

SOME ISSUES OF THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE IN SANKARA AND PLATO'S PHILOSOPHY (COMPARATIVE RESEARCH WORK)

BALDOO DAGZMAA*
BAATAR MUNKHJAVKHLAN**

ABSTRACT

Researchers, how we go into the deepness of great philosophers' thought, we still find precious and sophisticated ideas that make us to think. In this paper, we try to elucidate the theory of knowledge in the philosophy of Sankara and Plato and analyze similarities in their teachings. We aimed to clarify their views of knowledge and we grounded in a historical and hermeneutical methodology. Both of these philosophers' views are difficult to separate between their epistemological views and their ontology. We propose, first of all to analyze their philosophy and bring out differences and similarities of their view in terms of the means of knowledge. We examined the means of knowledge and view about the reality in their teaching. We consider that the intuition is the highest knowledge that reveals the absolute reality, according to their philosophy and this view is methodologically similar to each other. As the authors of this article, we have reached the conclusion that there are some similarities between their thoughts and idealists in general. However, we still need to provide an insight to degrees of knowledge taken into account. The concept of error, mental activity, realm of knowledge and infallibility specially.

Keywords: intuition, levels of knowledge, reality, idea, Brahman, sense-perception, inference, material world.

* National University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

dagzmaa@gmail.com

** National University of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

munkhjahlb@gmail.com

For the philosophy researchers or philosophers, the question of knowledge, especially the question about 'what can we know' or 'what knowledge is' is very sound and familiar. It is something that is uneasy to answer and even for thinking. But in the history of philosophy, philosophers never give up thinking or trying to figure out the 'what is knowledge' and 'how it could be examined'. In the oriental and occidental history of philosophy, great sages or thinkers had given invaluable inheritance of knowledge to humankind. Interestingly, one can find innumerable ideas those are similar to each other from philosophical thoughts. In other words, we can see clear similarities in modes of thoughts across the Indian and Greek philosophy. I think, it is an expression of universal search of truth and knowledge of human being. Also, I would like to say that we are being human, all are same and have the same need to find wisdom.

Therefore philosophy is something higher knowledge and somehow practical knowledge. And also it is better to say that philosophy is for everyone, but not everyone can philosophize in terms of theoretical cognition. It can show that why philosophers always discuss about degrees of knowledge and some failure to knowing reality. Again, one would say that our intuition tells us we should get rid of our ignorance to conform and realize the truth. From this point, authors would like to start search in the teaching of great thinkers.

In this paper, researchers examine that, is there any similarity in the concept of reality and theory of knowledge in terms of intuition and some of the means of knowledge of the philosophy of Plato and Sankara. Many authors and researchers had been researching their philosophical views from several points of view, but here, I would like to emphasize the concept of intuition and its connection to the Reality. Here to note, their teachings are similar in several aspects even though methodologies are different.

In the Routledge dictionary of philosophy, intuition defined as a 'direct relation between the mind and some object, analogous to what common sense thinks is the relation between us and something we see unambiguously in a clear light'¹. Philosophers, such as Bergson, Kant, and Husserl defined this concept of intuition in their own ways. But in this paper, researchers examine only those two philosophers; Sankara and Plato. Both of them, considered the intuition as the highest instrument of knowledge to know the reality.

Many researchers and philosophers of comparative philosophy have been comparing Sankara's philosophy to the philosophical thought of Plato. There are many contradictory views

about their teachings in some aspect that even though Plato and Sankara are both idealistic and monist. Plato's philosophy is very rationalistic, in this sense, he points to a transcendent reality as Idea. And to know the reality, one can use only reason. Reason can give true and proper knowledge.

But philosophy of Sankara is more intuitive and mythical and according to some views, and in his philosophy everything is simply an aspect of Brahman. Everything comes from or created by Brahman which is Absolute Reality or God. Therefore, researchers say that we must not identify their view mechanically. There are some similar approaches in their philosophy in terms of knowledge and their interpretation of the material world and Absolute reality. This kind of similar idea can be found from some works done by Radhakrishnan and other well-known researchers. And it is acceptable that their philosophical views are similar in terms of intuition. Because they say that intuition is the highest knowledge that can reach or reveal the Absolute Truth or Reality.

As for Plato, in his book *Republic*, he views, intuition as a basic capacity of human reason to comprehend the Absolute reality. In his discussion with Meno and Phaedo, he describes intuition as a pre-existing knowledge residing in the "soul of eternity," and a phenomenon by which one becomes conscious of pre-existing knowledge. He provides an example of mathematical truths, and posits that they are not arrived at by reason. It is significant to examine their analysis of knowledge to bring similarity of their methodologies.

We will elaborate here their views. Both of their theories of reality are based upon the theory of knowledge. For example, Plato converts Socratic theory of knowledge into a theory of the nature of reality. In his *Theaetetus*, Plato tries to define the knowledge but does not arrive with a proper answer. Instead of defining the knowledge, he analyses beautifully how knowledge constitutes.

In the first, he gives some objection against perceptual knowledge. This objection raised from the concept of perception, Protagoras famous saying "Man is the measure of all things" and "everything is in perpetual flux" of Heraclitus. According to Protagoras (Sophists), knowledge is grounded in sense perception. And truth is relative and subjective. It depends on the individual's view or perception, i.e. that any given thing "is to me such as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you."

The Sophists were skeptical about the possibility of true knowledge because they were impressed by the variety and constant change in things, and they argued, since our

¹ Michael Proudfoot, A. R. Lacey. *The Routledge Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, fourth edition, 2010), 203.

knowledge comes from our experience, our knowledge will reflect this variety and will therefore be relative to each person.²

Here to note, Sophists idea destroys the objectivity and universality of knowledge. According to Plato, there are different source of knowledge; perception and intellect. The intellect can be divided into reason and understanding. Let us see here how he refutes sense perception. For the sense perception, if one say that is knowledge constitutes of perception then problem arises; 'the same objects appears large when near, small when removed to distance. Also compared with some things it is light, with others heavy. In one light it is white, in another green, and in the dark it has no color at all, Looked at from one angle this piece of paper seems square, from another is appears to be rhombus. Which of all these impression is true?'³ From these comparisons, Plato tries to neglect the idea of perceptual knowledge.

Such kind of examples can be found from the Indian philosophy. For instance, in the Nyaya philosophy, perception is the primary means of knowledge. It gives immediate knowledge of object. Perception can give us knowledge of what is here and now and not of the past; or of the distant or of the future objects. In Indian philosophy, some examples always mentioned to show the concept of error or defect of perceptual knowledge as follows; rope and snake, silver and shell, and fragrance of rose. To note here, in this case Indian philosophical systems give more elaborate explanation of the means of knowledge. Moreover, Sankara and others gives more attention to the perception related to memory and cognition.

As we consider Sankara's philosophy in this paper, we discuss the Sankara's theory of knowledge. Sankara's views concerning the three sources or instrument of knowledge, i.e. Perception, inference, and scriptural testimony. "Perception is the direct consciousness of objects obtained generally through the exercise of the senses."⁴ "When the Advaita says that the immediately perceived object has no existence distinct from that of the knower, it only means that the substratum which maintains the object is not different from that of the subject."⁵

Therefore, as Radhakrishnan explained, perception in Sankara's philosophy refers to the identity of subject and object in consciousness. The subject and the object remain separate because of the covering of ignorance. From here, we can comprehend the means of perception cannot give us the proper knowledge of the reality. According to Sankara, inference also the

one of important instrument of knowledge. He says that the inference is made by our notion of concomitance between two things, acting through specific past impressions.

Let us shift to Plato's view of the theory of knowledge again. Another important view of Plato is the concept of right or wrong opinion. Comparing sensible things cannot be done by perception only, so there is the mind which performs comparison. But Plato considers it carefully. From the comparison, one can have an opinion either wrong or right. But any of them are cannot be called knowledge.

We often feel intuitively, or instinctively, that something is true, though we cannot give any definite grounds for our belief. This belief may be quite correct, but may be quite correct, but it is not, according to Plato, knowledge. To possess knowledge, one must not only know that a thing is so, but why it is so. One must know reasons. It must be grounded on reason, and not on faith.⁶

And knowledge is founded on reason or concepts. From this view, Plato builds up the concept of idea which is not merely in the mind, it is something objective and has a reality its own. But in Sankara, he considers Brahman is Absolute Reality and the material world is an illusion as Plato calls material world is the copy of the Absolute world. So that the perception is deluded by ignorance. In this sense, both Plato and Sankara's views are similar to one another. Because, they agreed with the only one Absolute Reality that is dependent on nothing, but the Absolute Truth. Both philosophers consider that the material world is nothing which is only copy or illusion of that Absolute Reality.

Again we should remember that the aim of knowledge in their philosophy is, to reach or reveal Absolute Reality. From here, we elucidate the concept of intuition. Indian philosophy is radically different from others school of thoughts. To elucidate clearer, Indian philosophy is more intuitive and mystical. In fact, they accept a special kind of means of knowledge as Scriptural Testimony or Sruti. For example, Sankara and other representatives of Indian philosophy considered Veda as an authentic source of knowledge. In fact, Mimansa school of thought itself, believes in verbal authority. Mimansa School considers that the Veda and Upanishad written by God. Even, it is the proof of existence of God or Brahman itself. This kind of thought and beautiful explanation of Vedas can be found in astika tradition in Indian philosophy.

⁶ Stace, *Critical history*, op. cit., 181.

² Samuel Enoch Stumpf. *Elements of Philosophy: An Introduction* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 254.

³ W. T. Stace. *A Critical History of Greek Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 2010), 178.

⁴ S. Radhakrishnan. *Indian Philosophy* (Bombay: Blackie & Son Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1983), 488.

⁵ Ibid, 493.

In this regard, Sankara says: “While there exist the everlasting words, whose essence is the power of denotation in connection with their eternal significations (i.e. the forms denoted), the creation of such individual things as are capable of having those words applied to them is called the origination from those words”⁷ “Intuition is the vital spiritual experience which can be communicated only through the language of imagination, and Sruti is the written code embodying it.”⁸ It also authoritative knowledge that requires genuine reasoning and without such experience, one can achieve nothing.

Sankara considers the concept of intuition as an experience through which one can come in contact with and experience Brahman. In this sense, his view somehow different from Plato's approach to the concept of the Ideal form. In other word, In Sankara's philosophy, one can find himself as Brahman. It is Self-Realization. The word ‘somehow’, author of the paper use here, is that, we might still can find some similarity in their philosophy. Because, the purpose of human being is to know the Truth and Happiness, the author believes that their aim of philosophy is in it.

Sankara never accepts the Shruti blindly. It is only because he fully knows that the Shruti is the result of the highest realization of the ancient sages, that it is the most valuable pearl that the ocean of human experience can ever boast to yield after having been churned by the rod of the intellect, in short, it is only because Sankara is fully conscious of the fact that the Shruti is the shining pure gold tested at the touch-stone of reason and experience, that he builds his many-storeyed magnificent palace of the Advaita on the firm foundation of the Shruti.⁹

According to Sankara's teaching, knowledge of Absolute Reality leads to eternal bliss, and such knowledge culminates in immediate experience or immediate spiritual realization. Knowledge is not a mental activity, because it depends not on mind but on existing facts. It leads to liberation. This is the chief point of Sankara's Absolute Reality. But for the Plato, in his book Republic, he tries to define ‘intuition as a fundamental capacity of human reason to comprehend the true nature of reality. This view can be identified with the concept of intuition in philosophy of Sankara. But, some significant features can be noted. In other word, intuition

is the highest knowledge and through intuition one can reveal the Absolute Reality or the Brahman, he becomes Brahman. From here, it can be noted that some mystical ideas are contained in his teaching.

In the Plato's teaching, he makes degrees of knowledge of realms. This is clearly said in the ‘Divided line’ in his philosophy. He illustrates in his ‘Divided Line’, he framed two kinds of world which are intelligible and visible. The former contains the Form and mathematical knowledge, latter contains things and images. Again, the former related to knowledge and thinking and the latter related to belief and imagining in terms of opinion. According to him, the objects presented to the mind at each level are not four kinds of real objects but they represent four different ways of looking at the same object.

At the lowest level of realities are shadows, pictures, and other images, with respect to which imagination is the appropriate degree of awareness, although it provides only the most primitive and unreliable opinions. The visible realm contains ordinary physical objects, and our perception of them provides the basis for belief, and related to temporal things. In the intelligible realm, we can achieve systematic knowledge of simple forms, numbers and shapes through a disciplined application of the understanding. Finally, at the highest level of all, are the more significant Forms such as Equality, Beauty, Truth, and Good. These permanent objects of knowledge are directly apprehended by intuition, the fundamental capacity of human reason to comprehend the true nature of reality. From here we can see Plato's view about intuition is related to Form which is an essential concept of his philosophy as the Sankara's view. And, we consider this is the highest knowledge or, perfect intelligence and intuition.

To have the perfect knowledge would require that the mind should grasp the relation of everything to everything else, that it should see the unity of the whole reality. Perfect intelligence represents the mind as completely released from sensible objects. At this level, the mind is dealing directly with the Forms. The Forms are those intelligible such as Triangle and Man which has abstracted from the actual objects. The mind is now dealing with these pure Forms without any interference from even the symbolic character of visible objects. The highest level of knowledge is approached to the extent that the mind is able to move beyond the restrictions of hypotheses toward the unit of all Forms. Perfect intelligence therefore means the synoptic view of reality and this, for Plato, implies the unity of knowledge.¹⁰

7 Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, op. cit., 496.

8 Ibid, 517.

9 C. Sharma. *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1983), 288.

10 Stumpf, *Elements of Philosophy*, op. cit., 259.

We have so far briefly examined the theory of knowledge in the teaching of great two thinkers. Both philosophers raises the issue of knowledge to define Absolute reality. As they called, Plato as a rationalist and Sankara called as spiritualist, both they seek to find right knowledge to know the reality and we consider these views are similar in terms of aim and levels of knowledge. Because, they criticized perceptual knowledge which is temporary and relative even though they agreed it is the source of knowledge. We conclude that there is some kind of similar thinking about the highest knowledge as intuition. Many researchers have been considered Plato as pure rationalist, we assume him that he has some idea about mystical knowledge that reveals the Absolute Reality. But Sankara's point of view, as he believed in Shruti, he already accepted the intuition as valid source of knowledge. We tried to analyze his teaching method is rational way though he is spiritualist. There is some need to analyze the concept if Demiurge, material world and Form besides investigating the relation between concept of Maya, material world and Brahman in terms of comparative philosophy.

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