

RADHAKRISHNAN'S NOTION OF INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE : A CRITIQUE

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My purpose in this paper is to examine Radhakrishnan's answer to the question which he addressed himself to in *An Idealist View of Life*, namely "Is there or is there not knowledge which by its nature cannot be expressed in propositions and is yet trustworthy?"¹ Radhakrishnan believes that there can be a kind of non-propositional knowledge which is trustworthy. He contrasts intellect with intuition and sets up a defense of intuitive knowledge over what I may call scientific knowledge.

Let me begin by an analysis of the concept of knowledge. We use the term 'know' in three senses. One is the sense in which it is used to show that we have a special sort of competence. For example, when we say 'I know driving'; 'I know the multiplication table'; 'I know the value of π '. In each of these cases I know how to do something. The other sense of 'know' is used to show that we are acquainted with whatever is claimed to be known. For example, we use 'know' in this sense when we say 'I know the professor of philosophy' 'I know the city'. In each of these cases of the use of 'know' I use it in the sense of 'knowing that'. However, it should be noted that the two senses of "know" we are distinguishing here are not exclusive.... the term 'know' may be used in more than one of these senses in a single utterance."² The third sense in which we use the term 'know' is to show that we have the necessary information. For example when I say 'I know that the earth revolves round the sun', or 'I know that the earth attracts everything towards its center'. I use 'know' in the sense of having this information'. It should however, be noted that "the information sense of the word 'know' is often implicated in the other senses of the word".³ For I ought to have some information about the multiplication tables or driving; or the professor of philosophy, or the city which I claim to know. As a result, the information sense of know 'is fundamental to

human cognition and required for theoretical speculation and practical investigation'.⁴

Irrespective of the sense in which the term knowledge is used, a claim in order to qualify as a knowledge claim has to satisfy the following conditions: (i) Truth Condition, (ii) Certainty Condition, and (iii) Justification Condition. A claim would qualify to be a knowledge claim if and only if whatever is claimed to be known is true. It can be true either in the absolute sense as in "it is true that the snow is white", or in the semantic sense of truth as in "The sentence 'the snow is white' is true". We call the former absolute conception of truth "because there is no reference to a language, or to any part of language, and, thus this conception of truth is not in any way relative to a language or the meaning of any of the terms in a language".⁵ The latter is called semantic conception of truth "because the truth of a sentence depends not only upon the facts but upon what the sentence means, upon the semantics of the sentence. Whether the sentence 'snow is white' is true depends not only upon the snow and its colour but upon the meaning of the sentence and the words contained therein".⁶

One cannot claim to know "unless one is completely sure of it".⁷ Being sure is what distinguishes a knowledge claim from a belief statement. One can continue to believe in something about which he is not completely certain and "admit that what one believes to be true may nevertheless be false but this does not apply to knowledge".⁸ In the case of knowledge, to "say of oneself that one knew that such and such a statement was true but that one was not altogether sure of it would be self-contradictory"⁹.

Whatever one claims to know one must be able to justify. Ayer christens it as the *right to be sure condition* and Chisholm formulates it in terms of *adequate evidence condition*. Whatever one may call this condition, in effect it means that one should be able to give the evidence on which one's knowledge claim is based. This is especially so when the claim to knowledge is disputed. Something would count as evidence if and only if it is known to be true. The justification condition would also be met if we are able to show that the knowledge claim in question is coherent within a system of beliefs. Though Radhakrishnan at no place explicitly states the conditions of knowledge, in one of his assertions, namely "certaintyis the truest test of knowledge"¹⁰ he

seems to be covertly agreeing with the necessary and sufficient conditions laid down above for calling a claim a knowledge claim.

After a brief description of the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge, let me analyse a cognitive situation. A description of the cognitive situation is necessary for my purpose, for knowledge is its product. A cognitive situation has often been analysed as comprising the following inter-related factors :¹¹

1. a subject that knows (cognizer)
2. an act of knowing (cognizing)
3. a content of knowledge (cognition)
4. object of knowledge ('reality'), and
5. language.

In the presence of all these factors, cognitive experience does take place. One may without much ado agree with Radhakrishnan when he says that cognitive experience resulting in knowledge "is produced in three ways". These three modes of acquisition of knowledge are "sense experience, discursive reasoning of intuitive apprehension".¹² Corresponding to these three modes, and depending upon the method of acquisition of knowledge, or what he calls the different ways by which knowledge 'is produced'. Radhakrishnan distinguishes between three type of knowledge : these are 'perceptual, conceptual and intuitive' respectively, and "they are suited to different kinds of objects".¹³ Matilal calls it Radhakrishnan's *pramāṇa theory*.¹⁴

Sense experience is the result of the contact of our senses with the objects and it leads to the perceptual knowledge of the external world. It provides us data for our investigations in the natural sciences. Sense experience is foundational to our knowledge. Radhakrishnan expresses the importance of sense experience thus : "Everything is known to us only through experience. Even such an abstract science as mathematics is based on the experience of stated regularities".¹⁵ Conceptual knowledge or what Radhakrishnan in *An idealist View of life* calls 'logical knowledge' is arrived at by the process of analysis and synthesis. The perceptual knowledge and the conceptual or logical knowledge are related to one another in that "The data supplied to us by

perception are analysed and the results of analysis yield a more systematic knowledge of the object perceived".¹⁶ Since logical knowledge is the product of our reflection, analysis and synthesis, it is qualitatively more distinct than our ideas of sense qualities or our perceptual knowledge.¹⁷ Logical knowledge "pieces together the scattered data, interpret for us the life they harbour and thus free the soul from the body (it) pays great attention to the logic of ideas, draws inferences, suggests explanations and formulates theories which would introduce some order into shapeless mass of unrelated facts".¹⁸ Since logical knowledge deduces relations between our observations, or whatever is given to us, and articulates these relations, it is "indirect (mediate) and symbolic in its character".¹⁹ There is an intimate relationship between logical or conceptual knowledge and perceptual knowledge. The organic relationship between the two can best be expressed in Kant's words : "percepts without concepts are blind; concepts without percepts are empty". These two kinds of knowledge are grouped under the category of knowledge which we acquire by intellect. Knowledge acquired by intellect is useful to us because "it helps us to handle and control the object and its workings", and it helps us to "acquire for practical purposes a control over our environment".²⁰ It "enables us to know the conditions of the world in which we live and to control them to our ends".²¹ Since "we cannot act successfully without knowing properly".²² and "intellect is useful for action :²³ it is necessary for us to have intellectual kind of knowledge. Intellectual kind of knowledge keeps evolving with time. It evolves to meet our changing needs and situations. It is not static. It is dynamic. Its contents vary with "our perceptions, our interests and our capacities".²⁴ There is hardly any philosopher who will disagree with the possibility of intellectual kind of knowledge comprising of perceptual and conceptual knowledge, i.e., the possibility of knowledge through the avenues of 'sense-experience' and 'discursive' or 'logical reasoning'. Intellectual kind of knowledge meets the conditions of knowledge laid down earlier and is the product of the cognitive situation.

However, Radhakrishnan feels that knowledge based on sense experience and discursive reasoning or logic is inadequate, because it does not give us the object in itself (whatever that may mean!) but tells us only of the qualities which the object has in common with others and provides us with a description of its relations.²⁵ According to him "intellectual knowledge is inadequate,

partial, fragmentary but not false. It fails to reveal the truth in its fulness.... It can be trusted within limits."²⁶ Intellectual knowledge by the operation of analysis reduces the object to previously known elements, i.e., to those it has in common with others. It "breaks up its unity into system of separate terms and relations".²⁷ This, according to Radhakrishnan results in "the falsification of the real". He does not only disparage intellectual knowledge on the above grounds but also considers it as inadequate. He considers it inadequate because "whatever be the object, physical or non-physical, intellect goes about it and about, but does not take us to the heart of it".²⁸ Radhakrishnan nowhere explains what it would be to go to the heart' of the matter. The other reason why intellectual knowledge is considered to be inadequate by Radhakrishnan is that he considers it to be a "mixture of truth and error, for (in it) practical motives interfere with the unclouded thought".²⁹ Finally, intellectual knowledge is considered to be inadequate by Radhakrishnan because it is not able to comprehend the experiences like deep love, music, moments of intense joy and acute suffering, parental affection, truth, beauty and goodness, the idea of the universal, etc. To understand each one of these it is alleged that one necessarily has to undergo these experiences.

Because of these shortcomings of the intellectual knowledge Radhakrishnan argues in favour of intuitive knowledge, i.e., knowledge based on intuition or what he calls in the *Recovery of Faith* and , in "Fragments of a Confession" integral insight. But in "Reply to critics" he categorically states "Intuition is of two kinds, perceptual knowledge and integral insight. Personally, I use intuition for intergral knowledge".³⁰ Where as Bergson defines intuition as that "by means of which we project ourselves into an object in order to achieve identification with that element which is unique and which is inexpressible",³¹ Radhakrishnan describes it "as a power more interior than intellect by which we become aware of the real in its intimate individuality, and not merely in its superficial or discernible aspects".³² He considers it "unfortunate that we are obliged to employ the single term 'intuition' to represent scientific genius, poetic insight, ethical conscience, as well as religious faith. Though these diverse movements represent the intergrated activity of the mind, the activity is oriented towards knowing in some cases, enjoyment or creation in others."³³ However, he defines intuition in terms of "integral experience"³⁴ "the exercise of consciousness as a whole",³⁵ "the response of

the whole man",³⁶ "private, subjective, intimately personal"³⁷ and treats it as "the extension of perception to regions beyond senses."³⁸ According to him "intuition" is "used to cover all cognitive processes which have a directness or immediacy, i.e., all non-inferential cognition. What we know by inference or hearsay is not intuitive knowledge".³⁹ Intuition gives us the knowledge of things "in their uniqueness, in their indefeasible reality". Intuitions are "vital in character since they are expressive of life and not mere logical analysis".⁴⁰ They "make us see things as they are, as unique individuals."⁴¹

Intuitive knowledge "is different from the conceptual, a knowledge by which we see things as they are, as unique individuals and not as members of a class or units in a crowd. It is non-sensuous, immediate knowledge".⁴² Knowledge based on intuition "arises from an intimate fusion of mind with reality. It is knowledge by being and not by senses or symbols".⁴³ "It is a state of mind..... it belongs to the structure of the mind".⁴⁴ Intuitive knowledge "brings into activity not merely a portion of a conscious being, sense or reason but the whole. It also reveals to us not abstractions but the reality in its integrity."⁴⁵ This kind of knowledge puts us "in touch with actual being." Radhakrishnan describes it as the highest knowledge which "transcends the distinction of subject". It is due to this knowledge that "logical knowledge is possible because this highest knowledge is ever present. It can only be accepted as foundational".⁴⁶ According to him "intuitive knowledge is a self-subsistent mode of consciousness different from the intellectual or the preceptual. Whereas perception gives us the outward properties of an object, and intellect discerns the Laws of which the object is an instance, intuition gives depth, meaning, character to the object".⁴⁷ Intuitive knowledge is "felt and affirmed and not derived or explained".⁴⁸ It is a set of "convictions arising out of a fullness of life in spontaneous way, more akin to sense than to imagination or intellect and more inevitable than either".⁴⁹ Intuitive knowledge "discloses to us eternity, timelessness in which time and history are included".⁵⁰ Knowledge based on intuition is "an intense and close communion between the knower and the known".⁵¹ In intuitive apprehension "there is complete fusion of the subject and the object." In intuitive knowledge "man ceases to be impartial spectator. His whole being is at work, not merely the power of observation and inference. It is knowledge by coincidence. Being and knowing are different aspects of one experience."⁵² It is something most immediate and most profound".⁵³ This

kind of knowledge "arises from an intimate fusion of mind with reality. It is knowledge by being and not by senses or by symbols. It is awareness of the truth of things by identity. We become one with the truth. One with the object of knowledge."⁵⁴ Radhakrishnan is silent about how this fusion of mind resulting in intuitive knowledge takes place. However, one may reasonably say that Radhakrishnan agrees with Schopenhauer when the latter says that in intuition there is a "sudden transition from the common knowledge of particular thing to the knowledge of *Ideas*.... The knowledge takes place suddenly; for knowledge breaks free from the service of the will"⁵⁵ Whereas for Radhakrishnan "the successful practice of intuition requires previous study and assimilation of a multitude of facts and laws" and intuitions "arise out of a matrix of rationality"⁵⁶ For Schopenhauer an intuition will emerge "if (a man) gives the whole power of his mind to the perception, sinks himself entirely in this, and lets his whole consciousness be filled with quiet contemplation"⁵⁷ Whereas Schopenhauer is certain that the nature of genius consists in pre-eminent capacity for such contemplation"⁵⁸ Radhakrishnan does not seem to be sure about the nature of persons who can have intuitive knowledge. For in *Indian Philosophy, vol.I*, he says that "man has the faculty of divine thought or mystic intuition by which he transcends the distinction of intellect and solves the riddle of reason"⁵⁹ implying thereby that every man has the capacity for intuition. But in the very next sentence he says the chosen spirits scale the highest peak of thought and intuit the reality"⁶⁰ implying thereby that intuition and therefore intuitive knowledge is only for a few. One of the characteristics of knowledge is that any one with some training is in principle able to grasp it. Would we be justified in calling intuitive knowledge, which is experienced by a few through their own special methods and which in principle cannot be adopted by all, knowledge? To grasp it one has to be either a genius or a chosen spirit! By its very nature intuitive knowledge is to be experienced, it is to be felt. In it "there is something incommensurable, eluding expression in words"⁶¹ Like many other great truths of philosophy it is not to be "proved but seen."⁶² As we have already shown, communicability or expression in words, or articulation is an integral part of a cognitive situation. So an intuitive experience could be rejected as a valid form of genuine knowledge just on that ground. However, Radhakrishnan tries to save such a rejection of intuitive knowledge by saying that "certainty and not communicability is the truest test of knowledge and intuitive experience has the sense of assurance or certainty and is therefore a

species of knowledge".⁶³

Let us now examine the possibility of proving its certainty. Let us not begin by rejecting *a priori* that a claim based on intuition is no knowledge claim. On the contrary let us begin by admitting that some knowledge, say, about self or values is obtained by a special intuition. Now this discovery has to be articulated in propositions to see whether they are verified or confuted by experience. This step is accepted by Radhakrishnan when he says that "knowledge when acquired must be thrown into logical form and we are obliged to adopt the language of logic, since only logic has a communicable language".⁶⁴ But when we ask Radhakrishnan to put the intuitive knowledge into propositions all that he is able to produce is propositions like "I have a direct, and immediate experience of the fact that the universe is good, spiritual and in some sense personal". He tries to hide his failure to produce the kind of propositions we are asking him to produce by saying that intuitive knowledge is "the only true and direct knowledge we have; all else is inferential",⁶⁵ and therefore, "it cannot be proved, since it is basis of all proof".⁶⁶ He goes on to add that "we cannot verify it and therefore cannot dispute it. It transcends the partial truths of the divided mind, the intellectual or the sensuous".⁶⁷ It is a kind of knowledge that is to be "proved on our pulses".⁶⁸ We need a very special subjective method of proving it because "it is the only kind of absolute knowledge", which "is possible only when the individual is fully alive and balanced".⁶⁹ It can be seen "truly only when our inner being is harmonized" since it represents "the ultimate vision of our profoundest being."⁷⁰ To get over this charge of subjectivity Radhakrishnan tries to universalise his personal experience which is embedded in "I have direct and immediate experience of the fact that the universe is good, spiritual and in some sense personal" by leaping from 'I statement' to 'we statement'. But this leap is unjustified. For the 'I statement' "may or may not be of psychological interest, which is capable of neither test nor proof, and which has no scientific, intellectual, spiritual or metaphysical interest or importance. All that one can say of it is that it may or may not be true". But the use of 'we statement' "implies that 'we' means 'everyone' and further that the direct perception of everyone that the universe is good is a guarantee that the universe is good". This according to Woolf is nothing else but metaphysical quackery. By metaphysical quackery he means "abandonment of and contempt for reason as a means to truth". It is a "revolt

against reason".⁷¹

The criterion of certainty available to an intuitionist is his own saying that he knows that he had a particular intuition. There is no other public check, no other way of certifying his claim other than his saying so. By definition whatever he claims to be true has to be true. But just as "the guarantee by the company of its products is no proof that the product is sound; the guarantee of intrinsic certainty of some beliefs is no proof that the beliefs are certain".⁷² The justification of certainty has to be in terms of some 'well known common standard'.⁷³ Depending solely upon the claim and authority of the person who experiences the intuitive knowledge for certainty, would be like buying several copies of the same newspaper to confirm a news item.⁷⁴

His failure to produce any intelligible propositions, other than dogmatically asserting and reasserting time and again, propositions containing terms like 'self-luminous', 'direct', 'unmediated', 'spiritual', 'self-contained', etc. and statements like: "Intuition is not logical but supra-logical. It is the wisdom gained by the whole spirit which is above any more fragment thereof, be it feeling or intellect",⁷⁵ or "Intuition supervenes on intellectual analysis".⁷⁶ The use of such terms and statements leads us to say that "his intuition has not revealed to him any facts." For we know that "If he really had acquired any information, he would be able to express it. He would be able to indicate in some way or other how the genuineness of his discovery might be empirically determined".⁷⁷ Radhakrishnan seems to be in a dilemma here. His rational self makes him admit that "the immediacy of intuitive knowledge can be mediated through intellectual definition and analysis. We use intellect to test the validity of intuition and communicate them to others. Intuition and intellect are complementary." But his failure to supply criteria for verification of intuitive knowledge and communicate to others the contents of intuitive knowledge makes him say in the very next sentence "we have of course to recognise that intuition transcends the conceptual expressions as reality does not fit into categories." ⁷⁸ Not only is he not able to articulate what he knows, he is also in no position to devise an empirical test to validate his "knowledge" so much so that he does not have any method to know whether what he calls knowledge today was the same what he called knowledge at a past occasion. So, what to talk of providing a justification to others for his claims of knowledge, no criterion

of justification is available for his own satisfaction. This shows that intuitive experience is available for his own satisfaction. This shows that intuitive experience is not a cognitive state at all.

So when an intuitionist describes his vision to us, he may at the most be describing to us his mental state. This description and the experience may be interesting from the psychological point of view but it does not in any way imply that there is such a thing as intuitive knowledge.⁷⁹

Radhakrishnan may dismiss this dismissal of the possibility of intuitive knowledge by saying that “No logical knowledge is possible of that which underlies all logical knowledge”.⁸⁰ He defends intuitive knowledge by saying: “If intuitive knowledge does not supply us with universal major premises, which we can neither question nor establish, our life will come to an end”,⁸¹ And by arguing that the validity of the highest idea is not derived from the senses or proved by logic. It is “self established by the reason of the soul’s trust in itself”.⁸² Therefore neither the condition of knowledge nor the components of a cognitive situation stated in the beginning of this paper are applicable to intuitive knowledge. But then what has he been trying to do throughout? Has he not been trying to give a logical account of intuition and intuitive knowledge? Surprisingly, in *Recovery of Faith*⁸³ Radhakrishnan quotes only the first part of what Wittgenstein says in TLP 6.52, namely, that “We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched”, to prove that Wittgenstein too supports his thesis about the undemonstrability of the knowledge of ultimate values, i.e., things known by intuition by objective science. If he had quoted the whole of TLP 6.52 : one would have easily seen that Wittgenstein does not support Radhakrishnan’s doctrine; rather he says that nothing is left outside the ambit of science. I give below the full text of TLP 6.52:

We feel that even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problem of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer”.

Rather than misrepresenting Wittgenstein by quoting half of his thought it would have been better if Radhakrishnan had heeded to Wittgenstein’s advise in TLP 7 “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence”. It would have saved him so much of a tall talk about something which is logically

incommunicable.

In our scientific discourse, of course, we do answer the question 'How do you know?' by saying that 'we know by intuition'. For example, we know the distinction between :

S-1 : ideas green colorless furiously sleep, and

S-2 : colorless green ideas sleep furiously

by intuition. Intuitively we know that S-1 is not a well formed formula (wff) whereas S-2 is wff though a meaningless sentence.⁸⁴ But in all such cases where we say that "something is known by intuition by direct acquaintance is not at all to say *how* it is known. The addition of the explanatory phrase serves only to deny an explanation".⁸⁵ When we say 'we know by intuition', the expression by intuition' is not meant to indicate the source from which we know but it only expresses that we have no explanation with respect to the source of knowledge. So in answering 'we know by intuition'. We have said nothing whatsoever regarding the source of our knowledge. And to say that there can be direct, unmediated experiences would be misleading because "all experience is processed through, organised by and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems if not self-contradictory, at best empty".⁸⁶

Let me conclude this paper with a controversy regarding the place of intuition in Indian philosophy. Radhakrishnan holds the view that "Hindu system of philosophy" believes in an intuitive "vision of truth" and not in "logical argument and proof".⁸⁷ And that the Hindu thinkers lay great stress and hold with great conviction "that intuitive insight is a greater light in the abstruse problems of philosophy than logical understanding".⁸⁸ All that Radhakrishnan claims to have done in all his works is to explain that insight in the modern idiom. But K. Satchidananda Murty⁸⁹ denies that there is an over emphasis on intuition or intuitive knowledge in the schools of Indian philosophy. According to him, to say that it is so would be like saying that Western philosophy consists only of "Plotinus, Dionysius, Eckhart, Tauler, St. Teresa of Avil and St. John of the Cross".⁹⁰ He categorically asserts : "In no Upaniṣadic passage do we find it stated that there is any mode of apprehension or experience higher than the one possible through reason or *buddhi*".⁹¹ And that "in the basic source

books of the vedanta, words exactly corresponding to "experience", "intuition" do not occur. The words used are "knowing" and "seeing" Even in *Māṇḍūkya* which is supposed to analyse experience, that word does not occur; the words used being *sthāna* and *pada* which perhaps mean situation, condition, state, aspect, mode, or as Śāṅkara says means of activity".⁹² Even Śāṅkara, according to him, cannot be said to be advocating intuition as basis for knowledge of the supreme Brahman or the self, for Śāṅkara while commenting on *Muṇḍaka* passage says; "The mind has to be recollected and concentrated on Brahman". "The self, he thinks, has to be experienced (manifested?) only by mental modes. By *Vijñāna* i.e., knowledge generated by the teachings of the scriptures, the preceptor, and dispassion, the wise see Brahman. The subtle Ātman can be known only by the mind".⁹³ Who among the two Radhakrishnan or Murty, is right? Or is it that the confusion arises because of the translation of the term '*Buddhi*'? If '*Buddi*' is translated as the faculty of reason' then even the knowledge of Brahman is rational. So that, unless *Buddhi* assumes the form of Brahman, unless it acquires the *vṛtti* of Brahman, no knowledge of Brahman is possible. I leave these questions to the decision of the pandits and scholars of classical Indian Philosophy.

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