CHAPTER 5

THE ÉLAN VITAL AND INTUITION

1. Reality and Intuition in Bergson’s Philosophy:

The French philosopher Bergson was not satisfied with a theory of intuition as advocated either by Plato or by Kant. Neither Plato nor Kant thought of intuition as a distinct faculty of knowledge in addition to those of intellect and sensibility. Plato thought, on the contrary, that intellect in itself could give direct and immediate knowledge of the real. Kant also believed that both sensibility and intellect might possess intuitive capacity. Therefore, intuition so far as it is used is either intellectual or sensuous. Bergson introduces intuition in his philosophic doctrines but he gives it a broader meaning and value. His novelty is not in the term itself but in the manner in which he used the concept of intuition. Bergson’s intuition is not characterized by intellectual or sensuous capacity. He makes intuition as an independent source of knowledge; and by means of it he is solving the problem of reality and knowledge in a revolutionary manner.

Intuition, according to Bergson, is a kind of direct revelation of reality and it does not need the help of either sensation or intellect, for both in his opinion distort the nature of reality which is an incessant process. Thus intuition itself
is an independent source of knowledge. It is the only method of knowing reality which is flow or change. Bergson did not elaborate his theory of process or life, yet, his philosophy points to the fact that "... life is the reality for which knowledge is..."¹ Hence an understanding of his theory of knowledge is not possible unless we study Bergson's theory of reality, first.

Therefore, we should turn to an analysis of Bergson's concept of reality. Bergson differs from the traditional philosophers with regard to the question of the method of philosophy; his concept of reality must also be different.

Bergson thinks that time is the only reality, the very essence of which is change. Of course, he is not speaking of ordinary time. His conception of time as reality is different from the concept of time as it is used in the domain of the scientists. Bergson was not satisfied with the notion of scientific time. In a letter to William James Bergson wrote, "It was the analysis of the notion of time, as that enters into mechanics and physics, which overturned all my ideas. I saw, to my great astonishment, that scientific time does not endure, that it would involve no change in our scientific knowledge if the totality of the real were unfolded all at once, instantane-

ously, and that positive science consists essentially in the elimination of duration...."\(^2\) (italics author's).

Therefore, Bergson starts with a critical analysis of the notion of scientific time. The result of his investigation had both negative and positive aspects. In its negative aspect, the investigation leads Bergson to hold that the notion of scientific time is not the real time. Scientific time is not essentially different from space which is static and fixed. According to Bergson, the scientist tries to measure time like all other things and also tries to grasp it by conceptual thought. But in so doing the scientist misses the true nature of time, i.e. change. The reason is that in order to measure time the scientist draws a straight line between certain points which are distinct and fixed. In fact, the thing with which the scientist deals is not the real time, but with the simultaneities of points. For instance, if I want to measure the amount of time spent by me to read a page, I have to note the position of the hands of my watch at the beginning of reading and at the end of reading. What I have observed here is only simultaneities of two events and not the change itself.\(^3\) The only difference between time and space is that whereas the points in time are distinguished as 'now' and 'then', the points in


space are distinguished as 'here' and 'there' etc.  

On the other hand, the positive result of his investigation leads Bergson to the conclusion that scientific time is only a superficial aspect of real time. Over and above such a time there is real time which endures and which is a continuous process of change. This real time Bergson names 'duration'. The duration is the very essence of reality or life.

But in our ordinary life we do not think about reality which is mobility itself. We see only the static objects in space and time. Then, how do we know that duration exists, at all?

Like Descartes, Bergson also believes that the self-consciousness is the best starting point in any philosophical investigation. For, everything in the external world can be doubted, but the self can not be so doubted. We are most certain of ourselves. Of course, Bergson did not follow Descartes too far. He is not emphasizing the thinking aspect of the self as Descrates did. Bergson, rather, advises to start with the entire field of self-consciousness.

In order to know that duration exists Bergson would suggest to begin with one's own duration. "There is at least one reality

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which we all seize from within, .... It is our own person in its flowing through time, the self which endures". In examining myself, Bergson points out, first, I shall discover different mental states such as perceptions, sensations, feelings, etc., which are different from each other and stand outside one another. These mental states also succeed one another. But if I draw my attention within myself a continuous flow of mental life is to be found over these superficial states. "..... within our ego, there is succession without mutual externality; outside the ego, in pure space, mutual externality without succession:...." Each and every mental state is ceaselessly changing. The similar view was expressed in the Creative Evolution. "My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing - rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow..... The truth is that we change without ceasing, and the state itself is nothing but change."

Despite the fact that we are changing ceaselessly, we do not speak in terms of pure duration in our ordinary life. Rather, we distinguish between different states of our psychical life to serve our practical purpose. In order to communicate with

others we speak of sensations, feelings, emotions, as if, the of mind are distinct from each other. In fact, they constitute an indivisible process of change. This indivisible unity of the process admits of no static position or segments within it. Pure duration is debarred from all idea of separation, disintegration, and of extension. In pure duration there is no distinction between a present mental state and a past one. It is the very constitutive stuff of life or being. It has the characteristic of multiplicity as well as unity. It is multiplicity because it is an evergrowing process of new characters. Again, it is unity simply because there is no break in this continuous process.

Pure duration or reality is, therefore, a continuous process of change which forms an indivisible unity in one's experience. There is no distinction between past, present and future in it. The question may arise: how is, then, the fact of memory to be explained? Generally speaking, memory is the faculty of preserving the past and also the faculty of remembering it. Bergson did not take such an explanation of memory. In his Matter and Memory he explained the fact of memory.

Memory, according to Bergson, is nothing but the self itself. "In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically".

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8 H.Bergson, Introduction to Metaphysics, op.cit., p. 129.
9 H.Bergson, Time and Free Will, op.cit., p. 100.
11 H.Bergson, Creative Evolution, op.cit., p. 5.
In his books *Time and Free Will* and *Matter and Memory*, Bergson was chiefly concerned with the problem of reality. In *Introduction to Metaphysics* he occasionally represented his theory of reality, but we find no alteration in his concept of reality. He repeats, "... reality is mobility." But in this book Bergson was chiefly concerned with the question of knowing reality.

Bergson does not bother about how things appear to us, as Kant thought it to be. He does not allow any aspect of knowledge to be withdrawn from its scope. Knowledge is not a joint product of two things. Rather, it is one complete fullness. Kant's solution of knowledge by means of understanding and sensibility in which reality is constituted as known, is not, therefore, acceptable to Bergson. He agrees with Kant in holding that our intellect has no capacity to know reality. Kant goes further and says that reality can never be known. Unlike Kant Bergson emphatically says that reality can be revealed to us. He, therefore, seeks a radically different faculty from understanding and sensibility, as both understand reality to be made of distinct, solid parts, to have an access to reality. According to Bergson, in order to reverse the usual procedure of our mind, we would have to do violence to it and our mind is capable of doing so. Reality is to be caught from within by means of

13 Ibid., p. 63.
"... intuition and not by simple analysis". Analysis divides reality into distinct elements, but cannot grasp the vital flow. In intuition "... an absolute internal knowledge of the duration of the self by the self is possible". Bergson defines intuition as "... the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it". It is the sole method by means of which reality is revealed as it is in itself.

2. Characteristics of Intuition:

The question may arise: why does Bergson introduce the intuitive method for self knowledge, while there is already the psychological method of introspection? Introspection also is the method of knowing the mind by one's own mind. May we, then, substitute the method of introspection for Bergson's intuition?

Of course, Bergson would not allow this substitution. Introspection as a method of psychology has its merits. But it cannot penetrate into the heart of reality. Introspection knows the self by separating its different mental states. Thus, it proceeds like all other empirical sciences by analysis or abstraction. Bergson also admits that this is the only way for

14 Ibid., p. 9.
15 Ibid., p. 22.
16 Ibid., p. 6.
any systematic development in psychology. Introspection as an analytical method deals with the concepts. Concepts try to represent the different mental states which are different from each other. It follows, then, that introspection can only deal with the empirical self. 17 Moreover, there is always the distinction between that which introspects and that which is introspected. That means, the self as a whole, introspection can never catch. On the contrary, the self of which Bergson is speaking is to be known as a whole. The self, which is the concern of Bergson, is the metaphysical, the spiritual self which is different from the empirical self. Bergson, therefore, needs a method different from introspection and the method is intuition.

Let us see, after Bergson, why intellect and sense-experience fail to give us knowledge of reality. Sensation cannot afford us knowledge of duration because it deals with the spatialized objects. But to spatialize reality means to destroy its generic character, i.e. change, movement; and spatialization means nothing but the breaking of mobile reality into certain discrete fragments which are external to each other. If we draw our attention from space and concentrate our mind on mobility itself, we may have an exact image of our duration, still, the image will not completely reveal reality. Contradictory characters such as unity and multiplicity belong to reality but no image can express both the aspects at the same time. 18

17 Ibid., pp. 22 - 23.
Intelligence or understanding, on the other hand, deals with the ready-made concepts which can only be applied to the static, the permanent, the spatialized objects. Concepts cannot, then, comprehend life, the essence of reality. Intellectual knowledge, according to Bergson, is relative knowledge, as concepts are applied in a particular practical context; but our knowledge of reality must be absolute. Therefore, any attempt to represent reality by means of different concepts of unity, multiplicity, indivisibility, etc. is a failure. The nature of intellect is analytical and, so, whenever it tries to know reality, it analyses reality into concepts and thereby explains reality. Intellect, no doubt, can explain but the business of philosophy is not to explain, but to know reality in its complete fulness.

Now, it is evident, that we may be aware of our own duration in immediate experience alone. But is change also the essence of the external world? Or, is duration psychological in essence? To answer the question Bergson suggests to consider our own experience as a clue to the generic nature of everything. In his own words: "Thus, whether it is a question of the internal or the external, of ourselves or of things, reality is mobility itself." 20

19 Ibid., pp. 1 - 2.

The next question is: how do we know that there is duration in outer world? and it immediately follows from the above question. Do we have a direct access to it? Or, do we depend on inference on the basis of the knowledge of our own duration?

With regard to this question Bergson seems to reply that on the basis of the knowledge of reality within us, we can seize the process character of the external world. That means, our knowledge of the external world is some kind of inferential rather than direct knowledge. I may quote the following passage from Introduction to Metaphysics in order to justify the above view. "The consciousness we have of our own person in its continual flowing, introduces us to the interior of a reality on whose model we must imagine the others." 21

Mr. G. Rostrevor quotes some passages from Introduction to Metaphysics and Creative Evolution and shows the inconsistency involved in them with regard to the question of the knowledge of the external world. He puts the following passage from Introduction to Metaphysics to support the theory of direct vision of the outer world. "By intuition is meant the kind of intellectual sympathy by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently

21 H. Bergson, Introduction to Metaphysics, op. cit., p. 60.
It seems that Mr. Rostrevor misunderstands the term 'object'. The word 'object' in the above quotation may not be the external object. The 'object' here is the self, the true object of intuition. If this interpretation is correct, the above quotation cannot be cited in favour of the direct vision of the external objects of the world.

Again, Mr. Rostrevor points out that Bergson's use of the word 'sympathy' in both the knowledge of ourselves and of the objects outside us clearly suggests the view that we have also a direct access to the outer world, for sympathetic knowledge is intuitive. This view, too, is not convincing as the word 'sympathy' can have sense in relation to ourselves and things like ourselves. Let us quote from Introduction to Metaphysics: "With no other thing can we sympathize intellectually, or if you like, spiritually. But one thing is sure: we sympathize with ourselves".

Still, there are references which can be shown in favour of the direct vision of reality. According to Bergson, the élan vital or duration is the basic principle out of which the world has evolved. If so, may we not suggest that in intuiting...

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23 Ibid., p. 97.
the duration in ourselves we intuit at the same time the different aspects of this duration? I need not enter into the detailed argument. One thing, which seems to me evident is that the inconsistency alleged to Bergson is due to his process of understanding the nature of reality in terms of the experience of the self. If self is thought to be the key to reality, it is possible to think that reality is also of the nature of the self. But as Bergson points out, external reality is on the model of self and need not be the same. So intuition of self can be the basis for an inferential knowledge of the external world. The nature of inference need not be of the same type as the logical one. Intuition of self offers the original vision of the flow, on the analogy of which we can understand the flow of the life-force in the outer world. Moreover, that the knowledge of the world is inferential rather than direct makes Bergson's position more justifiable, as it shows that the world has essentially the same nature as self. I do not find any difficulty to explain how the world has evolved out of the fundamental reality, if once I know what this reality is.

Intuition, thus, forms the basis of all knowledge. We may also show, from a different point of view, how it lies at the basis of knowledge. According to Bergson, metaphysics and science are not opposed to each other. Rather, metaphysics is the origin of different sciences. 25 It is, no doubt, true

that every science employs certain laws or axioms which cannot be deduced from anything else. The question arises: wherefrom do we get the laws? Intellect fails to supply such laws because in that case some other laws will be necessary to explain these laws and so on ad infinitum. This is evident from the fact that we need certain self-evident truths. Intuition alone can provide such truths. The greatest scientific achievements are not due to our conceptual thought. Infinitesimal calculus, the important method of inquiry, has its root in intuition.26 In other words, intellect needs something upon which it can operate its function of analysis and classification. But there is no other way of knowing this something unless we have a direct and immediate contact with it.

In the Creative Evolution Bergson explains the evolution of the world out of the one basic principle, the élan vital (life force) or the vital impetus. It is nothing but the pure duration in a new name. Life, in order to be realized produces different forms of being. Matter is also the product of the same life force but life is not realized in it. It may be described as the result of a "... slackening of the tension which is the essence of the creative impulse,..."27

26 Ibid., p. 64.
(italics author's). This creative impulse ascends through matter and finds its fullest manifestation in man.

In animal world life moves along with two divergent paths—one of instinct and the other of intelligence. Though intuition is the basis of knowledge, intellect has its definite role in human life. It serves our practical needs and in its particular domain it is no less important than intuition. It is the best method of scientific knowledge. In this connexion we may show how, according to Bergson, intuition is different from and related to intellect and instinct.

3. Intellect and Intuition:

Let us, first, state the differences between intuition and intellect.

(1) Philosophy that is concerned with life, reality, etc. should employ a method different from that of the scientist. The faculty of intuition is the method of philosophical speculation. Intelligence, on the contrary, is the instrument of scientific investigation. It is destined to explain and not to speculate. It is directed to the inert matter and serves our practical needs.

(2) The second point of distinction is that whereas intuition grasps from within the true nature of reality, i.e. change in its entirety, intellect fails to do so. It cannot seize the
essence of reality without breaking its mobile character into some distinct points which occupy space and can be put side by side. Intelligence can only give an external view of the reality.

(3) The third and the most important difference is that from intuition we can come to the different concepts but from a number of concepts we cannot reach the original intuition. That means, if once I have an intuition, I can analyse it into different concepts but the reverse is not possible. Take for example, a solid cone is placed before me. I can see easily how it gradually becomes narrow towards the peak and comes to be a mathematical point, I can also note how it increases into a circle at its base. But the different concepts of point, circle or the juxtaposition of the two on a plane can never provide me the idea of a cone. On the other hand, if once I have the idea of a cone, I can reconstitute the cone by these concepts. Intuition, thus, can apprehend both the downward and upward process of reality. Intellect, on the contrary apprehends only the downward process. This is an important advantage of intuition over intellect.

(4) To show the contrast between intuition and intellect Bergson draws a distinction between two types of knowledge - absolute and relative. In intuition, the object is known from within the object, whereas intellectual knowledge is only

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external because intellect cannot enter into the heart of the object; rather it goes round the object. As it is the case, an absolute is given only in intuition, but knowledge from intellect is relative.

(6) Intuition deals with life, reality, etc. whereas, intellect deals with relations of things.

(β) Intuition, as it is directly concerned with life, gives us direct, immediate knowledge. It would not allow any mediation between the knower and the object known. But the faculty of intellect is discursive. It cannot operate its function unless something is given to it by means of some other faculty. Hence the knowledge by intellect is some kind of mediate knowledge.

(7) The distinction between the knower and the known is absent in intuition since it is a kind of sympathetic knowledge by which the subject coincides with the object. This identification is the essential feature in intuitional knowledge. But the distinction is important in case of intellectual knowledge.

(8) Intellect, still, differs from intuition in respect of its procedure. Intellect proceeds by analyzing its object and then tries to recognize it by means of concepts. Intuition, on the other hand, grasps its object all at once. It does not analyze its object. It is rather 'synthetic act' as Russell describes it. 29

(9) The last difference is that while intellect deals with the universals, the common characteristics of objects, the object of intuition is the individual, the unique.

Despite the differences, intuition and intellect are not opposed to each other, rather they are complementary. Intuitive knowledge, according to Bergson, can be put to the proof and propagated only by the help of intellect. 30 He also says that though intuition surpasses intelligence to reach its object, it is intelligence alone that can raise instinct to the status of intuition. 31

4. Instinct and Intuition:

Is, then, intuition a developed form of instinct? What is the relation between them? Life, Bergson thinks, moves in two opposite directions— one of instinct and the other of intelligence. This movement always tries to obtain certain things from raw materials and to do this it can work upon matter either by means of ready-made instruments or by means of unorganized instruments. The first type of activity is termed instinct by Bergson. The other is intelligence. "Instinct perfected is a faculty of using and even of constructing organized instruments; intelligence perfected is the faculty of making and using unorganized instruments" 32 (italics author's).

30 H. Bergson, Creative Evolution, op. cit., p. 251.
31 Ibid., p. 187.
32 Ibid., p. 147.
Instinct acts, therefore, with the innate organs of living beings. According to Bergson, instinct embraces knowledge; unfortunately, it is not conscious. It is "... a knowledge at a distance". Hence intuition that is directly concerned with life, must intimately be connected with instinct. Actually, intuition is nothing but the developed and conscious form of instinct. In his own words: "... by intuition I mean instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely".

Bergson also says that instinct is specialized because it uses stereotyped instruments for a specific object. Now, the question, naturally, arises: how can instinct be elevated to the status of intuition which is self-conscious and deals with the mobile reality?

Mr. G. Rostrevor points out that to indicate its non-intellectual element Bergson linked intuition with instinct. Perhaps, there is no contradiction in saying that instinctive action is unconscious and still, it may become conscious at the level of intuition. Bergson does never say that instinct is incapable of being conscious. He has distinguished between two types of unconsciousness - (1) unconsciousness in which consciousness is 'absent' and (ii) unconsciousness in which consciousness is

33 Ibid., p. 177.
34 Ibid., p. 186.
'nullified'. Instinctive knowledge is unconscious in the former sense. Instinct may be said to have two aspects - outer and inner. In its outer action, it deals with the stereotyped instruments and is unconscious. But in its inner action it deals with the life itself, it may become self-conscious.

Though I have tried to defend Bergson, yet, the contradictions in his ideas about intuition have not been completely eradicated. In the Creative Evolution, Bergson says that though intuition transcends intelligence, "... it is from intelligence that has come the push that has made it rise to the point it has reached. Without intelligence, it would have remained in the form of instinct,..." Intelligence is the guide which raises instinct to the status of intuition. We find such references also in his The Two Sources of Morality and Religion. Bergson says in this book that intelligence is the "... only one road leading from action confined in a circle to action developing in freedom of space, from repetition to creation, from the infra-intellectual to the supra-intellectual".

It becomes evident from the above that instinct develops into intuition through the medium of intelligence. If so, instinct and intuition differ in degree, not in kind. But this view seems to be contradictory to Bergson's view of closed and

36 Ibid., p. 161.
37 Ibid., pp. 187 - 188.
open morality as stated in The Two Sources of Morality and Religion. 39 In this book Bergson distinguishes between the closed morality based upon instinct and the open morality based upon intuition. These two types of morality differ in kind. Does it not suggest that instinct and intuition differ in kind?

But the contradiction is only apparent. It is due to Bergson's confusion regarding the double aspects of instinct which I have suggested before. When he says that morality based on intuition differs in kind from morality based on instinct, he identifies instinct with its outer aspect alone and ignores the inner side. Bergson himself says that the instinct of which he is speaking is not that which we understand ordinarily. It is an ideal instinct with which he identifies intuition. 40 And all contradictions disappear if we say that morality based on instinct in its former sense differs in kind from morality based upon intuition. But morality based on instinct in its latter sense differs in degree from morality based upon intuition. That instinct and intuition differ in degree may also be established by pointing out that Bergson admits the degrees of intuition. If so, may we not suggest that instinct, when it is unconscious, is the lowest form of intuition?

39 Ibid., pp. 47 - 51.
40 H. Bergson, Creative Evolution, op. cit., p. 186.
Bergson's threefold distinction between instinct (in the sense we have suggested above), intelligence and intuition can be compared with Bradley's three stages in knowing: 'feeling below the level of relations', 'relational thought' and 'feeling'. At the stage of Bergsonian instinct or Bradley's 'feeling below the level of relations' mind is directly in contact with reality but there is not least trace of consciousness. Intelligence or 'relational thought' tries to know reality but as it is discursive, analytical, it distorts the unique character of reality. At the highest level, the level of intuition or 'feeling', reality is known as it is in itself. The difference between these two thinkers is that while Bradley's intuition approximates to intellectual intuition, Bergson advocates the theory of non-intellectual intuition.

Bergson's intuition, therefore, is not to be identified with instinct in the ordinary sense. To think that Bergson speaks of instinct or feeling for intuition is to misinterpret his meaning. He writes, "Not one line of what I have written could lend itself to such an interpretation. And in everything I have written there is assurance to the contrary: my intuition is reflection". But the term reflection is not to be understood in the ordinary sense which is condemned to deal with

41 W.H. Walsh, op.cit., p. 61.
concepts. It simply means to turn the mind inwards. In intuition one becomes directly acquainted with the living, in being lived one knows it. Intuition is the sympathy by which one enters into the heart of the object and, thus, one becomes most intimate with the unique character of the object. It is knowledge from within and, therefore, intuitional knowledge is direct and immediate. Intuition may be compared with 'knowledge by acquaintance' as Russell indicates,\(^43\) which possesses the character of immediacy.

5. **The precise nature of Bergson's Intuition**

Let us see what is exactly the nature of the kind of intuition Bergson speaks of? Is it sensuous, or intellectual, or simply intuition?

Sensation is in immediate relation with its object. Bergson also says that intuition is immediate and direct. Is, then, Bergsonian intuition sensuous? No, Bergson would not allow the characterisation. According to him, intuition is the sole method of knowing reality and as reality is not sensuous in character, intuition is not sensuous.

Bergson also refuses to call intuition intellectual. Yet, there is a confusion with regard to this question. He sometimes speaks of intuition as if it were intellectual. But there are

passages which are in favour of anti-intellectual interpretation of intuition. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, at first, he holds the view which suggests that he thinks of intuition to be anti-intellectual. Bergson distinguishes between two profoundly different faculties of knowing: (i) intuitional and (ii) intellectual. And the contrast between intellect and intuition suggests that Bergson’s concept of intuition is anti-intellectual. But, in the same book, later on, he defines intuition as an ‘intellectual expansion’, or as an ‘intellectual sympathy’. May it not suggest that Bergson is speaking of intellectual intuition?

How can this contradiction be resolved? The critics of Bergson fall into two groups as Cunningham points out. Thinkers like Royce, E.G. Spaulding and Miller belong to the first group who prefer the first alternative and the reason they offer in favour of their view may be that Bergson strongly emphasises the non-intellectual aspect of intuition. The other group of thinkers including Cunningham and Dr. Radhakrishnan think that Bergson implicitly held the theory of intellectual intuition and his theory becomes consistent and logical with this interpretation. According to Cunningham, the confusion in Bergson was due

to his misunderstanding of Kantian concept of intellect. If it is all that Kant said of the intellect, Bergson is bound to contrast it with intuition. 48

Mrs Landes says that Bergson speaks of the intellectual aspect in intuition. He also used intellect in a wider sense and whenever he used intellect in the context of intuition, Bergson emphasized its wider sense. Unfortunately, he never stated clearly in which of the senses he was introducing the term intellect in any particular passage. 49

In fact, Bergson sometimes used the word intellect in its wider sense. He often identified intellect with self-consciousness or the whole mind. 50 In the Time and Free Will, Bergson referred to ".... the organized and living intelligence". 51

The confusion may arise from Bergson's two different senses of intellect. But, from this it may not follow that he accepted both the senses. I do not agree with those who think that Bergson upheld the theory of intellectual intuition. If intellect be understood in its broader sense, in the sense that it has a different use other than analysis and classification, intellectual

48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., pp. 460 - 462.
intuition may be a possibility. It seems to me that Bergson used the word intellect in its broader sense only to imply that if intellect would have such a function, his intuition may be called intellectual. But he himself did not believe that intellect has a different function other than its habitual function. His intuition is 'supra-intellectual' as Bergson himself described. In a letter to J. Chevalier Bergson wrote, "You are perfectly right in saying that all the philosophy I have expounded since my first Essay, affirms, contrary to Kant, the possibility of a supra-sensuous intuition. In taking the term 'intellect' in the wide sense, given to it by Kant, I can call the intuition of which I speak 'intellectual'. But I should prefer to call it 'supra-intellectual', because I have felt bound to restrict the meaning of the term 'intellect' and reserve it for the whole of the discursive faculties of the mind, originally destined to think matter". 52

In the history of philosophy there is a tendency to identify intellect with the whole mind. And before Kant, there was no sharp distinction between intellect and intuition. Intuition was used as a developed form of intellectual knowledge. But we do not usually use the word intellect in its wider sense after Kant has distinguished intellect in its broader and narrower senses.

We think of intellect as a faculty of mind that develops through the interaction between the mind and the environment. Mind has developed this faculty to serve its purpose. Its natural function is to analyse and explain the objects. If we try to expand the meaning of intellect beyond its ordinary use, the confusion may arise. It would be better to confine intellect within its usual work.

On the whole, Bergsonian intuition is not intellectual. It is supra-intellectual. Does the concept of non-intellectual intuition of Bergson approximate to mysticism? Bergson would refuse to characterize his philosophy as mysticism, if by mysticism is meant ".... a reaction against positive science...."53 Bergson's concept of intuition in The Two Sources of Morality and Religion tends to be mystic experience, but, here, the mysticism is used in the sense of an "...appeal to inner and profound life ...."54

The upshot of the whole discussion is that according to Bergson intuition and intellect are opposed to each other, yet, they are complementary modes of knowing. The former is the method of philosophy, the latter of science. In intuition alone the absolute is known directly. It is some kind of supra-intellectual faculty that shows affinity with mystic experience. It is the basis of all knowledge.

54 Ibid., p. 111.
6. A Critique of Bergson's Theory of Intuition:

Let us see if Bergson's claim of intuition as the only perfect mode of knowledge is valid.

The most telling criticism against Bergson's theory is that intuition is a subjective faculty and opposed to intellect. Dr. Radhakrishnan points out that an intuitive experience can be the basis of philosophical truth if it is confirmed by intellect and if intuition be intellectual, there is the possibility of communication. Bergson refused to call his intuition intellectual. Therefore, the philosophy of Bergson is private and anti-intellectual.

But this criticism does not hold good. Bergson did not think of intuition as a subjective faculty. According to him it can be made public by external reference. "Intuition, if it could be prolonged beyond a few instants, would not only make the philosopher agree with his own thought, but also all philosophers with each other..... The object of philosophy would be reached if this intuition could be sustained, generalized and, above all, assured of external points of reference in order not to go astray".

Bergson should neither be called an anti-intellectual. He never denied that intellect as a faculty of knowledge cannot

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56 H.Bergson, Creative Evolution, op.cit., p. 252.
afford us true knowledge. It is a faculty of scientific knowledge and in its own domain intellect gives us true knowledge. Moreover though Bergson based philosophy on intuition, he admitted the importance of intellectual function in philosophy. According to him, philosophy should be based on intuition and that intuitional knowledge can be put to the proof and propagated only by the help of intellect. It is intelligence alone that enables philosophers to make a consistent system of philosophy. In order to make philosophy understandable an intellectual intuition is not necessary. It is not impossible that the truth is known by a suprainTELLeCTual intuition and later on it is explained by the intuitionist by means of intellect, though a difficult job indeed. It is true that the reality as it is in itself cannot be expressed but a picture of it can be constructed.

Bergson also says that though intuition transcends intelligence to reach its objects, it is intelligence alone that can raise the instinct to the status of intuition. From this point of view it may seem that Bergson’s intuition is not suprainTEllectual, but it has an intellectual element. It may not be the case. To say that from intellect comes the push that raises instinct to intuition does not mean that it has an intellectual element. Both Kant and Bergson thought that intellect cannot but think of certain problems, viz. soul, immortality, God, etc.

57 Ibid., p. 187.
Unfortunately, intellect cannot know them. When Bergson says that from intelligence comes the push, he means to say that unless intellect thinks of man's spiritual life, there would be no effort of knowing them. Intelligence makes us inquisitive. Intellect tries to know many things but it fails to know. Instinct can know them but does not try. Thus intellect and intuition are not opposed to each other, they are complementary.

Again, from a different point of view we may account for Bergson's intellectualism. If by intellectualism we mean, "a belief in the intelligibility of the real and a confidence that the human mind is capable of catching this intelligibility", as Monsieur L. Husson defines it, we cannot call Bergson an anti-intellectual. "The intelligibility of the real" does not imply that it is known by intellect, rather, it means that the real is understandable. In this sense Bergson's reality is no less intelligible and he also believes that the real is knowable, though by supra-intellectual method.

Thus a careful and sympathetic study of Bergson shows that the charge of anti-intellectualism and that of making philosophy private only arises from a misunderstanding of

58 Ibid., p. 159.
Bergson's writings.

Yet, the theory of intuition, as advocated by Bergson is not accepted by the logical positivists. Ayer points out that what is intuitively true to one person may not be so to another. So, if no criterion can be offered by means of which a choice among conflicting intuitions can be made, "...a mere appeal to intuition is worthless as a test of a proposition's validity." Bergson, no doubt fails to provide such a criterion. But we may accept Bergson's theory of intuition by saying that for building up a system of philosophy he suggests the interchange of the intuitions of different thinkers and the justification of the intuitions by external reference. This comparison of one's intuitions with those of others points out that intuition is not something private but is judged on the basis of what is public and objective.

Russell offers a series of objections against Bergson's theory of intuition. First, he points out that Bergson in the name of intuition raises the instinct to the status of the sole method of metaphysical truth. According to Russell, the opposition between reason and instinct is not ultimate. We arrive at beliefs through instinct or intuition but they need confirmation by reason or intellect.

61 H.Bergson, Creative Evolution, op.cit., p. 252.
It seems that Bergson thinks of intellect as a purely practical faculty and does not believe it to be a source of truth. Russell's point is that if intellect cannot give us true knowledge, the theory of evolution which is based on intellect must be misleading. Again, if it is thought that intellect has developed to serve a practical purpose, all the other faculties also have developed under the stress of practical necessity.

We may point to the fact that Bergson admitted intellectual activity in philosophy. Intellect, according to him, is a practical faculty so far as it is based on senses. Intellect, he believes, supplements the work of intuition. Moreover, his perfected view of intuition serves the supremely practical task of lifting ".... the humanity up to God". 63 Hence the above charge is not valid.

Russell also examines the infallibility of intuition. According to him, in intuition we become acquainted with ourselves and we believe that the knowledge we possess of ourselves is certain because ".... intuition has a convincingness which is lacking to intellect". 64 But, Russell continues, that "....self-knowledge is rare and difficult". 65 Russell thinks that the majority of men are not fully aware of their true

63 A.C.Bhattacharya, Sri Aurobindo and Bergson: A Synthetic Study, Jagabandhu Prakashan, Varanasi (India), 1972; p.50.
64 B.Russell, Mysticism and Logic, op.cit., p. 16.
65 Ibid.
nature and deception in case of self-knowledge is also possible. Sometimes, again, we believe that we have a direct acquaintance with other people's mind with whom we are most intimate. There is also the possibility of illusion in such case. Intuition, therefore, does not possess validity.

Mr. G. Rostrevor points out that this criticism does not stand against Bergson's intuition. According to him, this charge may be framed against the method of introspection which is an intellectual exercise. But Bergson's intuition is clearly non-intellectual. There is truth in Mr. Rostrevor's statement.

Bergson's intuition may be described as an effort of deep introspection by means of which one enters into the deepest secrets of life where there is no possibility of partial judgment.

Russell agrees with Bergson in so far as he holds that something unique and new is given at every moment and this character cannot be expressed by intellectual concepts. But Russell is not at one with Bergson in holding that in intuition alone such unique and new character is revealed. On the contrary, he holds that sensation is enough to supply such data. 67

66 G. Rostrevor, op.cit., p. 47.
It is undoubtedly true that sensation yields us new data. But if we have to depend on sensation for every new data, we will not be able to go beyond this mundane world. Philosophy that is not concerned with the sensuous world alone, therefore, cannot depend on sensation for its data. It should derive its data from a different faculty. That faculty may be intuition.

7. Intuition as a Source of Knowledge:

In my study of Bergson I have tried to establish Bergson's theory of intuition against possible objections. Still, it is possible that the theory is not free from difficulties.

Bergson understands the nature of reality in terms of self-knowledge; thereby, Bergson imposes what is true of the self on the external world. This is really a misinterpretation, as it seems to forget the differences between self and the external world. Self-experience is, surely, a clue to the mystery of the spiritual world. In India, the Upanisads say, "Atmanam Biddhi", "know thyself". But the vast area of the world is non-spiritual. How can we believe that the truth of the spiritual also holds good of the non-spiritual? Bergson's theory of intuition stands or falls so far as his theory of reality stands or falls.

Intuition, as Bergson understands, is the identification of the self with what is unique in the object. How is it, then,
possible to distinguish between the knower and the known? How are we to understand the object as something distinct? Is it, at all, a case of knowledge? Russell says that Berg confuses between the act of knowing with the known. 68

I venture to suggest that Bergson's intuition is good in so far as it is restricted to the self-knowledge alone. I am at one with Mr. H.W. Carr that Russell has no right to say that Bergson has confused between the act of knowing and the known. The identification of the two is the essence of intuitional knowledge; 69 as such identification gives us the perfect idea of the self.

Critics may even point out that intuitionists may have a certainty but they have no right to be sure. So, their claim of knowledge is not valid. Intuition may be a state of belief or faith, not knowledge.

Inspite of these flaws in Bergson's theory of intuition, I am not inclined to reject intuition as a source of knowledge, altogether. Let us now see from a different point of view whether the charge against intuition that it cannot yield us knowledge is justifiable. The criteria of knowledge as suggested by Ayer, Malcolm and others are: (1) feeling of being sure,

69 Ibid., p. 32.
(2) evidence and (3) what one knows is true. No doubt, intuution involves feeling of being sure. And in certain cases, I cannot but admit like Richard I. Aaron, that the expression 'feeling of being sure' and the term 'knowing' are synonymous. Sometimes the use of the expression 'I feel sure' implies that 'I am knowing'. Of course, one may doubt whether 'I am knowing' when 'I feel sure'. But can I ask myself the question whether 'I am knowing' when 'I feel sure' without my ceasing to feel sure? In some cases of feeling sure I may, of course, be mistaken but that does not entail that no case of feeling sure is a case of knowing.

So far as the criterion of evidence goes, it is not possible to produce evidence in case of self-knowledge. The feeling of being sure, therefore, must be deemed a sufficient condition for self-knowledge. We have no doubt, therefore, that intuition at least can afford us self-knowledge.

As Bergsonian intuition may also claim to have the feeling of being sure, can we not suggest that his intuition is quite good in so far as it is restricted to the knowledge of the self alone?


Intuition, I think, need not strictly be confined to the self-knowledge. In some other cases also it may yield us knowledge, as in the case of knowing other human beings. But it is, sometimes, proposed that the criterion of feeling of being sure cannot distinguish a case of belief from a case of knowledge. For belief also may involve a feeling of being sure.

Let us, then, consider if intuition can meet the other requirements of knowledge. In a knowledge situation the evidence is required. The intuitionist may claim to have certain evidences in support of his knowledge claim but he cannot show them to others who have not risen to his status. Does our inability to understand the claimed evidences entail the falsity of his claim of knowledge? Moreover, the question of evidence itself involves some difficulties. The same kind of evidence may not be convincing to different persons. Furthermore, we can demand the evidence of an evidence. But this procedure can no longer be maintained for that would involve the fallacy of infinite regress. We should have to rest at some point. And this point can be reached only in intuition. What one sees intuitively is self-evident, so no further evidence is required. We, therefore, cannot reject intuition on the ground that it lacks evidence.

Lastly, we should point out that the third condition of knowledge, viz. 'What one knows is true' cannot be a criterion
of knowledge since it is impossible to prove that what one
claims to know is, in fact, true. We cannot be rest content
with the fact that one feels sure that what he knows is true.
We may appeal to the convictions of others in addition to the
claimant's conviction. Neither the Claimant's conviction nor
the convictions of others in addition to the claimant's convic-
tion can prove that what one knows is, in fact, true. We cannot
but admit that we are fallible human beings. And to admit this
is to admit the possibility of being in error. But our failure
in some cases is no proof of the falsity of our claim to have
knowledge in some other cases. 72 If intellect and senses can
be sources of knowledge inspite of their fallibility, why should
we reject intuition for its not being infallible?

In fact, in most cases of what we regard as knowledge we
admit the possibility of our being mistaken. And to do this is
to use the word 'know' as proposed by Malcolm, in its weak
sense. 73 In intuition, too, we know in the weak sense.

What I have tried to establish is that intuition as a
source of knowledge cannot be ignored. There is no better method
other than intuition for arriving at self-knowledge. In some

72 J. Austin, Philosophical Papers, Oxford, At the Clarendon
Press, 1961; p. 66.
73 N. Malcolm, op.cit., p. 73.
other cases also we depend on intuition. But it is more advisable to depend on intellect and sense for our knowledge of the external world, because the faculty of intuition is not under our control and it is difficult to attain the right type of intuition. Lastly, intuition is neither an infallible nor the sole method of knowledge.