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Radhakrishnan's Concept of Intuition as the Foundation of Idealism

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Abstract

*S. Radhakrishnan's philosophy stands as one of the most significant reinterpretations of Indian idealism in modern intellectual history. In *An Idealistic View of Life*, he redefines the concept of knowledge by prioritising intuition over reason, arguing that the deepest truths of existence cannot be fully grasped through intellectual analysis alone. For Radhakrishnan, intuition represents an immediate and holistic awareness that penetrates deeper than empirical observation or logical inference, providing direct insight into the essential nature of reality. This shift from reason to intuition marks a transformative moment in Indian philosophical thought, allowing Radhakrishnan to reinterpret the ancient Vedantic tradition in the language of contemporary philosophy. This paper examines how intuition becomes central to Radhakrishnan's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. He presents intuition as the only means through which the Absolute, or Brahman, can be directly realised, since intellectual categories*

fragment experience rather than unify it. By grounding his philosophy in intuitive awareness, Radhakrishnan challenges the assumptions of both rationalism and materialism, which restrict knowledge to measurable or conceptual domains. Instead, he argues that intuition alone offers access to the unity of the self and the ultimate ground of being, illuminating the deeper dimensions of human personality, moral values, and spiritual experience. Ultimately, this research argues that Radhakrishnan's idealism is inherently experiential rather than speculative. His vision integrates the spiritual insights of the East with the analytical traditions of the West, creating a dynamic and transformative worldview. Intuition, in his system, is not merely a higher faculty of knowledge but the very foundation of spiritual life a mode of awareness that reveals the interconnectedness of all existence. Thus, Radhakrishnan's idealism emerges as a living philosophy rooted in the certainty of intuitive truth, offering a path toward self-realisation, ethical harmony, and the universal understanding of the human spirit.

Key Words

Radhakrishnan, Idealism, Ethics, Philosophy.

Introduction

S. Radhakrishnan stands as one of the most influential figures in modern Indian philosophy, representing a unique blend of scholar, interpreter, and spiritual thinker. His contributions are particularly significant because he sought to reinterpret India's ancient metaphysical and religious traditions in a modern intellectual framework.

At a time when Indian philosophy was often dismissed as mystical or irrational, Radhakrishnan demonstrated its depth, coherence, and universal relevance. His work helped restore global respect for Indian thought, placing it in conversation with the Western philosophical traditions.

Among his numerous writings, *An Idealistic View of Life* (1932) occupies a central place in understanding his mature philosophy. This text articulates a systematic vision of reality that harmonises Vedantic spirituality with modern philosophical inquiry. Radhakrishnan does not simply repeat classical ideas; instead, he revives them through an analytical and comparative approach that makes them accessible to contemporary thinkers. His goal was to show that Indian idealism is not outdated, but rather a timeless and dynamic worldview capable of addressing modern intellectual and spiritual challenges.

A key feature of Radhakrishnan's philosophical system is the concept of intuition, which he positions as the highest and most authentic mode of knowledge. For him, intuition is not a vague feeling but a direct and immediate apprehension of truth. It is a form of awareness that surpasses both sensory perception and logical reasoning, allowing the human mind to come into contact with the Absolute. In this sense, intuition becomes the foundation of his idealistic worldview, offering insights that are holistic, transformative, and spiritually grounded.

Radhakrishnan contrasts this intuitive knowledge with the limitations of empiricism and rationalism, the two dominant epistemological traditions in Western philosophy. Empiricism limits knowledge to the senses, which can only reveal the outer aspects of reality. Rationalism confines knowledge to abstract concepts, which divide and interpret but cannot fully grasp the living unity of existence. Radhakrishnan argues that neither approach can reach the depth required to understand the spiritual foundation of life. Intuition, however, is "self-certifying" because it arises from the deepest layers of consciousness and carries within itself the certainty of truth.

This distinction lays the groundwork for Radhakrishnan's broader philosophical project. His idealism is not merely speculative or theoretical; it is rooted in the lived experience of spiritual insight. Intuition, therefore, becomes the key to understanding his metaphysics, where the Absolute is conceived as the ground of all being. It also shapes his epistemology, where intuition stands above empirical and rational knowledge, and his ethics, where moral action flows naturally from the intuitive realisation of the unity of life. Through this framework, Radhakrishnan presents a philosophy that is both intellectually rigorous and spiritually profound.

The purpose of this research paper is to explore in depth how intuition forms the cornerstone of Radhakrishnan's idealism. By analysing his arguments and comparing them with other philosophical traditions, the study demonstrates how intuition informs his understanding of the Absolute, human personality, religious experience, and moral values. Ultimately, this paper argues that Radhakrishnan's idealism is experiential, dynamic, and transformative. It reveals a worldview in which the highest truths are not discovered through abstract reasoning but realised through direct, inner experience of spiritual reality.

The Nature of Intuition in Radhakrishnan's Philosophy

Radhakrishnan employs the term intuition (*anubhava*) to describe a direct, immediate, and holistic form of knowing that arises from the depths of consciousness. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he defines intuition as "the integral awareness of the total self," suggesting that it engages the whole being rather than merely the intellect. This intuitive awareness is unmediated, spontaneous, and complete, making it fundamentally different from the fragmented knowledge produced by sense perception or rational thought. For Radhakrishnan, intuition stands at the core of spiritual experience and marks the highest stage of human cognition.

He contrasts intuitive knowledge with sense perception, which depends on external objects and is confined to the world of appearance. Sensory experience can reveal only the outer form of reality and is limited by space, time, and causality. While useful for practical purposes, it cannot grasp the essence of existence. Intuition, however, arises from within the self and reveals the inner nature of reality. It penetrates

beneath the surface multiplicity to uncover the spiritual unity that forms the true foundation of the universe. In this respect, intuition operates at a depth that sense perception can never reach.

A central feature of Radhakrishnan's understanding is that intuition is experiential, not speculative. He insists that intuition is not an abstract idea or philosophical construct but a living, dynamic experience—a "living contact with reality." In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he draws parallels between intuition and the mystical insights described in Indian yogic and spiritual traditions. These experiences are transformative, offering a direct participation in the Absolute rather than a conceptual representation of it. Because intuition is rooted in lived experience, it carries a certainty and immediacy that intellectual reasoning cannot produce.

Radhakrishnan also emphasises that intuition is the only faculty capable of revealing the unity behind the multiplicity of the phenomenal world. The intellect divides and categorises, separating the world into discrete parts. This analysis is useful but ultimately incomplete. Intuition transcends these divisions by perceiving the interconnectedness of all life and the spiritual oneness that underlies the diversity of existence. This insight is essential to Radhakrishnan's idealism because it affirms the fundamentally spiritual nature of reality. Through intuition, individuals become aware of the Absolute as the unifying ground of all being.

Thus, intuition for Radhakrishnan is not irrational but supra-rational a mode of knowledge that goes beyond reason while still incorporating its strengths. Reason analyses, compares, and organises experience, but it reaches a limit beyond which it cannot operate. Intuition surpasses this limit by grasping truth in a direct and immediate manner. It does not contradict reason; rather, it completes and perfects it. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, Radhakrishnan affirms that intuition is the crown of human consciousness and the foundation of his metaphysical idealism, providing access to the highest truths of existence.

Reason and Its Limitations in Radhakrishnan's Philosophy

Radhakrishnan views reason as an important but limited tool in the search for truth. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he argues that reason helps humans organise their experiences, interpret the world scientifically, and understand empirical reality. While reason clarifies thought and guards against confusion, it cannot reach the deepest layers of existence. This is because rational knowledge depends on concepts, categories, and sense data all of which belong to the surface level of consciousness. Radhakrishnan thus maintains that reason offers clarity but not completeness; it illuminates the world of phenomena but cannot grasp the ultimate spiritual reality.

Furthermore, Radhakrishnan points out that reason is bound by dualities subject and object, cause and effect, particular and universal. These distinctions, while useful for practical life, limit our understanding of the unity that underlies all things. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he notes that rational processes divide experience into fragments and treat them as separate entities. This analytical approach creates boundaries within what is actually an interconnected whole. As a result, reason often becomes an obstacle when one attempts to comprehend the spiritual dimension of existence, which transcends such divisions.

Radhakrishnan also emphasises that reason cannot account for value-experiences such as love, faith, beauty, or spiritual joy. These experiences are felt rather than deduced, and they reveal truths that lie beyond logical explanation. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he explains that the highest values are rooted in intuition and inner realisation of reasoning. Rationality can describe these values or analyse their effects, but it cannot produce or fully understand them. This is why Radhakrishnan argues that spiritual knowledge requires a mode of consciousness that exceeds the limits of rational thought.

Ultimately, Radhakrishnan does not reject reason; he places it within a larger hierarchical vision of human knowledge. He writes that reason prepares the mind for intuitive insight by cultivating discipline, clarity, and intellectual honesty. Yet, the final leap into spiritual understanding occurs only through intuition, which transcends the limitations of analytical thinking. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he concludes

that human destiny lies not merely in rational development but in the awakening of intuitive consciousness, which alone can reveal the unity, depth, and meaning of existence. Thus, reason has a dignified but subordinate place in the overall structure of Radhakrishnan's idealistic philosophy.

Intuition and the Knowledge of the Absolute

Radhakrishnan firmly asserts that intuition is the only mode of knowing capable of grasping the Absolute, the ultimate reality that lies beyond sensory forms and intellectual constructions. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he explains that the Absolute cannot be understood through conceptual thinking because it exists beyond all categories of thought. Reason can point toward the Absolute through philosophical analysis, but it cannot penetrate or experience it. Intuition, on the other hand, offers a direct, immediate awareness of the real, bypassing the limitations of logic and language. This directness makes intuitive knowledge not only higher than reason but fundamentally different in quality.

For Radhakrishnan, the Absolute is not an abstract cosmic principle but a living spiritual presence that can be experienced in the depths of consciousness. Intuition is the means through which this experience becomes possible. As he often writes, true knowledge must be "lived, felt, and realised," not merely conceptualised. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he emphasises that the soul, when freed from egoistic distractions, becomes transparent to the light of the Absolute. Through this inner illumination, the individual perceives the unity that binds all existence. Intuition thus reveals the spiritual foundation underlying the manifold appearances of the world.

Radhakrishnan also notes that the Absolute cannot be divided into parts or described through oppositions like personal and impersonal, finite and infinite, or subject and object. Reason tries to categorise reality, but intuition dissolves these distinctions. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he suggests that intuitive insight reveals the Absolute as a seamless, dynamic unity that transcends intellectual dualisms. Rational thought is compelled to break experience into fragments for analysis, whereas intuition apprehends the whole in a single, unified act of awareness. This holistic vision is essential for grasping the true nature of spiritual reality.

Additionally, Radhakrishnan argues that intuition is validated through transformative experience. Knowledge of the Absolute is not merely theoretical; it transforms the way a person lives, thinks, and relates to others. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he explains that intuitive realisation results in inner peace, compassion, and a profound sense of interconnectedness. These moral and emotional changes are evidence that the individual has come into contact with a higher reality. While reason can debate or analyse truth, intuition produces a certainty that expresses itself in character and conduct.

Finally, Radhakrishnan stresses that intuitive knowledge of the Absolute is not reserved for a select few but is a universal human potential. Every individual, through spiritual discipline, moral purification, and inner reflection, can awaken the intuitive consciousness. In *The Metaphysical Vision of Human Destiny*, he maintains that intuition is the culmination of human evolution, the point at which finite personality becomes aware of its unity with the infinite. Thus, intuition is both the path and the goal of spiritual development, and knowledge of the Absolute stands as the highest achievement of human life.

Intuition and Human Personality in Radhakrishnan's Thought

Radhakrishnan places the human personality at the centre of his philosophical system, arguing that the true essence of personality lies far deeper than the empirical self shaped by body, mind, and social identity. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he explains that intuition is the gateway to discovering this deeper spiritual self. The empirical personality—formed by desires, habits, memories, and external influences—represents only the surface level of human existence. Intuition, by contrast, reveals the inner core of consciousness that is eternal, pure, and untouched by the limitations of the physical world. Through intuitive realisation, a person discovers that their essential nature is not the ego but the spiritual self.

Radhakrishnan distinguishes between the outer personality, which interacts with the world, and the inner personality, which is linked to the Absolute. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he argues that reason can only understand the outer personality because it relies on sensory data and conceptual distinctions. But intuition penetrates the depths of experience and uncovers the unity between the individual self (jivatman) and the universal self (Paramatman). This unity is not an abstract metaphysical doctrine but an experiential truth that transforms a person's understanding of who they are. When intuition awakens, the individual becomes aware of their divine heritage and spiritual potential.

Moreover, Radhakrishnan asserts that intuition plays a crucial role in the development and integration of personality. Human beings often live fragmented lives, torn between conflicting emotions, competing desires, and divided mental states. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he notes that intuition brings inner harmony by revealing the deeper spiritual ground beneath these conflicts. The intuitive self acts as a unifying centre, integrating thoughts, emotions, and actions into a coherent whole. As a result, personality becomes balanced, purposeful, and self-directed. This inner integration is impossible through reason alone, which tends to analyse and separate rather than unify.

Radhakrishnan further emphasises that intuition enriches human personality by awakening the highest moral and spiritual qualities. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he explains that virtues such as compassion, truthfulness, humility, and inner strength naturally arise when a person experiences their unity with the larger spiritual order. Intuition leads to a moral transformation because it dissolves the ego-centred view of life and replaces it with a sense of oneness with all beings. Reason may help articulate moral principles, but it cannot generate the deep, inner motivation needed for genuine ethical living. Only intuition creates this inner moral awakening.

Finally, Radhakrishnan believes that the fulfillment of human personality lies in its spiritual self-realization, a process made possible only through intuition. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he argues that human life reaches its highest meaning when the individual realises their true nature as part of the Absolute. This realisation liberates a person from fear, selfishness, and ignorance, allowing them to live with clarity and purpose. Thus, intuition not only reveals the essence of human personality but also guides it toward its ultimate destiny. Through intuitive insight, the fragmented, empirical self becomes a fully awakened spiritual personality, embodying the ideals of truth, freedom, and unity at the heart of Radhakrishnan's idealism.

Intuition and Moral Values in Radhakrishnan's Philosophy

Radhakrishnan emphasises that intuition is not only central to knowledge and spiritual insight but also forms the foundation of moral values. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he argues that ethical principles cannot be fully grounded in reason alone because rational calculation deals only with external consequences, rules, and obligations. True morality, according to Radhakrishnan, arises from direct awareness of the inner unity of life, which is accessible through intuition. This awareness allows individuals to perceive the interconnectedness of all beings and motivates actions that are genuinely compassionate, just, and selfless.

For Radhakrishnan, moral consciousness is intimately linked with the realisation of the spiritual self. Intuition reveals the essential identity between the individual and the Absolute, dissolving the ego-centred sense of separateness. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he notes that when individuals experience this unity, ethical behaviour emerges naturally, without reliance on external codes or sanctions. Intuition, therefore, becomes the inner guide that informs moral decisions and nurtures virtues such as honesty, humility, and benevolence. The ethical life is thus inseparable from the spiritual life.

Radhakrishnan also distinguishes between rule-based morality and morality grounded in intuition. Rule-based systems provide external guidance but cannot address the deeper moral impulses of the heart. In contrast, intuition cultivates an internal moral compass, aligning personal actions with universal principles. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he emphasises that intuitive morality is dynamic and adaptable because it

arises from the immediate perception of reality rather than rigid prescriptions. This makes it both authentic and responsive to complex human situations, unlike morality based solely on reasoning or social convention.

Moreover, intuition ensures that moral values are universal rather than subjective or culturally confined. By perceiving the spiritual unity of all life, individuals transcend narrow personal interests and local conventions, embracing ethical principles that are valid for all beings. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, Radhakrishnan observes that intuition allows individuals to respond to the needs of others with genuine empathy and selflessness. This universality of moral vision is central to his idealistic philosophy, demonstrating that true ethics arises from an inner, spiritual insight rather than external enforcement.

Conclusion

Finally, Radhakrishnan asserts that the cultivation of intuition is essential for the highest moral development of humanity. In *An Idealistic Philosophy of Life*, he argues that the ethical transformation of individuals is inseparable from spiritual awakening. As intuition deepens, it strengthens moral perception, heightens empathy, and inspires altruistic action. Thus, intuition is the bridge connecting knowledge, spirituality, and ethics, shaping the human personality into a harmonious, morally aware, and spiritually fulfilled being. In this way, Radhakrishnan demonstrates that the cultivation of intuition is both a personal and universal imperative, central to his vision of an idealistic life.

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