

# Knowledge and Human Liberation

## Jürgen Habermas, Sri Aurobindo and Beyond

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### Abstract

Knowledge and human liberation are epochal challenges and a key question here is what the meaning of knowledge and the meaning of human liberation are. This article argues that knowledge means not only knowledge of self, society and nature as conceived within the predominant dualistic logic of modernity but also knowledge of transcendental self beyond sociological role playing, knowledge of nature beyond anthropocentric reduction and control, and knowledge of cosmos, God and transcendence in an interconnected spirit of autonomy and interpenetration. Liberation means not only liberation from oppressive structures but also liberation from one's ego and the will to control and dominate. The article discusses the transformative link between knowledge and liberation through a critical dialogue with Jürgen Habermas and Sri Aurobindo, focusing mainly on their works, *Knowledge and Human Interests* and *Synthesis of Yoga*. The article does not simply compare and contrast Habermas and Sri Aurobindo or compare and contrast the so-called Western rationality and Eastern spirituality but seeks to create a condition for transformative criticism for both.

### Key words

■ global conversation ■ human liberation ■ knowledge ■ liberatory aspiration ■ self-cultivation ■ social movements

### Introduction

Human liberation has been a key concern for humanity from the dawn of history and in the contemporary moment, it manifests as an epochal challenge as the prevalent protectors of liberation in modernity – liberalism and socialism – have relinquished their roles in society. The position of stalemate in which our familiar projects of social emancipation and human freedom presently find themselves urges us to rethink liberation as part of a new seeking, a striving, and experimental

subjectivity at the level of both self and society. Human liberation means liberation from the oppressive structures of society, from one's ego and the urge to control (which is one of the most important sources of social evils, as Teresa Brennan (1995) states), and to be related positively and affirmatively to new schemes of being and becoming and to the creation of alternative spaces of self-realization, intersubjectivity and solidarity. In this practice and quest of human liberation, knowledge plays an important role and Jürgen Habermas and Sri Aurobindo, two soul-touching thinkers of our time, help us to understand the multi-dimensional links between knowledge, human interest and human liberation. Their ways of seeking and striving touch us not only as cognitive schemes but also as intimations of a beyond. Though Habermas is conventionally considered as having approached knowledge only through rational argumentation, there is the suggestion of a beyond in him. It is no wonder, then, that in many of his works, as, for example, in *Between Facts and Norms: Towards a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1996), he talks of the need to proceed with 'weak transcendental idealizations' in our practices of communication and acquisition of knowledge (see also Habermas, 2002a). Habermas urges us to realize that 'cognition, empathy, and agape' must be integrated in our quest for knowledge and 'concern for the fate of one's neighbor is a necessary emotional prerequisite for the cognitive operations expected of participants of discourse' (1990: 182). Such a suggestion for a beyond is not fully explored in Habermas (2002a) as he is anxious to reduce all transcendence to a 'transcendence from within' in the practices of knowledge. The full potential of a beyond, however, can be deepened and broadened by a dialogue with Sri Aurobindo.

In his *Knowledge and Human Interest*, published more than three decades ago, Habermas emphasizes the significance of self-reflection in knowledge. But at this stage, self-reflection for him seems primarily to emerge from the psychoanalytic situation of dialogue between the doctor and patient, though traces of its origin in mutually validating pragmatics of communication are already visible here. In his later works, self-reflection has a broader base of origin and nurturance, namely in our participation in processes of moral argumentation and public sphere. But this practice of knowledge can be deepened by Sri Aurobindo's (1992) concept of yoga of integral knowledge. For Sri Aurobindo, the yoga of integral knowledge enables one to have a deeper 'self-awareness', 'self-consciousness' and 'self-realization', to discover, know and realize the transcendental dimension in self, society and nature, and the inherent connectedness between self, other and the world. This dialogue also touches the very core of ontology and epistemology in thinking about and practices of knowledge. In Habermasian knowledge and human interest, knowledge mainly consists of knowledge of self and society but despite the Habermasian distinction between ego-identity and self-identity, Habermas does not discuss the transcendental dimension of self. He does touch upon knowledge of nature through the category of sciences but this knowledge here is mainly one of technical control.

Involving Sri Aurobindo helps us to bring the very conception of knowledge into a foundational broadening and cross-civilizational dialogue, for example,

thinking about knowledge of self, society, nature and God/transcendence as part of an interconnected field of autonomy and interpenetration. The relationship between them is not one of dualism alone, and though this relationship has been predominantly thought of and used in a regime of pervasive dualism within modernity, of which Habermas still continues to be a passionate advocate, there is a non-dualistic dimension in their logic of constitution and embodiment characterized by what J.N. Mohanty calls 'multi-valued logic' or what J.P.S. Uberoi calls the 'four-fold logic of truth and method' (cf. Mohanty, 2000; Uberoi, 2002). A dialogue between Habermas and Aurobindo not only can broaden the ontology of knowledge but can also help us realize that the distinction between ontology and epistemology, as it has been valorized in modernity, needs to be transcended by embodying what can be called an ontological epistemology of participation, taking its cue from recent transformations in both epistemological and ontological imaginations such as 'virtue epistemology' and 'weak ontology'.<sup>1</sup> But here a Habermasian mode needs to be ready for a foundational border crossing as, despite his critique of positivism, Habermas works within a modernist epistemological privileging in his conception and method of knowledge and his denial of ontology.<sup>2</sup> Even though this denial has to some extent to do with Habermas's understandable fight with the ghost of Heidegger, he seems now to turn this into a new orthodoxy, thereby showing how critical theory is incapable of critiquing its very foundational presuppositions such as valorization of rational argumentations, performative competence, validity claims and linguistic intersubjectivity instead of emotional intersubjectivity (Craib, 1998). But the problem of dualism and instrumentalism does not vanish by being part of communicative action, and knowledge as human liberation, not only as human interest, calls for the development of non-dual and non-instrumental modes of relationships which are not automatically guaranteed, even when we shift from positivism to a Habermasian communicative rationality (see Bhaskar, 2002).

A dialogue between Habermas and Aurobindo has another potential for a foundational border crossing for critical theory and this has to do with realizing the very limits of knowledge itself. The Habermasian articulation of knowledge and human interest valorizes knowledge and communication and here Habermas's critique of 'illusion of pure theory' does not really recognize the limits of knowledge itself in a foundational sense. Consider here the following lines from the *Ishopanishada* – one of the foundational texts of spiritual universality of India: '*Andham Tamah Prabishyanti Jo AVidyam Upasate, Tato Vuya Ibate Tamah Jo Vidyam Ratah.*' This means: 'Those who worship ignorance are steeped in darkness but those who are steeped in knowledge are also steeped in darkness.' Therefore, to be steeped in the valorization of knowledge and communication to the exclusion of other practices of self-cultivation, such as listening, silence and self-emptying vis-à-vis one's will to power and will to arguments, and connectedness with the world – not only the human social world but also with the world of nature and transcendence – is to be steeped in blindness, and we now need a new critical theory which will help us to understand the limits of knowledge and

human interests. Critical theory in its modernist incarnation started with a Marxist critique of valorization of capital to which the proponents of the early Frankfurt School added a very helpful critique of valorization of the state and the media. But now, especially in these days of communicative revolutions, we need a new mode of critique and reconstruction which combines the critique of valorization of capital and power with the critique of valorization of knowledge and communication, enabling us to understand the very limits of knowledge itself.

### **Knowledge, Human Interest and Human Liberation: A Brief Introduction to Jürgen Habermas and Sri Aurobindo**

Jürgen Habermas is an important interlocutor for our times. Born in 1929, he has continued to fight for a democratic Germany from the ashes of a Nazi past and is an outstanding public intellectual. Sri Aurobindo (1871–1950) was a major seeker and experimenter who, along with Gandhi and Tagore, can be considered one of the important architects of modern India whose strivings also included the goal of a better humanity. Sri Aurobindo was the most important leader of India's freedom struggle before the arrival of Gandhi and in many ways can be considered to be the source of major themes which were to preoccupy Gandhi such as 'Back to the villages' (1973). During his struggle for freedom, he was implicated in a bomb case and was arrested. While in prison he had a spiritual vision and found a new calling to strive not only for India's political independence but for a new spiritual dawn for the whole of humanity, for the manifestation of a new evolutionary consciousness. After being acquitted, Sri Aurobindo left British India and went to Pondicherry in 1910 which was then ruled by the French. He there embarked upon a multi-dimensional journey of seeking and creativity. He edited a journal called *Arya* and wrote his major works, *Human Cycles*, *Life Divine* and *The Syntheses of Yoga* as regular columns in this journal. Besides these works, Sri Aurobindo has also written *Ideals of Human Unity*, *Future Poetry* and the epic *Savitri*, which chronicles the journey of a soul in her quest to overcome death and suffering. This work was nominated several times for a Nobel Prize for literature.

Sri Aurobindo is one of the very few modern Indian thinkers who do not reject reason outright but accord it a primary place in both human development and evolution. Sri Aurobindo also does not reject modernity outright; his *Human Cycles* puts reason and modernity in perspective. When we read this piece, we find a great deal of similarity between Sri Aurobindo and a modernist European thinker such as Habermas. Sri Aurobindo here points to the crucial significance of reason in understanding the validity of traditions. Like Habermas, Sri Aurobindo also stresses the need 'to universalize first of all the habit of reason' but

the reason which is to be universally applied, cannot be the reason of a ruling class: for in the present imperfection of the human race that always means the fettering and

misapplication of reason degraded into a servant of power to maintain the privileges of the ruling class. *It must be the reason of each and all seeking for a basis of agreement.* (1962: 184, emphasis added)

Like Habermas's plea for undistorted communication, Aurobindo also sensitizes us to the distortion that power can introduce in the working of a rational discourse and the realization of even its inherent emancipatory potential. But for Aurobindo, even though reason is so important for moral development and evolution (both phylogenetic and ontogenetic), it cannot be the sole foundation of morality. Aurobindo accords this role to spirit. An ideal society, for Aurobindo, is not a mere 'rational society' but a 'spiritual society' which does not abandon rational foundation but deepens and transforms it. A society founded on spirituality is not governed by religion as a mere social custom. A spiritual society regards man not only as:

[a] mind, a life and a body, but as a soul incarnated for a divine fulfillment upon earth, not only in heavens beyond, which after all it need not have left if it had no divine business here in the world of physical, vital and mental nature. (Sri Aurobindo, 1962: 213)

Both Sri Aurobindo and Habermas are passionate critics of systems that deny human flourishing. Much of Habermas's passion can be attributed to his struggle for radical democracy and his fight against Nazism in his native Germany. Sri Aurobindo was also a critic of Nazism and contributed in his own ways as a *yogi* to the fight against the Nazis. While Habermas speaks of the colonization of the life world, Sri Aurobindo uses a much more passionate language of criticism such as barbarism, going beyond the familiar distinction between civilization and barbarism. Habermas (2002a) is now a critic of the marketization of the globe and his critique can be deepened by the critical perspective of economic barbarism that Sri Aurobindo outlines in his *Human Cycles*: 'Just as the physical barbarian makes the excellence of the body and development of physical force . . . so the vitalistic or economic barbarian makes the satisfaction of wants and desires and the accumulation of possessions his standard and aim' (1962: 94).

While there are similarities between Habermas and Aurobindo, there are also some major differences. One of these has to do with Habermas's thesis of linguistification of the sacred – the sacred has now lost its aura and is part of ordinary language. As is well known, Habermas makes the shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language and looks at the sacred linguistically. This is related to the issue of poetry and prose in thinking about language, and also critique and reconstruction. Habermas is critical of any poetic use of language as he is afraid that such can dislocate humans from their reason and make them servile followers of tyrannical crowds such as happened with the Nazis. But in his own work we find a poetic dimension. Consider here the following lines: 'This ontology fetishizes words, bows down before their roots, believing words to be pure only in their venerated origins' (Habermas, 2002a: 65). Habermas directs his energies here against Heidegger; but poetry in Heidegger was not only a poetry of glory, it also embodied a deep 'pathos of shakiness'

(Shanks, 2001). Sri Aurobindo, much like Heidegger, has a broader conception of language and dialogue which can be understood by reading what Derrida writes about his conversations with Levinas: 'we often addressed to one another what I would call neither questions nor answers but, perhaps a question-prayer, a question prayer that would be anterior to all dialogue' (Derrida, 1999: 13). For Sri Aurobindo, poetry is a *mantra*, an invocation of self, social and world-transformation. Sri Aurobindo wrote in his legendary epic *Savitri* (1948):

A lonely freedom cannot satisfy  
A heart that has grown one with every heart  
I am a deputy of the aspiring world  
My spirit's liberty I ask for all.<sup>3</sup>

### Knowledge and Human Interest: Towards Critical Dialogues

*Knowledge and Human Interest* is one of the earliest masterpieces of Habermas which lays the groundwork for his subsequent meditations. It contains Habermas's rich and multi-faceted dialogue with Hegel, Kant, Marx, Fichte, Dilthey, Nietzsche, Pierce and Freud. The main concern here is how knowledge and human interest have been conceptualized in these thinkers. But while carrying on a careful dialogue with these masters, Habermas develops a point of view of his own concerning knowledge and human interest. In this we find a tilt towards both psychoanalysis and pragmatism. While psychoanalysis provides him with the possibilities of combining therapy and critique, pragmatism offers him an alternative to both ontology and epistemology as it urges him to focus on the 'lack of alternatives to a practice in which communicatively socialized subjects always already find themselves engaged' (Habermas, 2002a: 118). Pragmatism also provides him with democratic possibilities in his elaboration of knowledge-constitutive interests: 'The anti-elitist, democratic, and thoroughly egalitarian attitude that shapes and penetrates the work of all the pragmatists was far more important than the *contents* of any particular essay on politics or democracy' (Habermas, 2002b: 228).

Habermas wants to establish a transformative link between knowledge and human interest through the practice of self-reflection as, for him 'in the power of self-reflection knowledge and interest are one' (Habermas, 1971: 313). The significance of *Knowledge and Human Interest* lies in initiating a break with not only idealism but also positivistic science and epistemology, a positivistic self-understanding of science as 'the sciences have retained the character of philosophy: the illusion of pure theory'. However, in this supposed break with the illusion of pure theory, Habermas unfortunately leaves aside the whole vision and practice of theory as a mode of ideal participation (Neville, 1974). Habermas tries to deal with this challenge by weak transcendental idealization, but even in weak transcendental idealization there is a work of idealization not only in a genealogical sense but in a permanent constitutive sense. Idealization is an

important part of practice itself. Therefore, the way out of the illusion of pure theory is not to oppose theory and practice but to understand how they are mutually constituted. Mutual constitution does not mean that there is no disjunction between them; in fact, there is a disjunction between them which is not external to their relationship but lies at the very core of it. But to acknowledge disjunction is not to accept it as fate and not accepting anything as fate is a Habermasian insight *par excellence* and the aim here is to cope with this disjunction in a creative manner. One creative mode of coping is striving towards reconciliation, and here a perspective of beyond is helpful.

In a recent reflection, Habermas says that what has been at the core of his strivings is to lay the foundations of what he calls a Kantian pragmatism (Habermas, 2002b). But this Kantian pragmatism in thinking about ontology and epistemology now needs a radical supplement of self-cultivation, self-critique and border crossing. Fallibility as an epistemic project is dear to the Kantian pragmatism of Habermas as well as that of Putnam (2001) but does it require some ontological self-cultivation such as the practice of humility? Habermas himself has embodied a border crossing between Kant and pragmatism and what is called for now is a transcultural border crossing and a transcivilizational dialogue on knowledge and human interest, ontology and epistemology. This is unfortunately a major problem with Habermas as with his pragmatic allies on the other side of the Atlantic such as Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam (Giri, 2003a). Though Habermas speaks of inclusion of the other, he wants to include the other, from the point of view of Kant, albeit a reformulated Kantianism, i.e., Kantianism with a pragmatic face. But there are some problems in the way Habermas has appropriated the pragmatic tradition, especially that of Dewey. While practices of knowledge are too disembodied in Habermas, this is not so in Dewey, and knowledge and the public sphere in Dewey are nourished by an aesthetic ecology and the agents here are not only rational but also cosmogenic, to borrow a term from Herbert Reid and Elizabeth Taylor (2002: 10).

But speaking of Kant, in these days of a questioning of boundaries, there is need for a genuine global conversation on knowledge, human interest and human liberation and here the challenge is not to valorize either Kant and Dewey but to make them fellow partners in a transcivilizational dialogue on human liberation and the Enlightenment, namely on what Habermas calls justification and application. In this cross-civilizational dialogue, we realize that what enables justification as a mode of persuasion and frees it from the problem of self-justification is not only rational argumentation or even mutual validation, but a new ethics of argumentation embodying love and suffering – the willingness to undertake suffering for the sake of love and truth. The capacity to undertake suffering hand in hand with and looking up at the face of the other is crucial not only for communicative validity but also for the realization of justice, both at the inter-subjective as well as the societal and global levels. This calls for not only a pragmatic translation of Kant but also a transcivilizational dialogue with him, say from the strivings and aspirations of a Gandhi (Giri, 2002a). A transcivilizational dialogue between Kant and Gandhi can help us realize the significance of not



only rational arguments, but also self-suffering which is different from sadism or inflicting suffering on others. A transcivilizational dialogue between Kant and Gandhi can radically transform the very foundation of justification and application and by establishing intimate links between not only suffering and justification, but also between suffering and hope. In this context, what Habermas writes about the three fundamental Kantian questions deserves our careful attention: "The first question, "What can I know?," is merely speculative. The second, "What ought I do?," is merely practical. But the third question, "What may I hope?," is both practical and theoretical at the same time" (Habermas, 1971: 203). But the question of hope also is more than theory and practice understood in a Kantian and Habermasian sense and here a Gandhian calling emphasizes the crucial significance of suffering with and for the love of other for the generation and sustenance of hope.

In this spirit of a global conversation, a key question is whether the vocabulary of interest is adequate and to ask ourselves whether Habermasian knowledge and human interest face the problem of not only instrumentalism but also anthropocentrism. Habermasian knowledge and human interest work within a model of mastery, performative competence and performative valorization and here a key challenge is 'exceeding the performative' and realizing our responsibility (Strydom, 2000; Derrida, 2001). In a related vein, Dallmayr raises the problem of humanism in Habermas; but Habermas does not want to listen as he is still deeply preoccupied with the understandable and, to some extent, admirable fight with the ghost of Heidegger. Habermas reduces listening to 'the "Yes" or "No" response of a potential hearer': 'The hearer must take the position of a second person, give up the perspective of an observer in favor of that of a participant' (Habermas, 2002a: 90). Thus, listening here is reduced to hearing and both of them are thought of in the frame of a valorized model of communication which does not realize its own inherent silence. Habermas is weary of 'auratic silence' because of its degenerative fascist possibility and reduces all silence to non-auratic silence 'which draws from the specific context of a more or less unmistakable meaning' (2002a: 90).

While Habermas makes much of the linguistic turn, his conception of language, as he himself admits, is formal-pragmatic and misses not only its integral dimension of silence but also what Vincent Crapanzano (1992) calls its dramaturgical character. Moreover, the apparent shift from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language does not solve all problems, much less issues of consciousness and ontology, as it just opens up a new vista of self-cultivation and understanding of the world. Consider here the following lines of J.N. Mohanty:

Is not 'consciousness' itself a word having its original home in a language game? Is not language – primarily as the act of speaking – a modality of consciousness? . . . are not consciousness and language both unified in a third something? It is Heidegger's *Dasein* or is it Hegel's *Geist*? (Mohanty, 2002: 112)

Human interest in Habermas is mainly cognitive interest and emancipatory



interest but there is a need to expand in both domains. Cognitive interest in Habermas is isolated from body and emotion (cf. Connolly, 1999, 2002). Emancipatory interest now faces the challenge of acknowledging the limits of emancipation, of going 'beyond emancipation' (Laclau, 1992). A key question is whether knowledge and human interest are entrapped within a logic of empowerment and are servants to a will to power. What kind of self-cultivation should we be engaged in so that in pursuing knowledge and human interest we do not use power to coerce and dominate, and are able to realize what Heidegger calls a 'power-free' state (Dallmayr, 2001c)? Habermas takes the calling of self-cultivation for granted as he is confident, that being part of communication, we can solve this problem automatically as doing otherwise would be an act of performative 'self-contradiction'. But performative self-contradiction is a very narrow aspect of self-critique and, here, building on the expectation that participants would suffer from the shame of self-contradiction if they do not reach out to the other in their communicative interaction, is too simplistic a move.

Once we understand the limits of an emancipatory interest, particularly as it faces the calling of self-cultivation, then we realize the other limits of the very language of emancipation. The discourse of emancipation has focused primarily on social emancipation and now this can be deepened by emancipation from ego, in fact, liberation of self from ego. Liberation then consists of overcoming both self-alienation and social alienation. Overcoming self-alienation is enriched by what Roy Bhaskar writes below, and which is in tune with the perspective of Sri Aurobindo:

The dialectics of de-alienation(of retotalisation) are all essentially the dialectic of love: of Self (Self), of each and all (Totality) and in both inner and outer movements, both as essentially love of God. The essence of liberated man therefore is love of God, and God, we could say, is not only love but essentially to be loved. (Bhaskar, 2000: 44)

A major problem here is Habermas's over-confidence in his rationalistic project and lack of participation in multiple traditions of humanity.<sup>4</sup> Despite his own admission that philosophy 'even in its postmetaphysical form, will be able neither to replace nor to repress religion as long as religious language is the bearer of a semantic content that is inspiring and even indispensable' (Habermas, 1992: 51), he can relate to other traditions only in a manner of 'appropriation' (Habermas, 2002a: 79). This appropriation begins with his translation of Kant. He finds Kant's actors solitary and wants to redeem this by making them part of a public discursive formation of will. Then comes his dialogue with Kierkegaard. He finds the Kierkegaardian inwardness of interest but does not want to leave it at that and wants inwardness to emerge from its participation in the public sphere (cf. Matustik, 1997). Similar is his translation of theologians such as Johannes Baptist Metz. Habermas appreciates Metz's effort to create a politically responsible poly-centric church and theology (Habermas, 1997). Metz does this with his critique of 'Hellenized Christianity' and his articulation of what he calls 'anamnesic reason', a reason which remembers the memory of struggle and resists forgetting. But in his dialogue with Metz, Habermas asserts a one-way approach. Instead of

using Metz's formulations of 'anamnestic reason' to broaden and deepen argumentative reason, Habermas asserts its primacy. However, Habermas retains Metz's terminology of 'Hellenized Christianity' which unfortunately soon degenerates into a quick judgmental category.

This is, for example, how Habermas terms some of the foundational questions that Dallmayr (1992: 141) raises, such as the issue of reconciliation. For Dallmayr:

the continued invocation of subject-philosophy [in Habermas] gives rise to various splits or divisions (other terms of 'demarcations') – between human beings and nature, ego and alter, ego and id – which in turn promote various modes of mastery and control. (1992: 142)

In response, Habermas writes:

I hope to have learned much from Kant, and still I have not become a Dallmayrian Kantian. . . . It is not a higher-level subjectivity and therefore, without sacrificing a transcendence from within, it can do without the concept of an Absolute. We can dispense with this legacy of Hellenized Christianity as well as any subsequent right-Hegelian constructions upon which Dallmayr still seems to rely. (2002a: 91)

Thus, Hellenized Christianity becomes a term of labelling in Habermas. But it is unfair to throw this at Dallmayr because Dallmayr works within a liberative tradition within Christianity and his conception of God and the Absolute emerges out of his deep participation with the emancipatory spiritual heritage of humanity as he has personally taken part in the new spiritual strivings in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity (Dallmayr, 1996, 1998, 2001a, 2001b). But compared to this, Habermas has an ethnocentric approach to knowledge and human interest, and though he speaks of post-conventional morality and post-metaphysical thinking, his metaphysics comes from Kant, on the one hand, and Judaeo-Christian tradition, on the other, though he himself does not integrate his own opening to Jewish mystical thought into his post-metaphysical mode.<sup>5</sup> In a recent interview, Habermas makes it clear:

We no longer confront other cultures as alien since their structures still remind us of previous phases of our own social development. What we *do* encounter as alien within other cultures is the stubborn distinctiveness of their religious cores. (2002a: 156)

It is of course to be noted here that in his approach to his own religion Habermas has made a shift from his earlier Marxist or even pragmatist denial as he writes: 'For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism . . . is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and Christian ethic of love' (Habermas, 2002a: 148–9). But he is anxious to de-transcendentalize religion and though it has a continued emancipatory potential in freeing us from what Spinoza had long ago articulated as the problem of 'theological illusion', the anxious reduction of all transcendence to only a 'transcendence from within' calls for a rethink. There are many different conceptions of transcendence possible and the Habermasian agenda of 'transcendence from within' suffers from the modernist anxiety

to imprison transcendence within a familiar language and the public sphere. Consider here the following lines by Luc Ferry:

When I hear a musical passage, it does not reduce to a series of related notes with no connection between them (actual immanence). On the contrary, it contributes – in an immanent way, apart from any rational operation – a certain structure that transcends this actual immanence, without being imposed on me from the outside like an argument from authority. This ‘immanent transcendence’ contains within itself, par excellence, the ultimate significance of lived experiences. (2002: 26)

In post-metaphysical and secular moments, God is referred not to ‘ground truth, but comes after it, to give it a meaning’ (Ferry, 2002: 31).

### **Knowledge and Human Liberation: Sri Aurobindo**

For Sri Aurobindo (1992), the need for a deeper knowledge requires us to be self-conscious and not only self-critical: ‘In this process the rationalistic ideal subjects itself to the ideal of intuitive knowledge.’ Self-reflection is an important concern in Habermas and Sri Aurobindo accords this to self-knowledge but self-knowledge here has a much deeper and broader meaning which includes the knowledge of Self as different from ego and knowledge of God, God not as a fixed structure but a creative becoming embodying and symbolizing the highest human possibility. For Sri Aurobindo, ‘our knowledge is not integral if we do not make this self in the individual one with the cosmic spirit’ (1992: 347). The Habermasian distinction between ego identity and self-identity gets a deeper calling in Sri Aurobindo’s ways of liberative knowledge: ‘Enlightenment brings to us the knowledge that the ego is only an instrument’ (1992: 53). Furthermore, ‘As we gain in clarity and the turmoil of egoistic effort gives place to a calmer self-knowledge, we recognize the source of the growing light within us’ (1992: 56). Acquisition of self-knowledge ‘brings us face to face with the extraordinary complexity of our own being’ but a seeker here does not ‘solve arbitrarily the conflict of his own inner members. He has to harmonize deliberate knowledge with unquestioning faith; he must conciliate the gentle soul of love with the formidable need of power’ (1992: 68, 71). The goal of knowledge here is a radical transformation of self, world and nature. Sri Aurobindo writes:

What we propose in our Yoga is nothing less than to break up the whole formation of our past and present which makes up ordinary material and mental man and to create a new center of vision and a new universe of activities in ourselves which shall constitute a divine humanity or a superhuman nature. (1992: 66)

Furthermore:

Life has to change into a thing vast and calm and powerful that can no longer recognize its old blind eager narrow self or petty impulse and desire. Even the body has to submit to a mutation and be no longer the clamorous animal or the impending clod it now is, but become instead a conscious servant and radiant instrument and living form of

the spirit . . . Life is the field of a divine manifestation not yet complete: here, in life, on earth, in the body. (1992: 68)

In his reflections on knowledge, Sri Aurobindo does not look at it only as an epistemic project. For him, 'The seeker of the integral state of knowledge must be free from attachment to action and equally free from attachment to inaction' (1992: 332). It also faces the challenge of overcoming our desire mind. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

Equality, not indifference, is the basis. Equal endurance, impartial indifference, calm submission to the causes of joy and grief without any reaction of either grief or joy are the preparation and negative basis of equality; but equality is not fulfilled till it takes its positive form of love and delight. The sense-mind must find the equal *rasa* [pleasure] of the All-Beautiful, the heart the equal love and Ananda for all, the psychic Prana [vital] the enjoyment of this *rasa*, love and Ananda [joy]. This, however, is the positive perfection that comes by liberation; our first object in the path of knowledge is rather the liberation that comes by detachment from the desire-mind and renunciation of its passions. (1992: 339)

Overcoming the desire mind in the yoga of knowledge is accompanied by realization of Gnosis. Gnosis has the power to overcome the duality between subject and object:

Reason or intellect is only the lower *buddhi* (intellect); it is dependent for its action on the precepts of the sense-mind and on the concepts of mental intelligence. It is not like gnosis, self-luminous, authentic, making the subject one with the object. (1992: 458)

The intuitive reason 'acts in a self-light of the truth' which 'proceeds not by intelligent but by visional concepts: it is a kind of truth-vision, truth-hearing, truth-memory, direct truth-discernment' (1992: 455).

For Sri Aurobindo, in the yoga of self-knowledge, 'The old philosophical quarrel between Being and Becoming' is not helpful and in it 'Our sense of separate existence disappears into a consciousness of illimitable, undivided, infinite being' (1992: 420). But Sri Aurobindo himself makes clear that realizing oneness is 'our essential fact of self-knowledge' but this 'unity works itself everywhere and on every plane by an executive or practical truth of duality' (1992: 418).

In his reflection on knowledge, Sri Aurobindo makes a distinction between higher knowledge and lower knowledge: the lower knowledge is the knowledge of the apparent world while higher knowledge is the knowledge which 'seeks to know the truth of existence from within' (1992: 492). But in making this distinction, Sri Aurobindo is not within the conventional scheme of hierarchy of knowledge as he writes: 'Science, art, philosophy, ethics, psychology, the knowledge of man and his past, action itself are means by which we arrive at the knowledge of the working of God through Nature and through life' (1992: 492). Thus, in this scheme of interconnected integral knowledge, knowledge of society is not inferior to knowledge of God or spiritual knowledge, rather, it holds the key to the latter.

In his work Habermas urges us to realize the significance of empirical<sup>6</sup> studies of our world, especially current transformations for striving for a more dignified society and this has an important place in Sri Aurobindo's ways of integral knowledge as well.

In contemporary critical theory, whether it starts from Habermas or from Foucault, knowledge is almost always subservient to either power or mastery but Sri Aurobindo urges us to understand the integral connection between knowledge and love: 'Perfect knowledge indeed leads to perfect love, integral knowledge to a rounded and multitudinous richness of love' (1992: 522). At the same time Sri Aurobindo tells us that knowledge has equal power as love but their method of arriving at is different (1992: 524). This suggests that Sri Aurobindo is open to acknowledging the differential autonomy of knowledge and love as the two domains are also interconnected.

In his *Human Cycles*, Sri Aurobindo laments that the modern European idea of society is founded upon the primacy of vital dynamism and has 'neglected the spiritual element in man which is his true being' (1962: 277). Sri Aurobindo advocates a spiritual vitalism and spiritual realism: 'spirituality will not try to slay the vitality in man by denying life but will rather reveal to life the divine in itself as the principle of its own transformation' (1962: 286). Furthermore, 'Our idealism is the most rightly human thing in us, but as mental idealism it is a thing ineffective. To be effective it has to convert itself into a spiritual realism' (1962: 301). Like Habermas, Sri Aurobindo stresses learning from our mistakes: 'Failures must be originally numerous and difficult but the time comes when the experience of past failures can be profitably used' (1962: 330).

Sri Aurobindo writes: 'The central aim of knowledge is the recovery of the Self, of our true self-existence, and this aim presupposes the admission that our present mode of being is not our true existence.' Sri Aurobindo also makes it clear that when he talks of knowledge and human liberation it is not individual salvation alone:

an individual salvation in heavens beyond, careless of the earth, is not our highest objective; the liberation and self-interest of others is as much our own concern – we might almost say, our divine self-interest – as our own liberation. Otherwise our unity with others would have no effective meaning.

## Knowledge and Human Liberation: Transformations and Beyond

Habermas speaks of practical discourse. Communicative interaction is the most important part of this practical discourse. This practical discourse can be part of a practical spirituality and Sri Aurobindo's perspective of spiritual realism is a significant part of it (Metz, 1970; Vivekananda, 1991). Practical spirituality, as Swami Vivekananda<sup>7</sup> (1991: 354) argues, urges us to realize that 'the highest idea of morality and unselfishness goes hand in hand with the highest idea of

metaphysical conception'. This highest conception pertains to the realization that man himself is God: 'You are that Impersonal Being; that God for whom you have been searching all over the time is yourself – yourself not in the personal sense but in the impersonal' (Vivekananda, 1991: 332). The task of practical spirituality begins with this realization but does not end there: its objective is to transform the world. Swami Vivekananda thus challenges:

The watchword of all well-being of all moral good is not 'I' but 'thou'. Who cares whether there is a heaven or a hell, who cares if there is an unchangeable or not? Here is the world and it is full of misery. Go out into it as Buddha did, and struggle to lessen it or die in the attempt. (1991: 353)

What practical spirituality stresses is that the knowledge that one is Divine, one is part of a Universal Being, facilitates this mode of relating oneself to the world. This knowledge is, however, not for the acquisition of power over the other; rather, it is to worship the other as God. In the words of Vivekananda: 'Human knowledge is not antagonistic to human well-being. On the contrary, it is knowledge alone that will save us in every department of life, in knowledge as worship' (1991: 353).

The realization of practical spirituality in the dynamics of self, culture and society is as much a normative ideal as the building of a rational society or realization of a state of undistorted communication (Wuthnow, 1998; 2001; Giri, 2002c). The coming of a spiritual society requires both the 'reflexive mobilization of self' (Giddens, 1991) as well as the building up of alternative communities which are founded on the principles of practical spirituality. According to Sri Aurobindo, the coming of a spiritual society begins with the spiritual fulfilment of the urge to individual perfection but ends with the building of a 'new world, a change in the life of humanity or, at the least a new perfected collective life in the earth – nature' (1970: 1031).

This calls for the appearance not only of isolated evolved individuals acting in the uninvolved mass, but of many gnostic individuals forming a new kind of beings and a new common life superior to the present individual and common existence. A collective life of this kind must obviously constitute itself on the same principle as life of the gnostic individual. (1970)

We find glimpses of the emergence of such spiritual communities in the integral education movement in India which is a grass-roots social movement at work in building spiritually inspired integral education schools. In the state of Orissa there are now nearly 300 such schools, inspired by the ideas of Sri Aurobindo and his spiritual companion, The Mother, and these schools were the product of an earlier study circle movement. In these spaces we find the emergence of a new connection between knowledge and human liberation through the mediations of love, labour and mutually shared time (see Giri, 2003b). But its fuller potential remains unrealized because of traces of authoritarianism in the management of these schools which is sometimes brushed aside or justified in the name of spirituality. Here opening up these spaces to further democratic deliberation of the kind suggested by Habermas is helpful.

Sri Aurobindo's gnostic individuals are seekers and bearers of the multi-dimensional transformation of practical spirituality. But these gnostic individuals are not the Nietzschean supermen driven by the will to power; they are animated by a will to serve and the desire to transform the contemporary condition and to build a good society (Connolly, 1991). But their seeking nonetheless faces the challenge of what Roy Bhaskar calls the prehistory of spirituality (personal communication). Bhaskar says that we are at a prehistory of spirituality as spiritual seeking in the past has not always embodied collectivist struggles for human emancipation. Spiritual seekers and movements continue to face the challenge of overcoming their egoism, a narrow self-centred view of salvation, and the will to assert and here participation in mutually validating discursive argumentation is a crucial step in overcoming these. Therefore, if Derrida (1998) says that we cannot authorize ourselves in the name of religion, the same is true of spiritual quest as well. We cannot authorize ourselves in the name of spirituality. In a critique of authority including acknowledging what Gianni Vattimo (1999) calls 'the contingency of the whole', there is the continued significance of a Habermasian critical perspective. Liberatory movements of even a spiritual kind continue to be entrapped in the logic of authoritarianism and here the Habermasian practice of argumentation and mutual validation can go a long way in creating an appropriate democratic public space for the spiritual evolution of self and society. As we have seen, this critical perspective for realizing its own inherent potential can learn from the ways of Sri Aurobindo as Sri Aurobindo's project of knowledge and human liberation can be facilitated by movements of radical democracy and formation of appropriate public spheres. Going beyond the simple polarity between rationality and spirituality, West and East, we can build here on this intertwined path of knowledge and human liberation to create a more beautiful and dignified world for us all.

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## Notes

- 1 While in virtue epistemology there is a recognition of ontological preparation involved in epistemological engagement (cf. Greco, 2001), in weak ontology as formulated by Vattimo, and suggested in the works of Connolly, there is a deep recognition of a danger of an essentialist fixed ontology. See Vattimo (1999).
- 2 Habermas writes: 'as long as philosophy remains caught in ontology, it is itself subject to an objectivism that disguises the connection of its knowledge with the human interest in autonomy and responsibility' (1971: 311). But why this should necessarily be the case? On the other hand, consider here what an uncritical primacy of epistemology does to human sciences and human action:

The primacy of epistemology short-circuits ontological issues by assuming that once the right procedure for attaining truth as correspondence or coherence or consensus is reached, any remaining issues will either be resolved *through* that method or shown to be irrelevant. The primacy of epistemology thereby treats the ideas of subject, object, representation, and knowledge as if they were already fixed in their range of application. . . .

The primacy of epistemology turns out itself, of course, to embody a contestable social ontology. The empiricist version, for instance, treats human beings as subjects or agents of knowledge; it treats human things as independent objects susceptible to representation, or, at least, a medium in which the designative dimension of concepts can be disconnected rigorously from the contexts of rhetoric/action/evaluation in which they originate. (Connolly, 1995: 6)

- 3 In *Savitri* there are many conversations between Savitri who is trying to overcome death and Yamaraj, the King of Death. The Rev. Chris Platt of the Episcopal Church, Lexington, Kentucky, suggests that these conversations also embody a Habermasian discursive argumentation (personal communication). I am grateful to Rev. Platt for this extremely innovative reading and further exploration of it.
- 4 In this context, what Sang-Jin Han writes from a Confucian perspective deserves our careful attention:

Critical theory is required to reflect on the normative basis of its own project. Critique always presupposes normative claims which need to be reorganized as such. Critique is, in fact, derived from, and based on, cultural traditions capable of orienting human actions. (1998: 306)

- 5 My argument that Habermas's postmetaphysics just hides a metaphysics of Kantianism and Christianity finds a support in what Connolly writes:

What, then, is the thought behind the thought that drives the actually existing Habermas to give singular primacy to one dimension of discourse over all others? Perhaps, at a visceral level, it is a reiteration of the Christian and Kantian demands to occupy the authoritative place of public discourse. The imperative to occupy that place of authority may be bolstered by another preliminary drive, that is, *the political* sense that a non-Kantian, religiously pluralized world fall into either disorder or religious tyranny if its participants did not endorse a single standard rational authority. (Connolly, 1999: 39)

- 6 Consider here the following lines from one of Habermas's recent interviews: '[the issue

of global justice] on the analytical level, it demands a great deal of empirical knowledge and institutional imagination' (2002a: 166).

- 7 Swami Vivekananda is another pioneering spiritual seeker of modern India known in the West for his interventions in the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893.

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