

Jonardon Ganeri



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Jonardon Ganeri was awarded the Infosys Prize 2015 in Humanities – Philosophy for his outstanding scholarship and originality in interpreting and scrutinizing analytical Indian philosophy and shedding light on shared ground as well as the dichotomy between Indian and Greek traditions of philosophical reasoning (www.infosys-science-foundation.com). Ganeri holds an M A in Mathematics from Cambridge University. He obtained his M Phil in Philosophy from King's College, London in 1989 and D Phil in Philosophy from Oxford University in 1994. He has taught in some of the most distinguished universities in the world. He is currently Global Network Professor of Philosophy, New York University, USA. He is also Visiting Professor, Department of Philosophy at King's College, London and a Fellow of the British Academy.

In an interview with *Current Science*, Ganeri talked about his interests, his inspiration, his views on topics like science and philosophy, and also gave a word of advice for those who want to pursue philosophy.

Congratulations on being awarded the Infosys Prize 2015. Can you describe for our readers, in simple terms, your prize-winning work?

I have tried to demonstrate that India's philosophical heritage, especially its analytical, logical and scientific heritage, has been of unparalleled global importance for as long as there has been global intellectual history, and it continues to be a resource of incredible richness today.

What motivated you to pursue philosophy after a Master's degree in mathematics?

I am, first and foremost, an analytical philosopher, which means valuing rigour in argumentation and the careful analysis of ideas and beliefs. Analytical philosophers are very careful to formulate ideas as precisely as possible, which is very important, because confusions about ideas can be disastrous when those ideas are translated into action. Analytical philosophy is a close cousin of other analytical disciplines, mathematics included.

What got you interested in Indian philosophy?

As it happens, throughout most of history the best analytical philosophers have been Indians, and so I have been drawn to the great figures of Indian analytical philosophy, such as Dignāga, Śrīharṣa and Gaṅgeśa. These are not household names, but they deserve to be just as well-known as Plato, Aristotle and Descartes. A lot of my work is about re-describing their ideas in a modern, contemporary vocabulary, so that the brilliance of their thought, and the enormous amount that they have to contribute to philosophy as a global intellectual culture of inquiry, become evident to all. In fact, throughout its history, philosophy in India was always highly pluralistic, and its history can serve as a sort of blueprint for the future of philosophy in the 21st century. The great intellectual axis was, first of all, the dialogue between a series of profoundly creative and innovative Indian Buddhist philosophers on one hand, and philosophers belonging to a variety of other schools and systems on the other. This created what we can call a 'Sanskrit cosmopolis'. Later, India became the only place in the world where that great intellectual cosmopolis overlaps with another – the Persian intellectual world – and this interaction and overlap produced an astonishingly rich period of intellectual life in early modern India, certainly equal of early modern Europe and also overlapping with the intellectual cultures of Europe. India was then the only place where this overlap was seen. This series of extremely fertile overlaps is what makes the philosophical heritage of India of such tremendous importance today.

According to you, how does philosophy in India stand apart from the other philosophies of the world?

As a matter of fact, India is predicted to have the largest body of students in higher education in the world by 2025, and that is both an enormous challenge and a great opportunity. It is a great opportunity because India is a deliberative democracy with a deep history of intellectual pluralism, and that is exactly the model other countries will increasingly need to emulate. The challenge is to avoid the temptation to try to reduce this plurality and create homogeneity. The challenge is also to avoid the temptation to think in terms of separate intellectual worlds that have nothing to say to one another. But there is a huge opportunity here for education policy makers in India to realize the vast possibilities of pluralistic heritage of the country. The challenge within the profession of philosophy is the same. As a profession it is very welcoming to anyone who loves to think. But it needs to become more inclusive, more diverse, more pluralistic, more cosmopolitan, and less centred around the needs and interests of former colonial powers. It needs to do more to fulfil its duty to educate global citizens in the 21st century pluralistic societies, which means above all, creating much more culturally diverse teaching curricula.

Philosophy is generally misconstrued as a subject that is complex and difficult to comprehend by young people. How do you think this misconception can be broken?

The sense of wonder and awe, the desire to question, to ask 'why', is innate in every child. If you never lose that sense of wonder and love for inquiry, then you end up being a philosopher. The role of Philosophy is to educate you to hold on to it, and to train you how to go about asking questions with rigour and precision, developing your skills of critical reasoning to work out arguments, and training you how to take care to say exactly and precisely what you mean. Philosophy aims to educate people to lead full, flourishing personal lives and also to participate fully in public life.

How important is it for today's generation to understand and appreciate the traditional philosophy?

The particular philosophical problems philosophers deal with have always been influenced by the historical context in which they lived. We see that throughout all historical epochs and in every region of the globe. The most significant fact about the 20th century is that different great world civilizations began to talk to each other as equals. The great question for philosophy is, how to understand this diversity and plurality in a global context. In fact, the American philosopher John Dewey said in 1915, just before the start of the first world war, that 'pluralism is the greatest philosophical idea of our times'. So the challenge is how to bring different intellectual traditions together without losing sight of their distinctness. In other words, to avoid the two extremes of homogenization and isolation. Globalization is a double-edged sword, and philosophers have done a lot of work trying to find a middle way between the pressure towards conformity and universality, and a sort of social constructivism that keeps people apart. So it's no accident that India and the US, which are both profoundly multicultural societies, produced some of the greatest pluralist thinkers of the 20th century. Thinkers like Tagore and Ambedkar, or Taylor and Nussbaum, are exemplary intellectuals of the age. What I see happening is that philosophy will become ever more cosmopolitan and cross-cultural. I think much more will be done to retrieve philosophical traditions from around the globe, voices that were lost or suppressed by colonialism. And I think this cosmopolitan approach to philosophy has a very bright future in the 21st century.

Whose work on philosophy inspired you the most and why?

The greatest influence on my work has without question been the Bengali philosopher Bimal Matilal, who had education both in mathematics and Sanskrit. Although a very modern thinker, he undertook complete training in the traditional Sanskrit syllabus of Nyāya and Navya-Nyāya. He then went on to do a Ph D in Harvard, USA and before very

long, he was chosen for the Spalding Professorship in Eastern Religions and Ethics at the University of Oxford, UK a chair previously held by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. I think Matilal exemplified all the best virtues of a philosopher, and indeed an intellectual, and to the highest degree imaginable. He was very humble, always ready to listen to other people and take their ideas seriously. He was full of empathy, compassion and kindness. Intellectually, he was the first person I met who showed me that there was a way to do philosophy that engaged India and the West on equal terms, with equal respect to the traditions of both. He was not a divisive thinker, but an expansive one. Had he lived beyond the age of 56, I think he would have utterly transformed the discipline of philosophy, but as it is, he deeply inspired a generation of Oxford students. I am one of them.

How are science and philosophy related to each other in the present-day context?

We need to start by being clear about what philosophy is and what it isn't. Philosophy begins with a sense of awe, wonder and curiosity about the world and our place in it. It is an attempt to seek understanding, to move from confusion to clarity, through very careful and patient examination of the concepts we employ, like reason, truth, knowledge, equality, dignity, justice, obligation, consciousness, mind, ethnicity, gender and meaning. It calls into question, challenges and scrutinizes the common-place and the commonly assumed.

Philosophy isn't an attempt to provide causal explanations of the way the world works, nor is it concerned with the accumulation of data. There is a division of labour between acquiring results and interpreting them. Philosophers don't themselves construct empirical or scientific models, but they ask: what is science? What is a model? What is evidence? What is the relationship between theory and observation? These aren't questions that scientists themselves think about. If you want to know what science is, don't ask a scientist, ask a philosopher. Now philosophers respond to claims by asking what arguments are in favour or against them. Stephen Hawking argued that questions like 'what is reality?' are best

left to scientists not philosophers. He also argued that philosophers have not kept up with modern developments in science. Neither of these arguments is very good. First of all, reality includes aspects of human reality like values – ethical, legal, aesthetic and epistemic values, and science can't tell us anything about this part of reality. Second, philosophers do, and always have, paid attention to the results of science. For example, in the philosophy of mind, where we study such things as the nature of consciousness, we study the empirical discoveries about how attention functions have had a great impact in the development of new philosophical theories. Likewise, recently there has been much collaboration between philosophy and neuroscience, cognitive science, economic theory and social psychology.

Are you currently working on your next book? If so, what is the premise?

I am writing a book about early Buddhist philosophy of the mind. The premise of it is that the best way to understand the functioning of the human mind is by studying the role of attention.

What is your word of advice for youngsters who want to pursue philosophy?

Above all, philosophy comprises the cultivation of two intellectual qualities. First, ability to be reflective, to think for oneself, which also means self-criticism. You are doing philosophy whenever you reflect on things, and reflection, especially self-critical reflection, is what makes us human. And second, the ability to listen to the views of others, with empathy and engagement, to be able to understand and respect alternative points of view. In other words, philosophy teaches one to be open-minded, both in one's dealings with oneself and in one's dealings with others, and so to be larger as an individual and to be able to participate fully in democratic deliberation with people whose views are different, but no less valuable, and in public spaces where every opinion is contested.

Swetha Gopal, S. Ramaseshan Fellow, *Current Science*.
e-mail: swetha.vgkrishnan@gmail.com