately, however, full verification of his theodicy requires us to engage in the spiritual practices of integral Yoga and to see for ourselves whether his extraordinary claims about God and the soul are true.

Phillips (1986: 64–67) aptly characterizes Aurobindo's mystical justification of his philosophico-spiritual worldview as a "mystic empiricism." Similarly, Michael Stoeber makes a compelling case for the justificatory value of "mystical theodical evidence" as found in the testimony of such mystics as Meister Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius (1992: 116). Of course, mystical experiences can only count as "evidence" for a theodicy if we grant epistemic value to these experiences—and this is, admittedly, a big "if." Indeed, some recent philosophers such as Evan Fales (1996) and Richard Gale (1991: 285–343) have argued that mystical experiences have no epistemic value. By contrast, numerous other philosophers have argued that there are good reasons for granting at least some degree of epistemic value to the experiences of credible mystics.[21] In the sixth chapter of my book *Infinite Paths* (Maharaj 2018: 196–237), I provide a detailed defense of the epistemic value of mystical experience by drawing on Rāmakṛṣṇa's mystical testimony and critically engaging the work of philosophers such as Fales and Gale. It would take me too far afield to rehearse the arguments of that chapter here. For present purposes, I only wish to argue that if we grant at least some degree of epistemic value to mystical experience, then a theodicy based on mystical experience—other things being equal—has greater plausibility than one that is not so based. In fact, McDonald (1995: 22–30) convincingly argues that Aurobindo's theodicy of spiritual evolution has a significant justificatory advantage over comparable Western "soul-making" theodicies—such as Hick's—precisely because Aurobindo's theodicy, unlike Hick's, is mystically grounded.

Addressing Three Major Objections to Aurobindo's Theodicy

We are now in a position to address some of the most serious objections that have been leveled against Aurobindo's theodicy. Since it is not possible for me to address all the objections that scholars have raised, I will focus here on the especially challenging objections of Phillips (1985) and Betty (1976). After outlining their objections, I suggest that there are cogent Aurobindonian responses to all of them. All their objections, I argue, stem from an incomplete understanding of Aurobindo's theodicy: both Phillips and Betty overlook the crucial theodical role of the consenting psychic entity. My aim here is not to argue that Aurobindo's theodicy is immune to all objections but that we should give Aurobindo his full due before passing a verdict on his theodicy. In many cases, we will find that Aurobindo either

[21] See, for instance, Alston (1994); Gellman (1997); and Swinburne (2004: 293–326).

anticipated our very objection or at least provided the conceptual resources for responding to it.

Phillips begins by reminding us—correctly—that Aurobindo attributes to the Divine Saccidānanda the "power to self-manifest or not to do so" (1985: 274). As Aurobindo repeatedly asserts, Brahman is absolutely "free" and, therefore, need not have created this world at all (*CWSA* 21–22: 98). According to Phillips, the fact that "Brahman could have refrained from self-manifesting" vitiates Aurobindo's theodicy from within (1985: 274). Phillips argues as follows:

> Indeed, sometimes Aurobindo says that essential Brahman does not lose awareness of *ānanda* while it bears suffering and evil. We, on the other hand, do not normally experience "Bliss" when we are in pain, nor are we all aware of pain's presumed cosmic significance. Could not Brahman have borne less evil out of regard for those bits of itself which are not directly aware of *ānanda*? If it could, then it would be just as much a bully as any extracosmic Creator would be (1985: 277).

For Phillips, if Brahman could have refrained from creating this world, why did He nonetheless choose to create this particular world which entails so much evil and suffering for us? Couldn't Brahman have created a better world with less suffering for His creatures? If He could have but chose not to, then we can reasonably question God's moral perfection.[22]

Phillips (1985: 278) even anticipates what he presumes would be Aurobindo's response to his objection: namely, that evil is necessary for the achievement of divine life here on earth, so the blissful divine end destined for us all justifies the admittedly arduous and painful means. However, as Phillips rightly points out, this argument, by itself, only justifies evil "from Brahman's perspective" (1985: 277), but not from our perspective—the perspective of us suffering souls: "We ourselves have values, at least most of us do, and by them we discern very real evil. So even if we grant that the development of divine life truly requires the evils we perceive…, the existence of these evils…prompts us to suspect that Brahman would be achieving an 'inhuman' goal in its self-manifestation" (1985: 277–78). Aurobindo's theodicy, Phillips argues, fails to justify evil and suffering from the standpoint of us ignorant people for whom evil is still all too real and distressing.

However, Phillips overlooks the fact that Aurobindo himself anticipates this very objection. At the end of the chapter "The Divine and the Undivine," Aurobindo raises the question of "why this kind of progressive manifestation was itself necessary" (*CWSA* 21–22: 426). His answer to this question, already quoted in the previous section, bears repeating: "A manifestation of this kind, self-creation or Lila, would not seem justifiable if it were imposed on the unwilling creature; but it will be evident that the assent of the embodied spirit must be there already" (*CWSA* 21–22: 426). Evidently, Aurobindo agrees with Phillips that any theodicy that explains evil and suffering only from God's standpoint but not from our human standpoint is doomed to fail. For Aurobindo, our suffering matters and must be

[22] Nozick (1981: 606) raises a similar objection to Aurobindo's theodicy.

taken very seriously. However, he reminds us that the psychic entity within us has already assented to participating in God's suffering-filled evolutionary *līlā*.

Phillips, I would argue, fails to take into account Aurobindo's multitiered ontology of the individual self—particularly his key distinction between the superficial ego and the deeper soul, or psychic entity, within each of us.[23] When Phillips claims that "we" who suffer and perceive evil have a right to object to Brahman's apparently "inhuman" ways, his "we" is evidently the "we" of the superficial ego. I think Aurobindo would happily concede to Phillips that the human ego, in many cases, does not consent to—or understand the divine rationale for—all the evil and suffering it undergoes and encounters. This fact, however, is not fatal to Aurobindo's theodicy, since he maintains that at a deeper level of our being, our psychic entity does assent to participating in God's suffering-filled *līlā*.

In Phillips's defense, one might object that Aurobindo's appeal to the consent of the psychic entity may be nothing more than an *ad hoc* strategy for weaseling out of a tricky philosophical bind. To appreciate why Aurobindo's theodical move here is not merely *ad hoc*, we should recall his ultimately mystical justification of his theodicy. As I discussed at the end of the previous section, if we are reluctant to accept what might seem to be Aurobindo's extragavant claim about the allegedly consenting psychic entity within us, he invites us to verify his claim for ourselves by realizing the psychic entity through spiritual practice. Of course, the requisite spiritual practices are no doubt arduous, but my main point here is that Aurobindo's appeal to the consenting psychic entity within us, far from being *ad hoc*, is an integral part of his theodicy that can only be verified through spiritual experience. Indeed, Phillips himself takes very seriously Aurobindo's "mystic empiricism" (1986: 64) and argues that there are good reasons to believe that his mystical experiences do, in fact, have epistemic value (5–87). Hence, I would argue that Phillips's objection fails because it overlooks the pivotal role of the consenting psychic entity in Aurobindo's theodicy.

We can now consider two major objections raised by Betty (1976) at the end of his important article, "Aurobindo's Concept of Lila and the Problem of Evil." First, Betty argues that the panentheistic metaphysics on which Aurobindo's theodicy is based precludes the possibility of any kind of relationship between human beings and God:

> If we adopt Aurobindo's metaphysics, we will indeed subdue the problem of evil; we will remove the antinomy between God and evil; but can we live with the God that is left? How, for instance, shall we relate to Him? *Can* we relate to Him? What could worship, or adoration, *mean* in the context of a metaphysics which says that "in our depths we ourselves are that One…the indivisible All-Consciousness"…? Worship, it seems to me, could no longer be experienced as a *relation* between oneself and the other; it would have to be experienced rather as a felt sense of *deepening*, of passing from identity with the superficial self to identity with the "real self" below. Will theists regard the

[23] Even in his more recent article on Aurobindo's theodicy (Phillips 2008), Phillips continues to overlook the theodical role of the psychic being.

> sense of *relationship* too dear a possession to be sacrificed on the altar of philosophical consistency? (1976: 328; emphasis in the original).[24]

While Betty concedes that Aurobindo's panentheistic theodicy does "subdue" the problem of evil, it does so at the arguably excessive cost of denying any ontological difference between God and His creatures. In other words, Aurobindo's panentheistic God would be alienating or repugnant to theists who value a loving, worshipful relationship with God. G. W. F. Hegel famously parodied his colleague F. W. J. Schelling's pantheistic philosophy of the Absolute as "the night in which…all cows are black" (1977: 9). One might say that Betty plays the Hegel to Aurobindo's Schelling: Aurobindo's panentheistic philosophy, Betty contends, erases or swallows all individuality and distinction. If there is nothing but God, then there is no scope for prayer, worship, or love—all of which presuppose the possibility of an individual relationship with God.

Betty's objection rests on an insufficiently nuanced understanding of Aurobindo's panentheistic metaphysics. As I emphasized in the previous section, Aurobindo repeatedly affirms that his panentheistic philosophy is one that preserves individuality and the possibility of personally relating to God. For instance, Aurobindo opens "The Divine and the Undivine" chapter of *The Life Divine* by summarizing his panentheistic metaphysics in this single pregnant sentence: "The universe is a manifestation of an infinite and eternal All-Existence: the Divine Being dwells in all that is; we ourselves are that in our self, in our own deepest being; our soul, the secret indwelling psychic entity, is a portion of the Divine Consciousness and Essence" (*CWSA* 21–22: 403). The key to understanding Aurobindo's panentheism is to recognize that the two final statements separated by semicolons represent two different, but valid, spiritual truths that are realized on different planes of consciousness. At the "deepest" level of our being, we are, indeed, one with the "Divine Being." At the same time, however, at the *ānandamaya* level of our being, we are the individual soul, the "psychic entity" which is a "portion" or "spark" of the Divine.[25] For Aurobindo, it is precisely the psychic being within each of us that has a loving relationship with God. As he puts it, "The natural attitude of the psychic being is to feel itself as the Child, the Son of God, the Bhakta; it is a portion of the Divine, one in essence, but in the dynamics of the manifestation there is always even in identity a difference" (*CWSA* 28: 61). Notice Aurobindo's insistence that while we are one "in essence" with the Divine, we are, at the same time, individual souls relating to God within "the dynamics of the manifestation." It is important to recall that Aurobindo's Advaitic philosophy is a "realistic" rather than illusionistic one, so the manifestation is emphatically real. For Aurobindo, since our psychic being—our eternal individual soul—is fully real, our individual relationships with the loving personal God at the level of our psychic being are also fully real. Betty overlooks

[24] Organ (1962: 151) raises a similar question about Aurobindo's theodicy—a question cited approvingly by Betty (1976: 327).

[25] Aurobindo frequently employs the fivefold "*ātmā*" scheme of *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* in *The Life Divine* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*. He explicitly locates the psychic entity at the *ānandamaya* level of being at *CWSA* 21–22: 112–13.

Aurobindo's insistence that at the level of the psychic being, "there is always even in identity a difference."

Betty (1976: 328) cites as evidence for his objection Aurobindo's statement in *The Life Divine* that "in our depths we ourselves are that One...the indivisible All-Consciousness" (*CWSA* 21–22: 112). However, Betty overlooks the context of this statement. In the very next paragraph, Aurobindo explicitly affirms that at the level of the *ānandamaya*, we are the individual psychic entity:

> But if we learn to live within, we infallibly awaken to this presence within us which is our more real self, a presence profound, calm, joyous and puissant of which the world is not the master—a presence which, if it is not the Lord Himself, is the radiation of the Lord within. We are aware of it within supporting and helping the apparent and superficial self and smiling at its pleasures and pains as at the error and passion of a little child.…In the entirely expressive Sanskrit terms, there is an *ānandamaya* behind the *manomaya*, a vast Bliss-Self behind the limited mental self, and the latter is only a shadowy image and disturbed reflection of the former (*CWSA* 21–22: 112–13).

In the context of this passage, our "real self" is not "the Lord Himself"—as Betty wrongly assumes—but "the radiation of the Lord within," the psychic entity which is a spark or portion of the Lord. Betty, like Phillips, makes the mistake of neglecting Aurobindo's multitiered ontology of the self: while we are one with the Divine at the deepest level of our being, we are simultaneously an individual soul relating to the Divine at the *ānandamaya* level.

Betty presents a second objection to Aurobindo's theodicy that he takes to be even more fundamental and damaging:

> But there is perhaps a more basic scandal: A God whose motive for creation is the sheer élan of the play, whose motive for His self-descent into inconscient matter is the delight of a toilsome self-evolution, is a God whose ways, at least for many thinking men, may be too strange to be even remotely congenial. One Christian theist [José Pereira] who knows a little of Aurobindo described Sachchidananda to me as a sadomasochist who "enjoys torturing both himself and us," and cynically concluded that the reason for Aurobindo's popularity was his "recipe for profundity" (1976: 328).

Many theists, Betty suggests, would find repugnant or perverse the idea of a God who delights in an arduous and painful evolutionary process. Hence, Aurobindo's theodicy mitigates the problem of evil only at the cost of leaving us with a conception of God that is unacceptable to many people.

However, the point I made earlier in the context of Phillips's objection applies to Betty's objection as well. I think Aurobindo would readily agree with Betty that "for many thinking men," his conception of God is strange or repulsive. But Aurobindo would add that the reason why these thinking people are repulsed by Aurobindo's God is that they identify with their superficial ego rather than their deeper soul within, the spark of God which fully assents to—and takes delight in—God's *līlā*. It is the very nature of the superficial ego to find its joy not in God but in sense pleasures and other forms of ego-gratification. From Aurobindo's perspective,

Pereira and others are only repulsed by his "sadomasochist" God because they have not penetrated beneath their selfish ego to their deeper divine soul within which delights in God's play. As Aurobindo puts it, the psychic being within us all supports and helps "the apparent and superficial self" and smiles "at its pleasures and pains as at the error and passion of a little child" (*CWSA* 21–22: 112–13). Pereira would no doubt find Aurobindo's claim about the psychic being both condenscending and farfetched, but we should recall that Aurobindo's claim is based on his own mystical experience of the psychic being—a rarefied experience that, he insists, can only be achieved through intensive spiritual practice and God's grace. Moreover, as I pointed out at the end of the previous section, many recent philosophers have argued that there are good philosophical reasons for granting epistemic value to mystical experience. Therefore, those like Pereira who are inclined to dismiss Aurobindo's alleged mystical experiences as fraudulent or delusive would be unjustified in doing so unless they provided cogent arguments for believing either that Aurobindo was lying or that mystical experiences in general have no epistemic value.

Increasingly, contemporary philosophers of religion and theologians have been calling for a cross-cultural approach to theodicy that takes into account responses to the problem of evil in a variety of global traditions.[26] As we have seen, Aurobindo himself ventured into cross-cultural theodicy by challenging theodicies in both Western and non-Western traditions that presuppose an "extra-cosmic" God who is ontologically distinct from His suffering creatures. Further, Aurobindo's innovative and multifaceted approach to the problem of evil lends itself to cross-cultural inquiry. One could, for instance, compare Aurobindo's skeptical theist stance with the various forms of skeptical theism that have been developed by contemporary philosophers such as Stephen Wykstra (1984), Daniel Howard-Snyder (2009), and many others.[27] Moreover, Aurobindo's theodicy of spiritual evolution arguably has two major philosophical advantages over the majority of Western "soul-making" theodicies, the most well known of which is John Hick's. First, since Aurobindo's theodicy—unlike most Western theodicies—presupposes the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, Aurobindo is in a better position than his Western counterparts to explain how the soul evolves and grows here on earth in the course of many embodiments until attaining the final goal of salvation. Second, if we grant some epistemic value to mystical experience, then Aurobindo's mystically grounded theodical worldview—other things being equal—has greater plausibility than theodicies that lack the evidential support of mystical experience.[28]

Ankur Barua's contribution to this special issue, which brings Hindu and Christian theodicies into constructive dialogue, demonstrates the value and timeliness of such cross-cultural inquiry into the problem of evil. Hopefully, his article anticipates a future in which all philosophers and theologians will strive to deepen their understanding of the range of theodical possibilities by drawing on the conceptual resources of both Western and non-Western traditions.

[26] See Herman (1976); Clooney (1989); Scott (2015: 213–14); and Maharaj (2018: 281–309).

[27] For a state-of-the-art volume on the varieties of skeptical theism, see Dougherty and McBrayer (2014).

[28] I defend both these claims in the context of Rāmakṛṣṇa's theodicy in Maharaj (2018: 281–309).

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