

Monism, Pluralism, and Integral Philosophy
Robert McDermott

As it is defined and developed by Sri Aurobindo and Haridas Chaudhuri, "Integral" refers, first, to a metaphysical position which avoids, or combines, the extremes of monism and pluralism and, secondly, to the three or four yogas (spiritual disciplines) taught in the Bhagavadgita. As it has been used in the CIIS community in recent years, "Integral" has come to include any overcoming of a dichotomy, whether of East/West, mind/body, masculine/feminine, intellectual/intuitive, spiritual/material, and academic/spiritual.

"Integral" has an important history in both Asian and western philosophical traditions. In the west, at least for the foreseeable future, the pluralist position, espoused mostly by the Anglo-American empiricist tradition from Hume to Dewey, has decisively won the philosophical battle of the one and the many. This position espouses a primary and ultimate pluralism, whether of ideas or atoms. Hegel and post-Hegelian Absolute Idealists were influential in the early to mid-Nineteenth Century but throughout the Twentieth Century the pluralist position has been dominant. Existentialists, materialistic scientists, neo-Darwinians, and postmodern thinkers of all varieties reject even the possibility of an Absolute Idealism such as espoused by Hegel or Royce, Radhakrishnan or Sri Aurobindo.

In the great debate between William James and Josiah Royce in the first decade of the Twentieth Century, James' sacrificed metaphysical unity in favor of a pluralistic universe. Royce, James's junior colleague, follows Hegel in arguing for a spiritual unity as a first and necessary framework for all meaning. In so doing, Royce continued, and brought to climax, and apparently an end at least for the foreseeable future, the monistic tradition brilliantly developed by Nagarjuna and Sankara in the Indian tradition, Plotinus at the end of the Greek tradition, Eckhart at the climax of the medieval Christian tradition, and Spinoza, the most monistic modern philosopher. For most philosophers and students of philosophy, the monism of these thinkers is too tight, too single, and too inhibiting of real particularity.¹

Sri Aurobindo's Integral Philosophy affirms an ultimate unity, whether called Brahman or Sat-Chit-Ananda (Being-Consciousness-Bliss), and also vigorously affirms the reality of every particular. He develops this affirmation in three steps similar to a Hegelian dialectic: The Absolute includes all particulars as one reality without a second; the particulars are also real; the Absolute is both absolutely singular and plural. In this way, Sri Aurobindo's philosophy claims to integrate absolute unity and plurality, or 1) the one, 2) the many, and 3) the absolute unity of the one and the many. This is exactly what Hegel tried to demonstrate in his philosophy, namely, the absolute identity of identity and difference.

For James and other pluralists, this position, however "Integral" it might claim to be, is too absolute and monistic to save particulars. Defenders of the philosophies of Hegel, Royce, Sri Aurobindo, and Rudolf Steiner argue that their positions hold the polarity between Absolute Oneness and a plurality of particulars. Their critics, such as James, argue that the difference between these philosophies and the more extreme monists such as Plotinus or Shankara is a distinction without a real difference. The argument continues.

"Integral" also refers to the yogas, or spiritual disciplines, of the Bhagavadgita, particularly the yogas of thinking, action, devotion or love, and meditation. Sri Aurobindo and Haridas Chaudhuri affirm all of these yogas and taught all of them from their own experience. Like Sri Aurobindo and S. Radhakrishnan, the two great spiritual philosophers of modern India, Rudolf Steiner, perhaps the foremost spiritual-esoteric philosopher of the modern west, wrote commentaries on the Bhagavadgita, and with modifications explained and taught all of its yogas.

S. Radhakrishnan especially emphasized *jnana-yoga*, the discipline of spiritual knowledge. Gandhi espoused, and dramatically exemplified, *karma-yoga*, the yoga of action. Bhakti Vedanta Swami, founder of the Hare Krishna movement in the United States, was a teacher of *bhakti-yoga*, or the discipline of divine love and devotion. Ramana Maharshi, the great south Indian mystic, was an example of the fourth (and sometimes ignored) yoga of the Gita, *raja-yoga*, or the discipline of meditation.

Sri Aurobindo, Haridas Chaudhuri, and Rudolf Steiner expressly consider the teachings of the Bhagavadgita, including particularly its four yogas, to be limited by the prevailing consciousness at the time of its composition. It matters for these three spiritual teachers that consciousness evolves. They recognize that thinking, action/willing, action/love, and meditation in modern times require a different understanding and practice.

In addition to these understandings of "Integral" derived from the writings of Sri Aurobindo and Haridas Chaudhuri, the community of CIIS tends to use this term to indicate a successful reconciliation, or reunification, of dichotomies prized by the dominant paradigm. This institutional subculture strives to put together what the larger culture has put asunder. While it is not easy to know the intended meaning of "Integral" in the CIIS subculture, all such meanings can be assumed to be in opposition to one or more values of the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview, the dominant paradigm that relies on scientific, quantifiable evidence to the exclusion of qualities, mechanism to the exclusion of organism, and everything masculine dominant over everything feminine. Perhaps the most revealing account of the complex history and disastrous effects of the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview is to be found in Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1982).

ⁱ See my essay, "Monism," in Mircea Eliade, editor, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (19 : Macmillan and Co., 19), pp./