



# The Paradox of Egocentricity

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## Early Twentieth Century Indian Philosophy Comes Alive

Nalini Bhushan and Jay Garfield's *Minds Without Fear* is a massive accomplishment for philosophy. It, along with their earlier (2011) work, *Indian Philosophy in English: From Renaissance to Independence*, brings into context a great many Indian philosophers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. I strongly believe these thinkers deserve our sustained attention. In what follows, I will move to a direct engagement with A.C. Mukerji, one of the many figures discussed in their work.

In chapter 11, Bhushan and Garfield take up the question of subjectivity in regard to the use of neo-Vedānta philosophy within Indian academic philosophy. They claim that the early twentieth century Indian philosophers A. C. Mukerji and K. C. Bhattacharyya were interested in a problem concerning the general relationship between the *self*, *subjectivity*, and *knowledge*. Here is their account of the problem.

[G]iven 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? (pg. 251)

They also note the following about how Mukerji saw the status of the problem.

Mukerji sees the conundrum posed by this apparently inconsistent triad as the central problem of modern epistemology, central both to the Western and Indian problematic, and only soluble by bringing the two traditions to bear on the problem. (pg. 251)

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I am interested in the fact that Mukerji saw this to be the central problem of modern epistemology and that it required, not comparative philosophy, but cross-cultural engagement for a solution. But I must admit, I cannot grasp the problem as it is presented above. Thankfully, we are later told that Mukerji frames his inquiry around what he called, ‘the egocentric paradox,’ which Bhushan and Garfield present as follows.

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. (pg. 259)

But: what exactly is the problem? For much more clarity can be brought to the problem Mukerji thought so highly of.

### **Towards the Paradox of Egocentricity**

In an attempt to seek greater understanding of the paradox, let me begin with dissent and simply reject the idea that the passages above offer us a well-formulated paradox that is transparent in the way that Zeno’s paradox is. Keeping both passages in mind, I will raise some questions about the philosophical problem and move from there to drive out the paradox more clearly.

Let me begin with another question: what is the question driving the investigation? Is it: how is self-knowledge possible? Let us consider a contrastive approach to understanding how the question of self-knowledge might be interpreted. Consider the following set of propositions concerning self-knowledge.

- (a) We possess self-knowledge.
- (b) Knowledge from an instrument  $I$ , such as introspection, minimally requires reliability.
- (c) We are unreliable with regard to identifying our own mental states.

While the problem above should be familiar to those working on self-knowledge in contemporary Anglo-American analytical philosophy, I take it, that it is not what Mukerji and Bhattacharyya were interested in. So, we need to clarify what is meant by ‘self-knowledge’ in their investigation. There are two notions of ‘self-knowledge’ that must be distinguished. On *the attribute reading*, self-knowledge has to do with knowing one’s own mental states. In this sense, self-knowledge amounts to knowing attributes of the self at a time through an instrument  $I$ , such as introspection. On *the structuring reading*, self-knowledge amounts to knowing the self, the entity which is the knower, in and of itself, and not simply an attribute of the knower, such as thinking at time  $t$ . Furthermore, there must be some characteristics that the self as knower must have for us to gain traction on the problem. There are three main features: (i) the self is necessary for the possibility of all subject-object structured mental states; (ii) the self can play a

role in grounding the normative dimension in which we can say that a subject  $S$  knows or is acquainted with a proposition or a particular; and (iii) the self is essentially a subject. The problem that drives the attention of Mukerji and Bhattacharyya concerns *the structuring reading* of self-knowledge as opposed to the *attribute reading*. However, even by drawing this distinction, we only get part of the philosophical problem that Bhushan and Garfield articulate. The part we get is the following:

- (i) Self-knowledge has the same structure as all knowledge:  $S$  knows that  $p$ .
- (ii) The self is essentially a subject and never an object.

From (i) and (ii), we already bring into view that either self-knowledge is impossible or self-knowledge is distinct from other cases of knowledge in terms of its structure. A live possibility that ought to be explored. One of the main themes of Bhushan and Garfield's presentation is that the present half of the problem is related to the nature of knowledge in general. Again, they say:

It hence appears that while self-knowledge is the necessary condition of all knowledge, it itself is impossible. (Pg. 259)

In (i) and (ii) above, we already have the elements required to get to the conclusion that structuring-self-knowledge is impossible. However, we do not get that self-knowledge is *necessary* for all knowledge. Thus, I start to lose grip on how this is a paradox as opposed to an insight into the metaphysics of structuring-self-knowledge, namely that the structuring self can never be known, although it is what knows. If we can make clear the relationship between structuring-self-knowledge and non-structuring-self-knowledge in general; then, there would be an open path for the following argument.

- 1. For any  $p$ ,  $S$  knows that  $p$  only if  $S$  has structuring-self-knowledge of  $S$ .
- 2. For any  $S$ , structuring-self-knowledge, where the object is the *self*, is impossible.  
∴
- 3. For all  $p$  and for all  $S$ , it is not the case that  $S$  knows that  $p$ .

If we can establish that all knowledge requires structuring-self-knowledge, we have the elements required to elevate the problem to the level of a paradox. The paradox would be both powerful and interesting. It would lead to the skeptical conclusion that knowledge is impossible, but it would do so from a metaphysical point of view concerning the structure of knowledge as opposed to the psychological and epistemic character of our sense organs. But, again: why believe (1)? For example, why should we believe that in order to know any of the following propositions, (a)–(d), a subject would need to have structuring-self-knowledge?

- (a)  $S$  knows that there is a table in front of them at time  $t$ . (*a posteriori*)
- (b)  $S$  knows that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . (*a priori*)
- (c)  $S$  knows that torture is morally impermissible. (*moral*)
- (d)  $S$  knows that they are thinking about food at time  $t$ . (*attribute-self-knowledge*)

In what sense is structuring-self-knowledge a necessary condition for (a)–(d)?

There are at least two interpretations we can give to the phrase ‘*r* is a necessary condition for *t*.’ On the *synchronic reading*, each of (a)–(d) has as a necessary condition that the subject has structuring-self-knowledge at any moment when they are said to consciously know (a)–(d). For example, whenever one knowingly asserts that they know that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , it follows that they also possess at that moment structuring-self-knowledge of their own self. On the *diachronic reading*, it is not necessary that when any of (a)–(d) are asserted, the person in question also has structuring-self-knowledge at that time. However, it does follow that for an assertion of  $2 + 2 = 4$  to count as knowledge, it must ultimately be shown that one does and could have structuring-self-knowledge at a prior time. That is, structuring-self-knowledge can either be a *synchronic* or *diachronic* condition on knowledge.

The *synchronic* is *not* plausible. It seems false to say that at the moment when one asserts that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , they must have structuring-self-knowledge at the same time. The idea that there is synchronic knowledge of *p* and knowledge of *S* by *S* at *t* at best requires explanation and elucidation. Consider the contrast between the two cases below as evidence for the need for more elucidation as to why the synchronic claim would be true.

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(Be) If *S* knows that *p* at *t*, then *S* believes that *p* at *t*.

(Sy) If *S* knows that *p* at *t*, then *S* has knowledge of the self as a structuring element of *S*'s knowledge of *p* at *t*.

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Arguably, (Be) expresses a synchronic necessary condition on knowledge in English, though it might not in Sanskrit, and it is controversial on some knowledge-first accounts in analytic epistemology. Assuming (Be), when Linda consciously asserts her knowledge that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , she consciously believes that proposition because, as the story could go, belief is a component of knowledge. However, (Sy) appears to require explanation and even argument. Why would one need to know the self as an object to know, for example, that there is a table in front of them or that  $2 + 2 = 4$  at the *very moment* at which they assert those things and their knowledge is occurrently realized? Note the difference is clear in English epistemology. In English epistemology, the relation, as noted above, between knowledge and belief is analytic. One knows that *p* only if one also believes that *p*. However, the relation between one knowing that *p* and one knowing that they are the knower of *p* is not analytic. For example, on an externalist account of knowledge, the principle that if one knows that *p*, one knows that they know that *p* fails. And on an internalist account, it is controversial as to whether the principle is about the iteration of knowledge as opposed to knowledge of the self as the knower. For example, when one says that if *x* knows that *p*, it follows that *x* knows that *x* knows that *p*, it is not clear that one is asserting that the subject *knows the self* as a knower. Rather, they just know what they know in the relation *knower-known*.

What about the *diachronic reading*? In order to get traction on that reading, we might formulate another conditional which discusses the temporal component diachronically as opposed to synchronically.

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(Di) For all *p*, if *S* knows that *p* at  $t_n$ , then there must have been some time prior to  $t_n$ ,  $t_k$ , such that at  $t_k$ , *S* has structuring-self-knowledge.

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(Di) at least gets us out of the quandary of having to hold the synchronic view under which we must have structuring-self-knowledge at the very moment we have knowledge of anything at all. However, the diachronic conditional still requires an explanation and argument. Again: why is structuring self-knowledge required for consciously knowing that  $2 + 2 = 4$ ? Let me now try and fill in how (Di) might be defended. Here is a non-formal set of steps that could help us see the problem more vividly.

1. Knowledge has a subject-object structure where there is a knower and something known.
2. If  $S$  knows that  $p$  at  $t_n$ , then  $S$ 's knowledge at  $t_n$  is tied to  $S$  as opposed to someone else  $S^*$ .  
∴
3. For  $S$  to be the possessor of the knowledge of  $p$  at  $t_n$ ,  $S$  must know or be able to distinguish  $S$  from  $S^*$  at some time prior to  $t_n$ ,  $t_k$ , otherwise,  $S$ 's knowledge would be attributable to  $S$  from another, but not accessibly ratifiable by  $S$  herself as her own.  
∴
4.  $S$  knows that  $p$  at  $t_n$  only if, at some  $t_k$  prior to  $t_n$ ,  $S$  possessed structuring-self-knowledge, which allowed  $S$  to discriminate herself from all other  $S_i$ .

The core idea comes at (3). Here, I am inserting into the work of Mukerji the idea that one can really only be said to know something if at some point in time they know who they are as a knower. The leading question is: what sense does it make to say that an individual knows something, if they do not know themselves as a knower? A distinction is useful here. We operate, for the most part, with *ordinary knowledge*. It has the structure of a relation between a subject and an object of knowledge. In general, we say that a person knows when they satisfy a relation to an object, such as possessing a warranted true belief about the object. However, *super-ordinary knowledge* is knowledge of the self that is the knower in such a way that all instances of ordinary knowledge can really be said to be known by a given knower. Perhaps, Mukerji's interests were in the latter.

Supposing that my defense of (3) is plausible, then along with the other components, I can give more shape to a version of the central epistemic problem that Mukerji might have been after.

## The Paradox of Egocentricity

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- (K) Knowledge has a subject-object structure.
  - (S) The self is essentially a subject and never an object.
  - (D) For all  $p$ , if  $S$  knows that  $p$  at  $t_n$ , then there must have been a time prior to  $t_n$ ,  $t_k$ , such that at  $t_k$ ,  $S$  could knowingly discriminate  $S$  from  $S^*$ , so that  $S$ 's knowledge can be claimed to be  $S$ 's as opposed to  $S^*$ 's.
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With (K), (S), and (D) we can now show the inconsistency through a simple example.

1.  $S$  knows at  $t_n$  that there is a butterfly on the flower across from them.  
∴
2. There is some  $t_k$  prior in time to  $t_n$ , such that at  $t_k$ ,  $S$  has knowledge of  $S$ 's *self* as a structuring element in the subject-object structure of knowledge in general. (from (K and D).
3. The *self* is essentially a subject and never an object. (from S)  
∴
4. There is no time  $t_k$  such that at  $t_k$ ,  $S$  has knowledge of  $S$ 's *self* as a structuring element in the subject-object structure of knowledge. (from K and S)  
∴
5. It is not the case that  $S$  knows that there is a butterfly on the flower across from them at  $t_n$ .

The example and the subject are arbitrary. So, the problem should generalize to all  $p$  and all  $S$ . This presentation approaches the level of a paradox.

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## References

- Bhushan, N., & Garfield, J. (2011). *Indian philosophy in English: From renaissance to independence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.