

Intuition v/s. Intellect: Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's 'Integral Experience'



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“Direct knowledge is incapable of growth, for it is individual and therefore incommunicable. Intuition is the ultimate vision of our profoundest being”

~ Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (An Idealist View of Life. P. 144.)

The twenty first century has once again marked the victory of science and amused the world with the innumerable wonders that scientific and technological knowledge can offer. The power and understanding of ‘Knowledge’ as we understand it today has undergone a major change over the centuries. While during the Vedic period the concept of ‘*vidya*’ (knowledge) largely centered around the idea of achieving ‘*atma jnana*’ (knowledge of self) and getting enlightened; the subsequent centuries brought with them an onset of Colonial Imperialism marked by a diffusion of Western Philosophical thought and the ideas of the Renaissance.

This revolutionary transition over the ages has metamorphosed the concept of *Vidya* into one of empirical and rationalistic knowledge based on science, logic, and humanism. On a lighter note, we Indians are at times stereotyped as individuals who can fix any Computer-software issues. Thus, we cannot go without acknowledging that this transition from the ‘land of snake-charmers’ to the ‘land of Engineers’ has been remarkable.

As students, we were once witness to a very curious observation made by one of our Professors, who stated that it is intuition rather than logical analysis which leads us to the greatest of discoveries and a clear understanding of reasons behind certain events. This claim stimulated reactions that were a mixture of both fascination and a sense of being taken aback.

However, thinking it through and juxtaposing it with the treatises of Radhakrishnan made us realize that it could indeed be the case. It's a consequence of the modern mindset that one tries to arrive at conclusions rationally, constraining one's analysis to the given set of facts; while denying agency to any intuitive understanding of the subject at hand. It's an oft-repeated claim that rationality (as we define it now), is a product of the Western scientific narratives, which seek logic and proof in every assertion made. In spite of being conscious of this fact, we still aren't ready to give agency to any other forms of reasoning and analysis. Radhakrishnan's works are a challenge to these hegemonic narratives, and an invitation to the exploration of analytical tools and methodologies beyond those provided by the Western sciences.

This essay proposes to revisit our understanding of the idea of 'Knowledge'. In doing so, we shall be taking guidance from the philosophical works of Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who was the second President of independent India and for a very long time taught as a Professor of Philosophy at various Universities. Radhakrishnan treated his philosophical enquiries as a scientific laboratory, searching for alternatives while engaging in the fields of science, ethics and religion. It is this playground which witnessed the emergence of a philosophy of intuition or "*integral experience*", as he often referred to it.

Born in a Brahmin family following the *smarta* tradition, he had sub-consciously imbibed Adi Sankara's *Advaita* teachings in his childhood days itself. Once exposed to Western metaphysics and the onslaughts of Christian missionary propaganda against Hinduism, he soon developed a metaphysics of his own within the *Advaita Vedanta* tradition and began to expose the fundamental flaws of Western sciences in their fetish of logical reasoning. Without denying the merits of rationality, he put forth the argument that not all knowledge could be processed through the rational scientific model, even in the case of physical sciences.

In 1929, he had delivered the Hibbert Lecture in response to a very popular philosophical-academic enquiry of that time: '*Is there or is there not knowledge, which by its nature cannot be expressed in propositions, and is yet trustworthy?*'^[1] Radhakrishnan responded by affirming that there can be a kind of non-propositional knowledge which is trustworthy. In elaboration, he contrasted '*intellect*' with '*intuition*'; and constructed a defense of Intuitive knowledge over what has been explained above as contemporary scientific knowledge.^[2]

Before proceeding any further we must understand the meaning of the words 'Intuition' and 'Intellect'. **Intuition**, quite literally means the competence to know/understand something by using feelings rather than considering the facts. It may be understood as a strong inner sensation that something may or may not happen in the near future. **Intellect**, on the other hand, is the ability to think in an analytical way and comprehend the working of things at a more advanced level. It should not, however, be thought that these two concepts are exclusive of each other. Both are complementary as the latter (Intellectual knowledge) is fostered by the former (Intuitive knowledge).

Dr. Radhakrishnan argues that the concept of Intuitive knowledge is what helps one grasp the ultimate reality. This metaphysical reality is the sole base that does not exist in space and time, neither is it universal.^[3] In Hindu philosophy, Intuitive knowledge is the knowledge of the self. This is precisely what is called *atma jnana* (self-knowledge). This

self-knowledge is not analytical in nature. It is a foundation upon which other forms of *Vidya* (knowledge) are fostered and made to grow.

Upon critical assessment, one would realize that the Indic philosophy puts a lot of emphasis on the idea that knowledge originates from within, or the 'inner self'. It would be reasonable to understand that this knowledge is possible only through intuition. Thus, once an individual develops his/her grip over intuition, it works like a part of their senses in the nature of uninterred immediate knowledge.

Dr. Radhakrishnan perceived Indic Philosophy as intuitive in nature. He termed this philosophical proposition as an '*Integral Experience*'. His principal argument puts forth the idea that underlying the concept of intellect, there lies a metaphysical consciousness called intuition which contains within itself, the purest form of Truth and the Absolute Reality in its native individuality. The intuition in an individual starts developing only after he/she has acquired a certain amount of intellectual maturity. The point of interjection between intellect and intuition is the starting point from where an individual proceeds to acquire higher consciousness; and is freed from speculative thinking and past impressions.

The biggest critique of Western Philosophy that Radhakrishnan made was of its insistence that the rational animal in a human always uses critical intelligence to meet all practical needs. It staunchly advocates that the intellectual method must be adopted for achieving the Ultimate Reality. One understands where this school of thought is coming from - well quite obviously, the Greek Philosophy. Socrates was a strong believer in conceptual knowledge while Plato strongly advocated the same further stating that conceptual knowledge alone allowed an individual to understand the universal and essential elements or things as true knowledge. Both also argued that since philosophy is inextricably connected with thinking, reason alone is the final assessment for knowledge.

Dr. Radhakrishnan viewed intellect as a form of instrument that gives us empirical knowledge. Intellect is, by nature, finite and limited in its scope of application; while on the other hand, intuition is the infinite totality of consciousness. Reference may also be made to the *Upanishads* here which state that the Ultimate Reality is beyond the reach of analytical reasoning.

Thus, the very nature of intellectual reasoning is limited in its approach to the understanding of ultimate values in life. The intellectual knowledge fails to provide the individual with unified knowledge: it may provide a rich analysis of scientific understanding but as long as we are confined to the limits of intellect, attaining philosophical synthesis would remain an absolute impossibility.

The Intuitive knowledge reveals the direct and real nature of things where we experience the object concerned as a unique entity in itself. Intellectual Knowledge on the other hand directs us or makes us aware of the various characteristics of the thing and thereby enriches our informative awareness. The Intuitive mind facilitates itself through the processes of [1] preparation [2] incubation and illumination and [3] verification.

The enlightened intuitive mind is not born from a sudden leap of enthusiasm. The individual must cultivate and prepare himself/herself by disciplining the mind. Such preparation is followed by a state of mental tranquility - known as incubation which subsequently metamorphoses into a state of Intuitive illumination. Intuition is also a state of self-consciousness. The individual gets completely submersed with the feeling of absolute reality. This may be understood as a metaphysical state of existence where the individual himself/herself feels like being indivisible with the absolute reality.

Dr. Radhakrishnan opines that Intuitive knowledge originates from an intimate fusion of the individual's thought process with reality. It is an awareness of the truth of things by identity. We become one with the Absolute Reality, one with the object of knowledge. This object must not be seen as an external entity, instead it must be viewed as an extension of the self. This experience, as suggested by Radhakrishnan, is the pathway to the realization of the true essence of life, as it brings out a synthesis of all the experiences at various levels. This is what he referred to as the merging of the *Atman* and the *Brahman*.

The connecting link between intuition and such experience are the ethical experiments which are allowed to be conducted in the domain (but not within the framework) of rational scientific analysis. The beautiful coherence which Radhakrishnan provided to his theory of intuition by meandering through science, ethics, and religion, is striking. According to him, "*Intuitions are not substitutes for thought, they are challenges to intelligence. Mere intuitions are blind, while intellectual work is empty. All processes are partly intuitive and partly intellectual. There is no gulf between the two.*"

Here we must caution the reader: No, Dr. Radhakrishnan does not completely reject intellect - he merely proposes that it be understood as a supplementary factor in the road to realizing the Ultimate Reality - that of intuition. He clearly states - "*Intellect need not be negated but only to be supplemented*"^[4], thereby acknowledging the importance of Intellectual knowledge in providing us with a pragmatic outlook in order to help our practical interest, but also holding that it fails to give us access to the Absolute Reality. Therefore, one may rightly conclude that Radhakrishnan's worldview of philosophy, while stressing upon the insufficiency of intellectual knowledge, does not view it as antagonistic to intuitive knowledge.

Differences in Intuitive Knowledge and Intellectual/Logical Knowledge:

The Eastern Philosophical School of Thoughts have always been advocates of the Intuitive Knowledge while the Western Philosophical Schools have been staunchly insistent on the faculty of intelligence. According to Dr. Radhakrishnan, Science and Philosophy have common intellectual aspirations. However, while the former heavily adopts an intellectual approach the latter has been a true follower of the intuitive school.

Nobody is denying the prowess and veracity of intellectual knowledge; however, at the same time one must also acknowledge that there exists a metaphysical reality beyond the superficial, tangible, and discernible aspects of the intellectual picture. A reality that has not yet been proven and well documented by the established processes of western scientific intellect.

Dr. Radhakrishnan perceives logical knowledge as *avidya* (non-knowledge). The Logical/intellectual mind does not help us see the absolute metaphysical reality. The purpose of an ‘intellectual mind’ comes to an end with the manifestation of ‘intuitive knowledge’ in the Individual. Such manifestation, as Dr. Radhakrishnan explains, is experienced as a breakdown of our selfish, egoistic mindset; which transposes us back to the primeval spirit in us from which our emotions and intellect originate. As the mind advances in such a state, the firm mound of intellect gives way to the infinite metaphysical feeling of being one with the reality i.e. possessing intuitive knowledge.

Concluding Note:

To briefly sum up all the entire discussion, intellect and intuition are two simultaneously existing levels of the state of consciousness that we call ‘reality’. Intellect is the logical awareness of the human mind, whereas intuition forms a part of uninterred knowledge of the self (*atma jnana*). Intuition must not be misunderstood as an abstract concept nor is it a formless darkness; it is wisdom at its purest.

Today, Dr. Radhakrishnan should be regarded as a *philosopher of science*; who proposes an alternative view of science, calls for initiation of the rituals of thought experiments, demands a space, and respect for cognition and intuition, and throws up new challenges to the barren Western hegemonic narratives of rationality in a colonial setting. He conceived a synthesis of science and religion in the organic worldview of *Advaita Vedanta*. His was a worldview which had a place for say, telepathy, as a rational science, and where every act of intuition would open a new avenue to understanding the ultimate reality.

End Notes:

^[1] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, Mandala Books, Unwin Paperbacks, 1980. Please see page 100.

^[2] Ashok Vohra, *Radhakrishnan’s Notion of Intuitive Knowledge: A Critique*, Indian Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. XXIV No. 1.

^[3] S.P Dubey - *The Metaphysics of Spirit* (ed.) at page 123.

^[4] Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Volume I. Please refer to page 179.

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