Chapter XI

The Reason as Governor of Life

REASON using the intelligent will for the ordering of the inner and the outer life is undoubtedly the highest developed faculty of man at his present point of evolution; it is the sovereign, because the governing and self-governing faculty in the complexities of our human existence. Man is distinguished from other terrestrial creatures by his capacity for seeking after a rule of life, a rule of his being and his works, a principle of order and self-development, which is not the first instinctive, original, mechanically self-operative rule of his natural existence. The principle he looks to is neither the unchanging, unprogressive order of the fixed natural type, nor in its process of change the mechanical evolution we see in the lower life, an evolution which operates in the mass rather than in the individual, imperceptibly to the knowledge of that which is being evolved and without its conscious cooperation. He seeks for an intelligent rule of which he himself shall be the governor and master or at least a partially free administrator. He can conceive a progressive order by which he shall be able to evolve and develop his capacities far beyond their original limits and workings; he can initiate an intelligent evolution which he himself shall determine or at least be in it a conscious instrument, more, a cooperating and constantly consulted party. The rest of terrestrial existence is helplessly enslaved and tyrannised over by its nature, but the instinct of man when he finds his manhood is to be master of his nature and free.

No doubt all is work of Nature and this too is Nature; it proceeds from the principle of being which constitutes his humanity and by the processes which that principle permits and which are natural to it. But still it is a second kind of Nature, a stage of being in which Nature becomes self-conscious in the individual, tries to know, modify, alter and develop, utilise, consciously
The intellectual reason is not man’s only means of knowledge. All action, all perception, all aesthetic and sensation, all impulse and will, all imagination and creation imply a universal, many-sided force of knowledge at work and each form or power of this knowledge has its own distinct nature and law, its own principle of order and arrangement, its logic proper to itself, and need not follow, still less be identical with the law of nature, order and arrangement which the intellectual reason would assign to it or itself follow if it had control of all these experiments with herself and her potentialities. In this change a momentous self-discovery intervenes; there appears something that is hidden in matter and in the first disposition of life and has not clearly emerged in the animal in spite of its possession of a mind; there appears the presence of the Soul in things which at first was concealed in its own natural and outward workings, absorbed and on the surface at least self-oblivious. Afterwards it becomes, as in the animal, conscious to a certain degree on the surface, but is still helplessly given up to the course of its natural workings and, not understanding, cannot govern itself and its movements. But finally, in man, it turns its consciousness upon itself, seeks to know, endeavours to govern in the individual the workings of his nature and through the individual and the combined reason and energy of many individuals to govern too as far as possible the workings of Nature in mankind and in things. This turning of the consciousness upon itself and on things, which man represents, has been the great crisis, a prolonged and developing crisis, in the terrestrial evolution of the soul in Nature. There have been others before it in the past of the earth, such as that which brought about the appearance of the conscious life of the animal; there must surely be another in its future in which a higher spiritual and supramental consciousness shall emerge and be turned upon the works of the mind. But at present it is this which is at work; a self-conscious soul in mind, mental being, manomaya purusa, struggles to arrive at some intelligent ordering of its self and life and some indefinite, perhaps infinite development of the powers and potentialities of the human instrument.
movements. But the intellect has this advantage over the others that it can disengage itself from the work, stand back from it to study and understand it disinterestedly, analyse its processes, disengage its principles. None of the other powers and faculties of the living being can do this: for each exists for its own action, is confined by the work it is doing, is unable to see beyond it, around it, into it as the reason can; the principle of knowledge inherent within each force is involved and carried along in the action of the force, helps to shape it, but is also itself limited by its own formulations. It exists for the fulfilment of the action, not for knowledge, or for knowledge only as part of the action. Moreover, it is concerned only with the particular action or working of the moment and does not look back reflectively or forward intelligently or at other actions and forces with a power of clear coordination. No doubt, the other evolved powers of the living being, as for instance the instinct whether animal or human, — the latter inferior precisely because it is disturbed by the questionings and seekings of reason, — carry in themselves their own force of past experience, of instinctive self-adaptation, all of which is really accumulated knowledge, and they hold sometimes this store so firmly that they are transmitted as a sure inheritance from generation to generation. But all this, just because it is instinctive, not turned upon itself reflectively, is of great use indeed to life for the conduct of its operations, but of none — so long as it is not taken up by the reason — for the particular purpose man has in view, a new order of the dealings of the soul in Nature, a free, rational, intelligently coordinating, intelligently self-observing, intelligently experimenting mastery of the workings of force by the conscious spirit.

Reason, on the other hand, exists for the sake of knowledge, can prevent itself from being carried away by the action, can stand back from it, intelligently study, accept, refuse, modify, alter, improve, combine and recombine the workings and capacities of the forces in operation, can repress here, indulge there, strive towards an intelligent, intelligible, willed and organised perfection. Reason is science, it is conscious art, it is invention. It is observation and can seize and arrange truth of facts; it is
speculation and can extricate and forecast truth of potentiality. It is the idea and its fulfilment, the ideal and its bringing to fruition. It can look through the immediate appearance and unveil the hidden truths behind it. It is the servant and yet the master of all utilities; and it can, putting away all utilities, seek disinterestedly Truth for its own sake and by finding it reveal a whole world of new possible utilities. Therefore it is the sovereign power by which man has become possessed of himself, student and master of his own forces, the godhead on which the other godheads in him have leaned for help in their ascent; it has been the Prometheus of the mythical parable, the helper, instructor, elevating friend, civiliser of mankind.

Recently, however, there has been a very noticeable revolt of the human mind against this sovereignty of the intellect, a dissatisfaction, as we might say, of the reason with itself and its own limitations and an inclination to give greater freedom and a larger importance to other powers of our nature. The sovereignty of the reason in man has been always indeed imperfect, in fact, a troubled, struggling, resisted and often defeated rule; but still it has been recognised by the best intelligence of the race as the authority and law-giver. Its only widely acknowledged rival has been faith. Religion alone has been strongly successful in its claim that reason must be silent before it or at least that there are fields to which it cannot extend itself and where faith alone ought to be heard; but for a time even Religion has had to forego or abate its absolute pretension and to submit to the sovereignty of the intellect. Life, imagination, emotion, the ethical and the aesthetic need have often claimed to exist for their own sake and to follow their own bent, practically they have often enforced their claim, but they have still been obliged in general to work under the inquisition and partial control of reason and to refer to it as arbiter and judge. Now, however, the thinking mind of the race has become more disposed to question itself and to ask whether existence is not too large, profound, complex and mysterious a thing to be entirely seized and governed by the powers of the intellect. Vaguely it is felt that there is some greater godhead than the reason.
To some this godhead is Life itself or a secret Will in life; they claim that this must rule and that the intelligence is only useful in so far as it serves that and that Life must not be repressed, minimised and mechanised by the arbitrary control of reason. Life has greater powers in it which must be given a freer play; for it is they alone that evolve and create. On the other hand, it is felt that reason is too analytical, too arbitrary, that it falsifies life by its distinctions and set classifications and the fixed rules based upon them and that there is some profounder and larger power of knowledge, intuition or another, which is more deeply in the secrets of existence. This larger intimate power is more one with the depths and sources of existence and more able to give us the indivisible truths of life, its root realities and to work them out, not in an artificial and mechanical spirit but with a divination of the secret Will in existence and in a free harmony with its large, subtle and infinite methods. In fact, what the growing subjectivism of the human mind is beginning obscurely to see is that the one sovereign godhead is the soul itself which may use reason for one of its ministers, but cannot subject itself to its own intellectuality without limiting its potentialities and artificialising its conduct of existence.

The highest power of reason, because its pure and characteristic power, is the disinterested seeking after true knowledge. When knowledge is pursued for its own sake, then alone are we likely to arrive at true knowledge. Afterwards we may utilise that knowledge for various ends; but if from the beginning we have only particular ends in view, then we limit our intellectual gain, limit our view of things, distort the truth because we cast it into the mould of some particular idea or utility and ignore or deny all that conflicts with that utility or that set idea. By so doing we may indeed make the reason act with great immediate power within the limits of the idea or the utility we have in view, just as instinct in the animal acts with great power within certain limits, for a certain end, yet finds itself helpless outside those limits. It is so indeed that the ordinary man uses his reason — as the animal uses his hereditary, transmitted instinct — with an absorbed devotion of it to the securing of some particular utility
or with a useful but hardly luminous application of a customary
and transmitted reasoning to the necessary practical interests of
his life. Even the thinking man ordinarily limits his reason to
the working out of certain preferred ideas; he ignores or denies
all that is not useful to these or does not assist or justify or
actually contradicts or seriously modifies them,—except in so
far as life itself compels or cautions him to accept modifications
for the time being or ignore their necessity at his peril. It is in
such limits that man’s reason normally acts. He follows most
commonly some interest or set of interests; he tramples down or
through or ignores or pushes aside all truth of life and existence,
truth of ethics, truth of beauty, truth of reason, truth of spirit
which conflicts with his chosen opinions and interests; if he
recognises these foreign elements, it is nominally, not in practice,
or else with a distortion, a glossing which nullifies their conse-
quences, perverts their spirit or whittles down their significance.
It is this subjection to the interests, needs, instincts, passions,
prejudices, traditional ideas and opinions of the ordinary mind\(^1\)
which constitutes the irrationality of human existence.

But even the man who is capable of governing his life by
ideas, who recognises, that is to say, that it ought to express
clearly conceived truths and principles of his being or of all being
and tries to find out or to know from others what these are, is
not often capable of the highest, the free and disinterested use of
his rational mind. As others are subject to the tyranny of their
interests, prejudices, instincts or passions, so he is subjected to
the tyranny of ideas. Indeed, he turns these ideas into interests,
obscures them with his prejudices and passions and is unable to
think freely about them, unable to distinguish their limits or the
relation to them of other, different and opposite ideas and the
equal right of these also to existence. Thus, as we constantly see,
individuals, masses of men, whole generations are carried away
by certain ethical, religious, aesthetic, political ideas or a set of

\(^1\) \text{The ordinary mind in man is not truly the thinking mind proper, it is a life-mind, a}
vital mind as we may call it, which has learned to think and even to reason but for its
own ends and on its own lines, not on those of a true mind of knowledge.\)
ideas, espouse them with passion, pursue them as interests, seek to make them a system and lasting rule of life and are swept away in the drive of their action and do not really use the free and disinterested reason for the right knowledge of existence and for its right and sane government. The ideas are to a certain extent fulfilled, they triumph for a time, but their very success brings disappointment and disillusionment. This happens, first, because they can only succeed by compromises and pacts with the inferior, irrational life of man which diminish their validity and tarnish their light and glory. Often indeed their triumph is convicted of unreality, and doubt and disillusionment fall on the faith and enthusiasm which brought victory to their side. But even were it not so, the ideas themselves are partial and insufficient; not only have they a very partial triumph, but if their success were complete, it would still disappoint, because they are not the whole truth of life and therefore cannot securely govern and perfect life. Life escapes from the formulas and systems which our reason labours to impose on it; it proclaims itself too complex, too full of infinite potentialities to be tyrannised over by the arbitrary intellect of man.

This is the cause why all human systems have failed in the end; for they have never been anything but a partial and confused application of reason to life. Moreover, even where they have been most clear and rational, these systems have pretended that their ideas were the whole truth of life and tried so to apply them. This they could not be, and life in the end has broken or undermined them and passed on to its own large incalculable movement. Mankind, thus using its reason as an aid and justification for its interests and passions, thus obeying the drive of a partial, a mixed and imperfect rationality towards action, thus striving to govern the complex totalities of life by partial truths, has stumbled on from experiment to experiment, always believing that it is about to grasp the crown, always finding that it has fulfilled as yet little or nothing of what it has to accomplish. Compelled by nature to apply reason to life, yet possessing only a partial rationality limited in itself and confused by the siege of the lower members, it could do nothing else. For the limited
imperfect human reason has no self-sufficient light of its own; it is obliged to proceed by observation, by experiment, by action, through errors and stumblings to a larger experience.

But behind all this continuity of failure there has persisted a faith that the reason of man would end in triumphing over its difficulties, that it would purify and enlarge itself, become sufficient to its work and at last subject rebellious life to its control. For, apart from the stumbling action of the world, there has been a labour of the individual thinker in man and this has achieved a higher quality and risen to a loftier and clearer atmosphere above the general human thought-levels. Here there has been the work of a reason that seeks always after knowledge and strives patiently to find out truth for itself, without bias, without the interference of distorting interests, to study everything, to analyse everything, to know the principle and process of everything. Philosophy, Science, learning, the reasoned arts, all the agelong labour of the critical reason in man have been the result of this effort. In the modern era under the impulsion of Science this effort assumed enormous proportions and claimed for a time to examine successfully and lay down finally the true principle and the sufficient rule of process not only for all the activities of Nature, but for all the activities of man. It has done great things, but it has not been in the end a success. The human mind is beginning to perceive that it has left the heart of almost every problem untouched and illumined only outsides and a certain range of processes. There has been a great and ordered classification and mechanisation, a great discovery and practical result of increasing knowledge, but only on the physical surface of things. Vast abysses of Truth lie below in which are concealed the real springs, the mysterious powers and secretly decisive influences of existence. It is a question whether the intellectual reason will ever be able to give us an adequate account of these deeper and greater things or subject them to the intelligent will as it has succeeded in explaining and canalising, though still imperfectly, yet with much show of triumphant result, the forces of physical Nature. But these other powers are much larger, subtler, deeper down,
more hidden, elusive and variable than those of physical Nature.

The whole difficulty of the reason in trying to govern our existence is that because of its own inherent limitations it is unable to deal with life in its complexity or in its integral movements; it is compelled to break it up into parts, to make more or less artificial classifications, to build systems with limited data which are contradicted, upset or have to be continually modified by other data, to work out a selection of regulated potentialities which is broken down by the bursting of a new wave of yet unregulated potentialities. It would almost appear even that there are two worlds, the world of ideas proper to the intellect and the world of life which escapes from the full control of the reason, and that to bridge adequately the gulf between these two domains is beyond the power and province of the reason and the intelligent will. It would seem that these can only create either a series of more or less empirical compromises or else a series of arbitrary and practically inapplicable or only partially applicable systems. The reason of man struggling with life becomes either an empiric or a doctrinaire.

Reason can indeed make itself a mere servant of life; it can limit itself to the work the average normal man demands from it, content to furnish means and justifications for the interests, passions, prejudices of man and clothe them with a misleading garb of rationality or at most supply them with their own secure and enlightened order or with rules of caution and self-restraint sufficient to prevent their more egregious stumbles and most unpleasant consequences. But this is obviously to abdicate its throne or its highest office and to betray the hope with which man set forth on his journey. It may again determine to found itself securely on the facts of life, disinterestedly indeed, that is to say, with a dispassionate critical observation of its principles and processes, but with a prudent resolve not to venture too much forward into the unknown or elevate itself far beyond the immediate realities of our apparent or phenomenal existence. But here again it abdicates; either it becomes a mere critic and observer or else, so far as it tries to lay down laws, it does so within very narrow limits of immediate potentiality and it
renounces man’s drift towards higher possibilities, his saving gift of idealism. In this limited use of the reason subjected to the rule of an immediate, an apparent vital and physical practicality man cannot rest long satisfied. For his nature pushes him towards the heights; it demands a constant effort of self-transcendence and the impulsion towards things unachieved and even immediately impossible.

On the other hand, when it attempts a higher action reason separates itself from life. Its very attempt at a disinterested and dispassionate knowledge carries it to an elevation where it loses hold of that other knowledge which our instincts and impulses carry within themselves and which, however imperfect, obscure and limited, is still a hidden action of the universal Knowledge-Will inherent in existence that creates and directs all things according to their nature. True, even Science and Philosophy are never entirely dispassionate and disinterested. They fall into subjection to the tyranny of their own ideas, their partial systems, their hasty generalisations and by the innate drive of man towards practice they seek to impose these upon the life. But even so they enter into a world either of abstract ideas or of ideals or of rigid laws from which the complexity of life escapes. The idealist, the thinker, the philosopher, the poet and artist, even the moralist, all those who live much in ideas, when they come to grapple at close quarters with practical life, seem to find themselves something at a loss and are constantly defeated in their endeavour to govern life by their ideas. They exercise a powerful influence, but it is indirectly, more by throwing their ideas into Life which does with them what the secret Will in it chooses than by a direct and successfully ordered action. Not that the pure empiric, the practical man really succeeds any better by his direct action; for that too is taken by the secret Will in life and turned to quite other ends than the practical man had intended. On the contrary, ideals and idealists are necessary; ideals are the savour and sap of life, idealists the most powerful diviners and assistants of its purposes. But reduce your ideal to a system and it at once begins to fail; apply your general laws and fixed ideas systematically as the doctrinaire would do, and Life very
soon breaks through or writhes out of their hold or transforms your system, even while it nominally exists, into something the originator would not recognise and would repudiate perhaps as the very contradiction of the principles which he sought to eternise.

The root of the difficulty is this that at the very basis of all our life and existence, internal and external, there is something on which the intellect can never lay a controlling hold, the Absolute, the Infinite. Behind everything in life there is an Absolute, which that thing is seeking after in its own way; everything finite is striving to express an infinite which it feels to be its real truth. Moreover, it is not only each class, each type, each tendency in Nature that is thus impelled to strive after its own secret truth in its own way, but each individual brings in his own variations. Thus there is not only an Absolute, an Infinite in itself which governs its own expression in many forms and tendencies, but there is also a principle of infinite potentiality and variation quite baffling to the reasoning intelligence; for the reason deals successfully only with the settled and the finite. In man this difficulty reaches its acme. For not only is mankind unlimited in potentiality; not only is each of its powers and tendencies seeking after its own absolute in its own way and therefore naturally restless under any rigid control by the reason; but in each man their degrees, methods, combinations vary, each man belongs not only to the common humanity, but to the Infinite in himself and is therefore unique. It is because this is the reality of our existence that the intellectual reason and the intelligent will cannot deal with life as its sovereign, even though they may be at present our supreme instruments and may have been in our evolution supremely important and helpful. The reason can govern, but only as a minister, imperfectly, or as a general arbiter and giver of suggestions which are not really supreme commands, or as one channel of the sovereign authority, because that hidden Power acts at present not directly but through many agents and messengers. The real sovereign is another than the reasoning intelligence. Man’s impulse to be free, master of Nature in himself and his environment cannot be
really fulfilled until his self-consciousness has grown beyond the rational mentality, become aware of the true sovereign and either identified itself with him or entered into constant communion with his supreme will and knowledge.