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## UNIT 1    BASIC UNITY OF REALITY

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### 1.0    OBJECTIVES

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The problem of the one and the many is a major point of discussion in Indian philosophy. In fact the whole of classical Indian philosophy revolves on this point. Therefore, the major objective of this section is to initiate a serious discussion of this crucial issue in philosophical discourse.

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### 1.1    INTRODUCTION

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The problem of the One and the Many is a fundamental question in Indian philosophy as it is in the West. One of the fundamental presuppositions of Indian philosophy is its explicit adherence to the idea that the Reality is one in essence. But the moment one asserts that reality is 'One' he is perplexed by the riddle of the 'Many' that encompasses him with its enigmatic flux. How are we to reconcile the Vedantic formula that Reality is one with the apparent many which are constantly changing? This problem itself stems from another presupposition and avowed acceptance of Brahman as the single substratum of the universe.

It has to be made clear at the outset that the realisation or the acceptance of Brahman as the fundamental and sole reality by the Indian thinkers was not the result of a moment. It was the outcome of the age-old search of the Indian Sages to find the ultimate substratum of the universe from the beginning of the history of human thought. It has also undergone various stages of development. Classical Indian philosophy has its culmination in the Vedantic thought. It was Vedanta that identified Brahman as the ultimate substratum of the universe.

Once the Transcendent, Infinite, and Immutable Brahman is accepted as the Absolute it naturally raises the question of the reality of the phenomenal world. A number of questions are possible here: what does one mean by saying that the Brahman is the Absolute? What relation has it to the phenomenal world? If Brahman is the only Reality, what is the nature and status of the universe? These

questions themselves take one directly to the problem of the one and the many. Therefore, we come back to the above statement: how can one substantiate the claim that the whole problem of Indian philosophy is the problem of the one and the many? To put it differently, the question of the one and the many has a dual dimension, i.e., the whole development of Indian philosophy originates from this centrifugal question and at the end of all our search and analysis we come back to this centripetal point. Thus, the one and the many become the pivot for our discussion of Aurobindo's metaphysics of integral advaita as well. Aurobindo maintains a synthetic approach to reality. How has he come to such a conclusion?

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## 1.2 REALITY IS ONE

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The originality of Aurobindo's thought is most clearly exemplified in his finding a way out to the age-old problem of one and many in which he establishes the basic unity of reality. Aurobindo maintains the unity of Reality giving adequate space for the multiplicities of the universe. Aurobindo develops his theory of the Oneness of Reality (i) through a re-interpretation of the theory of Maya, for in Sankara's absolute non-dualism, the theory of Maya played a key role in maintaining the unity of Reality, through its negation of the external world; (ii) through developing the co-existence of Matter and Spirit; (iii) through a reconstruction of the question of the one and the many; (iv) through his theory of Cosmic Consciousness; and finally (v) through his theory of Involution and Evolution or by presenting reality in its dual dimensions: being and becoming. Thus, some of these points constitute the subject matter of the present discussion.

### The Integral Advaitic View of Existence

After evaluating the extant theories of existence, namely the Supracosmic, the Cosmic-terrestrial, and the Supraterrestrial, Aurobindo developed his own system in the light of the Vedantic tradition. This approach tries to reconcile the elements of the above approaches, which themselves "tend to isolate." The fundamental tenet of this perspective is that it perceives human existence as a "Becoming with the Divine Being for its origin and its object, a progressive manifestation, a spiritual evolution with the supracosmic for its source and support, the other-worldly for a condition and connecting link and the cosmic and terrestrial for its field, and with human mind and life for its *nodus* and turning-point of release towards a higher and a highest perfection." (LD 667)

This citation of Aurobindo very well manifests how he has incorporated and integrated elements of the above theories. He admits them as a means and part of the self-manifestation of the Spirit in human life, but considers them as partial. Nevertheless, the integration of the first two theories, to a great extent, was already effected in the third by his predecessors. For Aurobindo, the fundamental flaw of the third approach, which attempted integration of the previous two was that in it, he maintained, the temporal as having no permanent value. What the realism of Aurobindo aims at is a richer unity and integrity of all the elements of existence.

For Aurobindo existence basically manifests two aspects: (i) Existence is integral: one and many, transcendence and immanence, spirit and matter, etc are different facets of it; and (ii) the nature of this Existence is dynamic or becoming: Being includes becoming as well. In other words, it is a progressive ascent.

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### 1.3 AUROBINDO'S INTERPRETATION OF THE CONCEPT OF MAYA

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A general and the often expressed impression of a Westerner about Indian philosophy is that it is a world negating philosophy or that it teaches that the world is mere illusion or Maya. However, the truth is that no teacher of *Advaita* holds the view that the phenomenal world is absolutely unreal or illusory. It is real as far as it is a manifestation of being but unreal as a self-subsisting entity. Therefore, it can be rightly observed that the over emphasis that the Advaitins gave to one aspect of the reality was only a means to substantiate the Absoluteness of Brahman and was not a denial of the reality of the world.

The question emerges is how has such a negative impression come about? It maybe the result of two mistakes or two factors that occurred in the history of Indian philosophy: (i) the Western world knew about Indian philosophy, at first, through the interpretation of the Western scholars themselves for whom Indian philosophy meant nothing but the Advaita philosophy of Sankara; and (ii) in Sankara's philosophy, which advocated an absolute non-dualism (monism), the notion of Maya was wrongly interpreted as pure illusion, which was taken to be the truth in subsequent ages. Therefore, in the Western world, and even in India, what prevailed was this wrong interpretation of the theory of Maya. Thus, it may not be wrong to say that history has done much damage to the philosophy of Sankara by interpreting the notion of Maya as mere illusion and that he advocated and perceived that the world has only an illusory existence.

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### 1.4 MAYA: THE POWER OF BECOMING

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Indian philosophy understands the notion of Maya in a number of ways. The introduction of the concept of Maya by the Indian sages has to do with the explanation of Brahman's relation to the world. For the Vedic sages, the "directing power" was known as Maya. For them, Maya was the "power of the infinite consciousness to comprehend, contain in itself and measure out" and also the power to form, name, and shape entities out of the vast illimitable Truth of infinite existence. It is by the power of Maya that the static being of infinite existence becomes the ordered being of active existence (LD 115). In the Vedic understanding Maya is also a mysterious, deceptive power of the gods (RV III 53. 8). Its deception lies in its ability to hide the Truth about reality. For the Advaitin, metaphysically conceived, Maya is the power of Brahman by which the world of multiplicity comes into existence. Therefore, it is right to say that metaphysically Maya is the mysterious power of Brahman that deludes one to take the empirical world as real, and epistemologically Maya is ignorance (*avidya*) with the power to conceal reality (*avarana Sakti*) and with the capacity of misrepresenting reality (*viksepa sakti*). Ontologically Maya considered as the creative power of Brahman that accounts for the variety and multiplicity of the phenomenal world. From an epistemological point of view, Maya is our ignorance about the difference between reality and appearance. And from a psychological point of view, Maya is the expression of human tendency to regard the real as the apparent, and vice versa. Thus, Maya is not only a negative designation, that is, a privation of vision, it is also a positive designation as far as it is capable of producing an illusion.

In the Advaitic interpretation in the state of Maya limitations (*upadhis*) are imposed upon reality. Thus, all attachments, aversions, fears, dreams are touched by Maya and one fails to recognise the oneness of the Real. Here it is appropriate to add that the Sanskrit word “*upadhi*” has another meaning as well, namely, “condition.” In this sense Maya is a necessary condition for the manifestation of the world. Moreover, in this sense the Vedic understanding of Maya as the creative power seems more reasonable. In the light of this interpretation of Maya, the Advaitic explanation of Brahman-world relation makes more sense. As the world is the manifestation of Brahman, Maya, the creative power, becomes the power of becoming.

The world’s reality is unreal only in the light of an ontological Reality. In contrast with the pure existence of the Absolute, Maya has existence as the power of limitation. In this respect, the description of Maya as *anadi* (beginningless), *acintya* (unthinkable) and *anirvacaniya* (indescribable) are reasonable. Indian philosophy understands Maya in its dual meaning: in its positive and in its negative meanings. In the positive sense it is the creative power, which also accounts for becoming and in the negative sense it is power of limitation. The world, being understood as the manifestation of the Absolute, would imply that there emerges the need for a mediator, for infinite action of the infinite Being would produce only an infinite world. Therefore, a world with order and unity demands “a selective faculty of knowledge commissioned to shape finite appearances out of the infinite Reality” (LD 115). It is in this sense, Aurobindo observes, that the Vedic seers understood the concept of Maya as the power of limitation (LD 115).

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## 1.5 MAYA: THE SELF’S EXPERIENCE OF ITS BEING

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Aurobindo undertakes a re-search into the meaning of “Maya” with a twofold purpose: (i) To establish the reality of the world, in contrast to the illusionism advocated by Advaita and (ii) thereby to establish the reality and relevance of matter in the cosmic process. Aurobindo speaks of two kinds of Maya: first, a lower Maya or mental Maya, which is the cause of illusion and, second, that which symbolises God’s play of the infinities of existence, the splendors of knowledge and the glories of force. The remarkable point Aurobindo brings to light is that the pessimistic and the illusionist philosophies either failed to identify or ignored this distinction between the higher Maya and the lower Maya. The problem is that those who recognise the mental Maya as truth consider it as the creatrix of the world. The fact is only an instrument in the descending creative process but not the secret creatrix, and it is a transitional stage in the ascent but not the supreme goal of cosmic existence.

For Aurobindo, Maya is said to be real only in the sense that it is the self’s experience of the Self. What does it mean to say that Maya is the self’s experience of the Self? This has to be seen in the context of the Vedic implication of Maya. At one point Aurobindo interprets Maya as integrally united with the Absolute. He writes that in its transcendent nature Brahman, the Reality, is the self-existent Absolute, and Maya is the Consciousness and Force of this self-existence. What is evident here is that it is an avowed acceptance by Aurobindo of the Vedic notion of Maya as the creative power of Brahman. In relation to the world or in its immanent dimension this Brahman is the Self of all existence, Atman, the

cosmic self. Moreover, due to its Infinite powers it is the supreme self-transcendent of its own cosmicity as well as it is the individual-universal in each being. In its cosmic dimension Maya is the self-power, *Atma-Shakti*, of the Atman.

Aurobindo holds that in a higher status of consciousness all illusions will vanish and one becomes aware of the relation between the temporal and the eternal. What is temporal is not absolute illusion or no-thing. It was already established at the outset that Aurobindo embarked on a re-search into the meaning of the notion of Maya with double purposes, which themselves are interrelated. Thus, the positive outcome of Aurobindo’s interpretation of Maya is the vindication of the reality of the world. Aurobindo proves the reality of the world or the finite existence in contrast to Advaitins by emphasizing the following two points: (i) the finite is the self-manifestation of the Absolute. What is from the real cannot be unreal and (ii) Aurobindo attests to the reality of the external world by pointing to the human capacity to enter into union with the Absolute. The point is that the finite must be real since what is unreal cannot enter into a relation with the Real. For Aurobindo, the only reality that can be described as unreal is the independent objective human existence. Thus, unlike his predecessors, Aurobindo maintains the Reality of both Brahman and the World without endangering the Absoluteness of Brahman.

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## 1.6 THE ONE AND THE MANY: THE WAY OF BEING IN BECOMING

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We have started with the presupposition that the whole problem of Indian philosophy is inter-related to the question of the one and the many. Now it is time to take up this question as the focal point of our discussion. Aurobindo’s Integral advaitism invariably points to the doctrine of Sankara which establishes the oneness of the Supreme Reality or Brahman by denying the true reality of the world. Aurobindo challenges this contention and seems to suggest that Advaitism is true even when accepting the reality of the world. Therefore, Aurobindo is a Vedantin who has attempted to explain the unity of the one and the many in a unique way. He has insisted on the absoluteness of the Absolute, who is limited neither by unity nor by multiplicity. In fact, one and the many are at the service of each other. Aurobindo affirms the unity as a basis for the manifestation of the multiplicity and the multiplicity as the basis for the return to oneness and the enjoyment of unity in the divine manifestation. Our remaining task is to vindicate the veracity of Aurobindo’s presumption that Advaitism is true even when accepting the reality of the world.

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## 1.7 THE ABSOLUTE: UNITY MANIFESTING MULTIPLICITY

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According to Aurobindo, the apparent contradictions that exist between Brahman and the world seem to be irreconcilable only to a finite or abstract reason. It can be solved by a higher reason, which he names as the Logic of the Infinite, that reconciles the opposites, including the one and the many, being and becoming, infinite and finite, and knowledge and ignorance. The true Advaita is that which admits all things as the one Brahman and does not seek to bisect its existence into two incompatible entities.



For Aurobindo, it was a later impatience of human heart and mind and a vehement attraction to high masterfulness that sought a univocal approach to reality and denied the many. *Sat* and *Asat* (Being and Non-Being) are not opposites, destructive of each other, but are the “last antinomy through which we look up to the Unknowable.” To know God truly is to “know him everywhere equally and without distinction”. What is necessary is to put aside the trenchant distinctions. The many appear as absurd because of our inability to perceive one in the many. It is because of the partial logic that one employs that one declares many an illusion or the Absolute is *Sat* and the relative is *Asat*, etc. If one is able to pursue insistently the One, it is to return with the benediction and the revelation of the One confirming itself in the Many. Therefore, the core of integral Advaita is identity in difference as opposed to Absolute identity advocated by Advaita of Sankara. The Infinite would not be the infinite Oneness if it was not capable of an infinite multiplicity. This does not mean that the Infinite One is plural or that it can be described as the sum of the Many. On the contrary, it can be the infinite many in the sense that it exceeds all the limitations or descriptions by multiplicity as well as all the limitations by finite conceptual oneness.

Here we have Aurobindo’s central argument for the claim that Advaitism is true even when accepting the reality of the world. It is not mere infinite multiplicity, rather all multiplicity finds its place in the One, where the singularity of the many is kept and recognised. Therefore, the “One” is not the Hegelian “Whole” where the singularity is muffled up in the whole. Substantiating the co-existence of One and the Many Aurobindo argues that there would be no place for reason and logic if there is only a “rigid monotone of limited oneness and sameness”. The essence of logic is nothing but the right perception of the relations, and the highest work of reason is to find the one substance, the one law, the cementing latent reality connecting and unifying the many, the different, the discordant and disparate. Moreover, he writes the Being is one, but this oneness is infinite and contains in itself an infinite plurality or multiplicity of itself: the One is the All; it is not only an essential Existence, but an All-Existence. The infinite multiplicity of the One and the eternal unity of the Many are the two realities or aspects of one reality on which the manifestation is founded.

The core of the problem of One and the Many consists in identifying the right relation between the individual and the Divine Being, between Soul and *Isvara*. Aurobindo has his own distinctive way of understanding this relation. In the normal theistic understanding the many are the creations of the Divine as a potter makes the vessel. There is a total dependence of the creatures on the creator. In Aurobindonian understanding, the many are themselves divine in their inmost reality. They are the individual selves of the Self-existence, eternal but eternal in his being. Here the material existence is the creation of Nature, but the soul is an immortal portion of the Divine being. In other words, Divine is responsible for the individual self of the natural creatures. However, the fundamental Truth of existence is one and the many for their existence depends on the One. Thus the dependence of the entire created world on *Isvara* is all the more kept intact. It is human ego that conceals this dependent nature, for it strives to stand on its own right. Thus, for Aurobindo, multiplicity is not something that broaches the unity of the One, but rather the existential diversity enriches the Being of the One. Therefore, the one and the many become the way of being the Absolute. And what makes it possible is the nature of becoming.

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## 1.8 THE INFINITE: THE LOCUS OF UNITY

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The statement that ‘the one and the many is the way of being the Absolute’ takes us to a more fundamental truth of Being, namely that the Infinite is the locus of unity. Here, the question regarding the identity of the individual self is natural: if it is a total surrender that is demanded how does one account for the identity of the creatures? For Aurobindo, this dependence is not contradictory to the identity but is “itself the door to the realisation of the Identity.” Once again we meet with the phenomenon of duality expressing unity, “proceeding from unity and opening back into unity” which is the fundamental principle of the operation of the universe. The core of the relation between the One and the Many is the consciousness of the fundamental unity with the Infinite. The duality is a position taken up, a double status accepted for the operation of the self-manifestation of being; but there is no eternal and fundamental separateness and dualism of Being and its Consciousness-Force, of the Soul and Nature. Manifestation of the one Absolute in many forms can also be understood as an expression of the immense possibilities of the Infinite Consciousness. The Infinite existence can at once be individual, universal, and transcendent. It is the supracosmic being which is conscious of itself as All-Being. It is possible in the sense that the single underlying principle in all these states or positions is the same triune Consciousness in a triple status. The *conditio sine qua non* for our human intellect to understand this contradictory existence is to accept that there can be different real statuses of consciousness of One Being, and it is completely logical and intelligible for the Existence which is free and infinite. One corollary of accepting the manifold statuses of one consciousness is that no limit can be put to the variation of status on the condition that the One existence is conscious of its simultaneous presence in all of them. There is nothing irrational in this understanding because the very nature of the pure Existence is to be universally conscious. One has to admit and promote both the unity and multiplicity of the One. For Aurobindo *unity is not unanimity, rather unity is a unity in multiplicity*. This is the core of his theory of the One and the Many. This is the way of being in becoming.

The cosmic consciousness is the source of reconciliation between matter and spirit, and so too of the One and the Many. A question emerges here as to, what is the relation that this reconciliatory principle has to the transcendent consciousness, the final assertion of all its negations? The “Unknowable” becomes the source of all affirmations and all negations and freedom becomes the ultimate source of both. Brahman is not an omnipresent cause of persistent illusions rather it is the omnipresent Reality. Thus, Brahman as the positive basis is the principle of harmony. If one admits that self alone exists, it must be also true that all is the self. If all is one self there must be some reason and inherent principle in it as the source of manifestation. To find that, Aurobindo observes, we must proceed with the hypothesis of potency. “There is one Lord and Self and the many are only His representations and becomings.” Therefore, in Aurobindonian perspective, there is only one Omnipresent Reality as the source of the World and the many are its manifestations. Human beings arrive at a perfect liberation and an infinite equality. It is this consummation of which the Upanishad speaks when it says: ‘He in whom the self has become all existences, how shall he have delusion, whence shall he have grief who knows entirely and sees in all things oneness.’ In fact, it is in and through a metaphysics of becoming that Aurobindo establishes both the fundamental unity of Reality amidst the multiplicity in the

universe. Moreover, his metaphysics of becoming positively establishes the Absolute as its Alpha and Omega.

The matrix for the whole development of Indian philosophy was the Brahma-world relation. If the Absolute is One how do we account for the multiplicity of the universe? What status has it? What is the truth of our phenomenal experience? It indeed is the question of the Reality itself.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1) How does Aurobindo view unity of existence?

2) Explain the unity in multiplicity.

1.9

LET US SUM UP

In this unit we discussed the basic unity of existence as advocated by Aurobindo. The condition of possibility for such an understanding is the realization that the ultimate source of the world is a single reality, namely Brahman. We have also seen that this Absolute manifests itself in multiplicity, in matter and form. Therefore one can say the basic substratum of existence is matter and spirit which is the subject matter of our discussion in the next unit.

1.10

KEY WORDS

*Maya in Advaita*

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In contrast with the pure existence of the Absolute, Maya has existence as the power of limitation. In this respect, the description of Maya as *anadi* (beginningless), *acintya* (unthinkable) and *anirvacaniya* (indescribable) are reasonable.



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## 1.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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