A. C. Mukerji (1888-1968)

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Mukerji's Context

Anukul Chandra Mukerji (1888-1968) was born in Murshidabad in West Bengal. He studied philosophy, earning his BA and MA at Central Hindu College (now Benares Hindu University) in Varanasi, where he was a student of the prominent philosophers Bhagavan Das and PB Adhikari. Mukerji's entire professional career was spent at the University of Allahabad. After the retirement of Prof RD Ranade, he was appointed Professor of Philosophy and Head of the Department. Mukerji was renowned during his lifetime and was offered, but declined, the King George V Professorship at the University of Calcutta. He retired in 1954. Mukerji was awarded the Padma Bhushan (one of India's highest civilian honors) in 1964 in recognition of his contributions to Indian philosophy.

A.C. Mukerji worked in pre-independence India, a period of the revival of Vedānta in conversation with Western philosophy, and in particular, Western idealism. Although Mukerji wrote in English, he was comfortable in Sanskrit and in the classical literature of India, as well as in the literature of Western philosophy. (Bhushan and Garfield 2008/2009, 2009/2010) Mukerji's own work moves easily between these traditions in the service of philosophical ideas. A. C. Mukerji's taught and published much of his work at Allahabad University. His principal teachers were the eminent scholar of neo-Hegelianism, Hiralal Haldar of Calcutta and the Vedānta scholar Bhagavan Das.

A. C. Mukerji's Philosophical Program

Mukerji was preoccupied with the history of philosophy. In the West his work focuses on the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, each of whom he read in German. But his attention to Kant is very much informed by a rich reading of Hume, as well as by Seth Pringle-Pattison. His reading of Hegel reflects his immersion in the British neo-Hegelian tradition. Mukerji had a particular interest in the work of Bradley, Caird, Green, and Bosanquet. Green's joining of Hegelian idealism to scientific realism was a powerful influence on Mukerji.

Mukerji approached Indian idealism through the Advaita Vedānta school. He focused there on the work of Śaṅkara and Yajñavalkya as well as Rāmānuja Vācaspati, and Prabhākara. He also attended to Buddhist idealism, particularly that of Dignāga, Vasubandhu, and Uddyotakara, and to its Buddhist Mādhyamika interlocutors, such as Nāgārjuna and his commentator Candrakīrti and Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika figures such as Kaṇāda and Praśastapāda.

Mukerji was a specialist in the philosophy of mind and psychology. He was a committed naturalist, in that he saw the deliverances of empirical psychology as foundational to an understanding of the mind. Nonetheless, he was convinced that psychologism was in the end insufficient as an understanding of subjectivity and required supplementation by a transcendental philosophy of the pure subject. He turned to Hegel, Caird, and Śaṅkara as inspirations for his own synthetic view.

Mukerji explicitly rejected comparativism as a method, in contrast both with Radhakrishnan and with his younger contemporary P. T. Raju, each of whom followed Seal in taking this to be the best avenue for advancing Indian philosophy. Mukerji instead insisted simply on *doing* philosophy, and doing it using all available resources. He never distinguished between Indian and Western sources in a

systematic fashion. In short, he was more a cross-cultural than a comparative philosopher. Finally, we should note that Mukerji was a perennialist in spirit: he was confident that a common cluster of philosophical problems and first principles turns up in each tradition.

Mukerji wrote two substantial monographs: *Self, Thought and Reality* (1933) and *The Nature of Self* (1938). Each of these develops themes first articulated in a series of journal articles published in *Allahabad University Studies.* These two books can be read as a single two-volume study exploring and defending a naturalistic, Vedānta-inflected transcendental idealism as an account of the nature of subjectivity and of the relation of mind to the world. In each book, Mukerji is concerned to emphasize the rational intelligibility of the world and the foundation role that consciousness and self-knowledge play in the edifice of knowledge more generally.

The first volume is more explicitly historical in character—a critical history of early modern Western philosophy focusing largely on Hume's realism, Kant's response to Hume, and a neo-Hegelian extension of the Kantian program, concluding with a discussion of Śaṅkara's idealism as an alternative to Kant's. Throughout, Mukerji is in constant dialogue with Edward Caird, James Ward, and especially T. H. Green. The second volume picks up where the first left off, with a discussion of Śaṅkara and Kant, but is much less historical in structure. In this volume, while remaining firmly in conversation with the history of philosophy—this time both Indian and Western—Mukerji focuses directly on developing an understanding of the nature of the self and of the nature of self-knowledge.

Both books are animated by a single puzzle that preoccupies Mukerji: given that it is (1) *manifest* that we do know ourselves; (2) *necessary* that we do so in order for any other knowledge to count as knowledge; but (3) clear that we don't know

ourselves as *objects*, in what sense and how does self-knowledge arise and count as knowledge? Mukerji sees the conundrum posed by this apparently inconsistent triad as the central problem of modern epistemology, and as central both to the Western and the Indian problematic, and only soluble by bringing the two traditions to bear on the problem. *Self, Thought and Reality* begins with the epistemology of the world of objects and the relation between knower and known; *The Nature of Self* uses this platform to launch the investigation of knowledge of the subject itself.

Self, Thought and Reality is organized around three concerns. The first is the relation between idealism and realism: Mukerji is concerned to show that they are not in fact rivals, but rather complementary aspects of any plausible philosophical position. Second, Mukerji is interested in the relationship between correspondence theories and coherence theories of truth and knowledge, once again, concerned to show that the dichotomy is false. Finally, he is concerned with the relation between metaphysics and science. These three concerns frame his inquiry into the possibility of knowledge of the inner.

Mukerji introduces the modern problematic concerning knowledge through a reading of Kant's response to Hume not as a critique of *empiricism*, per se, but of a *particular type* of *realism*. He sees Kant as taking aim at two theses advanced by Hume: first, that plurality is ontologically prior to unity; second, that the mind is one object among many that can be studied using the same scientific techniques that disclose the natural world.

Mukerji sees the foundation of Hume's realism in his commitment to a reductionist program—one he takes to ground the positivism and empiricism fashionable in his own time. He then reads Kant as rejecting that reductionism in

favor of a view of entities as constituted as unities in virtue of the synthetic operation of consciousness. Here is how he puts the point:

> Our aim, therefore, is to show, in how imperfect a form, that Kant's answer to Hume has thoroughly undermined the only basis upon which all forms of realism must ultimately stand, and consequently the realistic and empirical philosophies of our time, in spite of what value they may possess for students of philosophy, do not represent a real development of thought. If we attempt a brief formulation of the underlying principle of empiricism it will be found to consist in the assumption that the "unconnected manifold" have a superior reality in comparison to their unity. (1933, 20)

Mukerji, takes it that Hume argues that real entities exist prior to the relations in which they stand and that they exist independent of those relations. Kant, on his view, sees that things exist only in relation to consciousness; but Bradley completes this ascent, on Mukerji's view, by arguing that the identity of any thing is constituted by its relations to everything else, and hence that relations are essential, or internal not mere accidents. Mukerji hence lines up the distinction between Kantian idealism and Humean realism with the neo-Hegelian distinction between holism and atomism.

Mukerji takes the second issue between Hume and Kant as a debate concerning the ontological role of mind itself. To the question, "does the mind have a special ontological status?" Hume, argues Mukerji, answers "no." Kant answers "yes." That is, Hume adopts a psychologistic approach to epistemology, while Kant adopts a normative, transcendental approach. Mukerji defends Kant here, arguing that to be an empirically real object is to be an object for a subject, and that is to be an

object whose unity is the consequence of the synthesis of the manifold of sense by the operations of the understanding

Mukerji forcefully rejects subjective idealism, which he takes to be an inevitable consequence of psychologism, and which he associates with Berkeley (and certain Vedānta thinkers such as Śrīharṣa, as well as Buddhist idealists such as Dignāga and Vasubandhu). Instead, he argues that when each is properly understood, the apparent duality between idealism and realism is chimerical: idealism, he argues, presents an answer to the question, "what is it to be real?" and realism is guaranteed by the fact that although objects exist for us only as they are represented, their existence and character is independent of any particular thought or thinker. On Mukerji's view, things exist independently of us—the core of realism—but our knowledge of them is dependent on the structure of thought, and so they exist *for us* only subject to the conditions of thought—the core of idealism.

> The first thing which we should make clear in the beginning is that idealism, as we understand it, does not take away in the least the reality of anything which is considered as real by common sense of science. Far from subtracting anything from the common things of the world, idealism adds to the reality of the things, insofar as it alone makes it clear that things have far other aspects of their life than those which are revealed to commonsense or to science. (1933, 47)

This synthesis of idealism and realism provides the basis for Mukerji's second synthesis—that of correspondence and coherence. A pure correspondence theory of thought and truth would hold that the mind and the world are entirely independent of one another and that our ideas can be examined to determine the degree to which they

correspond in some way to be specified with an independently examined world. As Mukerji points out, Berkeley puts paid to this naïve idea.

The idea that correspondence is the *content* of truth, he says, Mukerji argues, makes good sense, but to take it as a *test* for truth does not. That is, Mukerji argues, it is internal to the very idea of the truth of a thought or a sentence that it represents the world correctly. The problem arises when we also take correspondence to provide a *criterion* of that correctness, requiring the impossible independent access to the representation and to the represented. Instead, he argues, a coherence theory, while it makes no *constitutive* sense of truth, provides the best possible criterion that we can use in the *evaluation* the truth of sentences or of thoughts. We can never escape the web of coherence criterially; but this does not mean that we do not discover the world, and that our criteria are not criteria for accurate correspondence.

The resolution of the dichotomies between realism and idealism and between correspondence and coherence take us to Mukerji's resolution of a third apparent duality: that between metaphysics and science. He argues that these two cognitive enterprises stand in need of one another. On his view, transcendental idealism ensures that the world is a systematic unity; its dependence as object on the mind ensures that it is intelligible. Thus, even empirical science has an a priori basis: science itself and its methodology, he argues, depend upon our conception of what constitutes explanation, and on our transcendental demand that all phenomena can be subsumed by explanation. No metaphysics or epistemology: no science. No science: no confidence in the reality of any objects of knowledge. Even the quantum theory and the uncertainty principle, Mukerji argues, presuppose transcendental conditions on explanation, the notion of truth, of knowledge, and of entities in interaction with one another. So, while scientific revolutions might alter the details of our metaphysical

picture, they still presuppose a metaphysics and an epistemology that render the science itself intelligible.

All of this scientific realism notwithstanding, Mukerji argues that these resolutions of idealism and realism, of correspondence and coherence, and of metaphysics and science together entail that the self cannot be conceived of as a thing among things, or as a substance with attributes, even cognitive attributes. Instead, he argues, the self is that to which all things or substances are related, that in relation to which they can be real, and by which they can be known. Its special place in the world is what grounds the normativity of knowledge and of the scientific enterprise in the first place. He concludes, drawing on Śaṅkara, that the very demand for rational understanding that takes one this far is the demand that self-knowledge be rationally comprehensible.

The Nature of Self

In the five years between the publication of these two volumes Mukerji thought hard about philosophical method, and in particular about philosophical method in colonial India. In the preface to *The Nature of Self,* Mukerji dismisses comparative philosophy:

> Comparative philosophy has so far been either predominantly historical and descriptive, or it has contented itself with discovering stray similarities between the Western and Indian thought. No serious attempt, as far as I know, has yet been made to undertake a comparative study for mutual supplementation of arguments and consequent clarification of issues. Yet, this alone can suggest the paths to new constructions and thus help the development of philosophical thought. (1938, v-vi)

The historical approach of *Self, Thought and Reality* is replaced here with a cross-cultural problem-based approach. The volume begins with a consideration of what Mukerji calls "the egocentric paradox" and ends with a critical reading of Śaṅkara and Hegel on the nature of self-knowledge. *The Nature of Self* is preoccupied with a series of ways of understanding the threat posed by skepticism. Mukerji takes it to be a necessary truth that we have knowledge and takes it that since all knowledge is grounded in appearances to the self, is mediated by the mind, and is structured by our cognitive faculties, all knowledge presupposes self-knowledge. Mukerji's project in this book is to demonstrate that and how self-knowledge is possible, and how every response to skepticism about self-knowledge can be met.

Mukerji frames the book in terms of what he calls "the egocentric paradox." He formulates the paradox in terms of another apparently inconsistent triad: On the one hand, the self must be known, and indeed must be known better and more intimately than any object. On the other hand, for anything to be known, it must be an object, and so not a subject. But, the self is that which is always subject and never object. It hence appears that while self-knowledge is the necessary condition of all knowledge, it itself is impossible.

The first approach to resolving this trilemma, already considered and rejected in the first book, is to reject the third claim, through psychologism. On this view, the self is placed on the object side of the divide. While this makes empirical psychology possible, it can never reveal or generate any understanding of the subject, and so remains a failure.

The second approach is that of Caird—the theory of so-called mediated self-consciousness—and rejects the second thesis of the trilemma. On this view, we know the subject in virtue of a thorough analysis of the object, and a transcendental inquiry

into the nature of a subject that can construct such an object. Mukerji objects that this falls prey to another form of skepticism. For given the co-relativity of subject and object, it is impossible to completely know the object without also knowing the subject. This project hence cannot get off the ground.

Mukerji argues that any model that distinguishes the self as knower from the self as known opens an unacceptable skeptical gap. He is led then to an articulation of Śaṅkara's idea of *svaprakāśa*, combines it with ideas drawn from Hegel, Bradley, and Green, and develops a highly original synthesis as an account of self-knowledge. Mukerji interprets *svaprakāśa* as a kind of immediate self-knowledge in which there is no distinction between subject and object. He is concerned to argue that there is nothing *mystical*, *irrational*, or even essentially *Indian* about this notion, pointing out that versions of it are adopted by Green, Caird, Haldane, and others in the Western tradition. He is also concerned to show that while there are good arguments for this view, it is not simply *obvious*, and that there may be reasons to doubt it. Moreover, he argues, if it is known to be true, that cannot be by means of introspection, but only through philosophical argument. For introspection can tell us nothing about the self as subject.

From Bradley, Mukerji takes the notion of immediate experience as the key to understanding *svaprakāśa* in a cogent way. Bradley argues in *Appearance and Reality* that any mediated knowledge of the world, or of the self, requires immediate experience of subjectivity as its condition. For all other knowledge must be constructed from this immediate foundation by inference from cause to effect. (1938, 321) Our objects, on this view are given to us as a causal consequence of this immediate experience, but it itself is not an object and is neither conceptualizable nor describable. We hence know this self, but we cannot express it.

While Mukerji argues that this absolute self is pure subjectivity, he hence argues as well that it is not a Kantian transcendental existence, but rather is entirely immanent. But unlike Śaṅkara, Mukerji does not take the absolute reality of the self as subject to undermine the reality of its objects. Mukerji argues that Śaṅkara's own position opens up one more skeptical abyss by denying the reality of the object that must be correlative with the subject. Mukerji's own position is simply that subjectivity is immediately self-revealing not in introspection, but rather in the pre-reflective awareness of the fact that one is the subject of one's experience. It is the impossibility of denying this fact and the distinctive awareness of it that preclude skepticism about the self, and hence skepticism in general; but it can never be reduced to any other kind of knowledge. He concludes as follows:

> The Self is not a category at all, and, consequently, it cannot be said to be even a system or a relational whole or, again, a unity-in-difference. On the contrary, it is the ultimate, non-relational, Consciousness, which is necessarily distinctionless, unobjectifiable, and immediate. (1938, 338-339)

We see in this volume Mukerji' positive vision, articulated in dialogue both with the history of his discipline—Indian and Western— and with his contemporaries, both in philosophy and in science. Despite the fact that he was educated and taught only in India, he displayed a remarkably cosmopolitan sensibility;, despite being educated in British-administered universities, he never lost contact with the Indian philosophical tradition; and, despite a colonial context, neither succumbed to the temptation to disparage European learning nor to that of imitating a parochial European sensibility.

Conclusion

Despite the impressive scholarship and masterful argument evident in Mukerji's books, the fact that they were published in India guaranteed their international obscurity, and with the exception of a single review of each, a short book note, they were hardly noticed in the West. In addition to these books and the articles that foreshadowed them, Mukerji published other important articles in epistemology, the history of philosophy, and the philosophy of mind, again, all locally. In one of these, "Puzzles of Self Consciousness," Mukerji distinguishes a number of senses of consciousness, such as phenomenal consciousness, creature consciousness, and introspective consciousness, anticipating contemporary debates with startling prescience.

Mukerji served for many years as head of the Philosophy Department at Allahabad and also served a stint as Dean of Arts. Mukerji was twice elected president of the Indian Philosophical Congress. We conclude with the opening words of his final presidential address in 1950:

> I would like to avail myself of this opportunity to give expression to my genuine admiration and appreciation for the work my colleagues in the Indian colleges and universities have succeeded in doing in the sphere of philosophy notwithstanding a hundred handicaps and formidable difficulties. I am fully aware of the general attitude of scorn and contempt, of distrust and discouragement, that has brought discredit upon the contemporary Indian thinkers from within and outside India; but I shall not enquire into the nature and cause of the circumstances responsible for this growing volume of suspicion. Of one thing, however, I am pretty sure and it is this that the adverse critics have neither the inclination nor the courtesy of spending on the

> Indian attempts a hundredth part of the time and attention they devote to the study of the currents of foreign thought. Philosophical convictions grow through the spirit of cooperation and helpful mutual criticism; it is positively unfair to refuse cooperation and yet wail over languishment. I for one do believe that the philosophers of contemporary India have already given sufficiently convincing evidence of the virility and strength of Indian thought which, given favourable atmosphere, would gradually develop into world views of far-reaching consequences whose value in the context of world philosophy would not be negligible. (1994, 181-182)

Recent work on the philosophy of the colonial period in India is testament to the value of the contributions of AC Mukerji and his university colleagues to "world philosophy".

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