

## NINE

# Participation Comes of Age

## *Owen Barfield and the Bhagavad Gita*

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There may be times when what is most needed is not so much a new discovery or a new idea as a different “slant”; I mean a comparatively slight readjustment in our way of looking at the things and ideas on which attention is already fixed.

—Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*

THIS CHAPTER makes use of Owen Barfield’s understanding of the history of participatory consciousness in order to illumine the way that three early-twentieth-century spiritual teachers variously engaged the Bhagavad Gita. Mohandas K. Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and Rudolf Steiner all considered the Gita a supremely important text but none of these three teachers read the Gita as, for example, one of Arjuna’s contemporaries might have. Instead, standing at the far end of what Barfield describes as participatory evolution, these teachers had to approach the Gita as a self-implicating text that unveils itself diversely to various participatory sensibilities. Building on Barfield’s work, this chapter looks at the diachronic participatory distance between these three thinkers and the Gita’s historical setting, as well as attending to the important synchronic differences in the ways that Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and Steiner each participatively engage the Gita.

The first half of this chapter summarizes the account of the gradual loss of participation and its possible recovery as described by Owen Barfield (1899–1998), the literary figure, lay philosopher, Coleridge scholar, and

anthroposophist. Barfield's major work, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, argues for the reality and significance of the evolution of consciousness, and particularly for a diachronic shift from original (primal, indigenous) participation to the gradual loss of participation (culminating in certain forms of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ways of relating to the world) and, very significantly during the past several centuries of Western thought and culture, to the contemporary possibility of "final" participation (the contours of which can be discerned, albeit imperfectly, in Romanticism and its related movements). The second half of this chapter discusses the ways that three twentieth-century interpreters of the Gita—Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, and Steiner—struggle with, explain, and engage the revelation that Arjuna received from Krishna. I first consider them one by one and then conclude the chapter with some comparative reflections in light of Barfield's participatory theory of the evolution of consciousness.

#### OWEN BARFIELD'S THEORY OF PARTICIPATION

Barfield's argument in *Saving the Appearances* builds upon his previous works of sustained scholarship and original thinking. His first book, *History in English Words*, is a masterful analysis of the way that words at one time held a fullness of meaning, both literal and metaphorical, that was gradually lost. This process, which Barfield traces philologically, involved the differentiation of exterior and interior meanings, which were subsequently identified as subjective and objective or literal and metaphorical meanings. This account essentially consists in showing how the world lost its interiors, how concepts lost their multivalence, and the way that the original poetic depth of words collapsed into a merely referential semiosis.

Barfield offers the example of the way we use the word *heart*: originally, the "heart" included both the physical organ and what we now consider its metaphorical associations. In contemporary usage, it is necessary, but difficult, to bridge the literal and metaphorical of a concept such as "heart." At present, we say that the "real" meaning is the organ, the pump in the chest; the metaphorical meaning has become separated from the organ and from the concept that meant both organ and affect. It is as though these have become two separate words such that it takes metaphoric and other forms of imaginative thinking to put these meanings together again. To reunite the physical and metaphoric meanings of heart takes an act of intentionally creative thinking, an imaginative (but not fanciful) act that Barfield calls final participation and which he finds anticipatively present in the Romantic poets (especially Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge). In *Poetic Diction* (1928), Barfield offers what amounts to a philosophy of poetry, arguing that the essential element in poetic experience is the inducing of a "felt change of consciousness."<sup>1</sup> This felt change is char-

acterized by a distinct wakefulness that serves as a preparation for the kind of extraordinary perception that is final participation, Barfield thus connects our interpretive, poetic, and imaginative capacities to a larger narrative of our participation in the world's own becoming. What Barfield offers throughout his works is an evolutionary vision of transforming participatory sensibilities, an account of the way that the human cocreation of the world has changed over time. Neither subjective nor objective, this change involves both the way that we comport ourselves to the world and also the way the world offers itself to us.

In order to understand Barfield's vision more fully, it will be helpful to consider his account of participation. *Saving the Appearances* focuses primarily on the contemporary loss of participation and the ways this affects modern humanity but it necessarily begins with an account of primal or original participation, the kind of immediate consciousness that humanity has been steadily losing, and in the modern West precipitously, through the entire sweep of history. Influenced by Steiner's philosophy of history (which resembles in important respects the philosophy of history of Georg W. F. Hegel and Friedrich W. J. Schelling), Barfield essentially sees history as a loss of participation and the longing to overcome this loss.<sup>2</sup> It is truer still to say, with Barfield, that this gradual loss of participation is half of history, the devolutionary half; the other half, evolution, is the gradual overcoming, by a series of breakthroughs and contributions, of this loss. Sri Aurobindo, also influenced by Hegel, offers a similar metanarrative: the divine empties itself into time and space, and evolves through diverse civilizations and modes of consciousness. This process leads humanity farther from the divine but, simultaneously, through a series of avatars (divine intercessory beings), overcomes this distance by initiating a new intimacy between humanity and divinity.

In several of his works, Barfield traces the evolution of consciousness, and the loss of original participation. By paying attention to the history of Western languages and supplementing this with the accounts of early-twentieth-century anthropologists, Barfield offers a picture of original (i.e., "early," "primal," or "indigenous") participation. However, as Barfield uses very few examples from outside the Western tradition, it would seem an important test to apply his account of the evolution of consciousness to the axial age of India, specifically the emergence of the Bhagavad Gita from the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, in approximately the sixth century. As India has preserved more thoroughly than the West certain original forms of participation, looking at the Gita offers us special insight into the participatory transformations in which Barfield is interested. The West, of course, has its own original consciousness with which it is partly continuous, but as a rule the West has violently suppressed and replaced each of its successive cultural expressions. The West's commitment to change has been more revolutionary than evolutionary, thus burying much

of its memory of original participation, forcing it to look for original consciousness in cultures far removed from its own.

The *Mahabharata*, which includes the events covered in the eighteen chapters of the Bhagavad Gita—particularly the warrior Arjuna in dialogue with Krishna, his charioteer (and not yet revealed as a god) on the firing line of a civil war—can be seen as a mix of primal and historical consciousness, or as a transition from myth to history, rather like the transition from Homer to Sophocles, and progressively to Virgil, Dante, and Joyce. This transition is one from a direct, or easily accessed, relationship to the divine or spirit world, to a consciousness in which both divinity and spirit seem removed and gradually replaced by the reality of the self and the earthly world. This process is characterized by the gradual loss of mythic consciousness and the gradual development of increasingly specific personalities. Even within classical Greek culture, Achilles, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander can be seen to advance a rather direct line from mythic to historical consciousness, from an immediate relation to the gods and the spiritual world to a dimmer relationship to a spirit world and a more confident relationship to their individual identity and their own thinking.

In original participation, a significant relationship to gods and spirits (e.g., in the afterlife) was neither problematic nor questioned; rather, it was automatic and easily shared. The gods were “here” and “there” in the mind’s eye, in the psyche of individuals and communities. A familiar phrase for original participation, “In the beginning,” signaled a no-time, or no specific time, an *arche* (an atemporal foundation or original principle), a “time” when the gods were luminously present to humanity. Barfield’s point is simply that in the course of several millennia, the accessibility of the gods and spirit beings became less obvious, then not at all obvious, before becoming doubtful, and finally unbelievable. Increasingly in the modern West, God and the world of spirit became realms of the far away, and then the unreachable, before such realms seemed to die entirely. In the West, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a consensus emerged regarding the nonexistence (both past and present) of God, gods, and spirits alike. What had been believed to be the case with respect God and spirits was not so, and never had been so; what had been believed was shown to be an illusion, a projection by humanity in its immaturity (i.e., in its naively conceived original participation).

Devolution of consciousness, characterized by a loss of access to the spirit, is the complement to the evolution of consciousness, ideally characterized by the development of human individuality, love, and freedom. In the modern (and postmodern) West, devolution of consciousness seems almost complete: the gods do seem to be have withdrawn, and truly to have died. Following Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Emile Durkheim in this regard, Barfield argues that primal consciousness was characterized by a unity of external and internal worlds, by a not-yet separated relationship of inner and outer, psy-

chic and physical, spiritual and material. The separation that would come, a separation that Barfield considered to be at least appropriate and perhaps inevitable, was the terrible loss of gods and spirit beings, and simultaneously a positive gain in independence, objectivity, distance, and individuality. This gain made the modern mind capable of amazing discoveries and creations—and catastrophes.

Advocates of the perennialist, or traditionalist, perspective, such as Frithjof Schuon, René Guénon, Huston Smith, Jacob Needleman, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr resist an evolutionary worldview because they do not see history as progressive.<sup>3</sup> Barfield agrees with these authors that the evolution of consciousness is an evolution of loss, and is therefore a devolution. However, in addition to this agreement, there is also a profound disagreement. According to Barfield, in contrast to the position of the traditionalists, this devolution is simultaneously a progression toward the possibility, and to some extent the realization, of individuality, freedom, and love. Using a developmental simile, we might say that to the extent that the young person withdraws from parental control or influence, he or she will be able to return love freely—and if not free, such love would be less than full. Similarly, it is only when a civilization attains a certain distance from its own commitments that it can reflect on them, and affirm or revise them. Without distance, individuals and cultures can change but cannot make conscious revision. It is crucial to understand that so long as the gods guided humanity, humanity was unable to take the place of the gods in creating new cultural forms. It was by separating from nature, the earth and the cosmos, and gods—and more poignantly, from the goddesses—that the self gained an objective, and then a rational, perspective on all three.

It is by a distance from itself that the self developed the ability to look psychologically at itself. Such distance gives individuals and entire civilizations an opportunity to create new figurations, new paradigms, new ways of seeing and thinking the same sources of a perceived and conceptualized object as were seen in the past but interpreted differently. It is important to grasp that an object, perhaps the Parthenon or Mount Kailash, are really different places as experienced in the past, or in the present. An object perceived in the past contained a fullness of both material and spiritual meanings; this (seemingly) same object as perceived and simultaneously conceptualized by a contemporary Western person no longer presents itself with the same wholeness. Rather, the object appears to us as a divided entity, separated from its concept and able to be rejoined only by an act of imagination.

In *Saving the Appearances*, Barfield tracks the gradual changes of the collective representations that have shaped, by both enabling and limiting, what individuals and groups actually see—not only by the physical act of the eye but by what the mind supplies in the way of meaning, without which whatever would be seen physically would be unintelligible. This is the point of

Barfield's insistence that we do not see, or taste, coffee. "Coffee" is a concept that we provide for the percept,<sup>4</sup> or set of percepts, that "coffee" identifies. In his *History in English Words* Barfield showed that the evolution of consciousness can be observed by many additional concepts that English language speakers have found to express their perceptions. Each new concept, new verb, new split of a word into two or more words, adds to the evolving habit of differentiation and fragmentation that has become characteristic of modern Western consciousness.

Furthermore, these new words advance the separation of inner and outer, mind and world, which were once a unity, the form of consciousness that made possible original participation. Original participation for a modern Western individual is correctly regarded as very difficult and perhaps impossible. More dramatically, nonparticipation might be so characteristic of modern Western consciousness that philosophers and social scientists seem increasingly to regard original participation, or any degree of participation, as not ever having been experienced, or as a false experience. Others think that unitive experience was the case, and occasionally still is, and is called mysticism, i.e., the unity of the self with some larger reality, whether nature, spirit, or divinity.

In *Saving the Appearances*, Barfield gives a splendid example of the separation of concept from its percept characteristic of the loss of participation:

Anyone who has struggled for a few pages with the Vedas in translation will know that in their language and entanglement of subject and object, of psychology and natural history, of divine and human, of word and thing, is such as to render the thought virtually unintelligible to a modern reader. . . . To take one instance, the word *Namarupa*, or "name-form," takes us back straight away to a stage of consciousness at which that surgical operation . . . whereby the thing is separated from its name, had not yet begun to be performed. In the measure that a man participates his phenomena, in that measure the name is the form, and form is the name.<sup>5</sup>

In *Cratylus*, Plato laments the loss of the natural meaning of words, i.e., the loss of identity of word and thing.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, dharma, a word that Barfield does not discuss, is an example of a concept that held many meanings at the time of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita. One of the foundation terms in the Gita, dharma has no single equivalent in English because it means obligation, place in the world, teaching, and religious practices; in effect, it includes religion, ethics, and social values. Indian thinkers without a knowledge of Sanskrit as well as a modern Western person attempting to understand the Gita must hold in unison the many wide-ranging meanings of this concept. Maya has an equally wide range of meanings: it refers to the gap between the phenomenal world and Brahman but also any entity or event that appears (mistakenly and, in fact, impos-

sibly) to exist or have a meaning unto itself. Barfield's description of primal consciousness functions as a contrasting background to the modern Western consciousness of the past three centuries. As participation was dealt a most deadly blow by the scientific revolution that began in the sixteenth century, Barfield argues that it is the task of humanity at the present time to break through, or transform, scientific thinking by full, final, will- and love-filled thinking. For Barfield, this is the great defining task of contemporary Western culture: to think "scientifically" in a way that reunites mind and world. This reunification is made possible by a thinking that is characterized by affection. Following Goethe, Barfield advocates a "delicate empiricism,"<sup>7</sup> and following Steiner, he advocates a way of thinking and knowing that unites the inner of the self with the inner of the world.<sup>8</sup> The gist of *Saving the Appearances* is to make it clear and consequential that modern Western individuals can attain, and should daily strive for, a consciousness that has a unity similar to original consciousness but made possible by an act of will, infused with affection, and highly individualized.

This entire evolutionary narrative is bound up with a series of controversial and important ontological and epistemological insights. Whereas the dominant narratives of today assume, in Barfield's words, that "whatever the truth may be about the psychological nexus between man and nature, it is an unchanging one and is the same now as it was when men first appeared on earth,"<sup>9</sup> Barfield holds to the contrary that the nexus between humanity and nature has changed decisively with each millennium, and in recent centuries, very nearly with each generation. As he writes:

This book is being written . . . because it seems to [the author] that certain wide consequences flowing from the hastily expanded sciences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in particular their physics, have not been sufficiently considered in building up the general twentieth-century picture of the nature of the universe and of the history of the earth and man.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible to grasp Barfield's meaning immediately by considering a rainbow, which is, as he says, "the outcome of the sun, the raindrops and our own vision."<sup>11</sup> Elaborating on this metaphor, he states:

The practical difference between a dream or hallucination of a rainbow and an actual rainbow is that, although each is a representation or appearance (that is, something that I perceive to be there), the second is a *shared* or collective representation.<sup>12</sup>

Barfield adds:

It is easy to appreciate that there is no such thing as an unseen rainbow. It is not so easy to grasp that there is no such thing as an unheard noise.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, human thinking contributes not only the union of sun and dew for the cocreation of a rainbow; it is equally necessary for the joining of the right concept to the percept that we know as coffee. This is difficult to articulate because all of the qualities such as color, aroma, and granularity necessary for knowledge of coffee require the same process of joining concept to percept. However unaware of the process by which the rainbow is created, we are all aware that the rainbow has human input. It is more difficult to be aware of human thinking with respect to coffee because we stubbornly believe that it is out there, really there irrespective of my thinking. It is true that the percepts to which I contribute concepts are there but without the concepts that I contribute the percepts would not be named and therefore unknown. Barfield thus advocates a *holistic, self-implicating epistemology* that eschews either empiricist or linguistic reductionism. As Barfield writes: “I do not perceive any *thing* with my sense-organs alone, but with a great part of my whole human being.”<sup>14</sup>

This important epistemological point is also important exegetically: what it means in Exodus for Yahweh to speak to Moses or for the bush to burn, or for the Sea of Reeds to part, or the Decalogue to be handed to Moses, or what it means in the Gita for Krishna to speak with Arjuna, depends on the collective representation of that people; its meaning for a contemporary person requires an understanding of that collective representative as well as one’s own. But such a double understanding requires an act of imagination, of breaking out of contemporary strictures to arrive at a conscious image of Yahweh, Moses, the burning bush, pharaoh, the Ten Commandments. Because the collective representation of the Book of Exodus is a mix of the mythic and historical, it is difficult to interpret within a contemporary Western collective representation for which mythic and historical consciousness have quite different meanings from the meanings at the time of Exodus. When we turn to interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita it will be important to keep in mind Barfield’s fundamental assertion that two processes are necessarily constitutive of thinking, both of which are relevant to the process of interpreting a sacred scripture such as the Bhagavad Gita:

1. “the sense-organs must be related to the particles in such a way as to give rise to sensations”;
2. “those sensations must be combined and constructed by the percipient mind into the recognizable and nameable objects we call ‘things.’”<sup>15</sup>

One of the “things” to be thought is Krishna, a charioteer who is also collectively represented in the Hindu mind as a god. Clearly, one’s own collective representation makes a difference as to how one interprets this complex figure. An interpretation of the Gita according to original participation, and particularly concerning Krishna, would presuppose the ultimate identity of



the perceiver and the world, including Arjuna as perceiver in his relationship with Krishna.<sup>16</sup> By enabling Arjuna, the warrior on the battlefield, to experience his identity with Krishna, Krishna in a sense restored Arjuna to an original participation. Yet, this is not quite exact because Arjuna, in his individual representation, lost some of the collective representation of an earlier time when Krishna would have been more immediately and obviously present to him than he is at the start of the Gita when Arjuna has fallen into depression due to the civil war about to begin.

In contrast to original participation, a contemporary Western person whose consciousness is shaped and limited by the Western scientific collective representation would not see a real Krishna behind his representation in the Gita. By contemporary representation, Krishna must be a fictional character, a creation of human imagination (i.e., fantasy, not knowledge of a real image). Such an interpretation would not attempt to reach the real Krishna but instead would “save the appearances,” that is, would deal with Krishna “as though” he were real. He is real for the purposes of the story, not ontologically real in time, space, or history. For Barfield, by contrast, the attribution of reality exclusively to material things is epistemologically naïve and spiritually idolatrous. The subtitle of *Saving the Appearances* is “A Study in Idolatry,” a study in the loss of participation and the substitution of idols for realities in which humanity in the present seems unable to participate. Humanity creates idols to replace realities it can no longer access and no longer affirm as being real, or as ever having been real.

Because of his subtle attention to the changing contours of both the world and the consciousness within which the world comes to manifestation, Barfield offers us a way of reading the Gita that avoids both the idolatry of literalizing ancient texts and the idolatry of evacuating these texts of any real reference. Instead, Barfield’s account suggests that one can participatively engage the Gita in a nonliteral, imaginative but nevertheless real manner. Such an engagement allows the participatory reader entry into an ancient world and the riches of an ancient spiritual vision without the sacrifice of his or her own modernity and autonomy. But what would such a participatory engagement look like? This is the task of the next section.

#### THE BHAGAVAD GITA IN EVOLVING CONSCIOUSNESS

In the rest of this chapter we will consider three robust, varied yet exemplary participatory interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita. For Gandhi, the Gita teaches nonattachment to the fruits of action. The battle about to be fought, with the bewildered warrior Arjuna on the front line pleading for help from his divine charioteer, is a battle in the human heart, not at all a historical battle. According to Sri Aurobindo, on the other hand, this battle was a historical event, Krishna really did instruct Arjuna to fight, and to do so in

accordance with the yogas that Krishna taught and intended for the rest of humanity. When Sri Aurobindo reads the Gita historically (as well as philosophically and spiritually), it is not merely a hermeneutical perspective but also a way of understanding contemporary events. For example, Sri Aurobindo's reading of the Gita convinced him that if Krishna had offered advice to India during World War II, he would have instructed India to join the battle on the side of Britain and against the Axis powers. Steiner offers a still different reading that regards Krishna as a very high spiritual being transmitting the several yogas to humanity as preparation for the great spiritual contributions to be brought subsequently by Buddha and Christ. How does one assess these three very different interpretations?

In the first chapter of the Gita we meet the situation to which the remaining seventeen chapters are the reply:

O Krishna, I see my own relations here anxious to fight, and my limbs grow weak. . . . I am unable to stand; my mind seems to be whirling. These signs bode evil for us. I do not see that any good can come from killing our relatives in battle. O Krishna, I have no desire for victory, or for a kingdom or pleasures. Of what use is a kingdom or pleasure or even life, if those for whose sake we desire these things—teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, in-laws, grandson, and others with family ties—are engaging in this battle, renouncing their wealth and their lives? Even if they were to kill me I would not want to kill them, not even to become ruler of the three worlds. How much less for the earth alone. (1.28–35)

Overwhelmed by sorrow, Arjuna spoke these words. And casting away his bow and his arrows, he sat down in his chariot in the middle of the battlefield. (1.47)<sup>17</sup>

Krishna's reply in chapters 2 and 3 favors Gandhi's conviction that the core of the Gita's teaching is *karma-yoga*, action without attachment to the fruits of action: "He who shirks action does not attain freedom" (3.3); "Fulfill all your duties; action is better than inaction" (3.8).

Chapter 4, however, favors Sri Aurobindo's emphasis on the human experience of the divine form and efficacy of Krishna in relation to human conduct:

You and I have passed through many births, Arjuna. You have forgotten, but I remember them all. / My true being is unborn and changeless. I am the Lord who dwells in every creature. Through the power of my own maya, I manifest in a finite form. / Whenever dharma declines and the purpose of life forgotten, I manifest myself on earth. / I am born in every age to protect the good, to destroy evil, and to re-establish dharma. / He who knows me as his own divine Self breaks through the belief that he is the body and is not reborn as a separate creature. Such a one, Arjuna, is united with me. / Delivered from selfish attachment, fear, and anger, filled with me, surrendering

themselves to me, purified in the fire of my being, many have reached the state of unity in me. / As men approach me, so I receive them. All paths, Arjuna, lead to me. (4.5–11)

These are but a few of the verses that show Krishna's influential and occasionally revealing and inspiring but far from obvious reply to Arjuna. While many of the words and phrases of these texts are ambiguous, it is especially the core revelation of the Gita—Krishna's teaching to Arjuna with reference to the civil war—that is, or certainly ought to be, most confusing and jarring to a contemporary sensibility, whether Indian or Western. There are important respects in which the worldview or *dharma*, implicit in the Gita is incompatible with the contemporary West. While the Gita provides important teachings and practices for a contemporary person, particularly regarding the avatar status of Krishna and the three or four yogas that are stressed in the Gita, even these teachings and practices are revealed in a "soul mood" that is unmistakably old, traditional, mystical, and imaginal, in short, very different from modern Western sensibility.

One way to characterize the context that makes every part of the Gita different from a contemporary mood or mindset would be to say that this consciousness is pre-Greek, i.e., it conveys a worldview that is prior to the kind of thinking that emerged when the efficacy, and then the existence, of the gods came to be questioned. Note the famous critique of the anthropomorphic character of Greek theology by the sixth-century Xenophanes: "If cows could draw, their gods would look like cows." There is no trace of so radical a separation of the divine and human in the Gita. The immediacy and indubitability of Arjuna's world, including the worldview of Krishna, seem to have only now, with Arjuna's great war, come into question: first Arjuna needs guidance, and then he needs a vision, to enable him to understand the nature and extent of the god Krishna and to be able to take Krishna's counsel as his own. The Gita, then, is a transitional, efficacious text, as are all important texts: such texts mediate the transition from one kind of consciousness, and from one paradigmatic insight, to the next. In the case of the Gita, Arjuna, and thereby humanity, is brought from despondency concerning the unhappy unfolding of his own *dharma* and *karma* to another level of consciousness. Depending on one's interpretation, this new *dharma* can be understood metaphorically, as the story of Arjuna's own interior realization, or historically as an injunction to participate in the fratricidal warfare demanded by Arjuna's *dharma*, but to do so with a transformed consciousness.

In the Indian consciousness, of which the Gita is a significant but by no means the sole expression of a higher or deeper insight into spiritual reality, profound mystical expressions visited the trained and attentive disciple as though he were listening to music. The refrains poured forth, more like melodies or visions than analytic propositions. Given this easy, if imperfect,

relationship between an individual human being (who is presumably a representative of humanity) and the divine (represented by Krishna, who is at least a god and perhaps a full manifestation of Brahman, the Hindu conception of the whole of divinity), it is the more remarkable that Arjuna turns to Krishna in the first chapter to announce that this war, and his part in it, is not to his liking. He laments that if all of the warriors prepared to kill each other across the field of battle actually were to do so, the structures (*dharma*) of society would be destroyed (*adharma*).

Arjuna does not exclaim, in twentieth-century existentialist fashion, that “God is dead!” He does, however, turn to his charioteer Krishna and speak in a way that reveals the sudden eruption of *adharma*. He says, in effect, “This is terrible. It will destroy the whole society. Dharma will not recover from such a disastrous war.” Arjuna pleads with Krishna that if all the leaders of their society were to kill each other, who would run the government, the temples, the schools? Shockingly, Krishna tells Arjuna to not worry about that: those who will be killed are already dead and you should do what you were born to do, but do it in full and loving consciousness of me.

How could Arjuna become so conscious of Krishna, whom he still knows as his charioteer and not yet as the god Krishna, that he could kill his cousins in hand to hand combat and do so with Krishna-inspired equanimity? After teaching Arjuna the yogas of knowledge (of the divine), action (without attachment to the fruits of action), love (of Krishna and his creation), and meditation (so as to withdraw from the influence of the senses), Krishna then gives to Arjuna a sublime gift, an apparition of his divine form. What does Arjuna see? If he sees Krishna in a divine manifestation, how is that possible? It might be the same question to ask what Sri Aurobindo sees in his many and presumably productive mystical experiences? Sri Aurobindo reportedly saw Krishna’s divine form in the context of the evolution of consciousness. It is remarkable for a twentieth-century person to see Krishna as a manifestation of the divine. It is less remarkable for Arjuna, in the time of the Gita, to see Krishna as divine being. The great achievement of Steiner and Sri Aurobindo, both writing independently on the Gita in the second decade of the twentieth century, was to have seen Krishna’s experience of Arjuna both in the light of Arjuna’s own historically determined consciousness and also from their twentieth-century perspectives.

One of the ways that the Gita presupposes a consciousness different from that of the modern West is the designation of *varna* (caste), or life-work, by birth. Arjuna is a warrior by the fact that his father was a warrior. To perform the duties of a warrior, including the unpleasant task of fighting this civil war, is his *varna*, his caste duty. In the modern West, by contrast, life-work roles are not determined by birth. In the India of the Gita, one’s birth reveals what one was born to do by virtue of one’s previous life and the life of one’s parents. That Arjuna could lose track of this essential fact indicates that a new

consciousness, which also brings about a certain amount of chaos, at least temporarily, has arisen. It is surprising, and very revealing of the extent of the emerging change of consciousness, that Krishna should need to remind Arjuna of his *varna*-duty and should need to teach him the discipline to perform it. Because of the emergence of a new *dharma*, Krishna has to teach Arjuna the four yogas—knowledge, action, devotion, and meditation.

The yogas that Krishna teaches to Arjuna in the Gita are theoretically and practically useful for a modern Western person but not without adjustments due to what Steiner, Aurobindo, Barfield, and others see as the evolution of consciousness during the past two and a half millennia. The yoga of spiritual knowledge is simply more difficult for the modern person than it was for Arjuna of the Gita: the spectator knowledge that has dominated Western consciousness since, and because of, the scientific revolution, is characterized by a great distance between the knower, even the spiritual seeker, and the divine, or spirit. It takes a great effort for the modern Western person to travel Arjuna's route to knowledge of Krishna.

How are we to make sense of this epochal change? In the Gita, Krishna teaches Arjuna concerning three *gunas*, three levels of consciousness: *sattva*, or light; *rajas*, or energy; and *tamas*, or dark and heavy. One way of understanding the evolution of consciousness, particularly the two and a half millennia that separate the present from the consciousness of the Gita, is to say that humanity has devolved from the preponderance of *sattva* and *rajas* to a preponderance of *tamas*. The time characterized by *sattva* (light) would have been much earlier than the Gita, when humanity lived entirely in myth and when divine and spirit beings were immediately accessible in the visible as well as in the invisible world. According to the present mode of consciousness, not only are the gods and spirit not available, the thought that there are such beings, and that they were once accessible, is also inaccessible. In this context, "God is dead" is the report of a *tamasic* consciousness.

The second yoga, *karma-yoga*, the discipline of selfless action, can and should be practiced by contemporary individuals but with a significant revision. According to the Gita, *karma* has already settled the future—those whom Arjuna will kill are already slain. The full meaning of Arjuna's life lies not in his decision whether to kill or to withdraw from battle but rather in his acceptance of necessity. Like the philosophical ideal of the Roman Stoics, wisdom in the Gita consists not in a wise choice but in *amor fati*, love of fate. The only real decision facing Arjuna is whether, with the help of Krishna, he will be able to act—in the most dramatic imaginable way, by killing his cousins and very likely in turn being killed himself—with the loving and knowing consciousness of Krishna. Failing to act yogically, in ignorance and darkness, he will act in the illusion of his own self-sufficiency. According to the Gita's Krishna, it is not the selection of right ends that matters but nonattachment to the ends. As Krishna teaches throughout the

Gita, in a fated world, nonattachment to the fated choice is the only true aim, the only path to liberation.

Krishna also teaches Arjuna the yoga of devotion or love. With this yoga, as with the yogas of knowledge and action, Krishna had a narrower gap to close than would be the case by a god whispering to a contemporary representative of Western humanity. While there are no shortage of mystics at the present time, including some who attest to experiences comparable to Arjuna's experience of Krishna in the middle chapters of the Gita, in general, participation of human consciousness in the consciousness of a divine being has been diminished by several centuries of philosophic and scientific critique, and particularly by a resistance to the possibility of a divine being who is loving, lovable, communicative, and able to be understood. As the West tends to consider a knowing relation between a representative of humanity and a putatively divine being implausible, a loving relationship between these same parties becomes equally suspect.

Sri Aurobindo considers the path of meditation a fourth yoga. In the Gita, as in the writings of Sri Aurobindo and Steiner, and particularly in their interpretations of the Gita, meditation is never separate from the other yogas. Knowledge, action, and love are all intended to be meditative, and meditation is intended to help in their transformation. In the contemporary West, meditation, particularly Hindu and Buddhist practices, tends to have a close relation to action and love but also tend to be separate from knowledge. All of this is only to say that none of the Gita's three or four yogas—neither *bhakti*, nor *karma*, nor *jñana*, nor indeed the path of meditation—make themselves easily available to the contemporary reader. We can only traverse this hermeneutical and chronological distance with great effort, or as Barfield says, with “a goodness of heart and a steady furnace in the will.”<sup>18</sup>

#### GANDHI, SRI AUROBINDO, AND STEINER ON THE GITA

##### M. K. (MAHATMA) GANDHI

In 1925, Gandhi wrote concerning his devotion to the Gita:

I find a solace in the Bhagavad Gita that I missed even in the Sermon on the Mount. When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not a ray of hope, I go back to the Bhagavad Gita. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies—and my life has been full of external tragedies. And if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita.<sup>19</sup>

The Bhagavad Gita gave Gandhi his deepest and most definite understanding of the inseparability, and perhaps identity, of political, moral, and reli-

gious action. Gandhi's fundamental concept, *satyagraha* ("truth-force"), which he practiced and taught for twenty years in South Africa and forty years in India, has as its core *karma-yoga* as taught in the Bhagavad Gita. As *karma-yoga* means nonattachment to the fruits of one's action, *satyagraha* essentially means nonpossession, noncontrol, and nonpleasure seeking, or, in short, nonattachment to the fruits, benefits, and pleasure of one's action.<sup>20</sup>

If *karma-yoga* is the basis of Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita, nonviolence is its fullest expression. There is no doubt about the prominence of *karma-yoga* in the Gita, but it is by no means obvious that the Gita teaches nonviolence in the usual sense of the term (i.e., not inflicting injury). At the end of the Gita, Krishna's sole instruction with respect to the war is that Arjuna should fight. Arjuna's enemies, after all, are in effect already dead. According to Gandhi's interpretation, Krishna instructs Arjuna go and fight against all of his lower impulses, go and fight in such a way that he would not cling to the rewards of his action. He should be equally disposed to his enemy and to himself.

For Gandhi the Gita tells of a battle not on a field of battle, but rather a battle within the human heart, within humanity, between the forces of good and evil. Gandhi taught that the best guarantee of nonviolent consciousness would be to refrain from both violent thinking and from violent action. He does not think, as a pacifist interpreter of the Gita might, that it would be possible to fight when required to do so without a violent emotion or motive, without wanting to harm the enemy. Such seemingly violent but perfectly equanimous action would be like physically—and lovingly—preventing a child from harm or a violent person from committing a violent action. Such a position affirms inner quietude and peaceful consciousness despite action that might appear violent. But Gandhi does not take that position with respect to the Gita; he does not suggest that Krishna tells Arjuna to fight but to do so peacefully, that is, with that total inner calm made possible by a meditative focus on the infinitely and eternally calm Krishna. Instead, Gandhi offers an analogical interpretation: the Gita teaches that the metaphor of the war on the battlefield is like the war in the human heart between positive and negative, higher and lower forces.

Against Gandhi one might argue that Krishna does in fact tell Arjuna to fight, and that he gives reasons why this is the highest teaching. Gandhi, however, would hardly have been swayed by such an argument. Gandhi's interpretation looks past Krishna's instruction to Arjuna to perform his historical, biographical duty, his *dharma* and *karma* in order to discern something that Gandhi considered more essential in the Gita. He was certain that the Gita teaches nonviolence in thought and deed, in motive and physical result, and could not possibly teach violence. Based on the text, this would seem to be a difficult interpretation to sustain. Violence, like slavery and fixed vocational *dharma*, were unquestioned components of classical Indian culture. In

rejecting these components, Gandhi essentially ignores them on the way to his own original interpretation. He did not consider it necessary, or particularly productive, to try to ascertain and to consider the teachings of the Gita in their historical setting but instead *creatively reinterpreted* the Gita, all but creating an entirely new text through his novel engagement with the ancient scriptural story.

Gandhi's approach is unapologetically subjective and thus distinctively modern. He says, in effect, this is what this great text means to me, and what it means to me is true because there is no other perspective that could be more true. There is a theory of meaning implicit in all of this. What the Gita means to me is exactly and necessarily what it means—there is no other meaning but what it means to me, or to you, or to anyone—there is no text outside of its interpretation. The revelation of Krishna to Arjuna happens in the personal experience of each interpreter.

#### SRI AUROBINDO

Sri Aurobindo wrote his *Essays on the Gita* from 1914 to 1921, at the beginning of his life in Pondicherry, a section of south India under the colonial rule of France. As Aurovind Ghose, his name before his spiritual experiences led to his being called Sri Aurobindo, he spent 1908 to 1909 in the Alipore Jail, in Calcutta, under charges of sedition against the British Government of India. On the second page of his six hundred-page commentary on the Gita, Sri Aurobindo makes explicit the extent of his subjective interpretation, and the subjective character of all interpretations, of the Gita:

We hold it therefore of small importance to extract from the Gita its exact metaphysical connotation as it was understood by the men of the time—even if that were accurately possible. That it is not possible, is shown by the divergence of the original commentaries which have been and are still being written upon it; for they all agree in each disagreeing with all of the others, each finds in the Gita its own system of metaphysics and trend of religious thought. Nor will even the most painstaking and disinterested scholarship and the most luminous theories of the historical development of Indian philosophy save us from inevitable error. But what we can do with profit is to seek in the Gita for the actual living truths it contains, apart from their metaphysical form, to extract from it what can help us or the world at large and to put it in the most natural and vital form and expression we can find that will be suitable to the mentality and helpful to the spiritual needs of our present-day humanity. No doubt in this attempt we may mix a good deal of error born of our own individuality and of the ideas in which we live, as did greater men before us, but if we steep ourselves in the spirit of this great Scripture and, above all, if we have tried to live in that spirit, we may be sure of finding in it as much real truth as we are capable of receiving as well



as the spiritual influence and actual help that, personally, we were intended to derive from it. And that is after all what scriptures were written to give; the rest is academical [sic] disputation or theological dogma. Only those Scriptures, religions, philosophies which can be thus constantly renewed, relived, their stuff of permanent truth constantly reshaped and developed in the inner thought and spiritual experience of a developing humanity, continue to be of living importance to mankind. The rest remain as monuments of the past, but have no actual force or vital impulse for the future.<sup>21</sup>

In his *Essays on the Gita* Sri Aurobindo explains some of the ways that each of the yogas can best be understood and practiced in our time. His *Synthesis of Yoga* is a two-volume study of the yogas of knowledge, action, and love plus several hundred pages on *purna yoga* (integral yoga), a discipline to strengthen a commitment to cooperation with the evolution of consciousness understood both as a divine force behind history and human development, and as a goal for humanity to attain. Critics of the evolution of consciousness often hold that it demeans the people and texts of previous times, but in the hands of someone such as Sri Aurobindo or Barfield this is far from the case. Instead, by placing the Gita in an evolutionary context, Sri Aurobindo was able to recognize its historical integrity while at the same time exceeding its teachings according to the demands of his day. Unlike Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo does not conform the Gita to his own teaching, but rather he tries to listen to the words and see the images in the Gita, to affirm what he can of them, and then to move beyond its yogas to his own account of yoga in the transformative context of the evolution of consciousness.

Writing nearly a century ago, Sri Aurobindo makes it very clear that the Gita is an incomplete teaching for contemporary humanity because it does not include—nor could it have included when it was composed—an awareness of the evolution of consciousness and the task of the present age, namely, to work for the transformation of the four levels of the human being: first, the transformation of the body and with it the transformation of the material world of which the body is a part; secondly, the transformation of the vital, or the life-principle, the emotional or feeling life, aesthetics and culture; thirdly, the transformation of the mind, and the realization of higher mental states, including illumined mind, and what he calls Overmind; and then, fourthly, the great achievement for which he and his spiritual collaborator the Mother (née Mira Richard) were reportedly instruments, namely, the descent and spread of the Supermind.

We turn now to Sri Aurobindo's approach to the Gita, the key elements in his interpretation, and the place of the Gita in Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga. Sri Aurobindo sees the Gita as a living document, the full meaning of which requires an active participatory or meditative reading. He memorized it and recited it during the year that he spent in the Alipure Jail. It was at

that time that he saw the jailers and the prisoners, presumably some of whom were murderers and thieves as well as innocent victims of an unjust and politicized penal system, all equally in the wise and loving grasp of Krishna. At that time in his development as a great spiritual teacher, it seems likely that Sri Aurobindo entered into a deep and intensely individualized relationship to the Krishna of the Gita, and committed himself to Krishna as a spiritual presence and force with the Gita as his outer manifestation. Sri Aurobindo explained his experience of the Overmind as “the descent of Krishna into the physical.”<sup>22</sup>

Murderers and jailers, like the two sides of the civil war in which Arjuna was caught by his *dharma* and *karma*, are equally expressions of a divine *lila*, play or drama, of history. Understood within the context of his own teachings and his own reading of the Gita, Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual mission placed him in the midst of a grand narrative that perhaps began in previous incarnations and surely included his fourteen years of elementary, high school, and college in England, his years as a radical opponent of the British Government of India, and his year in the Alipure Jail. In this context, all of these experiences themselves became a project of the Krishna of the Gita. Sri Aurobindo’s reading of the Gita was far more than simply registering the words on the page or even of offering an interpretation of the text. His entire life became a participatory exegesis of the Bhagavad Gita. After his experience of Krishna and his writing *Essays on the Gita*, it would seem that Sri Aurobindo’s entire spiritual endeavor had an Arjuna-Krishna quality, a combination of being on the firing line while at the same time seeing life’s battles from a divine perspective.

The key components of Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the Gita are the *yogas*—knowledge, action, love, meditation—the reality of Krishna as an avatar, and the task of maximizing *sattva* (light) at the expense of *tamas* (dullness), particularly in relation to the material realm. Sri Aurobindo extends, lifts, and deepens all of these components in the light of the evolution of consciousness. Specifically, he explains the *yogas* in such a way as to account for a greater degree of individuality than had evolved during the two and a half millennia separating the Gita and his *Essays*. He includes in his treatment of *karma-yoga*, for example, the fact that in the twentieth century a person does not become a warrior by the sole reason of birth but rather has a free, or nearly free, choice as to livelihood. In his treatment of *jñana* (knowledge yoga) and *bhakti* (devotion) he takes account of the fact that Krishna is not the only god affirmed by humanity and, further, that the Hindu spiritual tradition is one of many.<sup>23</sup>

In Sri Aurobindo’s total vision and teaching, the Gita is foundational but not final; it is basic but insufficient. The key to Sri Aurobindo’s mission, as he himself understood it, is his work on behalf of the spiritual evolution of humanity. This work includes his understanding and teaching but includes as

well his spiritual and esoteric battles with antihuman and antievolutionary forces. In these struggles, the Gita was an inspiration for Sri Aurobindo and a text that he recommends to spiritually striving allies, but he insists that the Gita as a text is limited by its time and its consciousness, and needs to be carried forward to a more progressive understanding of the divine-human relationship. It seems plausible to speculate that Sri Aurobindo was alert to Krishna's continuing revelation—through Sri Aurobindo himself and through his collaboration with the Mother as well as through their disciples and, no doubt, legions of spiritual seekers who practice the yogas and struggle on the side of light. The Gita completes itself age to age through the creative engagement of its readers and meditators. Put another way, one could say that, for Sri Aurobindo, the spiritual treasure of the Gita is like a gift that can only be opened through one's deepening relationship to Krishna, the divine presence that inspired the Gita initially.

#### RUDOLF STEINER

We turn now to Steiner's interpretation of the Gita and in the process summarize his participatory epistemology in relation to the Gita. Given Steiner's emphasis on the evolution of consciousness, we may ask the following questions: What is his approach to the Gita? What are the key elements in his interpretation? And what is the place of the Gita in Steiner's anthroposophy?

Steiner makes two statements concerning the Gita, and particularly concerning the revelation of Krishna, which at first appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, he states that Krishna's teaching of the yogas not only was but is the most advanced teaching concerning the possibilities for the spiritual transformation of the human being. In a later statement, on the other hand, it becomes clear that he considers that Krishna's singularly great contributions were surpassed by the contributions of the Buddha and Christ. He says that the Buddha brought a greater contribution of compassion than Krishna, and that Christ brought himself as a presence and force that transformed humanity and the earth. The key to solving this apparent contradiction lies in the distinction between Krishna's importance for the transformation of the individual and the power of the Buddha and Christ to transform humanity—however insignificant these transformations seem as one observes the affairs of humankind.

The key elements in Steiner's interpretation of the Gita are very similar to the elements in the interpretation of Sri Aurobindo: the yogas, the avatarhood of Krishna, and the struggle on behalf of the evolution of consciousness toward greater light—a light he most regularly interprets in terms of Christ, the Logos, whom he refers to as the Sun Being.<sup>24</sup>

The Gita holds a very important but not central place in Steiner's writings and lectures. It was while he was in a spiritual and esoteric struggle

within, or in relation to, the Theosophical Society that Steiner focused rather intensely on Krishna and the Buddha and the spiritual traditions of which he considered them to be the paradigmatic teachers. In 1912, when the complete and final break between the Theosophical Society and what was then forming as the Anthroposophical Society seemed inevitable, Steiner gave two sets of lectures on the Gita: the first, *The Bhagavad Gita and the Epistles of Paul*, which he delivered in December 1912, were the first lectures he delivered to the members of the newly created Anthroposophical Society. In May 1913 he went much deeper into the text itself in a series of nine lectures entitled *The Esoteric Meaning of the Bhagavad Gita*. In the first series he emphasizes the distinctive contribution of Krishna and the Gita as well as the unique and, according to Steiner, greater contribution of Christ. In the second set of lectures in which he went deeper into the text of the Gita, he emphasizes the significance of the samkhya philosophy, the *gunas* (*sattva*, light; *rajas*, energy; *tamas*, dullness), and the transcendent significance of Krishna as avatar.

It would be difficult to find a more appropriate characterization for Steiner's relationship to the Gita than participation. His statements about the teachings of the Gita and their contemporary significance derive directly from his participation in the soul mood of the time, in the reality of Krishna in the spiritual world, the historical fact of Krishna's revelation to Arjuna in the India of sixth century BCE, and the spiritual character of that revelation as expressed, however incompletely, in the words of the Bhagavad Gita. It is clear that Steiner came to his understanding, and deep appreciation, of the Gita by intense participatory esoteric effort; it is also clear that he considers it is necessary for any one who would experience the teachings of the Gita and the reality of Krishna to make a sustained and strenuous effort, under the heading of thinking or love, or a union of the two.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes with summaries of the approaches to the Bhagavad Gita by the three interpreters discussed, and some personal reflections on the various participatory modalities of each of these approaches.

It seems fair to say that Gandhi's approach is, by and large, more subjective than participatory—the Gita means what he thinks it should mean for his life work and for the task of the time. In contrasting subjective and participatory, I mean only that participatory affirms a degree of objectivity of a text (or any phenomenon) to be met by the interpreter; subjectivity in this context limits the meaning of the text to the framework of the interpreter with little regard for what the text (or any phenomenon) might mean in its own right. Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita would seem to be an instance of one of the deep, mysterious, and vexatious facts about philosophy and reli-

gion, namely the gap between “right view” and “right action.” Gandhi’s view of the Gita seems at the very least historically mistaken, but his use of the Gita, including his use of his presumably mistaken interpretation, produced manifestly positive results in his own field of battle against the British rule of India and against a wide range of injustices that he opposed first in South Africa and then in India. Many profound, scholarly, and presumably correct interpretations of the Gita by others, including Sri Aurobindo and Steiner, seem to have exercised a less significant effect on the common good than Gandhi’s arguably naïve interpretation and use of the Gita. For Gandhi, the most efficacious interpretation would have to be the one that supports what was for him the highest possible truth, the truth of nonviolence.

On this larger topic, the concept and practice of nonviolence, Gandhi is deeply participatory: he was an empiricist, a steady and devoted experimenter, ready to learn from the personal, social, and moral conflicts in which he participated. Within the context of those encounters, Gandhi’s focus is not on the Gita as such but rather on the pragmatic use of the Gita, with his unusual interpretation, in the larger cause of nonviolence. It does not seem that Gandhi asked the Gita for its meaning, nor did he ask Krishna. Gandhi’s epistemology is a commonsense rationality, a naïve realism, but thoroughly subjectivist, such that the Gita can be taken to mean whatever he, or any one else, thinks it means—provided that it serves the cause of nonviolence. Fortunately for the world, especially for India in the first half of the twentieth century, Gandhi participated brilliantly, generously, and consequently on behalf of peace and justice, perhaps the two most urgent needs during Gandhi’s lifetime and today.

With respect to the Gita—though not with respect to the cause of nonviolence—Gandhi represents the problem of the loss of participation without a solution, indeed, without even recognizing the problem or the need for a solution. A consistent humanist who was regularly horrified by the conflict among religions, particularly between Hinduism and Islam in India, and justly afraid of religious dogmatism, Gandhi is methodologically sophisticated but epistemologically naïve. Totally pragmatic with respect to a scripture such as the Gita, his was a genius of morality, and particularly the morality of nonviolence. This apparent polarity in his life-work would seem to be due to his attention to human nature and behavior, particularly concerning human injustice—and participation in the causes and solutions of human suffering—combined with his inattention to the competing claims generated endlessly by theology and philosophy. He argues against cruelty and injustice but not against competing claims about God or gods, or the competition among rituals and other religious practices.

Sri Aurobindo interprets the Gita within the framework of the evolution of consciousness but his focus is more metaphysical than epistemological. He is particularly focused on the need to follow the yogas taught in the Gita, and

only secondarily on the challenge that faces a modern person who seeks to experience Krishna. Even his extensive writings on *jñana-yoga* (“The Yoga of Divine Knowledge”) focus on the nature and function of the Divine, whether as Brahman or as Sat-Chit-Ananda (Being-Consciousness-Bliss), and very little on the problem of knowledge in the present age. He does not so much offer a spiritual epistemology, whether by analysis or argument, as he offers himself as a guide to mystical *noesis*. A likely source of Sri Aurobindo’s participatory epistemology was his study of British Hegelian idealists at King’s College, Cambridge University, from 1889–1893. These writers clearly support both his explicit ontology and his implicit epistemology, but he scarcely ever cites these philosophers and never quotes them, thus leaving the relationship between his integral philosophy and Hegelian idealism a matter of speculation.

Sri Aurobindo, like Steiner, claims to be an original source; he knows by and from his own experience. Unlike Steiner, Sri Aurobindo does not confront the modern epistemological challenge, the gauntlet laid down first by Hume and then by Kant. Sri Aurobindo simply proceeds to write from his experience oblivious of the maxim of the nineteenth and twentieth century that it is not possible to ignore Kant. Sri Aurobindo develops a metaphysics, including an account of the divine, the human, the earthly, and the relationships among them. He does not, however, confront Hume and Kant directly, and consequently his writings do not help his reader out of, or through, the Kantian foreclosure on certain knowledge. According to the epistemological strictures laid down by Kant, one can affirm the reality and efficacy of a Krishna-like being, and even the mystical vision in the middle chapters of the Gita, but one cannot know this reality and efficacy to be so. By absorbing a Hegelian worldview and using it to render systematic the direct transmission of spiritual truths to the *rsis*, the spiritual teachers at the time of the Upanishads, 1000–500 BCE, Sri Aurobindo presents a synthesis of Upanishadic and Hegelian idealism but without the logical and epistemological justification that Hegel and post-Hegelians have been so at pains to establish.

As he focused on neither the concept of alienation (as explored, for example, in the Hegelian corpus) nor the loss of participation (as traced by Steiner and Barfield), Sri Aurobindo does not offer significant direction to the contemporary Western student of the Gita—and no doubt there are increasing numbers of Indian interpreters in this same situation—whose (explicit or implicit) assumptions are blocked by Humean or Kantian prohibitions. Sri Aurobindo writes as though his readers can simply do what he can: enter into what he refers to as “the core” and “the gist” of the Gita’s message and the reality of Krishna as avatar. While he seems to accept something like the loss of participation throughout the evolution of human consciousness, he nevertheless seems entirely optimistic concerning the evolution of

humanity to increasingly higher states of consciousness, from the current mental stage (ordinary intellect), to higher mind or illumined mind, to Overmind (the level of consciousness realized by the great spiritual teachers of the past, including particularly the level exhibited in the Gita) and Supermind (reportedly possible since the mid-twentieth century through the agency of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother).

If only by giving instruction to many hundreds of disciples, Sri Aurobindo was made aware of the difficulty, in contrast to his own ease of access, that twentieth-century seekers experience in their attempt to know spiritual realities. It would seem that if anyone knew the Gita from the inside, including its intent and significance, it was Sri Aurobindo, and this participatory intimacy sustained his conviction that Krishna as avatar and the inner meaning of the Gita's teaching, particularly on the yogas, were readily accessible to seekers in the present age. It would be difficult to imagine a text more confident than Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, but at the same time it contains little or no insight as to how the author knows what he knows, either about the Gita or about anything else. This work is thoroughly participatory but not epistemologically critical. As he said quite emphatically, he was not a philosopher; he was a yogi, mystic, a poet, and a spiritual teacher.<sup>25</sup>

As Gandhi developed an interpretation that furthered his case for and practice of nonviolence, Sri Aurobindo developed an interpretation in such a way as to advance the synthesis of yogas at the core of his teaching. In contrast to Gandhi's approach, however, Sri Aurobindo first memorized and then studied the Gita in its original language and meditated on its meaning. Consequently, his approach, unlike Gandhi's, is not merely subjective, but should be considered intersubjective and participatory: Krishna and the Gita are active sources of revelation but they require an active listener, an Arjuna who asks for help and who follows each step from *karma-yoga* to *jñana-yoga* to *bhakti-yoga* to the realization that in the present age these yogas need to take account of the evolution of consciousness. As Sri Aurobindo establishes by precept and example, the Gita requires someone like himself who knows the entire Indian spiritual tradition and the spiritual needs of contemporary humanity.

Sri Aurobindo's work as guru, and perhaps as (co-)avatar, is very different from Gandhi's forty-year commitment to "experiment with truth." Gandhi is neither a poet nor mystic but a moral reformer and activist. With respect to the Gita and virtually every other part of their careers, including the years that they worked in the Indian nationalist movement, Sri Aurobindo and Gandhi missed each other completely. Gandhi's interpretation of the Gita is modest, humanist, entirely nonacademic, and in service of his daily work on behalf of *satyagraha* (truth-force), whereas Sri Aurobindo's approach to the Gita is elegant, brilliant, learned, confident, and vast. Gandhi presents himself as an Arjuna on the firing line fighting

modestly, courageously, and indefatigably against the myriad forces of violence and injustice; Sri Aurobindo presents himself as a Krishna participating in and explaining to a confused humanity the continuing revelation of divine both in the form of Krishna and in many other manifestations, both personal and impersonal.

Whereas Sri Aurobindo is rightly understood as a guru and spiritual force, Steiner is best understood as an initiate, a term he himself uses. Steiner saw that his initiation involved him in a mission to expose and oppose the dominant Western worldview, one in the grip of materialism and dead thinking. Steiner's mission was to teach and exemplify a new path of knowledge, one that would enable a modern Western person to attain with confidence the kind of knowledge perhaps best called spiritual, the very possibility of which Kant and the dominant philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries argue against so decisively. It is appropriate, then, that in his interpretation of the Gita, Steiner is eager to establish that this great text is a true revelation but because of its date and culture of origin it is not, and could not be, the most important revelation for contemporary Western thought and culture.

Because it is informed by the modern Western scientific and philosophical revolution, Steiner's analysis of the epistemological challenge facing one who would attempt to know Krishna, or Buddha, or Christ—a saint, an avatar, bodhisattva, or one's recently deceased beloved—is far more rigorous, detailed, and challenging than Sri Aurobindo's. He insists that without rigorous self-discipline, essentially in opposition to ordinary thinking, no higher being will bestow on the seeker what Krishna bestowed on Arjuna. For a typical modern Western person to attain Krishna- or Buddha- or Christ-consciousness, a multidisciplined effort is required. Steiner's anthroposophy, or spiritual science, is precisely such a multidisciplined effort to reach the spiritual world. As is evident by his characterization of anthroposophy—"a path of knowledge to lead the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe"<sup>26</sup>—it is the very essence of participation. Krishna is precisely one of the highest and most efficacious links between the spiritual in the human being and the spiritual in the universe. In Steiner's ecumenical esoteric research, Buddha and Christ are also sublime links accessible by anyone who opposes the prevalence of *tamas* by thinking characterized by will and affect. As the Gita recommends knowledge, action, and love, Steiner recommends the cultivation of thinking, willing, and feeling, and like the Gita, he also recommends the mutual strengthening of each by the other two.

Modern Western interpreters of the Gita, and increasingly Indian interpreters influenced by Western ways of thinking, can experience Krishna and his message intellectually, as an observer, an onlooker, but, unlike Arjuna, they cannot readily see or hear inside of Krishna's mind where Krishna holds civilizations and worlds upon worlds. Nor is it easy for an interpreter with typical Western consciousness to experience sufficient depth of Krishna as a



source of knowledge, love, and selfless action. It is precisely because Steiner excelled at knowing, loving, and effective action that he was able to glean from the Gita—and from Krishna, though it is difficult for us to know what that means exactly—its deepest secrets.

To the extent that we take seriously Barfield's description of the evolution of consciousness, and the implications for contemporary thought and culture that follow immediately from it, it is a short step to see that the Bhagavad Gita, and revelatory texts like it—that is, texts with some capacity to reveal spirit and divinity as once known by that sensibility that Barfield calls "original participation," a sensibility that is suppressed or even barred at present—require interpreters to approach its inner secrets with a consciousness that is as direct as it is loving. Such thinking includes the self-consciousness of modern Western thought, but it will also break through the strictures of modern consciousness to the kind of contact with spiritual realities typical of ancient religious traditions and texts. The remarkably different character of what Barfield names original and final participation, and the degrees of loss of participation from original participation to final, provide "the different 'slant,'" the "comparatively slight readjustment in our *way* of looking at the things and ideas" that will make the difference between the Bhagavad Gita as a set of ideas and practices and the Bhagavad Gita as a revelation of a God or avatar who teaches ways to transform thought, love, and action.

## NOTES

I am grateful to the original thinking and writings of my CIIS colleagues, Richard Tarnas, Sean Kelly, Jorge N. Ferrer, and Jacob H. Sherman, on behalf of the development of a participatory epistemology; I am similarly grateful to Rudolf Steiner and an array of thinkers influenced by him—Barfield foremost among them. For a careful reading of this chapter, and suggestions for its improvement, I am grateful to Kathy Ann Woodruff and John Tillyer, and the editors of this volume, Ferrer and Sherman.

1. Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973): "Thus, an introspective analysis of my experience obliges me to say that appreciation of poetry involves a 'felt change of consciousness.' The phrase must be taken with some exactness. Appreciation takes place at the actual moment of change" (52).

2. The first page of Augustine's *Confessions* is a prolegomena for a Christian philosophy and theology of history as well as a Christian anthropology: "Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. . . . The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you." Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans., intro. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 61.

3. Consider the title of the chapter "Hope, Yes; Progress No," in Huston Smith's *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), ch. 6.

4. In *Poetic Diction*, Barfield defines a percept as “that element in my experience, which in no way depends on my own mental activity, present or past—the pure sense-datum” (48).

5. Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 105.

6. Plato, *Cratylus* 383b and 385.

7. For Goethe’s “delicate empiricism” see Henry Bortoft, *The Wholeness of Nature: Goethe’s Way toward a Science of Conscious Participation in Nature* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1996) and David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc, eds. *Goethe’s Way of Science: A Phenomenology of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

8. See Steiner’s characterization of anthroposophy (divine-human feminine wisdom), his esoteric teaching and practice, as “a path of knowledge to lead the spiritual in the human being to the spiritual in the universe,” in Steiner, *Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts: Anthroposophy as a Path of Knowledge*, trans. George and Mary Adams (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1973), 13; see also Robert McDermott, ed., *The Essential Steiner* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1984), 415, and McDermott, ed., *The New Essential Steiner* (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, forthcoming).

9. Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 12.

10. *Ibid.*, 17.

11. *Ibid.*, 15.

12. *Ibid.*, 16.

13. *Ibid.*, 22.

14. *Ibid.*, 20.

15. *Ibid.*, 24.

16. Some interpretations of the Gita present Krishna as Arjuna’s higher self. See Eliot Deutsch, trans., intro., critical essays, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968), 20.

17. *The Bhagavad Gita*, trans., intro. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1985). All passages from the Bhagavad Gita are from this excellent translation by the founder and spiritual guide of Blue Mountain Center for Meditation, Tomalas, California. See his three-volume commentary, *The Bhagavad for Daily Living: The End of Sorrow; Like a Thousand Suns; and To Love is to Know Me*.

18. Barfield, *Saving the Appearances*, 161.

19. M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 1925.

20. For Gandhi’s theory and practice of *satyagraha*, see especially Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev Desai (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), Part IV, chs. 28–30.

21. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library: Vol. 13 (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram), 4.

22. For Sri Aurobindo's account of his experience of the descent of the Overmind as the descent of Krishna, see K. R. Shrinivas Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo: A Biography and a History* (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 1972), 987–90.

23. It should also be acknowledged, however, that for someone who lived in the West for the formative years of his life he was remarkably inattentive to Christ and Christianity, and during his adult years in India he developed no relationship to Buddha or Buddhism.

24. Steiner's approach here reflects what we might call "esoteric ecumenism," an approach that has the advantage of neither dismissing nor facilely equating the diverse religious traditions of humankind. Apropos our present discussion, for example, Steiner reports how the yogas of the Gita were esoterically transmitted to Paul at the time of his experience of Christ while Paul was on his way to Damascus, an unusual but nonetheless suggestive remark. See Steiner's *The Bhagavad Gita and the Epistles of Paul*, in *The Bhagavad Gita and the West*, ed. McDermott (Great Barrington, MA: Steinerbooks, 2007).

25. McDermott, ed., *The Essential Aurobindo* (Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Press, 1987), 23.

26. *The Essential Steiner*, 415. See also *The New Essential Steiner*.