

I am Jonardon Ganeri, philosopher working on mind, metaphysics and epistemology across the Eastern and Western traditions.  
AMA!

jonardon <sup>1</sup> and r/Science AMAs<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Affiliation not available

April 17, 2023

### Abstract

I am Jonardon Ganeri, Professor of Philosophy, Arts and Humanities at NYU Abu Dhabi. I studied Mathematics at Cambridge, including an MMath in Theoretical Physics, before turning to Philosophy, which I studied first at King's College London followed by doctoral work in Oxford under the supervision of Bimal Matilal and John Campbell. I taught for many years at various universities in Britain, and I have been a visiting professor at the Universities of Chicago, JNU Delhi, Kyunghee Seoul, EHES Paris, and UPenn, and a Fellow of Clare Hall Cambridge. I now make a living doing teaching for NYU in its global network, but also have visiting positions at King's College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies. You can read a bit more about me in this interview in 3:AM magazine. And I have made a lot of my writings available on academia.edu. With roots in Britain and India, my work has focussed primarily on a retrieval of the Sanskrit philosophical tradition in relationship to contemporary analytical philosophy, and I have done work in this vein on theories of self, concepts of rationality, and the philosophy of language, as well as on the idea of philosophy as a practice and its relationship with literature. I have also worked extensively on the social and intellectual history of early modern South Asia and on the socio-political concept of identity. One of my areas of interest has to do with the nature of the human being as a place of selfhood and subjectivity, and of the person as a category of moral identity and social importance. Through a retrieval of theory from first millennial India, I have sought to show that Indian conceptions of the human subject have a richness and diversity that can enable modern thinkers to move beyond the traditional oscillation between materialism and dualism, an oscillation that has dominated and restricted philosophical understandings of human subjecthood. Another area of interest is in the nature of modernity. I believe that we should move away from a "centre/periphery" model that sees modernity as an originally European discovery which propagated out to other parts of the world; rather, there have been many geographical locations of distinct forms of modernity at different times. Over the last few years I have made an extensive study of one particular location, the early modernity of 'new reason' philosophers in Vārāṅsi and Navadvīpa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. My book about this, *The Lost Age of Reason*, as been well-received and generated a new appreciation of the philosophical richness of this period, when a Sanskrit cosmopolis and a Persian cosmopolis encountered each other for the first time. Recently I have been working on the notion of attention and connection between attention and subjectivity. I have just published a book about this, *Attention, Not Self* already available in Europe and out in the States next February. The book draws 6th century Buddhist theories about attention into conversation with contemporary philosophy and cognitive science. I argue for cosmopolitanism in philosophy, the view that philosophy must of necessity make appeal to a plurality of intellectual cultures if it is to avoid parochialism in the intuitions that guide it and the vocabularies in which it is phrased. I think we need new kinds of philosophical institution to make this happen. It's also very important that there is a reform of the university curriculum in philosophy, to make it richer though a proper representation of all the world's philosophical heritage. I have been very busy, recently, preparing a range of teaching and self-study materials for Indian Philosophy. I just published, after 5 years work, the *Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, I've been collaborating with Peter Adamson on a series of podcasts about Indian philosophy in his wonderful *Philosophy Without Any Gaps* series, and I brought out a four-volume collection of essential secondary literature in the field with Routledge. So if you want to get your knowledge about the world of Indian philosophy up to speed, some combination of these resources will hopefully do the trick.

Links of Interest: “Conceptions of Self: An Analytical Taxonomy” - first chapter from *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance* Interview at 3:AM Magazine Short piece at Aeon: “The Tree of Knowledge is not an apple or an oak but a banyan” Interview at Current Science NYT interview: “What Would Krishna Do? Or Shiva? Or Vishna? My books. OUP has been kind enough to offer a 30% discount on all of these by using discount code AAFLYG6 at checkout at the OUP website. Attention, Not Self *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness and the First Person Stance* *The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology* *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700* *Semantic Powers* *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*

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JONARDON [R/SCIENCE](#)

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[Interview at 3:AM Magazine](#)

Short piece at Aeon: "[The Tree of Knowledge is not an apple or an oak but a banyan](#)"

[Interview at Current Science](#)

NYT interview: "[What Would Krishna Do? Or Shiva? Or Vishna?](#)"

My books. OUP has been kind enough to offer a **30% discount on all of these by using discount code AAFLYG6 at checkout at the OUP website.**

[Attention, Not Self](#)

[The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness and the First Person Stance](#)

[The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology](#)

[The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700](#)

[Semantic Powers](#)

[The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy](#)

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Professor Ganeri, thanks for taking the time to answer our questions. I have two questions to ask you.

Matthew Dasti, in his paper *Indian Rational Theology: Proof, Justification, and Epistemic Liberality in Nyāya's Argument for God* as well as in his dissertation *Rational Belief in Classical India: Nyāya's Epistemology and Defense of Theism* has said that for Nyaya, any structure at all requires agency, and thus an agent. In pg 188 of his dissertation, he says

" Despite my attempts to find room for non- agential instances of structure (perhaps that of mere heaps) in the classical literature, it seems that for Nyāya, structure always involves agency: any instance of negentropy requires conscious agency, as conjunction requires movement and independently generated movement is impossible for insentient things like atoms."

1) **Does this not make Nyaya essentially a metaphysics of occasionalism? Did any Nyaya thinkers deal with this problem?**

2) **Did Raghunatha Siromani's treatment of *abhava* or absence differ from the traditional treatment of it?**

[SpeakToMeBaby](#)

Hi there! Excellent questions! I think Matthew would be delighted to know that his thesis is being read so carefully. I will have to ask you to say a bit more about what you have in mind. The Nyaya inference is from structure to structuring to structurer. But they don't have a problem about efficient causation per se, either among parts (atoms) or wholes (structures). So at the moment I don't see why it should be a version of occasionalism.

About Q2, the short answer is yes. He was fascinated by such questions as whether the absence of an absence = a presence, and whether the absence of an absence of an absence = the same absence as the first one. In short, he invented a whole logic of absence.

What advice would you give a High School student who wants to major in Philosophy in the future?  
What books do you recommend I read?

[cecilia108100](#)

Do you know of a book called Sophie's World? I'd start there!

have you studied embodied cognition a la Varela and Thompson? what are your thoughts?

(<https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/embodied-mind>)

[svabhava](#)

Yes, I have and I'm a huge fan. There is a whole emerging area within philosophy that is bringing together embodied cognition, Buddhist philosophy, and analytical philosophy of mind, and it is very exciting. You should definitely look at Evan Thompson's latest book, *Waking, Dreaming, Being* as an example. I think in fact that this is one of the most exciting areas in philosophy at the moment. The Varela and Thompson book you mention was path-breaking, but at that time did not engage in sufficient detail with Buddhist theoretical literature, which I think adds nuance and subtlety to the notions of embodied and inactive cognition. I've actually tried to put more of this Buddhist theory on the table in my new book *Attention, Not Self* (linked above), drawing especially on the work of Buddhaghosa.

[/u/nishraz](#) asked in the announcement thread:

Hi Jonardon!

I have read books by Matilal, which I have found astounding in their clarity and depth - *Logic, language and reality*, *The Character of Logic and Perception*.

My family is a Kashmiri Pandit family, brought up in a Kashmiri Shaivite environment, philosophically subscribing to Advaita Vedanta, and ritualistically following the Vaishnava Smarta tradition.

I would like to now from you about how Kashmir Shaivism was different from other prevalent philosophies, and how it fit in the larger mosaic of darshana in India.

Thanks in advance!

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

That's great to hear. Matilal was my DPhil supervisor, and his work encouraged me to take up Indian philosophy in the first place, for exactly the reasons you give.

I do hope you can record the oral history of your family. It's a precious part of India's intellectual history and shouldn't be lost.

It used to be the case that scholars of Indian philosophy, the philosophers rather than the historians, didn't pay much attention to Kashmiri Shaivism. But recently I'm glad to say that this has begun to change. I can mention two scholars whose work you should look at: Isabelle Ratie and Alex Watson. They have really done fantastic work to show how Kashmiri Shaivism has a lot of good philosophy going on, not least in its critique of Dharmakirtian epistemology.

Hi Professor Ganeri - thanks for joining us today! I have two questions to begin.

#1

Most philosophers I know teach the same sort of introductory course to philosophy. You do a bit of history, usually starting with the Greeks, then jump into a bunch of problems that have been prevalent in Western philosophy, sometimes reading classic readings (e.g. Descartes on skepticism) and sometimes not (e.g. a contemporary philosopher on skepticism). I'm wondering how you, as a philosopher who works across multiple traditions, teaches an introduction to philosophy course. In particular I'm wondering whether you might have any suggestions for how Western analytic philosophers like myself might teach a topics-based intro to philosophy which incorporates Eastern

readings.

#2 I read in your [3:AM Magazine interview](#) that you got pulled back into philosophy partially due to reading Dummett's *Elements of Intuitionism*. Could you say a bit more about this anecdote, because as a bit of a Dummett acolyte I find it remarkable. Do you know of any Eastern philosophy that should be read alongside Dummett?

#### [A Definite Description](#)

Q1. In fact I think topics-based intros lend themselves particularly well to a cross-cultural treatment. If the topic is, for example, scepticism, one can give the students primary and secondary materials about some of the great sceptical arguments that have been put forward in India and China. I don't think it is even necessary to make them "compare" these arguments with western ones - one can just take each argument in its own right, and so gradually build up a global picture of sceptical thinking. The same is true of pretty much any major topic in philosophy, unless it be one that is very specific to a particular debate or context. Fortunately the last couple of decades have seen an enormous expansion in both high quality secondary literature aimed at a philosophical audience and in really professional translations. So as long as you are in touch with an expert in the field who can provide a good reading list, the sort of course you want to put on is probably easier to do so now than it ever has been in the past.

Q2 Dummett was a very good friend of my supervisor Bimal Matilal, and was someone who really appreciated the potential value of bringing Indian philosophy into the philosophical mainstream. Matilal organised a conference on the realism-antirealism debate in Oxford, with people like Mohanty, PK Sen, Dummett, Davidson, and many others. Of all the people to read Dummett alongside Indian thinkers, the one who has done it best is Arindam Chakrabarti. I think you should look at his work especially, to start with.

Professor, I've got a question regarding your switch in fields which you've studied. I'm an aerospace engineering student on my 3rd year and I like the area and what it concerns, but I've realised and accepted what I've felt for a long time that I'd love to study psychology and would feel happier doing that. So I'd like to ask you why did you switch, what was the main reason? I come from a family which looks down heavily on psychology, philosophy and other similar studies, me being only the second generation which went on to try and graduate as they have strong roots in agriculture and running a farm. Did you face similar problems or heard of them? Could you speak on this topic?

Anyhow Thank you for doing this AmA, I'm waiting for all your responses!

#### [White Squall](#)

Hi there. You'd be in good company if you switched from aerospace engineering to philosophy - wasn't that what Wittgenstein did? I understand what you are saying about family pressures and being second generation. In my case I didn't find the career paths that mathematics opened up very enticing, and so decided to follow my passion instead. I think that if you do what you love doing, then it will work out much better than being stuck in a career you don't enjoy.

What advice would you give to graduate students in philosophy who want to be more interdisciplinary? I'm interested in dipping my toes into, for example, cognitive neuroscience or anthropology, but getting the necessary background while also fulfilling all of the other requirements being a graduate student seems pretty daunting.

#### [zalvane\\_02](#)

This is a good question. I was lucky because my supervisor was affiliated in two faculties. My basic answer, and this may come too late for you, is to make sure you get into the right graduate programme in the first place, somewhere where the faculties of the disciplines you want to work in do actually talk to each other.

Thank you for doing this AMA Dr. Ganeri.

You mention in your introduction that you work "on a retrieval of the Sanskrit philosophical tradition in relationship to contemporary analytical philosophy." I've recently read Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, and was wondering if you could point me in the direction (if there is one) where similar issues are discussed in the Sanskrit philosophical tradition. I realize Kripke's book covers a lot, but I'm not looking for anything in particular either. I just want to expand my horizons into this tradition in a manner that has some connection to my formal studies!

[BonsaiMononoke](#)

You might actually take a look at my first book, which was on the philosophy of language and was trying to do something of this sort. It's called *Semantic Powers*, and a rewritten version was called *Artha*.

Professor Ganeri, thank you for doing this AMA. I have two questions:

- 1) Is there a text you could recommend as a comprehensive introduction to Jain philosophy?
- 2) One of the most common arguments against the Buddhist "no-Self" theory was that it could not explain the first-person experience of memory. What do you make of this argument? Do you think it succeeds?

[kropotesta](#)

1) Though it came out in 1981 and is a bit dated, I still think that B.K. Matilal's, *The Central Philosophy of Jainism* is a great place to start. And for more general background about Jainism, Paul Dundas, *The Jains*. 2) Wow, it's funny you ask this! I have just done a target essay on exactly this topic, which is coming out in the latest issue of the [Australasian Philosophical Review](#) along with many excellent replies. It's a complex and fascinating topic. What I argue, in a nutshell, is that there are three different Buddhist strategies for deflating the apparent tension between episodic memory and the denial of self. Buddhaghosa's idea is that the memory perspective is a centred field of experience whose phenomenal constituents are simulacra of an earlier field of experience, yet attended to (organised, arranged) in a way that presents them as happening again. I think that is a better solution than that the memory perspective consists in taking as object-aspect the subject-aspect of the earlier experience (Dignaga), or the idea that it consists in labelling a representation of the earlier experience with an I-tag (Vasubandhu). So, in the end, the argument doesn't work but it forces the Buddhists to think very hard about the nature of memory.

[/u/JacobjamJacob](#) asked in the thread on "The Tree of Knowledge is not an apple or an oak but a banyan":

Im interested in reading some of the Jaina philosophers. Anyone have a rec on what to start out with?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Anything by Piotr Balcerowicz and Marie-Helene Gorrive, for a start.

[/u/chefboyrdeuce](#) asked in the announcement thread:

Greetings Professor Ganeri,

I'm here via reading your piece on Aeon.co, *The tree of knowledge is not an apple or an oak but a banyan*. Fascinating perspective and work. Thank you.

Author, Charles T. Tart, in his book *Waking Up*, states that "we can never be given knowledge by others; we can only be stimulated. We must develop our own knowledge". Do you agree?

Follow up question, if I may.

What are your thoughts on the teachings of George Gurdjieff?

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Hi. I think that this sounds like a very good working definition of the difference between the humanities and the sciences. In the humanities the emphasis is on human beings working towards their own forms of understanding. In the Indian context, if you take a text like the Upanisads, it doesn't tell you what self-knowledge is, but encourages you to go in search of it.

[/u/anticks1](#) asked in the announcement thread:

Dear Prof. Ganeri,

My collection of books includes many works of yours and other scholars including Kisor Kumar Chakraborti and Chakravarti Ram Prasad.

I will try to participate in your AMA. However, if that is not possible, hopefully you can choose to address the following questions of mine relating to Nyaya ontology depending on your convenience.

The Nyaya holds that the self (or soul) is numerically individuated [one for every living being] and spatially ubiquitous. Amongst Indian philosophies, the Nyaya is the only school to uphold this thesis.

(Q1) What ontological premise of the Naiyayikas forces them to have to uphold this seemingly radical thesis? In other words, if they do **not** uphold the ubiquitousness of the self, what other subsequent position/argument of theirs runs the risk of being compromised?

(Q2) Even if the self is ubiquitous, is it considered stationary? Or, does this spatially infinitely extended self also move when a person moves?

Thank you and look forward to participating/reading your AMA.

[BernardJOrcutt](#)

Hello. Yes, this is one of the more obscure aspects of the Nyaya theory of self. I think that it has its origins in the photo-physics they believed in. They recognised that one can "reach out" in thought to any object anywhere, that is that the intentional object of thought can be located anywhere in space. And they thought that the only way for one thing to influence another was by being in contact with it. So they had to conclude that the self was everywhere.

I actually don't think that this doctrine is essential to their theory of self. One can update Nyaya physics and Nyaya theory of intentionality, but preserve the basic structure of their theory of self.

As for Q2, if the self is ubiquitous then it cannot move by changing its spatial boundaries. But if one

thinks of it as having a sort of centre-periphery structure, then the location of the centre could move as the person moves and their perspective changes.

Thanks for doing this AMA. I was not previously aware of your work, but scanning through the material you linked to I have realized that you touch on several topics that I am deeply interested in. I am a clinical psychologist, and my understanding of what it is to be human is focused on behavioral theories. I was wondering to what extent you involve theories of stimulus and response in your musings?

There's a recent behaviorist theory called Relational Frame Theory which is currently taking the field of clinical psychology by storm, and which I believe change a lot about how we are to understand the human psyche. Are you familiar with this theory?

My impression is that philosophers that use psychological research in their works generally stick to cognitive psychology, and not so much behavioral psychology, would you agree?

[goodtomeetya](#)

Hi. These are all good points, and thanks for the reference to Relational Frame Theory. I'm afraid that I'm guilty as charged, but I do agree that it would be good if philosophers paid more attention to behavioural psychology.

Hello, I am a student and am taking an introductory class on philosophy next semester. What should I look forward to? Any books I should read to prepare myself to understand philosophy better? Any notable philosophers in history?

[ramjaz](#)

Hi there. Your question gives me a gold opportunity to put in a plug for Peter Adamson's excellent podcast series, A History of Philosophy Without Any Gaps] (<https://www.historyofphilosophy.net>). Listening your way through this would be a perfect way to prepare and probably to know a lot more than your professor!

Professor, I'm very interested in the Buddhist concept of the No-Self. I'm thinking of doing a bit of work on how one would account for it empirically. My focus would be on establishing whether it is possible for our phenomenological experience to support the No-Self theory. Where should I start? Or would someone in the field of psychology be better suited to answer my question? (In case anyone is intrigued, my interest in this topic was first sparked by Thomas Metzinger's article 'The No-Self Alternative'.)

[fridakillo](#)

Great question. I would point you in the direction of [this](#) wonderful book to start off with.

What is biggest difference between eastern and western philosophy? What is the difference you found weird?

Sorry if it's a stupid questionz

[Sergeant-sergei](#)

I don't think it is a stupid question at all, but I do think it's not the right one to ask, because we shouldn't think of "western philosophy" as one monolith and "eastern philosophy" as another, standing in some sort of polar opposition to one another. Both have been highly stratified and multidimensional traditions of inquiry, with many points of overlap and convergence, and many points of difference. It's much better in my opinion to focus on particular philosophical questions or else on particular thinkers. And I think it's better to think of philosophy as a common global undertaking, with many facets and currents.

Hi, Professor Ganeri. Thanks for this AMA! Two quick questions:

1. Do I exist?
2. Do you?

Thanks!

[emeraldshellback](#)

1. This is a question you can only answer for yourself (see Descartes).
2. Ask me again when you have worked out the answer to 1.