



Scrutiny, not applause: Philosophy meets its skeptics



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Indian spiritual figures have been travelling abroad for more than a century. Halls have filled, applause has sounded, and followings have formed across the world. My tour of Britain in May to July 2026 might look like one more link in that chain. But what mattered was who sat across from me, and the standard against which the argument was placed.

The tour began on May 30, at the Cambridge Union, moderated by Professor Jaideep Prabhu. A student put her point: "At Cambridge, learning is based on evidence, and every belief is tested against a standard. So how is this philos-

ophy any different from any other belief?"

"Let us rebuild this framework right now, right here, from scratch," I said, "leaning as little as possible on belief and dogma." If a framework is universal, it cannot belong to any one person; it has to be built and tested together. A session scheduled for one hour stretched into nearly three sittings across two days. When a participant thanked me for sharing "my philosophy," I corrected her: it had been built together in that room.

At the London School of Economics there was a dialogue with Professor Jonathan Birch, who has led the Jeremy Collier Centre for Animal Sentience and whose work has shaped Britain's animal welfare laws. At University College London there was a long conversation with Professor Steve Fleming, an expert in metacognition. There were dialogues with Cambridge-trained biologist Rupert Sheldrake in Hampstead; Professor Lars Chittka, a Fellow of the Royal Society and an expert in insect cognition, at Queen Mary University; and Harvard-educated psychologist Melanie Joy, who works on the psychology of eating animals.

These gatherings assembled not for emulation but examination. Those present had every reason to challenge the framework in their own professional fields.

At the centre of this philosophical framework is a question that shifts the source of human problems. The real issue is not external but psychological: a mistaken sense of "I" that identifies itself with the body and mind. Vedanta calls it the ego. From it arise fear, desire, conflict and consumption that widen into social and ecological crises. Without examining this inner structure, external solutions such as law, technology and reform remain incomplete, because the same agent that creates the problem stays active within the solution.

At London Climate Action Week, the present climate effort was compared to a society that keeps repairing roads and ambulances without addressing the drunk driver. The belief that technology and policy will solve the crisis has to be abandoned. Technology is born not of human need but human desire, and what the world calls success is, to a large extent, another name for a growing carbon footprint.

At Queen Mary University of London, when the ego was called the "master exploiter" behind every discovery, Professor Chittka offered examples where scientific work led directly to conservation. "I am perhaps a little less pessimistic," he said. The answer was that the agent that does the damage is the one that repairs it too, and the repair does not acquit it: a clean-up campaign run by the exploiter himself.

When animal violence was called instinct rather than psychological, Chittka countered with field observations. The answer was that the observer projects human interiority onto animal behaviour. "Sir, you yourself have long campaigned against anthropomorphism," I said, "and I am afraid that at this moment you are doing exactly that." The dialogue ended without agreement, but with full engagement.

Animal welfare law has been growing for nearly two centuries, yet neither species extinction nor per-capita meat consumption has fallen. The one who makes the law and the one who breaks it are the same person. At LSE, Professor Birch did not give up his ground: "Do laws help? I think they do. But I do not believe they solve all our problems."

The sharpest moment came when Birch said, "But I think we matter." I answered, "No, we do not." His counter-question was direct: what measurable change has come from my work? Media reports record more than a million animals saved from slaughter in 2024, and more than two hundred thousand registered students in structured programmes of self-enquiry.

At UCL, Professor Fleming appreciated an analogy separating metacognition from self-knowledge: a car's speedometer reads the system, while the driver examines himself and finds that there is no driver at all. But Fleming did not agree. "There is one part of your analogy where I would perhaps differ," he said, "and that is the notion of the driver."

If the system has no separate dashboard, then the sense of a separate ego reading it is itself the error. Fleming asked: if the ego is an illusion, then whose is the error? My answer was that the one speaking and thinking is the one predicating itself. No separate observer exists apart from the ego who could say there is an error. Professor Fleming held out a research goal that runs against the framework: an account of the mind so complete in its computations that there is no need to admit any third thing. My answer was direct: "You may explain it, and the ego will say, I did the explaining, but it will still remain."

In Kingston, the conversation with Rupert Spira was the closest philosophically, yet it was not allowed to dissolve into mutual admiration. Where most Advaita teaching turns towards awareness, I keep bringing the conversation back to the ego. "If you are speaking of spirituality without the ego," I said, "then we are speaking of medicine without the patient."

The professors were on their own ground, in their subjects and institutions. The conversation was held in the language of empirical science, not in the tradition's vocabulary. The framework had to be tested; there was no room to escape by saying, "this lies beyond the scope of my tradition." The established guru circuit usually keeps its distance from such a format.

What this proves is limited, but real. It made a demand of both sides that traditional gurudom does not. The speaker had to bear the risk of being shown wrong, and the audience had to take part in examination in place of applause. In a field where success is usually measured by crowd size, this tour set down another test: whether the argument holds up in that room. Whether this can grow larger, or even wishes to, remains an open question.



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