



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IRRATIONAL CONCEPTS IN CONTEMPORARY EASTERN AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Abdurrokhmon Boydadaev,
Independent Researcher of the National University of
Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek
E-mail: a.boidadaev@yandex.com

Abstract

This article explores the concept of the irrational in contemporary philosophy through a comparative analysis of Eastern and Western traditions. While Western thought often frames the irrational in terms of rupture, limit, or existential crisis - whether through the unconscious, anxiety, or the absurd - Eastern traditions regard it as a pathway to higher knowledge, spiritual insight, and harmony. The study draws on recent scholarship to show how categories such as intuition, emptiness, spontaneity, and unveiling function as epistemic resources in Indian, Buddhist, Daoist, and Sufi contexts. In contrast, Western debates emphasize symbolic structures, affective experiences, and the fragility of rational control. By juxtaposing these perspectives, the article demonstrates that irrationality is not merely the negation of reason but a constitutive aspect of human existence. The comparative approach highlights both divergences and convergences, suggesting that intercultural dialogue offers new possibilities for philosophy of mind, ethics, and the understanding of human subjectivity in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Irrationality, reason, intuition, unconscious, absurd, mysticism, intercultural dialogue.

Introduction

The problem of the irrational has remained one of the most contested and ambiguous categories in the history of philosophy. Whereas antiquity and especially modern European philosophy emphasized reason and sought to



interpret reality through universal categories of rationality, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the focus has shifted. Philosophers increasingly turn to forms of experience that cannot be reduced to rational discourse: intuition, mystical insight, unconscious impulses, or the categories of paradox and absurdity. Eastern and Western traditions approach this topic differently. The Western view often interprets the irrational as a challenge or limit to reason, while the Eastern perspective sees it as a pathway to higher or transcendental knowledge.

Literature Review and Methodology

The present study employs a comparative philosophical method, which seeks to bring Eastern and Western traditions into a productive dialogue rather than treating them as isolated systems. Following the approach of cross-cultural philosophy, the analysis does not aim at simple juxtaposition but instead at identifying structural analogies and differences in the way irrationality is conceptualized. As Gupta stresses, comparative philosophy requires careful contextualization: concepts must be understood within their own intellectual traditions before being set in relation [1, pp. 18-20].

Scholarship on irrationality in philosophy since 2000 reflects an increasing interest in cross-cultural perspectives. In Western thought, the irrational is often revisited through the legacies of Freud, Heidegger, and Camus, yet contemporary authors emphasize new contexts. Critchley interprets the absurd as an enduring category that shapes the ethical dimension of modern existence [2, pp. 51-55]. Lear expands this discussion by examining how irrational desire informs ethical life in situations of cultural crisis [3, pp. 14-17]. Similarly, Carlson re-reads Heidegger's analysis of anxiety as a way of disclosing the fragility of rational self-understanding [4, pp. 112-115].

Results and Discussion

In contemporary Western philosophy, the notion of the irrational continues to attract significant attention, particularly in the fields of philosophy of mind, existential studies, and postmodern thought. One of the central debates concerns the relationship between the irrational and the unconscious. Ricoeur emphasizes



that the unconscious cannot be reduced merely to pathology; rather, it embodies symbolic structures that carry meaning beyond rational articulation [5, pp. 72-76]. In existential and postmodern traditions, the irrational is often associated with the limits of rational explanation. Critchley highlights the category of the “absurd” in Camus and argues that it retains relevance for modern philosophy as a way of naming the mismatch between human longing for meaning and the indifference of the world [2, pp. 51-55]. Similarly, Lear underlines the importance of Kierkegaard’s and Freud’s insights into irrational desire [3, pp. 14-17]. Another strand of discussion links irrationality to the phenomenology of affect and embodiment. Carlson interprets Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety not as a purely existential category but as a mode of revealing the limits of rational control in human life [4, pp. 112-115]. Contemporary cognitive philosophy also contributes to this debate. Gallagher and Zahavi note that irrational experiences, such as moods, bodily affects, or spontaneous impulses, form part of the pre-reflective structures of consciousness [6, pp. 86-90]. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that in Western thought after 2000 the irrational is no longer treated merely as the negation of reason. Instead, it is recognized as a constitutive dimension of human existence.

In contemporary scholarship, Eastern philosophy has often been interpreted as offering a positive revaluation of the irrational. Within Indian thought, Garfield stresses that the irrational in Madhyamaka is not an abandonment of reason but a recognition that reason itself points toward its own limits [7, pp. 183-186]. Similarly, Gupta argues that Advaita Vedānta identifies intuition (aparokṣānubhūti) as a direct experience of the self [1, pp. 212-215]. In Chinese traditions, Daoist philosophy highlights the ineffability of the Dao. Ames and Hall note that spontaneity (ziran) embodies a creative irrationality, presenting an alternative to Western notions of rational autonomy [8, pp. 37-40]. Islamic philosophy and mysticism also contribute. Chittick observes that Sufi writers such as Rumi and Ibn ‘Arabi describe knowledge of God as an unveiling (kashf), accessible not through discursive proof but through inner transformation [9, pp. 67-70]. Modern interpretations of Eastern traditions converge on a common point: irrationality does not negate rational inquiry but supplements and transcends it. When viewed side by side, the contemporary Western and Eastern



approaches to the irrational reveal both sharp contrasts and intriguing convergences. Katz emphasizes that mystical traditions in Asia and Europe both deal with ineffable experiences, yet while the West frames them in terms of paradox or limit, the East frames them as positive modes of knowing [10, pp. 56-59]. Anthropologically, Western accounts of the irrational are tied to experiences of rupture – unconscious drives [5, pp. 72-76], existential dread [4, pp. 112-115], or the absurd [2, pp. 51-55]. Eastern traditions, by contrast, describe the irrational as harmonizing rather than fragmenting [7, pp. 183-186]. Ethically, the divergence is significant. In Western thought, the irrational often becomes the ground for freedom and responsibility [3, pp. 14-17]. In Eastern traditions, however, it is associated with liberation and moral transformation [1, pp. 212-215; 9, pp. 67-70]. Bitbol argues that irrationality must be seen not as the negation of reason but as its complement [11, pp. 325-328]. This suggests that intercultural dialogue can help reframe irrationality as a constitutive element of human thought and culture [12, p. 88].

Conclusion

The comparative study of irrational concepts in contemporary Eastern and Western philosophy demonstrates that irrationality should not be treated as the mere antithesis of reason. Instead, it emerges as a constitutive dimension of human thought and experience. In Western contexts, irrationality is often linked to crisis, rupture, or the exposure of limits - whether through the unconscious, or existential anxiety. These perspectives emphasize that rational systems cannot fully account for the complexity of human subjectivity. Eastern traditions, by contrast, interpret irrationality as a higher or complementary form of cognition. Intuition in Advaita Vedānta, the Buddhist notion of *prajñā*, Daoist spontaneity, and Sufi unveiling (*kashf*) all reveal irrationality as a pathway to transcendence, harmony, and liberation. Rather than undermining rational inquiry, these approaches affirm its insufficiency and point toward a more holistic vision of knowledge.

Recent cross-cultural philosophy suggests that integrating these perspectives can enrich our understanding of both rational and irrational dimensions of human life. Michel Bitbol has argued that Buddhist thought, for example, helps cognitive



science reconsider the boundaries between rational cognition and non-discursive awareness. Such interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogues highlight that irrationality is not an obstacle to philosophy but an indispensable resource for ethics, anthropology, and the philosophy of mind in the twenty-first century.

Thus, the central insight of this comparative analysis is that irrationality must be seen not as a negation of reason but as its necessary counterpart. While Western philosophy stresses its disruptive and conflictual dimensions, Eastern traditions emphasize its transformative and integrative potential. Taken together, they point toward a richer, more nuanced conception of human existence - one that acknowledges the indispensable interplay between rational clarity and irrational depth.

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