A Theory of the Human Being

It is a superstition of modern thought that the march of knowledge has in all its parts progressed always in a line of forward progress deviating from it, no doubt, in certain periods of obscurcation, but always returning and in the sum constituting everywhere an advance and nowhere a retrogression. Like all superstitions this belief is founded on bad and imperfect observation flowering into a logical fallacy. Our observation is necessarily imperfect because we have at our disposal the historical data and literary records of only a few millenniums and beyond only disjected and insufficient indices which leave gigantic room for the hardly-fettered activity of the mind’s two chief helpers and misleaders, inference and conjecture. Our observation is bad because, prepossessed by the fixed idea of a brief & recent emergence from immemorial barbarism, imagining Plato to have blossomed in a few centuries out of a stock only a little more advanced than the South Sea islander, we refuse to seek in the records that still remain of a lost superior knowledge their natural and coherent significance; we twist them rather into the image of our own thoughts or confine them within the still narrow limits of what we ourselves know and understand. The logical fallacy we land in as the goal of our bad observation is the erroneous conception that because we are more advanced than certain ancient peoples in our own especial lines of success, as the physical sciences, therefore necessarily we are also more advanced in other lines where we are still infants and have only recently begun to observe and experiment, as the science of psychology and the knowledge of our subjective existence and of mental forces. Hence we have developed the exact contrary of the old superstition that the movement of man is always backward to retrogression. While our forefathers believed that the more ancient might on the whole be trusted
as more authoritative, because nearer to the gods, and the less ancient less authoritative because nearer to man’s ultimate degeneracy, we believe on the contrary that the more ancient is always on the whole more untrue because nearer to the unlettered and unenquiring savage, the more modern the more true because held as opinion by the lettered and instructed citizen of Paris or Berlin. Neither position can be accepted. Verification by experience & experiment is the only standard of truth, not antiquity, not modernity. Some of the ideas of the ancients or even of the savage now scouted by us may be lost truths or statements of valid experience from which we have turned or become oblivious; many of the notions of the modern schoolmen will certainly in the future be scouted as erroneous and superstitious.

Among the ancient documents held by the ancients to be deep mines of profound and fertile truth but to us forgetful and blind of their meaning the Veda & Upanishads rank among the very highest.