

# Intuition includes Experience—an explanation after S. Radhakrishnan

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Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan is a versatile genius, universally recognised as teacher, scholar, and administrator, as philosopher, statesman, and India's cultural ambassador throughout the world. His deep learning and his absolute tolerance have brought him recognition not only as the greatest interpreter of Indian philosophy, religion, and culture, but also as an original and creative thinker of the first order. Radhakrishnan located his metaphysics within the Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta tradition (*sampradaya*). And like other Vedantins before him, Radhakrishnan wrote commentaries on the *Prasthanatraya* (that is, main primary texts of Vedanta): the *Upanisads* (1953), *Brahma Sutra* (1959), and the *Bhagavadgita* (1948).

I like to focus on Radhakrishnan's understanding of intuition and his interpretations of experience. It begins with a general survey of the variety of terms as well as the characteristics Radhakrishnan associates with intuition. For Radhakrishnan, intuition is an "integral experience". Radhakrishnan uses the term "integral" in at least three ways. First, intuition is integral in the sense that it coordinates and synthesizes all other experiences. It integrates all other experiences into a more unified whole. Second, intuition is integral as it forms the basis of all other experiences. In other words, Radhakrishnan holds that all experiences are at beginning intuitional. Third, intuition is integral in the sense that the results of the experience are integrated into the life of the individual. For Radhakrishnan, intuition finds expression in the world of action and social relations.

For Radhakrishnan, intuition is a distinct form of experience. Intuition is self-established (*svataḥsiddha*), self-evidencing (*svāsamvedya*), and self-luminous (*svayaṃ-prakāś*). Intuition entails pure comprehension, entire significance, and complete validity. It is both truth-filled and truth-bearing. Intuition is its own cause and its own explanation. It is a positive feeling of calm and confidence, joy and strength and above all it is sovereign. For Radhakrishnan intuition is the ultimate form of experience. It is ultimate in the sense that intuition constitutes the fullest and therefore the most authentic realization of the Ultimate Reality (*Brahman*). According to Radhakrishnan, the ultimacy of intuition is also accounted because it is the ground of all other forms of experience.

Finally, intuition, according to Radhakrishnan, is inexpressible. It escapes the limits of language and logic, and there is "no conception by which we can define it". While the experience itself transcends expression. The provocation of expression is, for Radhakrishnan, testimony to the creative impulse of intuition. All creativity and indeed all progress in the various spheres of life is the inevitable result of intuition.

## 1) Cognitive Experience

According to Radhakrishnan the other forms of experiences are cognitive, psychic, aesthetic, ethical and religious. Radhakrishnan recognizes three categories of cognitive experience: sense experience, discursive reasoning, and intuitive apprehension. For Radhakrishnan all of these forms of experience

contribute, in varying degrees, to a knowledge of the real (*Brahman*), and as such have their basis in intuition.

### ➤ *Sense Experience*

Of the cognitive forms of knowledge, Radhakrishnan suggests that sensory knowledge is in one respect closest to intuition, for it is in the act of sensing that one is in “direct contact” with the object. Sense experience “helps us to know the outer characters of the external world. By means of it we acquire an acquaintance with the sensible qualities of the objects”. “Intuitions,” Radhakrishnan believes, “are convictions arising out of a fullness of life in a spontaneous way, more akin to sense than to imagination or intellect and more inevitable than either”. In this sense, sense perception may be considered intuitive, though Radhakrishnan does not explicitly describe it as such.

### ➤ *Discursive Reasoning*

Discursive reasoning, and the logical knowledge it produces, is subsequent to sensory experience (perception). Logical knowledge is obtained by the processes of analysis and synthesis. For Radhakrishnan, discursive reasoning and the logical systems they construct possess an element of intuition. For Radhakrishnan, “In any concrete act of thinking the mind’s active experience is both intuitive and intellectual”.

### ➤ *Intuitive Apprehension*

While logic deals with facts already known, intuition goes beyond logic to reveal previously unseen connections between facts. Radhakrishnan holds that, “The art of discovery is confused with the logic of proof and an artificial simplification of the deeper movements of thought results. We forget that we invent by intuition though we prove by logic”. Intuition not only clarifies the relations between facts and seemingly discordant systems, but lends itself to the discovery of new knowledge which then becomes an appropriate subject of philosophical inquiry and logical analysis.

Radhakrishnan offers three explanations to account for the tendency to overlook the presence of intuition in discursive reasoning. First, Radhakrishnan claims, intuition presupposes a rational knowledge of facts. “The insight does not arise if we are not familiar with the facts of the case.... The successful practice of intuition requires previous study and assimilation of a multitude of facts and laws. We may take it that great intuitions arise out of a matrix of rationality”. Second, the intuitive element is often obscured in discursive reasoning because facts known prior to the intuition are retained, though they are synthesized, and perhaps reinterpreted, in light of the intuitive insight. Finally, intuition in discursive reasoning is often overlooked, disguised as it is in the language of logic. In short, the intuitive is mistaken for the logical. “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.”

Intuition is not the end, but part of an ever-developing and ever-dynamic process of realization. Cognitive 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”.

## 2) **Psychic Experience**

Radhakrishnan accounts for psychic experiences in terms of a highly developed sensitivity to intuition. “The mind of man,” Radhakrishnan explains, “has the three aspects of subconscious, the conscious, and the superconscious, and the ‘abnormal’ psychic phenomena, called by the different names of ecstasy, genius, inspiration, madness, are the workings of the superconscious mind”. Such experiences are not “abnormal” according to Radhakrishnan, nor are they unscientific. Rather, they are the products of carefully controlled mental experiments. In the Indian past, “The psychic experiences, such as telepathy and clairvoyance, were considered to be neither abnormal nor miraculous. They are not the products of diseased minds or

inspiration from the gods, but powers which the human mind can exhibit under carefully ascertained conditions”.

For Radhakrishnan, psychic intuitions are suprasensory: “We can see objects without the medium of the senses and discern relations spontaneously without building them up laboriously. In other words, we can discern every kind of reality directly”. In a bold declaration, Radhakrishnan believes that the “facts of telepathy prove that one mind can communicate with another directly”.

### 3) Aesthetic Experience

“All art,” Radhakrishnan declares, “is the expression of experience in some medium”. However, the artistic experience should not be confused with its expression. While the experience itself is ineffable, the challenge for the artist is to give the experience concrete expression. “The success of art is measured by the extent to which it is able to render experiences of one dimension into terms of another.”

In Radhakrishnan’s view, without the intuitive experience, art becomes mechanical and a rehearsal of old themes. Such “art” is an exercise in reproduction rather than a communication of the artist’s intuitive encounter with reality. It is not simply a difference of quality but a “difference of kind in the source itself”. For Radhakrishnan, true art is an expression of the whole personality, seized as it was with the creative impulse of the universe. For Radhakrishnan, artistic expression is dynamic. Having the experience, the artist attempts to recall it. Radhakrishnan believes that, the recollection of the intuition is not a plodding reconstruction, nor one of dispassionate analysis. Rather, there is an emotional vibrancy: “The experience is recollected not in tranquillity... but in excitement”.

### 4) Ethical Experience

Not surprisingly, intuition finds a place in Radhakrishnan’s ethics. For Radhakrishnan, ethical experiences are profoundly transformative. By definition, moral actions are socially rooted. As such the effects of ethical intuitions are played out on the social stage. While the intuition itself is an individual achievement, Radhakrishnan’s view is that the intuition must be not only translated into positive and creative action but shared with others. The impulse to share the moral insight provides an opportunity to test the validity of the intuition against reason. The moral hero does not live by intuition alone. The intuitive experience, while it is the creative guiding impulse behind all moral progress, must be checked and tested against reason. There is a ‘scientific’ and ‘experimental’ dimension to Radhakrishnan’s understanding of ethical behaviour. Those whose lives are profoundly transformed and who are guided by the ethical experience are moral heroes. To Radhakrishnan’s mind, the moral hero, guided as he or she is by the ethical experience, who carves out an adventurous path is akin to the discoverer who brings order into the scattered elements of a science or the artist who composes a piece of music or designs buildings.

According to Radhakrishnan “Feeling the unity of himself and the universe, the man who lives in spirit is no more a separate and self-centred individual but a vehicle of the universal spirit”. Like the artist, the moral hero does not turn his back on the world. Instead, “He throws himself on the world and lives for its redemption, possessed as he is with an unshakable sense of optimism and an unlimited faith in the powers of the soul”. The moral hero is no longer guided by external moral codes, but by an ‘inner rhythm’ of harmony between self and the universe revealed to him in the intuitive experience. For Radhakrishnan “By following his deeper nature, he may seem to be either unwise or unmoral to those of us who adopt conventional standards. But for him the spiritual obligation is more of a consequence than social tradition”.

## 5) Religious Experience

For the sake of clarity, we must make a tentative distinction between religious experience on the one hand and integral experience on the other. Religions, for Radhakrishnan, represent the various interpretations of experience, while integral experience is the essence of all religions. “If experience is the soul of religion, expression is the body through which it fulfils its destiny. We have the spiritual facts and their interpretations by which they are communicated to others”. “The idea of God,” Radhakrishnan affirms, “is an interpretation of experience”. It follows here that religious experiences are, for Radhakrishnan, context relative and therefore imperfect. They are experienced through specific cultural, historical, linguistic and religious lenses. Because of their contextualisation and subsequent intellectualization, experiences in the religious sphere are limited. Radhakrishnan spends little time dealing with “religious experiences” as they occur in specific religious traditions. However, “religious experiences” have value for Radhakrishnan insofar as they offer the possibility of heightening one’s religious consciousness and bringing one into ever closer proximity to “religious intuition”.

Throughout his life, Radhakrishnan interpreted the Upaniṣadic *mahavakya*, *tattvamasi*, as a declaration of the non-duality (*advaita*) of Atman and Brahman. Radhakrishnan readily appropriates his acceptance of the non-dual experience to his interpretation of religious intuition. Radhakrishnan not only claimed to find support for his views in the Upaniṣads, but believed that the ancient sages expounded his interpretation of religious intuition. As the ultimate realization, religious intuition must not only account for and bring together all other forms of experience, but must overcome the distinctions between them. Radhakrishnan goes so far as to claim that intuition of this sort is the essence of religion.

With this, the present discussion of intuition and the varieties of experience has come full circle. Radhakrishnan identifies intuition — in all its contextual varieties — with integral experience. According to Radhakrishnan, the two expressions are synonymous. Integral experience coordinates and synthesizes the range of life’s experiences. It furnishes the individual with an ever-deepening awareness of and appreciation for the unity of Reality. As an intuition, integral experience is not only the basis of all experience but the source of all creative ingenuity, whether such innovation is philosophical, scientific, moral, artistic, or religious. Moreover, not only does integral experience find expression in these various spheres of life, but such expression, Radhakrishnan believes, quickens the intuitive and creative impulse among those it touches.

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