INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF SKEPTICISM
12 (2022) 90–100
BRILL
brill.com/skep

A. C. Mukerji on the Problem of Skepticism and Its Resolution in Neo-Vedānta

Jay L. Garfield
Department of Philosophy, Smith College, Northampton, MA, USA
jgarfield@smith.edu

Abstract

This paper examines the work of the unsung modern Indian Philosopher A. C. Mukerji, in his major works *Self, Thought and Reality* (1933) and *The Nature of Self* (1938). Mukerji constructs a skeptical challenge that emerges from the union of ideas drawn from early modern Europe, neo-Hegelian philosophy, and classical Buddhism and Vedānta. Mukerji's worries about skepticism are important in part because they illustrate many of the creative tensions within the modern, synthetic period of Indian philosophy, and in part because they are truly profound, anticipating in interesting ways the worries that Feyerabend was to raise a few decades later. Arguing that Humean, Kantian, neo-Hegelian, and Buddhist philosophy each fail to provide an adequate account of self-knowledge, Mukerji leverages this finding to further argue that these systems fail to offer a proper account of knowledge more generally. His solution to skepticism centers on a distinctively modern interpretation of Śaṅkara's Vedānta.

Keywords

A. C. Mukerji – neo-Vedānta – Vedānta – neo-Hegelianism – Indian renaissance – Śaṅkara

1 Anukul Chandra Mukjerji

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 P. B. Adhikari. Mukerji's

 | DOI:10.1163/22105700-BJA10031

entire professional career was spent at the University of Allahabad. After the retirement of Prof. R. D. 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.

Mukerji was among the most influential philosophers in India during his life, and served several times as President of the Indian Philosophical Congress. It is a pity that he is so little known at present, as his philosophical oeuvre is extraordinarily rich in historical and philosophical insight. Mukerji was an exceptional scholar of the history of Western and Indian philosophy. On the Western side, he was particular interested in early modern European philosophy, the philosophy of Kant and British neo-Hegelianism, as well as early 20th Century critical realism. On the Indian side, he studied Advaita Vedānta, Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, and Yogācāra Buddhist philosophy. He was particularly interested in the relationship between idealism and realism, and the nature of self and subjectivity.

Mukerji's two monographs *Self, Thought and Reality* (1933) and *The Nature of Self* (1938) are together animated by an attempt to understand self-knowledge. Among the issues that motivate this investigation is a skeptical problem that Mukerji frames from the standpoint of neo-Vedānta thought—that stream of philosophical reflection that arises in India during the period of the 19th–20th century Indian renaissance through the interaction of Vedānta and neo-Hegelianism. The revived interest in Vedānta was largely inspired by the Ramakrishna movement in the person of Swami Vivekananda and the Līlāvāda interpretation of Advaita developed by Aurobindo Ghosh. British neo-Hegelianism arrived through the teaching of Scottish missionaries and through the work of Indian scholars who studied in Cambridge as well as through the encyclopedic exposition of Hiralal Haldar (1927). The confluence of these two streams of realistic idealism in the hands of those who had studied both generated the sophisticated, cosmopolitan neo-Vedānta that dominated much of Indian philosophical thought in the first half of the 20th century (Bhushan & Garfield 2017a). Mukerji's own work was central to this synthesis.

Mukerji constructs and responds to a skeptical challenge that emerges from the union of ideas drawn from early modern Europe, neo-Hegelian philosophy and from classical Buddhist and Vedānta philosophy. He sees the inability of Humean, Kantian, neo-Hegelian, or Buddhist philosophy to provide an adequate account of self-knowledge to entail that these systems can make no sense of knowledge more generally, and argues that only a particular,

distinctively modern interpretation of Śaṅkara's Vedānta can resolve this problem. This is a different skeptical problem from that we see raised in Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism in Greece; it is different from Humean and Cartesian skepticism; and it is different from the skeptical problems raised by Madhyamaka Buddhists. Mukerji's worries about skepticism are important in part because they arise in the context of this synthetic period of Indian philosophy, and in part because they are truly profound, anticipating in interesting ways worries that Feyerabend (1981) was to raise a few decades later in the philosophy of science.

Mukerji's formulation and attack on skepticism owes a great deal both to classical Indian and to modern and more recent Western philosophy. Some might think it odd to address the work of somebody whose own thought is so inflected by Western philosophical ideas and arguments in the context of Indian skepticism. That would be wrong: Mukerji was Indian. He was educated in and taught in India, and indeed never left India. And India is no more hermetically sealed from global philosophical currents than is the United States or Europe; it has been in constant conversation with other cultures and philosophical traditions for centuries. There is hence nothing new about the fact that Mukerji as an Indian philosopher is thinking cross-culturally. That kind of cosmopolitan philosophical consciousness is as authentically Indian as is anything in any orthodox Indian tradition, and the interaction between Indian and European philosophy in the period of the Indian renaissance was especially fecund (see Bhushan & Garfield 2017a).

2 The Skeptical Problem and the Egocentric Predicament

Mukerji introduces his skeptical worries in the context of a discussion of TH Green's version of neo-Hegelian thought. He points out that on Green's view, the reality of the external world must be taken for granted if we are to make sense of truth and objectivity, and hence of knowledge, but we must also grant that we know that external world only through the mediation of our own cognitive processes. Mukerji puts the point this way:

> There is a real world of things which we do not create but discover through experience. This experience, however, does not exist while we passively receive the sense-data. It implies the interpreting function of thought through which that which would otherwise be a mere play of unrecognisable throng of sense-data on our animal sentience received articulation, and in this sense thought is the real revealer of the world to us. (1933: 108)

This essentially Kantian idea—that the world we experience is real and exists independent of us, but that we can have no *immediate* access to it, knowing it only through the mediation of our sensory and cognitive processes—Mukerji argues, opens up a problem about *truth.* In particular, he argues, the most obvious account of truth—the correspondence theory—makes no sense. In a discussion of Joachim's critique of Kant, and with reference to Berkeley's critique of representationalism, Mukerji writes:

> [Joachim] justly urges that the independent truth remains as good as nothing for us till it exists in our experience, and interpreted in terms of our knowledge… Hence it is futile to defend the correspondence theory which must in some form or other appeal to the facts outside experience for the perception of the correspondence. In fact, the main arguments of the idealists have always been directed against this false theory of correspondence that implies a reference to what is supposed to be external to experience… and which therefore, as Mr. Joachim puts it, "may be anything you please"; for, as it is supposed to be beyond all possibility of experience "it remains beyond all and any knowledge, and is a mere name for nothing." (1933: 120–122)

It is worth remarking that at this point in the dialectic, Mukerji follows neither Sextus Empiricus nor Descartes in his inference from the essential role of the subject to a skeptical conclusion. That is, he is not recapitulating the argument that since there is no valid inference from the nature of our immediately known first-person experience to claims about the external world, that all we can know is our internal experience; instead, he is arguing that without independent access to two things—our experience and that which we experience—the correspondence theory of truth makes no sense.

This is more radical because it applies to the inner world as well as the outer. Correspondence only makes sense when there are two independently accessible entities between which there is a correspondence. So, the first consequence of egocentricity, argues Mukerji, is the incoherence of the correspondence theory of truth in any domain. But without truth there is no knowledge, and so, unless truth can be reconstructed, knowledge is impossible. Mukerji sums this up as follows:

> [T]he real defect of the correspondence theory consists in not the *definition* but the *test* that it claims to offer of a true judgment. It is futile… to attempt to know whether our knowledge at a particular stage is true or not by reference to things outside of knowledge. (1933: 127)

Mukerji ends up defending coherence as providing a better *test* for truth. But this by itself doesn't dissolve, but rather specifies the peculiar skeptical problem arising from the egocentric predicament. For even if coherence is the only *test* for truth, that for which it tests is *correspondence* in some sense. To be true is to be true to the world, and so we need some sense of the relation between the world and the subject in order to understand the very notion of truth that is essential to knowledge. But more than that, if we are to make sense of the notion of correspondence at all, we need a way to know both subject and object. And it is the former that poses the problem: how can the knower be known? If it cannot be known, and if our subjectivity is the only instrument through which objects can be accessed, we can have know knowledge at all. If we do not know whether we are looking through a telescope or a kaleidoscope, no matter what we see, we know nothing in virtue of seeing it.

3 Early Modern Western Roots and Neo-Hegelian Branches

Mukerji begins his articulation of the problem of the knowledge of the subject with attention to Hume and Kant, but also to the critiques of the Kantian system developed by Maimon (2010) and Joachim (1919). Hume, Mukerji argues, poses the problem in the West. By arguing that we do not have so much as the idea of a subject of experience, in virtue of having no impressions of subjectivity, Mukerji argues, Hume demonstrates that there can be no empiricist account whatsoever of the self, and so, on empiricist epistemic grounds, no knowledge of the self. If that is so, then even if we were to claim knowledge of our impressions, including our impressions of reflection, we could never know that any of them were true to anything; that any of them were more than mere meaningless sensations.

This might seem bad enough, but it gets worse, for, as Kant saw, and, as we saw Mukerji arguing above, without anything external to our impressions against which they can be compared, there can be no standard of correctness for impressions, including no standard of correctness for impressions of reflection! Without standards of correctness, nothing counts as true or false; nothing we can say about our inner life can count as knowledge about ourselves. There is simply nothing to which any impression can relate in virtue of which it could yield knowledge.

Kant, Mukerji argues, attempts to solve this problem by arguing that the empirical spatio-temporal manifold and all of the objects it contains are objectively real, with determinate structural properties known *a priori* and intersubjectively available empirical properties. Kant's insistence on the

empirical reality of the external world, Mukerji points out, is meant to provide the standard against which an individual's perceptions can be tested, and so a standard of truth and falsity.

But it is not as clear that this can provide a solution to the problem of empirical self-knowledge. If intersubjectivity is to guarantee that our impressions of outer sense are truth-evaluable in virtue of corresponding or failing to correspond to an intersubjective spatio-temporal manifold, it is not clear that there is a route to a corresponding vindication of inner sense, which would still render empirical self-knowledge mysterious.

Even if we thought that we could solve the problem of empirical self-knowledge, however, there is a greater difficulty, and this is the one that Mukerji sees as the crux of the skeptical problem as set by modern Western epistemology. This problem arises, Mukerji argues, from the fact that the subject of all knowledge, the site of synthesis, is not the empirical ego, but the transcendental ego. And even if we could make sense of the possibility of genuine empirical knowledge of the empirical ego, the transcendental ego lies, on Kant's view, outside of the spatio-temporal manifold, and so outside of all intuition, and even outside of the scope of the legitimate use of the categories, and so is something regarding which no judgments—whether true or false—can be made.

For this reason, Mukerji argues, Kant rescues the possibility of empirical objectivity regarding the spatio-temporal manifold at the expense of locating the knowing subject outside of the bounds of any knowledge. Indeed, Mukerji correctly notes (1933: 296–299) that Kant argues in the *Transcendental Dialectic* that the source of transcendental illusion—the illusion that we can know anything at all about things in themselves—and in particular in this instance the noumenal self—is the confusion of the noumenal with the empirical self and the illegitimate extension of judgments regarding the empirical self to the noumenal.

And by doing so, Mukerji argues, Kant himself, despite his heroic attempt to escape it, confirms the egocentric predicament that is the natural consequence of either the psychological attitude of Locke and Hume or the epistemological attitude of Kant towards the self: inasmuch as the self is unknowable, and is the very instrument by means of which knowledge is possible, the credentials of knowledge are impossible to vindicate. We can never know whether the synthesizing subject is an accurate instrument or the source of constant illusion, and so the skeptical problem that originates from the impossibility of making the subject at the same time an object of knowledge remains in place.

4 Advaita Vedānta Formulation and Śaṅkara's Proposed Solution

In the final chapter of *Self, Thought and Reality,* Mukerji returns to this problem in the context of Advaita Vedānta. He opens the chapter as follows:

> We cannot close the exposition of Śaṅkara's views on the nature of the self… without raising her a rather difficult question following from the centrality of the self. As all objects exist for the subject, as the subject is the centre to which all objects point, every theory that confuses the subject with the object must commit what may be called the fallacy of decentralisation of the ego. Now, the question that arises is: How can the subject for which exists every object itself be known? (1933: 365)

Mukerji frankly acknowledges that while this is the problem that animates Śaṅkara's Vedānta, Śaṅkara fails to solve it within the domain of reason. Faced with the same dilemma on which Kant is impaled, Śaṅkara, he avers, resorts to the distinction between the *vyāvahārika* (mundane) and the *pāramārthika* (transcendental) viewpoints, claiming that self-knowledge, while possible, occurs only in the domain of *pāramārtha-sātya,* and transcends all reason, which is restricted to the mundane domain. So, on this view, the skeptical problem posed at the mundane level is answered at the transcendental level. When we ascend to that level, we can know the self as a self-luminous source of knowledge (1933: 385–386).

Mukerji is not satisfied with this attempted resolution, which be describes, properly, as "mystical" and which he compares to the view of Plotinus. The problem is plain: the radical disjunction between conventional and ultimate reality on this account, and the inaccessibility of the ultimate to reason, mean that whatever the awakened mystic is meant to know at the ultimate level that vindicates faith in the epistemic credentials of the knowing subject cannot be used at the mundane level to effect that vindication. So, nobody already worried about the skeptical problem can gain solace from the knowledge of a sage, which cannot even be articulated. Moreover, he points out, in virtue of the mystical character of this transcendental intuition, it gives no positive knowledge of the nature of the self in any case.

Mukerji considers a neo-Vedānta alternative to the classical position proposed by RD Ranade in his *Survey of Upaniṣadic Philosophy* (Ranade 1926). On this view, the difficulty posed for this solution to the skeptical paradox by the disjunction of the ultimate and the mundane perspectives is resolved by the nondualism of Advaita Vedānta. That is, given the nondual relation between the two levels of reality in the Advaita framework, Ranade argues (1926: 215 ff.)

whatever is true at the *pāramārthika* level is also true at the *vyāvahārika* level, and so the self-knowledge we gain in transcendental insight is knowledge of the finite, mundane self, albeit in its guise as pure subjectivity.

But whatever the religious credentials of this reply, Mukerji suggest at the close of *Self, Thought and Reality,* it can provide no rational response to the problem of which it is meant to be a solution. For even on Ranade's irenic reading, we have a problem posed by reason, and a solution that works only to the degree that we accept the epistemic credentials of a standpoint from which reason is allegedly transcended. In the first part of *The Nature of Self,* Mukerji writes:

> Thus, the real problem of self-consciousness of self-knowledge remains unsolved to the present day. The inductive or psychological method has inevitably led to the decentralization of the self which is wrongly identified with one of the pseudo-egos on the periphery.... The transcendental method, on the other hand, leads, by an inner logic, to the theory of the self as a *focus imaginarius;* and in so far as the transcendentalist has succeed in avoiding this legitimate conclusion from the centrality of the ego... he has done so only by committing the same fallacy which he has himself done so much to explode in the psychological theories. ... [A] third method is the crying need of modern philosophy. (1938: 21)

The transcendentalist commits "the same fallacy" because, as we have just seen, the only way that the transcendental move can offer us the hope of empirical knowledge is to permit judgments about the self; but those judgments can only be about an empirical, not a transcendental self. It is to the quest for a third way that Mukerji's second volume is devoted.

5 Mukerji's Synthetic Reply to Skepticism

Mukerji's response to this conundrum is to push the neo-Vedānta program further, and to forge a synthesis between the tradition of Kant and Hegel—as refracted through Green and Caird—and Śaṅkara. He introduces his solution by quoting Caird on Hegel to the effect that self-knowledge is distinctive in its being like the sun that illuminates itself as well as all upon which it shines, in a stunning echo of the classical Indian metaphor used both in Vedānta and in Buddhist texts for consciousness as *svaprakaśa,* as self-illuminating like a lamp that reveals itself as well as the objects around it (1938: 218–219).

Mukerji draws on this parallel between neo-Hegelian and classical Indian metaphors to argue for the identity of these neo-Hegelian and Advaita Vedānta positions on self-knowledge. He argues that while strictly speaking, the self is not the object of any discursive judgment, as it does manifest non-discursively as cognition itself in a kind of pre-thetic givennness, and this manifestation can be described figuratively (through *avabhāsa*). For this reason, he argues (1938: 222 ff.), while the self cannot be *explicitly* described, we can use language and discursive thought to know it *indirectly,* through the device of analogy. Here is how he puts it:

> The self is beyond speech and thought, *not* because it is the denizen of a world altogether inaccessible to human faculties, but because it is presupposed by all distinctions including the distinction of subject from object or of agent from activity. Our knowledge must be based upon distinctions (*viéeṣaṅbandho hi upalabdhihihetuḥ*); whatever is known must be known through the intellect. (*buddhi-dvāreṇu* or *antaḥkaraṇadvāreṇa*) But in that case we must not be misled by the grammatical forms when the self is represented through the intellect… The self can be described only in so far as it is represented in conformity with the forms of the intellect, and as so represented, we must distinguish between knower and known. That is, though the self is of the nature of foundational knowledge, and, as such, devoid of the distinction between subject and object; yet it has to be described as the subject for which exists the object. (1938: 222–223)

The point is plain. We *do* have knowledge of the self as subject, although not as object, and that knowledge is not *mystical*; it does not require a kind of higher intuition. We have that knowledge in an immediate, first-person way, not in a dualistic subject-object way. That is we know ourselves because we *are* ourselves, and we manifest to ourselves in our subjectivity which is present to us in every cognitive event. We are in that sense self-revealing.

To say this does is to say that in one sense self-knowledge is ineffable, and is so in precisely the sense and for precisely the reasons that Kant and Śaṅkara thought it was: we cannot literally say or judge anything about it because it cannot be a direct object of thought. But in another sense, on this view, we can speak about the self, and we do so figuratively. But figurative language is language, and is capable of conveying understanding. That understanding, on Mukerji's view, is the self-knowledge that allows us to break the skeptical impasse: we do know that we are selves, and that we are capable of illuminating objects of knowledge, although we can know this only in an analogical, indirect way.

We see here that Mukerji is appealing to one of the classical Indian *pramāṇas*—instruments of knowledge or epistemic warrants, *viz*., *upamāna,* or analogy. In most Indian epistemological traditions *upamāna* is a *pramāṇa,* and the inclusion among the set of *pramāṇas* indicates that it is an irreducible and necessary epistemic instrument. It is the one, for instance, that enables induction, or generalization from a single case. (One school that does not recognize *upamāna* as a *pramāṇa* is the Buddhist epistemological tradition of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, in which *upamāna* and *śabda* are reduced to *pratyakṣa* (perception) and *anumāna* (inference).) Here Mukerji points out that it allows us to generalize from objects to subject, from the sun or a lamp to the illuminating character of consciousness.

I am not suggesting that Mukerji's own neo-Vedānta solution to this form of skepticism is ultimately successful. In fact, I fear that it is not. For even if we were to grant the cogency of the analogical model of self-knowledge and the self-intimating character of consciousness—neither of which is obvious—the original problem that motivated this excursion remains unsolved. At best, this solution gives us knowledge of the self by acquaintance—a familiarity with our own self-consciousness, and our existence as a subjective pole correlative to our objects of experience. But the skeptical problem with which Mukerji begins is that posed by the inability to know whether the self is an *accurate* mirror of reality, not by a lack of *acquaintance* with the self. That leaves open the question of whether we are epistemically virtuous subjects, and I see no way to argue that that property could be self-intimating. Nothing in Mukerji's account suggests that he thinks it is, and his own attacks on the givenness of the data of inner sense militate otherwise. (Bhushan & Garfield 2017b). It thus seems that even if we grant him all he wants, the problem remains to be solved.

My point, however, is not that Mukerji solves the skeptical problem he poses, but rather that he presents us with a new kind of skepticism, a skepticism about *all* knowledge based upon a problem about the possibility of *self*-knowledge; and that, whether successfully or not, he proposes a novel solution to it. Moreover, that kind of skepticism, as well as that solution, reflect the confluence of European and classical Indian ideas that characterizes the neo-Vedānta philosophy of the Indian renaissance. When we consider the resources that Indian philosophy offers us for thinking through skepticism, we must not forget that Indian philosophy is a living tradition that, like all great philosophical traditions contributes to and draws on a global marketplace of ideas. Mukerji's formulation of skepticism is part of that great cosmopolitan tradition.

References

Bhushan, N. & Garfield, J. 2017a. *Minds Without Fear: Philosophy in the Indian Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bhushan, N. & Garfield, J. 2017b. "Anakul Chandra Mukerji: The Modern Subject." In J. Ganeri (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, 750–765. New York: Oxford University Press.

Feyerabend, P. 1981. "An Attempt at a Realistic Interpretation of Experience." In his *Realism, Rationalism and Scientific Method*, 17–36. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haldar, H. 1927. *Neo-Hegelianism*. London: Heath Cranton, Ltd.

Joachim. H. 1919. *Immediate Experience and Mediation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Maimon, S. 2010. *Essay on Trasncendental Philosophy*. Translated by N. Midgley et al. London: Continuum.

Mukerji, A. C. 1933. *Self, Thought and Reality*. Allahabad: The Juvenile Press.

Mukerji, A. C. 1938. *The Nature of Self*. Allhabad: The Indian Press.

Ranade, R. D. 1926. *A Constructive Survey of Upaniṣadic Philosophy*. Pune: Oriental Book Society.