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Bonnitta Roy

- Purpose** To discuss various interpretations of ontological levels in Aurobindo's thought.
- Outcome** To create more useful interpretations of ontological dimensioning of reality.
- Questions** How can ontological levels be integrated into a post-postmodern integral theory?

Introduction

This topic was created from post 25 in the Gebser discussion topic area.

2 Bonnitta Roy

revised 03/03/07 9:04AM



First, I think it is important to repeat myself here, so that we understand what I mean by the ontological dimensioning of reality, and how we posit discrete ontological levels. Positing ontological levels is not something only the Great Chain theorists, or yogic adepts do in higher states of realization. Positing ontological levels is such a fundamental condition of cognition, that it is no longer transparent to us. It is embedded into our cognitive process at such a primordial level, that the way in which the world arises, is already preconstituted by assumptions of ontological priors.

For example, before an infant develops object constancy, there is a period where although the infant can successfully negotiate the world (crawl through space) s/he has no reflective apperception of the object world. When the apperception of the object-world develops, when the infant gets the "ah ha!" ... there is something curious about that learning experience. The "ah ha" doesn't come to her as if the object world were suddenly created right then and there, it comes to her as if the object world was always and already -- an ontologically pre-given level of reality-- except that s/he just didn't know it until she reached a certain ability to apperceive it.

Most of us share what we posit as ontologically prior, and what we don't. These are so habituated and agreed upon, we don't usually go off and cry "foul-- the object world cannot survive the postmodern critique!". Except some people do cry foul-- most notably the Buddhists and Wilber, for example, when they points out that strong realism is untenable in the post-postmodern world.

And yet, Wilber, and we and Buddhists of all sorts successfully negotiate the world "as if" the object world is ontologically prior, and started with something called the big bang-- notwithstanding that we can critique that perspective (that assumption of origin) from a

meta-systemic view of cognition.

Now many interesting ideas come into play when people have different ideas of what is ontologically prior, different ideas of what is original and what doesn't exist until it arises in time, and therefore is a construct of reality, rather than a something that is discovered about reality. Take "god" for example. Prior to, lets say, Nietzsche, God was construed as the ultimate and absolute ontological Being. Nietzsche [...more...](#)



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3 Bonnitta Roy

revised 03/03/07 9:22AM



In response to [Bonnitta Roy \(2\)](#)

This is where I get into the second part of my story (and if you're still here, I'm much appreciative)-- where we look at where the need to establish an ontological basis comes from in the first place. Why do we bother to relate to the world in this way at all? Why didn't Aurobindo just describe his experiences **as if** there were these levels and layers of Being? Why do we negotiate the world in terms of **that** -- that there is a me and objects and other selves-- instad of **as if**-- as if there were a me and objects and other selves?

Again, I try to answer in terms of a process view. There seems to be a process that operates to establish one or another, or one in a series of ontological bases. So on the one hand we have, as described in part 1, a process that is the ontological dimensioning of reality. On the other hand, we have a process that seeks to establish a basis out of this ontological dimensioning of reality. I distinguish this second process as a cognitive operation, like all cognitive operations is dependent upon epistemological categories and structural conditioning. These structural conditions are as we saw above, is having to decide which paradigm to use-- having to decide the direction of the arrow of time, the relationship between wholes and parts (and there is a third condition, the relationship between interiors and exteriors).

So now we get to my statement of Aurobindo making a category error. Aurobindo is not mistaking his experiences-- they are experiences of the ontological dimensioning of reality. They are given in time, and they are realized as if they were always already. But then, IMO, he imputes a cognitive paradigm with a fixed arrow of time (it is embedded in his hierarchichal bias) when he builds his system-theory. And this, IMO is his categorical error. What escapes Aurobindo's attention, is the process of establishing ontological bases-- the necessary first step is creating a hierarchy among them.

It makes no sense to discredit in order to discard Aurobindo. We have the opportunity to include and contextualize his thought into our integral theory. I believe the way to do this is to look at this process of establishing basis. For example, we can look at the ego-self this way. There is a cognitive process that establishes certain aspects that preconstitute [...more...](#)



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4 Bonnitta Roy

03/03/07 10:02AM



In response to [Bonnitta Roy \(3\)](#)

Finally, on the notion of **living as if**. There are two common "places" in which we **do** live **as if**. Both these places exist on the fringes of self-- the one on the inner or deep subliminal level that pre-constitutes self, and the other at the far edges of realization that de-construct self. An example of the first instance is in the deep affect level of dreaming, which I describe in my Process Model article (IR, Dec 2006). One awakes from such a dream with a distinct feeling of the message of the dream, but the dream itself has no prior content. Unlike a more fully articulated dream, where, for example, which might be

accompanied by the image of a door opening and the image of one's self walking through it-- a deep affect level dream doesn't deliver specific imagistic content. One wakes from such a dream saying things like "it is as if a door opened and I walked through a kind of threshold." ...

Similar language typifies the description of higher states of consciousness at the far edges at or beyond the deconstructed self. One of the best examples is the wonderful way John Heron languages his subtle level experiences in "as if" terms. He writes (from <http://www.human-inquiry.com/expsr1.htm>)

"I hold to one cardinal principle: if you are aware of an ambiguous experience in which it is as if there are other world components, then it is a good thing to foster and elaborate the ambiguity, rather than try to reduce it and eliminate it sceptically"

I think this is a wonderful model for the kind of open mind of inquiry that is required of integral thinking-- to foster and elaborate the ambiguity of "as if".

Recently, I've come across a lot of interest in his notion of "living as if" and its relationship to an aesthetic apperception of phenomena.

It shows up in the writings of Lama Tashi Namgyal on Mahamudra who writes :
 "[Compassionate decision making is] the dance and play of the myriad possibilities in any given situation [and] is more akin to the decision-making process that takes place in the course of making aesthetic judgements than it is to following a code of conceptual morality or ideology" (from his introduction to Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche's Ocean of Definitive Meaning).

It show up in Jason Brown's process theory of the Authentic Life in which [...more...](#)



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5 Richard Carlson

03/06/07 2:31PM



Bonnie:

No time at the present to answer all the detailed questions you raised (but one sees that you have been doing a fairly in depth study) so briefly regards the arrow of time which you indicate that Sri Aurobindo overlays upon reality. In fact the arrow goes both ways. There is an evolution and there is an involution. Aurobindo is (like Gebser) not merely furnishing another variation of the myth of the Enlightenment e.g. that there will be unending progress in one direction. For example in describing the transition from Vedantic to the Upanishadic and beyond to the modern periods he describes evolution as not linear but rather paradoxically as "circular progress":

"Therefore the age of intuitive knowledge represented by the early Vedantic thinking of the Upanishads had to give place to the age of rational knowledge; inspired scripture made room for metaphysical philosophy, even as afterwards metaphysical philosophy had to give place to experimental science. Intuitive thought which is a messenger from the superconscient and therefore our highest intuitive faculty, was supplanted by pure reason which is only a sort of deputy and belongs to the middle heights of our being, pure reason in its turn was supplanted for a time by a mixed action of reason which lives on our plains and lower elevations and does not in its view exceed the horizon of the experience of the physical mind. and senses or such aids as we can invent for them can bring to us. And this process which seems to be a descent is really circular progress <my emphasis>. For in each case the lower faculty is compelled to take up as much as it can assimilate of what the higher had already given and to attempt to reestablish it by its own

methods" (Life Divine p68)

Regards the Psychic Being, the psychic being is not posited as an ontological level but rather as an evolutionary being (e.g. which is to say its role in the evolution is not in the stasis of being but rather in the dynamics of becoming; a coming to presence in the world) I do not think that one would best describe an entity whose main purpose is to evolve, change, or mutate, solely according to an ontology. As for epistemology, the way of knowing proper to the psychic being is not cognition, but rather through what could perhaps best be described as [...more...](#)

6 Bonnitta Roy

revised 03/07/07 5:47AM



In response to [Richard Carlson \(5\)](#)

Rich,

Thank you for the thoughtful comments. These are the kinds of comments that made me feel that "mainstream" integral was in jeopardy of marginalizing the important contributions of Aurobindo, by a cursory reading (contextualizing) of his thought. At risk of doing a great injustice to the depth of his thought, and at the risk of insulting your own appreciation of the depth of his thought, I'd like to share a series of diagrams with you. They are just initial organizing tools, so please don't look at them as conclusive-- but I share them with you because as you will see from how they work- from the story they tell- that just this process of the higher coming down and the lower being drawn up occurs (and you will see that I then switch from Aurobindo's notion of Sachianandra to the Dzogchen notion of EVAM--- not that I am trying to force all this rich cultural variety into one skin, but I am trying to create a kind of heuristic tool -- A Process Model of Integral Theory -- that will enable people to have some kind of orienting start so they can go on to read the works in the original, and be able to make distinctions and contextualize the various differences in view.

I have uploaded both a Power Point and PDF versions-- the Power Point is most effective when viewed as a slide show. There are a couple of features of the diagram. First, I am primarily interested in the "journey of the self" -- so I have this little dot that is the self, and show at different stages what is the self's blind spot. You can see in the diagrams that as the self becomes more aware, it tries to chase a "basis" into the ontological depths, and at the psychic level, it has a choice -- the big question mark -- to forego this process. You will also note how the self reappears in the final slides, as the pivot point in a kind of mechanistic illustration where the higher realms and the lower realms are being "ratcheted together" -- at least that is how the diagrams make them appear -- until the realms coalesce in a kind of EVAM hot dog, with the self as the evolutionary arrow of time, going forward.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this little "cartoon".

Finally, I have a uploaded a jpg file which kinds of summarizes what I imagine an western integral model might [...more...](#)



edit

7 Edward Berge

revised 03/07/07 10:24AM



On a personal note:

Bonnie said:

"You can see in the diagrams that as the self becomes more aware, it tries to chase a "basis" into the ontological depths, and at the psychic level, it has a choice -- the big question mark -- to forego this process."

This is how I've come to personally feel lately about taking a view or perspective. I'm losing the desire to "chase a basis into the ontological depths," or find a model or theory to account for my experience. From my investigation of Nagarjuna and Derrida I'm coming to feel that indeed "no views is good views," as the moment I take a position I immediately see my own negative projections--and the antithesis--built right into the very premise(s) of that view. Perhaps I am entering into the psychic level as Bonnie describes, perhaps I am having nondual experiences, perhaps I am tired of arguing, perhaps it is an expression of deeply-seated psychological resignation. Perhaps it is some, all or none of those things and more, or less. The point is I just don't care what it is anymore. I'm tired of defending positions. And I'm not skilled like Nagarjuna or Derrida at not taking a position while I deconstruct all positions. As the bumper sticker says: I'd rather be dancing.

8 Tom Murray

03/08/07 1:42PM



I have a question...

I occasionally pick up my copy of Brown's Self-Embodying Mind and read a few pages, feeling my head spin a bit, as I did this AM. That feeling that there is something important there that is just not sinking in yet. Your posts put me back into that world!

RE BR: "what I mean by the ontological dimensioning of reality, and how we posit discrete ontological levels. Positing ontological levels is such a fundamental condition of cognition, ...embedded into our cognitive process"

And " The postmodernists think of ontology as establishing ultimate basis, or ultimate first cause. They think of a kind of closed ontology. But we have been talking about an open ontology-- a process of opening into.

And "Positing ontological levels is such a fundamental condition of cognition, that it is no longer transparent to us." And "experiences of the ontological dimensioning of reality"


Though the dialog is clearing it up somewhat, I am still confused on how you see epistemology vs. ontology here. Isn't anything we say about an "ontological level of reality" really an epistemological statement about how the mind structures things? It seems as though your "ontology" refers to how objects come into existence in our awareness. But isn't this an epistemological issue? In your process theory it seems as though the "epistemological dimension" is limited to the part of understanding that conceptualizes and languages, which is just one aspect of epistemology. Both your ontological dimensions and epistemological dimensions seem to fall under what I would call epistemology (how we experience and come to know). Ontological questions about "how reality is actually structured" seem unaddressed, as they should be in a "post-metaphysical" context where we are aware of the "myth of the given." Would it be correct to say that for you "epistemological" is about the language, categorizing , theorizing part of understanding, and that the ontological levels are about the dimension of *experiences* prior to our attaching concepts etc. to them?

It may sound like this is just a question about vocabulary, but I think that beneath it there are conceptual issues that can be cleared up (for me at least).

- RE BR: "And yet, Wilber, and we and Buddhists of all sorts successfully negotiate the

[...more...](#)

9 Richard Carlson

03/08/07 8:47PM 



Bonnie

Thanks for posting your diagrams I certainly will go carefully through them. One other thing I should add about Aurobindo's ontology, is that it seems to me that it is all contingent on his first move to account for Origins which is that it is the Lila or ultimately the Play (of the Divine) which sparks the manifestation of what he refers to as the parts and planes of being or what you may refer to as ontological levels

This idea of a play - also important in Derrida - perhaps also provides an response to Tom's final question, in that if we keep in mind that what we are essentially engaged in is play may provide a way out for us thinkers.

Rich

10 Bonnitta Roy

revised 03/09/07 5:14AM 



In response to [Richard Carlson \(9\)](#)

Rich,

I appreciate your mentioning that aspect of Aurobindo, especially since I don't have a natural ear for the way he writes, and he seems so burdened by seriousness of it all. Also, I appreciate your understanding that my treatment of Aurobindo -- for the purposes of creating a kind of bridge between mainstream integral and his writings -- is rather "light" -- it cannot possibly deliver all Aurobindo's nuances and vision -- only Aurobindo himself can do that! For my Aurobindo article, then, I am going to primarily rely on Dalal's Book which he titles Aurobindo's *Greater Psychology* -- bringing it more in terms of the central psychological self, and its path in Aurobindo's system I want to make a place for Aurobindo's view in integral theory, without however, putting a convenient "lid" on him the way many tend to do ... I will definitely look for instances of "play" in his book, and weave them into my story of him.


Very interesting that you choose to point out these two notions : ORIGIN and PLAY. One of the criticisms of my Process Model I received was that it did not have a "space" for primordial origin or source (this was a comment from a Daoist theorist) ... and I certainly agreed that for now there is no explicit reference to such origin ... I need somehow to articulate this without hypothesizing a "thing" that stands in for origin -- hence the attempt to maintain a "pure process view" such that there is no origin, but only origination -- only the dance, only the play.....

much light,

Bonnie



11 Richard Carlson

03/09/07 12:41PM 



Bonnie

What impressive work you have done here with the organization of your power point presentation. You certainly have a powerful skill in organizing a complex sets of data. Good work. The fact that you may have taken concepts from several esoteric traditions is not an issue for me, because more importantly is how we personally make sense of the data to chart our own course most effectively. I have a few questions and comment regarding the Aurobindo parts and planes of being. Actually it would be much better to have an in depth conversation because forum communication is often constrained to a linear dimension by the media. I also think it maybe useful to you to have a conversation with the Aurobindo integral psychology folks or others who are actively involved in charting the topography of integral yoga, who I could put you in contact with..

My questions and comments concern your representation of the psychic being, prakriti, and purusha.

You seem to be making a correlation between the ascent through the graduations of consciousness and the psychic being, is that correct? In other words are you equating gaining access to higher mental states , higher mind, illumined mind, intuitive mind etc and contact with the psychic being?

If so it can be pointed out that the psychic being in fact moves along a different axis than does the mental transformation. There is a horizontal and vertical axis if one can use such spatial terms, and movement along one of the axis does not necessarily entail movement along the other axis

The psychic moves from the depths of the subliminal reality to the surface being while the mental being moves in ascent or descent along the graduations of consciousness

I should add that Aurobindo's taxonomy does not correspond to the Wilber/Combs matrix of states and structures, I actually invited Alan Combs to a conference I organized and was frankly surprised with how little he understood about Aurobindo's parts and planes. For example he was equating the psychic being with the subtle state which is an error of logical typing. The psychic being is an entity proper not a state of consciousness. Nor is Wilber's transformational scheme comparable in what it accomplishes. As I remember in Ken's scheme the soul emerges when the "heroic individual" reaches the subtle structure, which he [...more...](#)

12 Jonathan Reams

03/09/07 6:13PM



Thanks Rich for going into depth on these points. I have a similar view of these matters, but from a different source, and appreciate the degree of similarity I perceive in what you describe.

"In fact when the individual ascends through the mental graduations of consciousness, the psychic may retreat." I see this a lot, and feel that Wilber's view of the higher stages of development leading to a greater emergence of soul is not aligned with this view you describe, nor with how I perceive/experience things. I see a lot of people getting lost in ever expanding mental complexity chasing its own tail, thinking that it will lead out of the cave.

Yes it is clear that getting out of the cave is the same as "no grace no transformation." Mental mountain climbing is not the way, nor is even understanding that it is not the way.

Anyway, thanks for helping Bonnie out with this, as I will benefit from it :-)
Jonathan

13 Bonnitta Roy

revised 03/10/07 6:57AM

*In response to [Richard Carlson \(11\)](#)*

Rich,

Much appreciation for you encouragement and comments. I cannot respond to your comments on prakriti and purusha, because I really have no understanding at this time how they function in Aurobindo's thought, or alternately, how Aurobindo sees them ordering reality. The diagrams are a kind of like working pictures for me. They illustrate my assumptions as I go along, and help underscore distinctions. As I go forward, I am confronted with a choice -- either I need more places to include new realms entirely, or I need some kind of interpretation scheme to justify how certain distinctions can be placed in the same category. Therefore, I understand my goal is not to be Aurobindo's illustrator, as it were, but to create an integrative interpretation. I did realize what my goal was, but only subsequent to your post, did I see what the angle of my inquiry is. I am reading Aurobindo and asking questions of the sort: "What kinds of process generates the kind of experiences that Aurobindo describes? What kinds of process makes those kinds of distinctions within experience, i.e. why isn't experience just one seamless whole, rather than given as distinct types?" These are questions in the form of "soft" ontology. But I also include the possibility of a more meta-physical ontology, by being open to alternate versions of those questions, i.e. "What kind of process *reveals* reality in the way that reality is revealed to Aurobindo through these varieties of experiences?"

Evidently, then, I already have an interpretive framework that I bring to my reading of Aurobindo-- which is I am assuming that Aurobindo's thought/experiences/revelations arise from a local view, not a direct realization of "what reality is like", but as such, and given the depth, extents and elucidation of these experiences, can be used to test and improve my own interpretive framework-- because, at bedrock, I believe that both Aurobindo's and my views arise from the same origin -- and that neither the higher view nor the lower view (if one insists on using that kind of taxonomy -- I don't) are closer to or further from origin. View and view source and actualize each other.

In this sense I might have a different "relationship" with Aurobindo than others who are reading him as a spiritual guide, or a teacher. I am not chasing after Aurobindo for [...more...](#)



edit

14 Bonnitta Roy

03/10/07 7:11AM

*In response to [Bonnitta Roy \(13\)](#)*

It occurs to me I have more of an aesthetic relationship to the life-work of Aurobindo. As if Aurobindo and his work are an artistic creation of spirit. One of Spirit's masterpieces, for sure, but like a painting, this masterpiece is an opportunity to resonate with spirit at some fundamental level, and it is this resonance, not the actual content -- the gestalt of the painting, not the actual paint -- that is the goal of bothering to look.

Bonnie



edit

15 Edward Berge

03/10/07 10:34AM



Bonnie said: "How reality is will arise in me, not by a reading and exegesis of Aurobindo or anyone else-- it will and does arise in me moment to moment from origin. I think that both Aurobindo and I truly always already surf the same reality, perhaps under different

weather conditions, or different seas."

Here are a couple of points I was trying to make (yes, still taking positions) in the Gebser thread:

1. That we all have the same core, ontological experiences as a given birthright.
2. That these experiences take different form and content depending on the cultural matrix.

Now if I understand what Richard said in this thread and elsewhere (and perhaps I do not) they are not the same experiences, that different cultural matrices elicit different experiences altogether, and that to try to find such universalizing commonalities is a hegemonic, colonizing endeavor, which of course only goes one way, from west to east. And to defend this position Richard and Debashish use early Derrida in that he said much the same thing based on difference.

However later Derrida found something undeconstructable in everyone's experience, yet he did so without turning it into a hegemonic, colonizing universal that destroys difference because he left it open-ended and unattainable, as it is always a "to come" that never actually arrives as a definite something in "presence" but is always already here and now nonetheless, for everyone.

Perhaps Richard and Debashish were on to something with the notion of "presance" but we didn't get to hear about it.

16 Richard Carlson

03/10/07 12:52PM



Ed wrote

However later Derrida found something undeconstructable in everyone's experience, yet he did so without turning it into a hegemonic, colonizing universal that destroys difference because he left it open-ended and unattainable, as it is always a "to come" that never actually arrives as a definite something in "presence" but is always already here and now nonetheless, for everyone.

Rich

I like your description here and think Derrida would heartily agree.

17 Bonnitta Roy

03/11/07 6:01AM



In response to [Tom Murray \(8\)](#)

Tom,

I've had your post opened in a draft response pad since you sent it. But now that these forums are winding down, I am hoping we can return to them in a fresh light if/when we start a discussion on the Process Model article.

Until then, have fun (?) with Jason Brown.

much light,

Bonnie



All times are displayed in your local time (Eastern)