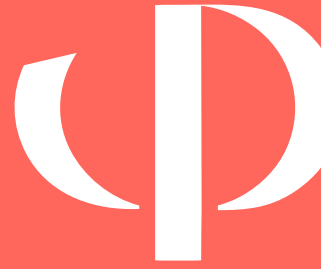


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SPECIAL ISSUE ON BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY: BOOK SYMPOSIUM ON *WHY I AM NOT A BUDDHIST* BY EVAN THOMPSON

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

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A. MINH NGUYEN, EDITOR

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FROM THE EDITORS

Editors' Introduction: Buddhist Modernism and Its Discontents

A. Minh Nguyen, Editor
FLORIDA GULF COAST UNIVERSITY
ATNGUYEN@FGCU.EDU

Yarran Hominh, Associate Editor
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
YDH2106@COLUMBIA.EDU

I. OVERVIEW

Evan Thompson's new book, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, is a provocative, insightful, and challenging critique of what he calls "Buddhist modernism" (1), a broad religious, cultural, and intellectual movement that he regards as "the dominant strand of modern Buddhism" (1).¹ Like Bertrand Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian" and similarly named texts like Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu*,² Thompson's *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is, among other things, a critique of the place of the Buddhist modernist movement in our world, especially Europe and North America, today. Unlike those texts, however, Thompson's target is not Buddhism in its entirety. Nor is his critique purely negative or antagonistic. He neither contends nor asserts, for instance, that Buddhism has no place in the contemporary world. Rather, Thompson's critique is conceived and formulated from the perspective of a "good friend to Buddhism" (2, 189), one who wishes for Buddhism "to take its rightful place as a valuable contributor to a modern cosmopolitan community" (2). Such a community brings together in deep engagement different religious, philosophical, literary, artistic, social, economic, political, and scientific traditions. Thompson himself, of course, has been a valuable contributor to these conversations between Buddhism, Western philosophy, and the cognitive and brain sciences, beginning with his influential co-authored book, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*,³ and then as part of the Mind and Life Institute over the last two decades. Thompson's main argument is that Buddhism's contributions to a "modern cosmopolitan community" (2) are disserved by core assumptions and commitments of Buddhist modernism. If Buddhism is best to play its part in this cosmopolitan conversation, a conversation between contemporary science and various religious, philosophical, intellectual, and contemplative traditions, then it must question these assumptions and

commitments, "destabilize" (180, 184) them, and eventually repudiate them.

The two key terms in Thompson's argument are "Buddhist modernism" (1, 172) and "cosmopolitanism" (165–89). That is where much of the cut and thrust occurs between Thompson and his interlocutors in this issue. We will set out briefly how Thompson conceives of these two fundamental concepts and then move to the arguments made by the other contributors to the issue.

II. BUDDHIST MODERNISM

Thompson uses the term "Buddhist modernism" in much the same way as David L. McMahan does in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, which is to pick out an interrelated set of tendencies and themes in contemporary (largely) Euro-American Buddhist thought.⁴ The term is not intended as a definition or to specify a set of necessary or sufficient conditions for an entity (whether a person, community, tradition, culture, movement, concept, conception, viewpoint, theory, argument, commitment, practice, discourse, rhetoric, or apologetics) to be a Buddhist modernist one. Rather, it is meant to highlight some common and recognizable ideas from a complex and diverse tradition arising from the collision of modernism in its broadest and most pluralist sense and the varied histories of different Buddhist traditions.⁵ As Thompson makes clear in his "Replies to Critics," especially his response to Abraham Velez de Cea, he takes Buddhist modernism not to have a "unique [ideological or doctrinal] essence," defined by a set of rules, tenets, theories, or principles, but rather to be "a broad cultural movement having many variants . . . [and] constituted by clusters of traits or properties," of which Buddhist modernist traits or properties there is, in general, "a frequency distribution." The traits or properties with which Thompson concerns himself are those specifically relevant to Euro-American Buddhist modernism and not, say, to the political or nationalistic forms of Buddhist modernism found in Myanmar (formerly Burma) or Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon).⁶

The particular ideas that Thompson targets are relevant to two themes in the philosophy of science and religion. The first theme is the "encounter" (76), "interaction" (179), "exchange" (10), or "dialogue" (48) between Buddhism and modern science, particularly neuroscience. The second theme is the relation between Buddhism and various conceptions of religion as the concept of religion was (and religions themselves were) transformed through (European) Enlightenment secularism. Thompson's main target is what he calls "Buddhist exceptionalism" (23–55). Thompson defines it as "the belief that Buddhism is superior to other

religions in being inherently rational and empirical, or that Buddhism isn't really a religion but rather is a kind of 'mind science,' therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation" (2). Buddhist exceptionalists hold that Buddhism is epistemically superior to other religions or to religions generally when religion is understood a certain way. It is held to be superior given an epistemology according to which contemporary science provides us with *the* standard for rationality and for empirical content and support.

Buddhist exceptionalism, Thompson avers, rests on false or confused assumptions about science and about religion. Chapter 1 of *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, "The Myth of Buddhist Exceptionalism," sets out these issues in broad strokes. In chapter 2, "Is Buddhism True?," Thompson argues against one Buddhist modernist way of legitimating certain interpretations of Buddhist assertions. Exemplified in Robert Wright's book *Why Buddhism Is True*, this approach contends that Buddhism is uniquely supported by evolutionary psychology. Wright's book is a good example, argues Thompson, of how certain prominent strands of Buddhist modernism tame and domesticate Buddhist ideas by trying to fit them into a limiting naturalistic and scientific framework. In treating Buddhism as "inherently rational and empirical" (2), as "inherently rational and scientific" (24), and as "inherently more scientific than . . . other religions" (52), Buddhist modernism misses out on what is truly exceptional about (though not unique to) Buddhism, namely, its capacity to challenge commonly held assumptions, to "invigorate our thinking" (85), to "reinvigorate contemporary philosophical debates" (86), and thereby to contribute to an ongoing cosmopolitan discussion.

One influential form that Buddhist exceptionalism takes is "neural Buddhism" (12-13, 19, 52, 87, 144, 163, 192, 227), which Thompson critiques in chapters 3-5. Neural Buddhists take certain interpretations of key Buddhist doctrines and practices such as no-self, awakening (enlightenment), and mindfulness to be corroborated by contemporary cognitive science, particularly neuroscience. They also take a reductive view of relevant concepts associated with those doctrines and practices, treating them as definable solely in terms of brain states or processes. Mindfulness meditation *just is* brain training; awakening *just is* a particular brain state (12). Neural Buddhism, Thompson submits, fails on two counts. First of all, it assumes an overly reductive view of our cognitive capacities. Thompson instead champions "4E cognitive science," which maintains that "cognition is embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive" (131) and which grows out of the "enactive approach" articulated and defended in *The Embodied Mind* (131). He contends that the 4E perspective on cognition is better able to understand the mind and to put Buddhist ideas in dialogue with cognitive science. Secondly, neural Buddhism takes an overly simplistic and highly selective view of the religious, ritual, and traditional aspects of Buddhism. The scientific fetish for neuroscience is coupled with a reductive Protestantism about all religions that focuses on the individual's relation to themselves and to (modernized) quintessential Buddhist ideas like awakening at the expense of the depth of historical, exegetical, and faith-based aspects of different Buddhist traditions.

These two commitments support each other. The Protestant individualization of Buddhism enables the excessive and scientific focus on the individual's psychology and brain "as seen through neuroimaging technologies" (139) apart from the physical, social, and cultural environments in which the psychology and the brain, indeed the whole embodied being, are embedded. Conversely, the naturalistic framework of the cognitive sciences, including psychology and neuroscience, mandates a naturalistic and individualistic reading of the role and benefits of mindfulness meditation and associated conceptions of awakening that cannot but ignore or downplay interpretations or conceptions of aspects of reality that are necessarily embedded in a larger physical, social, or cultural structure.

This Protestant aspect of Buddhist modernism also underlies, Thompson argues, a particular tangle of conceptual confusions surrounding the idea of awakening or enlightenment. Buddhist modernists are committed to awakening being "psychologically plausible" (149-50, 157), that is, explicable in naturalistic terms as a particular state of the brain, mode of attention, et cetera. Simultaneously, they are committed to the claim that Buddhism is exceptional in not relying on faith in the divine or supernatural and the claim that awakening is a nonconceptual intuitive state. But, Thompson contends, in order to have some specifiable content to the notion of awakening such that it can be investigated and understood scientifically, it cannot be (purely) nonconceptual. And if one wants to give such specifiable content to the notion while remaining sensitive to the longstanding and ongoing disputes as to the nature of awakening in Buddhist traditions, one cannot do without reference to the notion of nirvana, the reality of which is accepted by Buddhists as a matter of faith. Thompson's broader point in bringing out this dialectic is to emphasize the importance of the material, embodied, and sociocultural contexts for understanding key Buddhist ideas and putting them in conversation with modern science and other religious, philosophical, and intellectual traditions. Abstracting away from these contexts, as Buddhist modernism does, is to remove the ground on which we stand and grasp those ideas in their fullness, as having meaning other than that which our default scientific worldview gives them. This broader point brings us to Thompson's cosmopolitanism.

III. COSMOPOLITANISM

The problem with Buddhist modernism, or so Thompson argues, is that the above Buddhist modernist commitments undermine Buddhism's potential contributions to a wider cosmopolitan culture. As he outlines in chapter 6, "Cosmopolitanism and Conversation," cosmopolitanism for Thompson is not limited to the European universalist conception articulated by Hugo Grotius and Immanuel Kant.⁷ With reference to the Sanskrit cosmopolis beginning around the start of the Common Era theorized by scholars like Sheldon Pollock (21, 51, 117, 170-72),⁸ Thompson identifies cosmopolitanism with "processes and practices of transregional affiliation" (172) that carry with them a normative commitment to respecting and engaging with the variety of particular human ways of living that are ways of instantiating our common humanity. Cosmopolitanism for Thompson, who follows Kwame

Anthony Appiah, involves a deep conversation with others in their particularity.⁹

Conversation is central to Thompson's argument. Conversation across different communities and traditions, that is, conversation among individuals with ties or attachments to different communities and traditions, is both the process that constitutes cosmopolitan identities and the means by which cosmopolitanism as a practice generates insights and directions for inquiry. A true cosmopolitanism, on this view, demands a particular kind of conversation, one where the parties truly allow, perhaps even welcome and encourage, the other voices in that conversation to challenge and "destabilize" (180, 184) their deepest commitments, including their "assumptions, positions, and arguments" (77). This is consistent, Thompson claims, with retaining those commitments. He insists, in section III of his "Replies," that he does not conceive of cosmopolitanism as sketching an abstract or purely liberal space of discussion outside one's commitments. But, he maintains, one cannot merely address others while remaining squarely within one's commitments, cherry-picking what they say only to adorn, validate, or otherwise bolster one's own views. Cosmopolitan conversation fails when it falls into "embellishment" of one's views with the picked cherries such as metaphors, similes, analogies, and allusions taken from another tradition or into "justification" of one's views by the theoretical frames, methodological approaches, knowledge-generative discourses, or epistemic practices taken from another tradition (180, 185). Not to fall into either of these traps involves being cognizant of the depth and variety of commitments within any given tradition and of the past and ongoing conversations in which those commitments have been and continue to be discussed, debated, negotiated, amended, and approved.

Buddhist modernism, in Thompson's view, is unc cosmopolitan because it falls short of these norms of conversation. It embellishes Buddhist teachings by cherry-picking certain strands of the cognitive sciences. It takes what modern science (understood in the most metaphysically and epistemologically reductive terms) tells us as the gold standard of truth and, in doing so, does not allow that reductionist scientism to be properly challenged in a cosmopolitan manner by Buddhist ideas. And, to make Buddhism more scientifically tractable, it simplifies and occludes the rich traditions and intellectual debates that underpin certain Buddhist commitments, thus falling short of the demand of a cosmopolitan sensitivity to the depth and variety of historical traditions. Instead, Thompson argues, for Buddhism to be a full player in this wider cosmopolitan conversation, it ought not to be subsumed into or under a modern scientific worldview and its full resources as it has developed them over centuries of intellectual and cultural engagement ought to be brought into the conversation.

Part of Thompson's point here is historical. Buddhism was at the center of the Sanskrit cosmopolis of the first millennium of the Common Era. In its different historical forms, it has been part of ongoing cosmopolitan conversations for centuries. In more recent times, Buddhist modernism has opened the door to cosmopolitan conversations with modern science. Given this history, Buddhist modernists

ought to want Buddhism to continue to contribute in this way. Insofar as commitments to this kind of conversation are internal to Buddhist modernism itself, Thompson suggests, Buddhist modernism is self-defeating. The very commitments that made it at first amenable to dialogue with modern science have closed off possibilities for deeper and more challenging conversations, thus thwarting the purpose it was designed to serve. As Thompson puts it in his "Replies," "much of Buddhist modernist thinking, particularly Buddhist exceptionalism, is untenable by Buddhist modernists' own lights, that is, by their own criteria of truth, rationality, and evidence, and the cosmopolitanist values they espouse." Thompson's call in his book is for Buddhism to realize its full cosmopolitan potential, to continue radically to challenge the overweening individualism and scientism of our time.

IV. THEMES FROM THE COMMENTARIES

In line with Thompson's own expressed desire to open conversation, this issue includes nine commentaries on his book from philosophers and scholars of religious studies. Some of these commentators are longtime interlocutors of Thompson's who raise anew issues aired in other contexts; others come to his work with fresher eyes. Together, their comments draw out the complexities and nuances of the various philosophical issues raised by Thompson, challenge him on many of his points and commitments, and bring to light some of the underlying historiographical and interpretive background to his views. The comments range across Thompson's varying commitments. In particular, they all raise questions and issues about either one or both of the central themes of Thompson's book—Buddhist modernism and cosmopolitanism. For the sake of explication, we shall group them into two sets corresponding to the two themes.

The first set of comments raises questions about Thompson's arguments against Buddhist modernism. Bronwyn Finnigan asks for clarification about the "distinctive contours" of Buddhist modernism and who counts as a Buddhist modernist.¹⁰ Accepting the goals of cosmopolitan dialogue between Buddhism and science, she wonders whether it is true that fruitful cosmopolitan conversation *must* take a Thompson-endorsed deep contextualist form or whether there are forms of conversation that productively abstract ideas away from the traditions and debates in which they were developed.¹¹ Jay L. Garfield's comments push Thompson on whether there are forms of Buddhist modernism that are still naturalistic without being neuroessentialist. Such a "moderate Buddhist modernism" challenges Thompson's arguments to the effect that there is a "very strong tension," albeit not a "fatal inconsistency," between naturalism and traditional Buddhist ideas such as rebirth, karma, nirvana, and awakening. Louise Williams disputes Thompson's claim that Buddhist modernism rejects the notion of faith. She suggests that Buddhist modernists can be understood as having faith, but faith in future science rather than in the reality of the transcendent. Sonam Kachru's comments delve into Thompson's historiographical and interpretive claims about Buddhist modernism and Buddhist exceptionalism. Kachru asks, using B. R. Ambedkar as a key comparison,¹² exactly what kinds of modernist reconstructive interpretive methodologies are subject to Thompson's critique of Buddhist modernism.

Is it the fact of a reconstructive methodology *per se* or the goals to which such a methodology is put and the framework or worldview in which it takes place? Kachru raises questions about the relations between modernity, Buddhist exceptionalism, and the kind of separation from tradition that Thompson thinks impedes cosmopolitanism.

The second set of comments focuses on Thompson's conception of cosmopolitanism, the kind of conversation he thinks profitable, and the commitments that underlie that kind of conversation. Jonardon Ganeri—sympathetic to Thompson's cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan vision of Buddhism as “one of humanity's great religious and intellectual traditions” (1) since Buddhism, Ganeri notes, has always been cosmopolitan—asks what a truly cosmopolitan conversation between Buddhism and science might look like. It would be another error, he claims, for that conversation to begin from a Eurocentric and Orientalist conception of science. Science, he argues, is better understood in a cosmopolitan sense as a special form of inquiry, aiming at the production of public knowledge, that is constrained and guided by an idealized conception of the common good. Extending Christopher I. Beckwith's work, Ganeri argues that Buddhism in South and Central Asia was part of the development of science insofar as it was part of the transmission of methods of question and answer that were taken up first by Arab scholars and then by Western medieval scholars.¹³ Ganeri's comments serve as an example of the kind of historically informed and detailed cosmopolitan conversation that Thompson suggests as a model. Abraham Velez de Cea argues that a moderate cosmopolitanism of Thompson's sort, one that allows for pluralism about value and way of life and partiality to particular individuals and groups, may be inconsistent with certain universalist Buddhist ethical tenets. He also suggests that Buddhist modernists may not necessarily be Buddhist exceptionalists or neuroessentialists and that emphasizing the variety and equality of Buddhist traditions amounts to a kind of “postmodern Orientalism.” Laura P. Guerrero argues that Thompson's critique of Buddhist modernism is itself anti-cosmopolitan because it is an external critique that does not fully respect the cosmopolitan commitment to individual choice of a way of life. Cosmopolitanism, for Guerrero, should not involve taking up “some acultural, ahistorical, and neutral view from nowhere from which to arbitrate among diverse participants.” Neither should it be inconsistent with or hindered by exceptionalist claims to truth of whatever stripe. Constance Kassor, while sympathetic to Thompson's cosmopolitanism, wonders whether Thompson's conception of Buddhist modernism is too narrow insofar as it reflects Thompson's own personal concerns with bringing Buddhism into fruitful conversation with Western science. There are other forms of Buddhist modernism, Kassor notes, that ought not to be held to this standard. So, Kassor asks in a clarificatory spirit, who is the intended audience for this book? Christian Coseru, in the cosmopolitan spirit of dialogue that Thompson proposes, argues that Thompson's rejection of evolutionary psychology as a suitable framework for analyzing Buddhist moral psychological ideas and for relating Buddhism to science is unwarranted and that Thompson's apparent Madhyamaka commitments are themselves not well suited

for pursuing the Buddhism-science exchange, especially for engaging in a debate about progress in science.

The preceding summary only skims the surface of a host of important issues raised by Thompson's book, the commentaries, and his “Replies.” Many of the comments also touch on Thompson's views about the no-self doctrine and its relation to modern science, on the relation between Thompson's personal history and personal commitments and the larger cultural and philosophical points that he wants to make, on the distinction between faith and confidence, and on the relationship between naturalism and the Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective on the mind. Thompson responds to each of these issues in some depth and analytical detail in his “Replies.” The contents of this issue are themselves a contribution to building the kind of philosophical and cosmopolitan conversation that Thompson exemplifies so eloquently and we will leave the reader to see how the conversation continues to play out.

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NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book unless the context indicates otherwise.
2. Sonam Kachru references both Russell's essay and Ilaiah's book in his contribution to this issue. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996).
3. Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991 / revised edition, 2016).
4. David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
5. Compare McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 21: “This portrait of Buddhist modernism . . . is not one that attempts to cover every contour and capture every color of this widely diverse movement. Certain features are rendered in bright light; others are left in shadow with vague outlines coming through. The colors are refracted through the developments that have been prominent in the West, especially North America, where Buddhism has proven most successful.”
6. This is not to make the sociological claim that Thompson's conception of Buddhist modernism is held or proposed only by Westerners. The Dalai Lama's claims about “Buddhist science” are an explicit target of Thompson's critique (26, 48–50, 54–55, 185) and in the background of several of Thompson's explicit targets is D. T. Suzuki's Romanticist/Transcendentalist-influenced conception of Zen Buddhism (27–28). Other important Asian Buddhist modernists include Anagarika Dharmapala, S. N. Goenka, Chögyam Trungpa, and Thich Nhat Hanh (Thompson, “Replies,” note 3). Thompson considers this issue in chapter 1 of the book. The political and nationalist Buddhist modernist strands

in South and Southeast Asia would deserve a very different critique, one much more akin, perhaps, to Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian" or Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu*. Kachru, in his comments, and Thompson, in section II of his "Replies," discuss the interesting case of B. R. Ambedkar's Buddhism, which draws together modernist exegeses for political (anti-caste) purposes. See Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (London: Verso, 2014). See also Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma, *B. R. Ambedkar, The Buddha and His Dhamma: A Critical Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

7. Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace [De Iure Belli ac Pacis Libri Tres]*, trans. Francis W. Kelsey with the collaboration of Arthur E. R. Boak, Henry A. Sanders, Jesse S. Reeves, and Herbert F. Wright (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925 / originally 1625); Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, trans. David L. Colclasure, with essays by Jeremy Waldron, Michael W. Doyle, and Allen W. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
8. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).
9. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007). In *Cosmopolitanism*, Appiah articulates and defends an attractive cosmopolitan position, which he dubs "partial" or "rooted" cosmopolitanism (xvii). Partial cosmopolitans "take sides neither with the nationalist who abandons all foreigners nor with the hardcore cosmopolitan who regards her friends and fellow citizens with icy impartiality" (xvi-xvii). Rooted cosmopolitans affirm that "loyalties and local allegiances . . . determine who we are" and that "a creed that disdains partialities of kinfolk and community may have a past, but it has no future" (xviii). In accordance with Appiah's crisp formulation of cosmopolitanism as "universality plus difference" (151), cosmopolitan virtues include concern for others on account of shared humanity and respect for legitimate differences in thought and action (xv), whereas cosmopolitan commitments include commitments to universal truth, tolerance, pluralism, and fallibilism (144). Pluralism, he asserts, is the view that "there are many values worth living by and that you cannot live by all of them"; for pluralists, it is neither surprising nor undesirable that different people and different societies subscribe to different values (144). Fallibilism, which Appiah also calls "epistemic humility," is the view that "our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence"; knowing they do not have all the answers, fallibilists are humble enough to think they may learn from others (144). Appiah-style commitments to universal truth, tolerance, pluralism, and fallibilism (epistemic humility) share a strong family resemblance to confidence in reason, intellectual empathy, intellectual integrity, and intellectual humility as delineated by Richard Paul and Linda Elder in their celebrated model of critical thinking. See Richard Paul, *The Thinker's Guide to the Nature and Functions of Critical and Creative Thinking* (Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2008); Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005); Richard Paul and Linda Elder, *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts and Tools*, 6th ed. (Tomball, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2009); Linda Elder and Richard Paul, "Critical Thinking: Developing Intellectual Traits," *Journal of Developmental Education* 21, no. 3 (1998): 34-35. See also A. Minh Nguyen, "Transformation Through Study Abroad: Critical Thinking and World Citizenship," in *Preparing Tomorrow's Global Leaders: Honors International Education*, eds. Mary Kay Mulvaney and Kim Klein (Lincoln, NE: National Collegiate Honors Council, 2013), 21-43; A. Minh Nguyen, "Study Abroad's Contribution to Critical Thinking and World Citizenship," *Think: Philosophy for Everyone* 11, no. 31 (2012): 27-40.
10. The phrase "distinctive contours" is taken from Sonam Kachru's comments. In his contribution to this issue, Kachru poses questions that "seek to clarify the distinctive contours of Thompson's target," i.e., Buddhist modernism.
11. For a comparison with contemporary trends in the history of early modern European philosophy, see Christia Mercer, "The Contextualist Revolution in Early Modern Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 57, no. 3 (2019): 529-48.
12. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*; Rathore and Verma, *B. R. Ambedkar*.

13. Christopher I. Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

ARTICLES

Précis of Why I Am Not a Buddhist

Evan Thompson

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

EVAN.THOMPSON@UBC.CA

This précis presents the main themes and ideas of my book, but without summarizing the arguments for them. I begin with an overview of the book, followed by brief chapter summaries.

OVERVIEW¹

Buddhism is one of humanity's great religious and intellectual traditions. It is, and deserves to be, a participant in the secular and liberal democratic societies of our modern world. It is, and deserves to be, a contributor to a cosmopolitan community, one in which people participate in relationships of mutual respect and cooperation, despite their differing beliefs. Throughout its history, especially in South and East Asia, Buddhism has played this role of contributing to cosmopolitan societies. It has enriched the religious, intellectual, and artistic worlds of its pluralistic host cultures. Now Buddhism also enriches the modern world. In North America, Asian immigrants and European and American converts have created new kinds of Buddhist communities, rituals, and artworks. Buddhism's influence on popular culture is widespread. Buddhism continues to be one of our most vibrant traditions.

Nevertheless, the dominant strand of modern Buddhism, known as "Buddhist modernism," is full of confused ideas. They coalesce around what I call "Buddhist exceptionalism." Buddhist exceptionalism is the belief that Buddhism is superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical, or that Buddhism isn't really a religion but rather is a kind of "mind science," therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation. These beliefs, as well as the assumptions about religion and science on which they rest, are mistaken. They need to be discarded if Buddhism is to take its rightful place as a valuable contributor to a modern cosmopolitan community. Cosmopolitanism, the idea that all human beings belong to one community that can and should encompass different ways of life, provides a better framework for appreciating Buddhism and for understanding religion and science than Buddhist modernism. That is the argument of my book.

Buddhist exceptionalism is central to Buddhist modernism, the dominant strand of modern Buddhism that downplays the metaphysical and ritual elements of traditional Asian Buddhism while emphasizing personal meditative experience and scientific rationality. Buddhist modernism presents itself as if it were Buddhism's original and essential core, when in fact it's historically recent, originating in the nineteenth century.

“Religion” is a term created by European scholars; it isn’t native to the languages of premodern Asia. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the scholarly study of religion, Buddhism qualifies as a religion, and it’s no more or less inherently compatible with science than any other religion. Religions consist not just of beliefs and doctrines but also of social practices of meaning-making, including rituals and contemplative practices, such as prayer and meditation. Religions instill a sense of transcendence, a sensibility for that which exceeds ordinary experience. Every form of Buddhism, including even so-called secular Buddhism, contains these elements.

Science isn’t a monolithic edifice of final principles and established facts. Rather, it’s a system of orderly and testable public knowledge comprising multiple and sometimes rival views about the universe, life, and the mind. It includes not just experimental investigations with increasingly sophisticated technologies but also epistemology, linguistics, logic, and mathematics. In a broad sense, science is a form of public knowledge based on testable, empirical observations and rational principles that can be intersubjectively agreed upon.

Science can devolve into narrow-minded ideology no less than religion can, and religion can nurture and inspire science. Asking whether science and religion are compatible or incompatible is like asking whether art and science or art and religion are compatible or incompatible: It all depends on the larger culture that contains them.

Buddhist exceptionalism presents Buddhism as uniquely suited to the modern world, but we can sanitize any religion in this modernist way. Consider modern Christian humanism, which stresses the humanity of Jesus, unites Christian ethics with humanist principles, promotes science, and calls attention to the Judeo-Christian and ancient Greek sources of scientific ideas such as the “laws of nature.” Or consider Liberal Judaism, which regards the Torah as written by human beings, not written by God and given to Moses on stone tablets, and emphasizes the progressive Jewish intellectual tradition.

Religion and science have never been separate and autonomous spheres, or “nonoverlapping magisteria” in Stephen Jay Gould’s famous phrase.² On the contrary, they constantly intersect, usually with friction. Often the friction leads to conflict; sometimes it leads to cooperation and new insights. The culture and historical epoch determine the forms that conflict and cooperation will take. Gould’s proposal to reconcile religion and science by treating them as independent realms, each with its own authority, is a nonstarter.

The New Atheists recognize that religion and science can’t be separated in the way that Gould proposes, but their campaigns to stamp out religion in the name of science misunderstand the meaning-making activities of religion. Religions don’t explain the universe as science does; they create meaning through rituals, communities, textual traditions, and ways of understanding life’s great events—birth, aging, sickness, trauma, extraordinary states of consciousness, and death. The New Atheists also

misunderstand science. They fail to see that when science steps back from experimentation in order to give meaning to its results in terms of grand stories about where we come from and where we’re going—the narratives of cosmology and evolution—it cannot help but become a mythic form of meaning-making and typically takes the structures of its narratives from religion.³

Buddhist modernism encourages a kind of false consciousness: It makes people think that if they embrace Buddhism or just pick out its supposedly nonreligious parts, they’re being “spiritual but not religious” when, unbeknownst to them, religious forces are impelling them. These forces include the desire to be part of a community organized around some sense of the sacred, the desire to find a source of meaning that transcends the individual, the felt need to cope with suffering, or the desire to experience deep and transformative states of contemplation. The actions people undertake to satisfy these desires, such as practicing meditation or going on retreats, are also religious. People use the word “spiritual” because they want to emphasize transformative personal experiences apart from public religious institutions. Nevertheless, from an outside, analytical perspective informed by the history, anthropology, and sociology of religion, “spirituality without religion” is really just “privatized experience-oriented religion.”⁴

Buddhist modernism is now replete with appeals to the supposed authority of neuroscience. It has claimed that neuroscience confirms the truth of the Buddhist idea that there is no self, that neuroscience shows that mindfulness meditation “literally changes your brain,” and that enlightenment has “neural correlates.”

These ideas aren’t just wrong; they’re confused. The self isn’t a brain-generated illusion or nonexistent fiction; it’s a biological and social construction. Anything you do “literally changes your brain”; evidence for mindfulness meditation leading to beneficial changes in the brain is still tentative; and mindfulness meditation is a social practice whose positive or negative value depends on social facts beyond the brain. “Enlightenment” isn’t a singular state with a unique brain signature; it’s an ambiguous concept whose different and often incompatible meanings depend on the religious and philosophical traditions that give rise to them. Contrary to “neural Buddhism,”⁵ the status of the self, the value of meditation, and the meaning of “enlightenment” aren’t matters that neuroscience can decide. They’re inherently philosophical matters that lie beyond the ken of neuroscience.

Since I’m a modern Westerner who does not wish to renounce the world and become a monastic religionist, there is no way I can be a Buddhist without being a Buddhist modernist. But Buddhist modernism is philosophically unsound, so I see no way for myself to be a Buddhist without acting in bad faith. That is why I’m not a Buddhist.

My book has a critical part and a positive part. The critical part is a philosophical critique of Buddhist modernism. I argue against Buddhist exceptionalism and the mistaken ideas about science and religion on which it rests. I also

argue against neural Buddhism, which is a scientific version of Buddhist modernism. The point, however, is not to argue that Buddhist modernism is less “authentic” than “traditional” Buddhism. Such arguments are nonstarters. There is no one traditional Buddhism. Buddhism is an evolving tradition that has taken innumerable forms over the millennia in Asia and now in Europe and North America. Trying to go back to the “original teachings of the Buddha” is a typical Buddhist modernist move (and one that Buddhist modernism shares with the equally modern phenomenon of religious fundamentalism). The move flies in the face of the fact that we have no direct access to what the Buddha thought and taught. To be inspired by the early Buddhist texts and construct out of them a message for today is one thing; to try to legitimize one’s construction by claiming historical veracity for it is another. Buddhist modernists typically take the second step and thereby undermine their case.

We shouldn’t conflate Buddhist modernism and Buddhism in the modern world. Buddhist modernism is only one way to be a Buddhist in the modern world. There are also traditional monastic forms of Buddhism throughout the world and traditional Asian lay forms of Buddhism. There is also Buddhist fundamentalism (for example, in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand). These forms of Buddhism aren’t insulated from one another; rather, they intersect in complex ways. Nevertheless, Buddhist modernism can be singled out as a recognizable historical movement and a widespread contemporary phenomenon. As historian David McMahan observes in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, “Buddhist modernism is becoming the lingua franca of Buddhism as it is presented in transnational, cosmopolitan contexts.”⁶ The language of Buddhist modernism is becoming a “meta-language” for how to interpret the fundamental elements of Buddhism and situate them in the modern world. Although the context of my critique is Buddhism in the modern world, the scope of my critique is Buddhist modernism or, more precisely, Buddhist modernism in Europe and North America since Asia is evolving its own unique forms of Buddhist modernism. My critical arguments apply to European and American Buddhist modernism, not to every form of Buddhism or Buddhism as a whole.

The positive part of this book is an argument for cosmopolitanism, the idea that all human beings belong to a single community, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. In the Mediterranean philosophical narrative, this idea goes back to Epictetus, a first-century Stoic philosopher who said, “Never, when asked one’s country, answer, ‘I am Athenian or Corinthian,’ but ‘I am a citizen of the world.’”⁷ Cosmopolitan thinking stretches from ancient Greece and Rome through the European Age of Enlightenment and into the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. South Asia and East Asia have their own versions of cosmopolitanism, as does Africa. The historian Sheldon Pollock uses the term “the Sanskrit cosmopolis” to describe the classical South Asian world of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and later Islam, in which Sanskrit was the language of literature.⁸ In East Asia, the “three teachings” of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism coexisted and cross-fertilized one another.

Kwame Anthony Appiah has recently reinvigorated cosmopolitanism.⁹ He argues that the values worth living by are many and not one, that different people and societies can and should embody different ways of life, that we ought to care about the welfare of the individuals engaged in those different ways of life, and that the insights of any one tradition are not the exclusive preserve of that tradition or any other.

Cosmopolitan thinkers move across different religious, scientific, philosophical, and artistic traditions and explore the presuppositions and commitments of those traditions. Cosmopolitanism offers a perspective from which to adjudicate the complex relationship between religion and science. It provides a better way for us to appreciate Buddhism’s originality and insights than Buddhist modernism.

My title for this book—*Why I Am Not a Buddhist*—recalls the title of Bertrand Russell’s famous essay “Why I Am Not a Christian,” which he originally gave as a lecture to the National Secular Society in London on March 6, 1927. I admire Russell’s philosophical brilliance and his courage as a social critic and political activist. There are important differences, however, between his aims and mine in this book. Unlike Russell, I’m not concerned to argue against religion. His view that fear is the foundation of religion and that science can help us to get over this fear is simplistic. My feelings toward Buddhism aren’t hostile as his were toward Christianity. Nevertheless, I approve of his words at the end of the essay: “We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world—its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it.”¹⁰ I argue that the Buddhist intellectual tradition can help contribute to this effort in a cosmopolitan world without our having to accept the dubious claims of Buddhist modernism.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

INTRODUCTION

The above overview is drawn from the Introduction, which also presents my personal history of involvement with Buddhism, particularly in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue. Because of my involvement in this dialogue, many people assumed I was a Buddhist and were usually surprised when I said I wasn’t. I wrote the book to present my perspective on Buddhist modernism, to explain why I am not a Buddhist, and to correct what I thought were the ways that Buddhism, science, and religion were often mischaracterized in the Buddhism-science dialogue, principally as a result of Buddhist exceptionalism.

CHAPTER ONE: THE MYTH OF BUDDHIST EXCEPTIONALISM

This chapter discusses the historical and intellectual movement of Buddhist modernism and the role that Buddhist exceptionalism plays in it. I argue that Buddhist exceptionalism distorts Buddhism, religion, and science.

CHAPTER TWO: IS BUDDHISM TRUE?

This chapter presents a critique of Robert Wright’s *Why*

Buddhism Is True. Wright uses evolutionary psychology to legitimize a naturalistic version of modern North American Buddhism. I argue that evolutionary psychology is not the right framework for understanding the human mind or the right framework for relating science to Buddhism, that naturalistic Buddhism is not compelling because it distorts the normative and soteriological commitments of Buddhism, and that the question “Is Buddhism true?” is not the right one to ask when “truth” is understood as “scientific truth.”

CHAPTER THREE: NO SELF? NOT SO FAST

I argue for two principal claims concerning how to relate the Buddhist theory of no-self to cognitive science and contemporary philosophy. First, cognitive science does not indicate that the self is an illusion; it suggests that it is a construction. So when Buddhist modernists claim that science demonstrates the truth of the Buddhist view that there is no self, they are mistaken. Second, it is facile to think that the Buddhist no-self theorists are superior to the Brahminical self-theorists in being more “scientific” or rational and empirical. The Brahminical theorists are just as committed to rational and empirical inquiry as the Buddhists. So Buddhist exceptionalism—that Buddhism is superior in being uniquely scientific—is unwarranted.

CHAPTER FOUR: MINDFULNESS MANIA

I argue against two widespread ideas about mindfulness meditation practices. One is that mindfulness is essentially an inward awareness of one’s own private mental theater. The other is that the best way to understand the effects of mindfulness practices is to look inside the head at the brain. Instead, I argue that the cognitive capacities on which mindfulness relies are metacognitive and belong to social cognition, that mindfulness consists in the integrated exercise of a host of cognitive, affective, and social skills in situated action, that brain processes are necessary enabling conditions of mindfulness but are only partially constitutive of it, and that they become constitutive only given the wider context of embodied and embedded cognition and action.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE RHETORIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

This chapter targets the Buddhist modernist idea of “awakening” or “enlightenment,” understood as a kind of nonconceptual insight or epiphany, or as a scientifically comprehensible psychological state with identifiable neural correlates (or as both). I argue that *enlightenment* is an ambiguous concept, that what it refers to is not a singular state, and that its many Buddhist meanings are often incompatible. Enlightenment is concept-dependent in the sense that any experience called an “enlightenment experience” is concept-dependent. So the idea that some state could inherently be an enlightenment state outside of concepts, language, history, and tradition makes no sense.

CHAPTER SIX: COSMOPOLITANISM AND CONVERSATION

This chapter discusses philosophical cosmopolitanism, especially in the context of the Buddhism-science

dialogue. I argue that the cosmopolitanist viewpoint, as sketched above in the overview, provides a better way for us to appreciate the Buddhist intellectual tradition and its importance today than does Buddhist modernism.

NOTES

1. The overview borrows from the Introduction to Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020) and from Evan Thompson, “Beyond Buddhist Exceptionalism,” *Yale University Press Blog*, January 10, 2020, <http://blog.yalebooks.com/2020/01/10/beyond-buddhist-exceptionalism/>.
2. Stephen Jay Gould, *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002).
3. See William Irwin Thompson, *Coming into Being: Artifacts and Texts in the Evolution of Consciousness* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), chapter 3; and Marcelo Gleiser, *The Dancing Universe: From Creation Myths to the Big Bang* (New York: Plume, 1998).
4. Heinz Streib and Ralph W. Hood, “‘Spirituality’ as Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion: Empirical and Conceptual Perspectives,” *Implicit Religion* 14, no. 4 (2011): 433-53.
5. The term “neural Buddhism” comes from David Brooks, “The Neural Buddhists,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/opinion/13brooks.html>.
6. David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 259.
7. Epictetus, *Discourses*, Book I: IX. See Epictetus, *Discourses*, Books 1-2, trans. W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 63.
8. Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).
9. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).
10. Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

On Pursuing the Dialogue Between Buddhism and Science in Ways That Distort Neither¹

Christian Coseru

COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON
COSERUC@COFC.EDU

I. INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon for engagements with Buddhism to be motivated by the conviction that its various claims about the mind, knowledge, and the nature of reality are, in effect, true. In such instances, “Buddhist” can sometimes attach to those with expertise in, say, Abhidharma in the same way that “Catholic” can attach to Thomists. My general impression, however, is that, at least among philosophers of European descent, the label indicates expertise rather than conviction (the two, of course, are not mutually exclusive). And while there are many reasons why one *might not* want to be associated with the object of one’s scholarly endeavors, two in particular stand out. First, since scholarship in the humanities and social sciences is not incompatible with upholding a particular religious or

ideological view, one might want to avoid getting boxed in as a doctrinaire thinker. Second, the ascendancy of science and the scientific method as the most effective way to gain reliable knowledge means that traditional religions have had to adapt and seek new relevance, often by claiming to be the repositories of wisdom or knowledge that falls outside the purview of science. And few have been more successful in responding to this challenge than Buddhism. Of course, Buddhism's encounter with modernity tells a complex story of adaptation and change.² But the global explosion of the mindfulness movement in recent decades, backed by a cross section of the scientific and religious studies establishment, means that large segments of the educated public now regard Buddhism as a tradition that, in effect, has got its principles and methods right.

This new brand of recognizably Buddhist apologetics cloaked in a scientific aura is the second reason why one might deliberately resist the label "Buddhist." It is also the main reason behind Evan Thompson's new book, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, a refreshing, original, and insightful contribution to our understanding of "Buddhist modernism," the now widely shared belief that Buddhism is a kind of science of the mind whose insights have been experimentally tested and confirmed over millennia through meditative practice. There is much that Thompson and I agree on about the best way to engage Buddhism and bring it into dialogue with contemporary thought. But since my role here is that of a critic, I will focus on two areas where, I think, most of our disagreements lie: (i) the suitability of evolutionary psychology as a framework of analysis for Buddhist moral psychological ideas and (ii) whether a Madhyamaka-inspired anti-foundationalist stance can serve as an effective platform for debating the issue of progress in science.

II. BUDDHISM AND EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY: MATCHING PARTNERS OR INCOMPATIBLE BEDFELLOWS?

Critics of Buddhist modernism have so far argued that the seemingly self-evident claims made about Buddhism—that it is not a religion but a practical guide to living, that it is a method of self-analysis compatible with modern psychology, that it is egalitarian and democratic, and that meditation is its core practice—are a modern construct.³ Thompson's contribution to this critique has two primary targets: (i) the mindfulness movement, which is inspired by, and strongly endorses, neuroessentialism or the view that the best and most definitive way to explain human psychology is by reference to the brain and its activity; and (ii) the evolutionary psychology paradigm used to legitimize a naturalized version of Buddhism favored by many Europeans and North Americans, as found, *inter alia*, in Robert Wright's best-selling *Why Buddhism Is True*. I think Thompson is spot-on in his assessment of Buddhist modernism as an ideological expression of the mindfulness movement. But his critical stance on evolutionary psychology and the project of naturalizing Buddhism is less convincing. Indeed, much of Thompson's critique of Buddhist modernism turns on his rejection of some of the foundational premises of evolutionary psychology. And he takes issues with those who appeal to evolutionary

psychology as the right framework for relating Buddhism to science. Is he right? Undoubtedly, as an enterprise that attempts to explain most mental traits as adaptations or functional products of natural selection, evolutionary psychology is not without controversy. But Thompson, I will argue, relies on some common misconceptions about the field and its overly critical reception, mainly among philosophers of biology.

First, Thompson argues that evolutionary psychologists operate with a skewed conception of evolution, which regards organisms "as passive recipients or passive effects of natural selection" (65). A better alternative, he suggests, is to regard organisms as able to "exert an influence over their own evolution by actively shaping their environments" (65)—an idea favored by what evolutionary ecologists call "niche construction theory" (65). But this way of framing the issue plays on a misconception that evolution and adaptive behavior or learning represent different explanations. To claim that some traits—for instance, the human fear of snakes—are evolved does not mean they are present at birth. Rather, it is to claim that humans have an evolved learning mechanism that makes it more easily in their case to acquire a fear of snakes than of other things in the environment. Furthermore, learning itself is enabled by neurocognitive processes that are themselves the product of evolution.

Consider perception, one of the modalities by which we learn to navigate the environment. In order to understand how perception works, we must look to the causal processes that have configured our perceptual systems. While cats and human infants have similar perceptual systems, the difference between the way cats and human infants perceive is largely a function of their evolved brain-based mechanisms. Lastly, evolution and learning operate at different levels of explanation. In the middle of the last century, Ernst Mayr suggested that we understand biology as an enterprise in the pursuit of two sets of questions: (i) *proximate*, concerned with the matter of structure and mechanism (that is, with the immediately preceding mechanisms that lead an organism to do what it does on a given occasion); and (ii) *ultimate*, concerned with why organisms are the way they are (that is, why organisms tend to have a system that responds that way).⁴ Mayr thought the former were the province of functional biologists, while evolutionary biologists were mainly concerned with the latter, even though the study of adaptive functions of traits is central to evolutionary explanations. The confusion these notions created led the ethologist Niko Tinbergen to frame biology as actually concerned with four types of questions, now known as "Tinbergen's Four Questions."⁵ Two are about ontogeny (How does a specific trait develop in individuals?) and mechanism (What is the structure of the trait?). The other two are about phylogeny (What is the trait's evolutionary history?) and adaptive significance (How have trait variations influenced fitness?).⁶ Although these two sets of questions may lead to conflicting explanations, they are not necessarily incompatible: To single out a specific trait as a product of evolution says nothing about how the organism exhibiting that trait will behave during its lifespan. For instance, in the case of some butterfly pupae turning brown rather than green, we can tell a story about

how a shortened photoperiod leads to the release of a chemical that turns off the green pigment. But we can also say that butterflies have this system because butterflies that lack it would have produced green pupae in the winter, which would have resulted in higher rates of predation.

Second, Thompson thinks evolutionary psychologists unfairly privilege one period in our evolutionary history—the Pleistocene—“as the source of all our important psychological adaptations” (65), downplaying the role that cultural transmission has played in human evolution. As an alternative proposal, he suggests that “gene-culture coevolution theory” (65) is better suited to show how “changes in genes can lead to changes in culture, which can then influence genetic selection” (66). In Thompson’s view, making room for the “cultural transmission of tools and concepts” and the “inheritance of culturally shaped environments” (66) gives this theory an added explanatory advantage. But this alternative proposal begs the question: If our ability to act in ways that go beyond our genetic heritage is not itself a product of evolution, then where does this ability come from? Tools and concepts have certainly served as proximate factors of cultural transmission, but our ability to fashion them and to adopt behaviors in keeping with their function must itself have been made possible by the forces of evolution. Of course, not all aspects of human behavior fit neatly the current approach favored by evolutionary psychologists. But progress in explaining a wide range of human behavior, from parenting⁷ and cooperation⁸ to perception⁹ and cross-cultural differences in social behavior,¹⁰ mitigates against this wholesale dismissal of evolutionary psychology as a deeply flawed enterprise.

Third, Thompson targets the hypothesis, favored by many evolutionary psychologists, that the mind has a modular cognitive architecture composed of computational processes that are innate adaptations. He thinks there is no evidence from neuroscience in support of this hypothesis. Against the evolutionary psychology hypothesis that cognition is mostly domain-specific, Thompson proposes that we interpret the evidence from neuroscience as providing support for an alternative hypothesis, namely, one that regards brain areas and networks as specialized for performing “a variety of functions depending on the context” (67) and as exhibiting “flexible tendencies to respond across a wide range of circumstances and tasks” (68). Whereas the massive modularity hypothesis puts forward an image of the mind as modular through and through—including both low-level systems underlying perception and language and high-level systems responsible for reasoning and decision-making—the alternative, emergentist hypothesis that Thompson favors understands cognition as a function of dynamic interactions among various modules, not as a result of their activation. In short, there are no “dedicated, special-purpose cognitive modules instantiated in specific brain structures” (69) of the sort evolutionary psychologists assume to be the case.

But this way of framing the issue glosses over a rich history of debate in both cognitive science and the philosophy of mind going back to Jerry Fodor’s landmark book *The Modularity of Mind*, which first introduced the term

“module” and its cognates. As that debate shows, the question of the modularity of the mind is far from settled. For advocates of the massive modularity hypothesis,¹¹ the advantage modular systems have over their alternatives lies in their problem-solving capacity. That is, adaptive problems are more readily and efficiently solved by modular systems than by non-modular systems, which explains why evolution has favored this type of cognitive architecture.¹² Critics of the hypothesis single out things like neuroplasticity,¹³ high-level cognitive capacities such as mind-reading,¹⁴ and positive correlations among ostensibly distinct cognitive abilities¹⁵ as evidence against the view that the mind essentially consists of a collection of distinct and adaptively specialized modules for different cognitive tasks. But even critics often concede that despite the ensuing debate, the concept of modularity has wide relevance beyond cognitive science and the philosophy of mind. Indeed, in epistemology, it is often “invoked to defend the legitimacy of a theory-neutral type of observation, and hence the possibility of some degree of consensus among scientists with divergent theoretical commitments.”¹⁶

Fourth, Thompson joins the chorus of critics who point out that the hypotheses of evolutionary psychology aren’t confirmed by evolutionary biology. The problem, in this case, is said to lie in their approach. That is, “evolutionary psychologists look for what they consider to be design in the makeup of our psychological traits and then present a scenario involving natural selection that would have led to the formation of those traits” (69). What makes this approach problematic, according to critics, is a series of mistaken assumptions: (i) that all traits have evolved by natural selection; (ii) that adaptations are properly defined as traits; and (iii) that certain cognitive traits can be shown to be widespread in human beings with the right experimental framework (70). But this way of framing the debate paints evolutionary psychologists as something they explicitly are not: genetic determinists.¹⁷ As evolutionary psychologists such as Leda Cosmides and John Tooby make quite clear, evolutionary psychology is not behavioral genetics: “Behavior geneticists are interested in the extent to which *differences* between people in a given environment can be accounted for by *differences* in their genes. Evolutionary psychologists are interested in individual differences only insofar as these are the manifestation of an underlying architecture shared by all human beings.”¹⁸ This underlying architecture is what mediates an organism’s phenotypic expression, which in turn can be explained in terms of adaptations that were selected for, which are present because they are in turn causally coupled to traits. The question is not whether genes or the environment are more (or less) important in determining an organism’s phenotype. Rather, as Cosmides and Tooby clarify, “[e]very aspect of an organism’s phenotype is the joint product of its genes and its environment. To ask which is more important is like asking, Which is more important in determining the area of a rectangle, the length or the width? . . . Genes *allow* the environment to influence the development of phenotypes” but “what effect the environment will have on an organism depends critically on the details of its evolved cognitive architecture.”¹⁹

As for the view that evolutionary hypotheses are mainly post-hoc storytelling or “just-so” stories—a seemingly unscientific process of noticing something special about human behavior, concocting a convenient (read evolutionary) explanation about it, and defending the explanation without further experimental work—the response from evolutionary psychologists is quite categorical: This is nothing but a widespread misconception. While it is true that generating a hypothesis without deriving or testing any new predictions based on it might open one to the charge of just-so storytelling, as I noted above, evolutionary psychologists have made progress in explaining a wide range of human behavior.²⁰ Part of the problem is that critics assume scientific enterprises that have a historical component such as evolutionary psychology somehow trade in unfalsifiable hypotheses. But if that were the case, the hypotheses of all scientific disciplines with a historical component—e.g., astrophysics, cosmology, and geology—would amount to nothing more than just-so storytelling. The crucial point is to generate novel predictions about previously unobserved phenomena “that can be tested in the present day.”²¹ Science, as we all know, is an open-ended enterprise whose conclusions are subject to revision in light of new findings and better theorizing.

Regardless of Thompson’s critical stance on the viability of evolutionary psychology as a scientific enterprise, it is a further question whether evolutionary psychology is an appropriate framework for relating Buddhism to science. The aggregate view of human experience, a focus on latent disposition as subpersonal or subconscious conduits to conscious cognition, and the paramount importance of causal rather than justificatory accounts of reasoning certainly speak in favor of this corroboration. Does that mean there is no room for competing approaches, specifically for the embodied and enactive cognitive science that Thompson favors? Certainly not. I myself have argued in favor of the usefulness of the latter in accounting for certain aspects of the Buddhist epistemological account of perception, attention, and reasoning.²² Whether naturalistic Buddhism is compelling depends on whatever conception of naturalism is in play. A naturalism fine-tuned to accommodate mental phenomena is precisely what Varela’s neurophenomenological project²³ advocates for in putting forth a vision of cognition as embodied, embedded, and enactive, and thus as seemingly continuous with the environment of which it is a part.

Since Thompson has assiduously defended this vision in his work,²⁴ he ought to find compelling a conception of naturalism that aligns Abhidharma Reductionism with the neurophenomenological enterprise. And, as his summation of the enactive approach testifies, it seems that he indeed does: “[C]ognition is embodied sense-making; it is the enactment or bringing forth of a lived world of meaning and relevance in and through embodied action. . . . Instead of applying a scientific framework to Buddhism from the outside, we engage in a two-way exchange with Buddhism, including developing a version of embodied cognitive science that incorporates ideas from Buddhist philosophy” (71-72). But in order to find out whether the proposal he puts forward is a viable one, we must consider two things: first, whether the school of thought Thompson turns to—

that of Madhyamaka (Middle Way), associated with the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 CE)—does indeed capture Buddhism’s core teachings; and second, whether that school of thought provides a viable framework for advancing positive knowledge claims about cognition and the mind.

III. MADHYAMAKA AND THE REAL WORLD

Madhyamaka metaphysics, as Thompson rightly points out, is anti-foundationalist: “Mādhyamikas argue that knowable phenomena are concept-dependent in this technical sense. This implies that it doesn’t make sense to think of knowledge as grasping how the world is in itself apart from the mind” (74). To think of human experience in Madhyamaka terms, then, is to think of its various cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects as lacking any ultimate ground or foundation whatsoever: “Cognition as enaction means that cognition has no ground or foundation beyond its own history, which amounts to a kind of ‘groundless ground’” (74). That’s all fine and good. But Thompson does not understand his two-way exchange with Buddhism as a project in metaphysics *simpliciter*. Rather, the goal is to advance cognitive science in ways that can better account for human experience. So, the question is: Can Madhyamaka deliver? That is, does Madhyamaka provide the sort of stabilizing framework that allows for various theoretical perspectives (physics, biology, psychology, etc.) to be integrated into a unified worldview?

The answer, in this case, is a categorical “no.” Let me explain. As a knowledge enterprise, science is predicated on a reliable method (the scientific method) and on open-ended modes of inquiry that allow for its hypotheses to be falsified. Furthermore, the advancement of science has meant the diversification of explanatory frameworks to accommodate ever-expanding classes of observable phenomena. Biology alone now branches out into some two dozen subfields, including biophysics, evolution, genetics, and, most consequentially for our times, virology. Each one of these domains contributes to a burgeoning conceptual vocabulary that, in many cases, is domain-specific. Can an anti-foundationalist metaphysics contribute the kinds of hypotheses that would be required to ground scientific inquiry across various domains?

Before venturing an answer, I need to clarify one important aspect of Madhyamaka, specifically its two truths doctrine. The general idea is that there is an ordinary, conventional way of seeing things, and an ultimate, correct way, which takes those things to be empty in the specific sense that they lack a nature of their own and are instead brought about by multiple causes and conditions. This way of mapping out the epistemic domain recalls Wilfrid Sellars’s conception of philosophy as the cultivation of a “stereoscopic vision” that takes in at once both the scientific and the manifest images of the world.²⁵

But the two truths framework is far more radical than it may seem at first blush. Conventionally speaking, there are tables and chairs and people. Ultimately, there are no such things, not because what we ordinarily call a chair is just some material (e.g., wood, plastic) arranged chairwise as a result of multiple causes and conditions,

but because no phenomena, in effect, come into being. As Nāgārjuna famously declares in his *Foundation of the Middle Way Verses*, to think of something “as produced by causes and conditions” is to think of it as a “product” (15.1cd). But something that is a product could not be a stable and intrinsically existent thing, for if it were, it would not be a product. Nor could its existence be due to extrinsic factors, “for an extrinsic nature is said to be the intrinsic nature of another existent” (15.3cd). And since “an existent is established given the existence of either intrinsic nature or extrinsic nature” (15.4cd), it follows that, absent these two singular ways to establish what exists, there can be no existent.²⁶ That is, no phenomena either come into being or go out of existence. And if that wasn’t radical enough, consider the notion that commitment to “it exists” or “it does not exist” (15.7ab) with regard to any entity whatsoever is a slippery slope to either eternalism or nihilism, positions that a Mādhyamika strives to avoid by following the middle way.²⁷

Hence, from a Madhyamaka standpoint, there is no fundamental explanatory framework to account for the way different things (e.g., spacetime geometry, atoms, molecules, enzymes, honey bees) appear or function the way they do. If the ultimate truth is that no phenomena come into being as ordinarily conceived, then this is not something that can be conveyed in language. In short, the Madhyamaka standpoint—to the extent that “standpoint” can be coherently applied in this case—is that reality has an inarticulable structure. Specifically, Nāgārjuna thinks that the conceptual schema implicit in the commonsense view of the world presupposes the existence of a world of stable and self-sustaining objects and processes. Hence, his method consists in demonstrating that existential presuppositions about a world of such stable and self-sustaining objects and processes are never true. To see things from the standpoint of ultimate truth is to call into question the conventions of our everyday world, including our understanding of causation as the relation that links objects and events, and ultimately to show them to be misleading.²⁸

This notion that ordinary objects and events, and the conventions we employ to assess their ontological status, are not what they seem to be when subjected to rigorous analysis should strike most readers as sensible enough. But as some have argued, in lacking a commitment to revising and reforming the conventional ways of seeing things, Madhyamaka falls short of allowing for sophisticated theoretical ideas and explanations of a scientific nature. Tom Tillemans makes this point quite clear while reflecting on an influential Madhyamika philosopher’s efforts to rescue conventional truth: “Saying, as does Candrakīrti repeatedly in debates with Sāmkhya and his fellow Buddhists, that rice just leads to rice rather than barley, may well be a very good answer to the various metaphysicians who think either that the effect must really be present in the cause to ensure that causality is not haphazard or that cause and effect must be completely separate real entities. It is of course, however, a bad answer to a plant scientist inquiring about genetic features in rice that explain its growth, yield, color, form, resistance to disease, and so on.”²⁹ In short, dumbed-down conventional truth of the sort Madhyamaka trades in was

not terribly attractive even to fellow Buddhist thinkers and their historical rivals, let alone to scientifically informed and philosophically savvy modern audiences.³⁰

Given this unsophisticated conception of the conventional and the view of the ultimate as explanatorily inarticulable, there is little that Madhyamaka can contribute to debates about the best and most effective ways of mapping out a reality that is structured differently at different levels of organization. The problem for Madhyamaka is not just the inadequacy of its two truths framework. Rather, the dialectical progression leading up from conventional to ultimate truth itself is fraught. We can’t overcome the pure conventionalism of the first dialectical step without some epistemology.³¹ In short, claiming, as Madhyamika philosophers do, that the conventional level of truth and/or reality is empty won’t do, since such an assertion can only be made from the standpoint of the truth that defines the quality of being empty, and this assertion presupposes that one first gets the conventional right. And Madhyamaka, it seems, provides no resources (of a conceptual or any other sort) for achieving that goal; there is no master argument for emptiness. If the question of what counts as an oasis is not settled first, how is one to understand the difference between it and a mere mirage? Indeed, as Eviatar Shulman notes, “Nāgārjuna’s critique of any notion of existence is unrelenting; all *bhāva*, existence, must go. . . . This leaves him with very few positive things to say, aside from likening reality, or different aspects of reality, to illusions.”³²

I would suggest that the only way for Thompson to rescue his proposal is to abandon the cosmic illusionism of the Perfection of Wisdom literature and the Madhyamaka paradigm that grew out of it. In doing so, he would be in keeping both with the trajectory of Buddhist thought in India and with the unfolding of the scientific study of the mind for the past century and a half.³³ It is, after all, common knowledge that Nāgārjuna’s writings and his concerted effort to discredit some of the fundamental concepts of Abhidharma had relatively little impact on the subsequent development of Buddhist thought in India (Abhidharma continued to flourish well into the second half of the first millennium with no perceived need on the part of Abhidharma thinkers to defend their theories against his criticism). Nor did Nāgārjuna’s radical critique of the very possibility of grounding knowledge in reliable sources have any impact on the epistemological agenda of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti, which dominated Indian Buddhist intellectual circles and was engaged by Brahmanical philosophers well into the early modern period. Indeed, as Richard Hayes notes, “[a]side from a few commentators on Nāgārjuna who identified themselves as Mādhyamikas, Indian Buddhist intellectual life continued almost as if Nāgārjuna had never existed.”³⁴

These points of criticism aside, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* should be welcomed as an invaluable and timely corrective to the ideological excesses of Buddhist modernism. As I see it, the book’s most important contribution lies in its rather unique vantage point. Thompson has been involved with the Mind and Life Institute (one of the key organizations responsible for spearheading the rapprochement between Buddhism and science) from its inception, and so he is in a

privileged position to reflect critically both on its successes and on its excesses. Over more than three decades, the Mind and Life Symposia have hosted large cohorts of scientists, philosophers, Buddhist scholars, and Tibetan contemplatives, all under the watchful eye of the Dalai Lama. Thompson's own reportage on these intellectually stimulating but often ideologically motivated ventures is that of an insider concerned about having unwittingly participated in an enterprise aimed at remaking Buddhism in the image of modern science. And part of that *mea culpa* should be a celebration of Thompson's prodigious and important work, which promotes a way of thinking that embodies the very best of cosmopolitan philosophy.

NOTES

1. This paper is an abridged version of my essay "The Middle Way to Reality: On Why I Am Not a Buddhist and Other Philosophical Curiosities" (see Coseru forthcoming), which engages a broader set of themes prompted by Thompson's book. Both my essay and Thompson's detailed response to it are forthcoming in *Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions*.
2. Gombrich and Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka*; Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism"; Hubbard and Swanson, *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*; Faure, *Bouddhismes, Philosophies et Religions*; Lopez, *Buddhism and Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*; McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.
3. Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism"; Lopez, *Buddhism and Science*; McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*.
4. Mayr, "Cause and Effect in Biology."
5. Tinbergen, "On the Aims and Methods of Ethology."
6. Nesse, "Tinbergen's Four Questions: Two Proximate, Two Evolutionary."
7. Lawson and Mace, "Trade-Offs in Modern Parenting: A Longitudinal Study of Sibling Competition for Parental Care"; Avinun and Knafo, "Parenting as a Reaction Evoked by Children's Genotype: A Meta-Analysis of Children-as-Twins Studies."
8. Pradel, Euler, and Fetchenhauer, "Spotting Altruistic Dictator Game Players and Mingling with Them: The Elective Assortation of Classmates."
9. Jackson and Cormack, "Evolved Navigation Theory and the Environmental Vertical Illusion."
10. Fincher, Thornhill, Murray, and Schaller, "Pathogen Prevalence Predicts Human Cross-Cultural Variability in Individualism/Collectivism."
11. Sperber, "The Modularity of Thought and the Epidemiology of Representations"; Sperber, "In Defense of Massive Modularity"; Cosmides and Tooby, "Cognitive Adaptations for Social Exchange"; Pinker, *How the Mind Works*; Barrett, "Enzymatic Computation and Cognitive Modularity"; Barrett and Kurzban, "Modularity in Cognition: Framing the Debate."
12. Carruthers, *The Architecture of the Mind*, 25.
13. Buller, *Adapting Minds: Evolutionary Psychology and the Persistent Quest for Human Nature*; Buller and Hardcastle, "Evolutionary Psychology, Meet Developmental Neurobiology: Against Promiscuous Modularity."
14. Currie and Sterelny, "How to Think about the Modularity of Mind-Reading."
15. Carroll, *Human Cognitive Abilities: A Survey of Factor-Analytic Studies*; Rabaglia, Marcus, and Lane, "What Can Individual Differences Tell Us about the Specialization of Function?"
16. Robbins, "Modularity of Mind."
17. Cornwell et al., "Introductory Psychology Texts as a View of Sociobiology/Evolutionary Psychology's Role in Psychology."
18. Cosmides and Tooby, "Cognitive Adaptations for Social Exchange."
19. Ibid.
20. See also Lewis et al., "Evolutionary Psychology: A How-To Guide"; Al-Shawaf, Zreik, and Buss, "Thirteen Misunderstandings about Natural Selection."
21. Al-Shawaf, Zreik, and Buss, "Thirteen Misunderstandings about Natural Selection," 9.
22. Coseru, "Naturalism and Intentionality: A Buddhist Epistemological Approach"; Coseru, *Perceiving Reality: Consciousness, Intentionality, and Cognition in Buddhist Philosophy*; Coseru, "Are Reasons Causally Relevant for Action? Dharmakīrti and the Embodied Cognition Paradigm"; Coseru, "Consciousness, Naturalism, and Human Flourishing."
23. Varela, "Neurophenomenology: A Methodological Remedy for the Hard Problem." First sketched in Laughlin, McManus, and d'Aquili, *Brain, Symbol and Experience: Toward a Neurophenomenology of Human Consciousness*.
24. Lutz and Thompson, "Neurophenomenology: Integrating Subjective Experience and Brain Dynamics in the Neuroscience of Consciousness"; Thompson, "Neurophenomenology and Contemplative Experience."
25. Sellars, "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man."
26. As Siderits has convincingly argued, the claim that everything originates in dependence on causes and conditions cannot be used to prove that nothing has intrinsic nature. Indeed, Abhidharma thinkers held both that things originate in dependence on causes and conditions and that they have intrinsic natures, since possessing an intrinsic nature says nothing about how that nature was realized. "Consequently, its coming into existence in dependence on causes and conditions is not by itself incompatible with its having an intrinsic nature." Siderits, "Is Everything Connected to Everything Else? What the Gopis Know," 170.
27. Siderits and Katsura, *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way: Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, 154–60.
28. Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka*, 99; Hayes, "Madhyamaka."
29. Tillemans, "How Far Can a Mādhyamika Buddhist Reform Conventional Truth? Dismal Relativism, Fictionalism, Easy-Easy Truth, and the Alternatives," 160.
30. Other interpreters of Madhyamaka, most notably Jay Garfield, have argued that it would be a mistake to think that Madhyamaka, at least as articulated by Nāgārjuna, Candrakīrti, and Tsongkhapa, "eschews reliance on or an account of epistemic authority" (Garfield, "Taking Conventional Truth Seriously: Authority Regarding Deceptive Reality," 29). But as Garfield himself acknowledges, Madhyamaka rejects an "account of epistemic instruments . . . according to which the *instruments* are taken to be *foundational* to all knowledge" because such a position "would undermine his account of emptiness" (ibid., 26–27). However, an account of epistemic instruments that works to demonstrate the thesis of emptiness is not exactly a neutral way to advance knowledge claims. The possibility that a revised and reformed account of epistemic authority could end up invalidating the thesis of emptiness might be precisely why Madhyamikas resist this approach. For to forgo the thesis of emptiness means that one must return to the hard (Abhidharma) job of categorizing the *dharma*s by way of figuring out how epistemic instruments ground our knowledge of particulars.
31. Siderits, "Is Everything Connected to Everything Else? What the Gopis Know," 178.
32. Shulman, "Nāgārjuna the Yogācārin, Vasubandhu the Mādhyamika?," 187.
33. For a detailed discussion of whether cognitive science poses a particular problem for realism because the subject matter of cognitive science includes mental states and processes that are not mind-independent, see Saatsi, "Realism and the Limits of Explanatory Reasoning"; and Wray, "Success of Science as a Motivation for Realism."
34. Hayes, "Nāgārjuna's Appeal," 299.

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On Being a Good Friend to Buddhist Philosophy

Bronwyn Finnigan

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
BRONWYN.FINNIGAN@ANU.EDU.AU

To be honest, I was a bit dismayed when I first learned the title of Evan Thompson's latest book. It was not because I had previously thought he was a Buddhist (I didn't think this). Nor was it because I believed one *should* be a Buddhist in order to engage insightfully and rigorously with Buddhist philosophy (I don't believe this). It was because the title, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, invites speculation about the reasons why, and it seemed to me that the most natural speculation is that he thinks there is something wrong with Buddhism, and that if one accepts his reasons for rejecting it, one would reject it also.¹ Now, there is nothing wrong with arguing against Buddhism. But I work in a discipline that is already indifferent to it (at best). Academic philosophy is one of the least diverse and inclusive fields in all of the humanities. Its professional culture does not value Buddhism. Those who work in this field must continually make the case for Buddhism's relevance to contemporary philosophical concerns. Evan is highly regarded in this community. His work on 4E (embodied, enactive, embedded, extended) cognition is ground-breaking and has deeply penetrated the philosophy of mind and cognitive science. That his early writings relate this work to Buddhist philosophy has both promoted Buddhism as a worthy interdisciplinary partner and created new avenues of cross-cultural research. Evan's scholarly engagement with Buddhism is also some of the clearest and best in the field. He's one of my intellectual

heroes and I've always considered him to be a great friend to Buddhist philosophy. For him now to be perceived as denouncing Buddhism and retreating from these earlier views creates a challenge for those following in his wake. It might appear that we've lost a champion, an influential one, and those already indifferent to Buddhism might take it as further reason not to engage with it at all.

Now, of course, this is not what Evan argues in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* and is the very opposite of his intention. Evan repeatedly insists that he is, and wishes to be, "a good friend to Buddhism" (2, 189). "[I]t's unquestionably true," he writes, "that Buddhism possesses a vast and sophisticated philosophical and contemplative literature on the mind" (37). He claims that "modern interpretations" of the Buddhist denial of self have "reinvigorated contemporary philosophical debates" and that this "confluence of cross-cultural philosophy and cognitive science has proved to be fertile for thinking about the self" (86). He also defends a form of cosmopolitanism that includes Buddhist philosophy as a conversational partner worthy of respectful intellectual interest. But Evan ferociously denounces what he calls 'Buddhist modernism.' The claims of Buddhist modernism, he argues, are "biased" (104), "confused" (18), "dubious" (22), "specious" (28), "nonsensical" (45), "superficial" (119), "facile" (88), and "misguided" (121). The arguments advanced in its support, Evan contends, are based on limited concepts (36) and erroneous ideas (64), involve conflation (20), and turn on distinctions that are impossible to maintain (49). He concludes that the core tenets of Buddhist modernism are "philosophically and scientifically indefensible" (189) and so are to be thoroughly rejected.

Evan identifies Buddhist modernism as a view typical to Buddhist participants in the Mind and Life Dialogues with the Dalai Lama initiated by Francisco Varela. He argues that it is advanced by S. N. Goenka and presupposed by the *vipassanā* or insight meditation movement. And he locates it in the popular writings of several public intellectuals who promote Buddhism in relation to science. Buddhist modernism is no straw dummy. There is a genuine target for Evan's critique. It is tempting to think, however, that academic cross-cultural Buddhist philosophy falls outside its purview. None of the Cowherds are explicitly mentioned or targeted, for instance.² Nor are any well-regarded and philosophically trained Buddhist scholars.³ Moreover, according to Evan, a central tenet of Buddhist modernism is that Buddhism is superior to all other religions and, because of its unique rationalism and empiricism, counts as a science and not as a religion. While some academic Buddhist philosophers do discuss its methodological features and do reconstruct and defend naturalized forms of Buddhist thought, you rarely find them doing so in the service of this comparative and scientific position. And that they take truth as their evaluative standard for defending Buddhist claims is surely not a flaw. But academic Buddhist philosophy does not get off so lightly. Evan includes Thomas Metzinger and Miri Albahari in the class of Buddhist modernists (106–110). Metzinger and Albahari are university-based academic philosophers. Does Evan think they are isolated cases that just happen to share the views that he critiques? Or does he think they exemplify

a broader problem with cross-cultural Buddhist philosophy in general? Who else count as Buddhist modernists beyond those mentioned in the book? What views, arguments, and methodological approaches should we include under this heading and similarly dismiss, and which views does Evan think are genuinely worthy of respectful intellectual conversation? Evan clearly has a lot of time for historical Buddhist philosophy and its exposition. But does any positive engagement with Buddhism that seeks to interface with science survive this critique?

To answer these questions, we need to consider the arguments contained in the book. To some extent, that is what I will now do. But let me flag from the outset that my response is mixed. Evan is an extremely clear writer. His scholarship in the philosophy of biology, cognitive science, and Buddhist thought is exceptional. I agree with some of the expositions he provides in relation to these fields. Some of his arguments resonate with some of my own. And I agree with others that I hadn't considered. But I also find that the rhetorical strength with which Evan articulates his views often suggests that he is arguing for much stronger and more restrictive positions than I think his reasons warrant. Indeed, I find that many of his arguments admit of two interpretations: a moderate version with which I agree and a stronger version with which I do not. These different versions of his argument have different implications for what counts as an appropriate way to engage with Buddhist philosophy, and thus for who is a target of his critique. I will attempt to demonstrate this in what follows, and I will conclude by inviting Evan to clarify which version of his views he intends. I will start, however, by both articulating and endorsing what I take to be a central argument of the book and considering its positive upshot for contemporary Buddhist philosophy.

Evan rejects the Buddhist modernist claim that Buddhism is proven true by modern science. Indeed, he argues that the question "Is Buddhism true?" is the wrong question to ask. One of the main clusters of reasons offered for this claim relates to the diversity of philosophical positions we find in the historical Buddhist tradition. This is also a theme of my own work. The question "Is Buddhism true?" invites treating Buddhism as a systematic whole. But while all Buddhists sought to be consistent with the Buddha's teachings, there was considerable debate about how they are to be interpreted, what they entail, and what texts should be accepted as authoritative. And these debates are reflected in distinct Buddhist traditions (*Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, *Vajrayāna*), distinct philosophical schools (*Abhidharma*, *Yogācāra*, *Madhyamaka*, *Pramāṇavāda*), as well as differences amongst thinkers within each of these traditions and schools. These debates are also shaped by the different cultures and intellectual traditions prevalent in the countries into which Buddhism was transmitted. There is thus no singular Buddhist position on most debated issues by Buddhist philosophers; there are many Buddhist views on many substantive philosophical issues. It follows that one cannot answer the question "Is Buddhism true?" without first clarifying which interpretation of Buddhism and which philosophical analysis of it that one has in mind. The question "Is Buddhism true?" is underdetermined. Evan is right—it is not the right question to ask.

Evan goes further. He argues that Buddhism, if taken as a whole, contains many radical ideas that are typically overlooked by those who argue that Buddhism is proven true by science. He focuses on the idea that liberated awareness (*nirvāṇa*) is unconditioned, nonconceptual, and nondual. Evan denies that such awareness is possible. He also insists that it does not fit easily with modern science. To argue that Buddhism is true, however, requires engaging *all* of it, creating a narrative that justifies *all* Buddhist claims, including this idea of *nirvāṇa*. We might even wonder whether such a comprehensively justifying narrative is possible. Centuries of debate have resulted in a diversity of competing and even conflicting viewpoints. Buddhism, if taken as a whole, is thus inconsistent. How could Buddhism be both internally inconsistent and true? Evan additionally points out that those who claim that science proves Buddhism to be true often exclude karma and reincarnation, as if all else would remain the same. However, he argues, these ideas are so tightly integrated with important Buddhist ideas that their exclusion *does not* leave all else the same but requires constructively re-interpreting Buddhist thought.

What is the upshot of these arguments for contemporary Buddhist philosophy? It is certainly not that Buddhism is wrong or that questions of truth are misplaced. Rather, if one seeks to positively defend Buddhist thought in dialogue with science and other philosophical traditions, one should make clear which Buddhist position one is defending and be reflective and explicit about the extent to which one is reconstructing that position. But to clarify which Buddhist position one is defending requires first understanding that there is a diversity of interpretative options. And it seems that one reason Evan advises engaging with Buddhist philosophy is precisely to gain this perspective. He seems not to have a problem with positive reconstructions of Buddhist positions or with innovating new forms of Buddhist thought and practice to solve new problems. But attempts to legitimize one's viewpoint as reflecting "the original teachings of the Buddha" are firmly ruled out. "To be inspired by the early Buddhist texts and construct out of them a message for today is one thing; to try to legitimize one's construction by claiming historical veracity for it is another" (20). The former is OK, whereas the latter is not.

So far, I strongly agree. Since I take this to be a main argument of the book, I endorse its central message. But I have some reservations about some of the subsidiary arguments that appear to allow for two interpretations: a moderate version with which I agree and a stronger version with which I do not.

Throughout the book, Evan emphasizes the importance of context for appreciating Buddhist thought. But it seems to me that there are two ways to understand his point. Moderately, it is the claim that recognizing and understanding the philosophical and historical context of Buddhist ideas is important for understanding those ideas, particularly if those aspects of context are presupposed by Buddhist arguments. More strongly, however, it is the claim that Buddhist ideas do not make sense at all, that they lose their meaning entirely, if extracted from their philosophical

and historical context. These are not the same claim and have different implications for how one might legitimately engage with Buddhist thought. Consider the following two examples.

Evan calls “naturalistic Buddhism” the idea that Buddhism is consistent with scientific naturalism if one omits karma and reincarnation. He argues, however, that Buddhist theories of mind “lose their point” if one extracts them from this framework (11). This might be understood as the moderate claim that to understand (all, most, or some) Buddhist ideas about the mind, one needs to recognize that they are tightly integrated with ideas of karma and reincarnation and that to omit them requires some reconstruction. This sounds right. It could be read more strongly, however, as claiming that reconstructions of Buddhist views about the mind that do not mention and integrate karma and reincarnation have no point and make no sense. But this seems unduly restrictive. There are different degrees with which Buddhist ideas about mind integrate with karma and reincarnation. Some are more tightly connected than others. Surely it is admissible to selectively focus on those that are a bit more distant (such as the possibility of reflexive awareness) and to put such ideas into interdisciplinary dialogue without necessarily mentioning, emphasizing, or including the Buddhist commitment to karma and reincarnation.

Consider also Evan’s discussion of the importance of engaging with non-Buddhist Indian philosophical views for appreciating the Buddhist tradition. Evan seeks to refute the Buddhist modernist idea that the Buddhist position of no-self is superior to that of the Brahmanical traditions in classical India, which hold that there is a self. He does so by showing that classical Nyāya philosophers identified two important problems with the Abhidharma Buddhist reductionist analysis of no-self, and that these problems are still significant for contemporary cognitive science (105). The moderate upshot of this discussion is that Buddhism is not the only intellectual tradition with rigorous and important arguments relevant to science. “[T]he Brahmanical self theorists are no less rational and empirical than the Buddhist no-self theorists” (105). Further, if one seeks to defend the truth of Buddhism, it pays to engage and respond to the most pressing objections. And the Brahmanical traditions are important sources of targeted critique. So far, I strongly agree. But Evan draws a stronger moral, namely, that “we need a nonsectarian and cosmopolitan philosophical perspective to appreciate the Buddhist intellectual tradition in general and its no-self theory in particular” (105). He claims that “Buddhist philosophy must be seen in the dialectical context of its engagement with the other South Asian philosophical traditions” (105) and that “to privilege the Buddhist view in isolation from its dialectical interdependence with other traditions is to engage in Buddhist apologetics” (117). These remarks suggest that one cannot make sense of the Buddhist idea of no-self, let alone plausibly defend it, if one does not also consider objections raised against it by historical Brahmanical philosophers. This is unwarranted, however. Certainly, if Buddhist arguments for no-self *presuppose* Brahmanical ideas, then it follows one cannot properly appreciate them without considering those ideas. But just because Brahmanical philosophers had targeted

objections does not mean that we cannot understand or appreciate the ideas they target independently. It does not mean that there is something wrong with putting Buddhist claims into interdisciplinary dialogue with philosophy and science without, at the same time, engaging the Brahmanical traditions or, indeed, any other worthy conversational partners that have a stake in the debate. Evan identifies Jonardon Ganeri as a paradigm of the approach he is championing. He writes, “I find his cosmopolitan, pan-Indian perspective to be much more productive for cross-cultural philosophy than a strictly Buddhist view” (117). I am also inspired by Ganeri’s work. It is worth noting, however, that his 2017 book, *Attention, Not Self*, restricts itself to reconstructing and defending Buddhaghosa’s Theravāda Buddhist conception of the mind in dialogue with the philosophy of mind.⁴ And this strikes me as perfectly legitimate. While I strongly agree with the moderate upshot of Evan’s observations, I find the stronger versions unduly restrictive.

I have similar reservations about Evan’s critique of the attitude towards science assumed by naturalistic Buddhism. The question “Is Buddhism true?” assumes a standard of assessment. And naturalistic Buddhists take this to be modern science. According to Evan, the view of science it assumes is a form of realism that holds that there is “a way the world essentially is in itself independent of any conceptual framework and that the mind can know this world” (48). Evan claims to be both puzzled and frustrated by the attempt to make Buddhism fit science so conceived. Puzzled, because he thinks it fails to recognize that the more radical Buddhist ideas undermine this realist assumption. Frustrated, because he thinks it is a missed opportunity for a “genuine encounter” (77), which he takes to involve distinct traditions challenging one another by focusing on their points of difference. He also seems to be a bit frustrated that the view of science assumed by naturalistic Buddhism is not the innovative 4E version that he himself champions.

There are some very reasonable points here. First, one should not uncritically assume the current state of modern science (or some image thereof) as one’s standard for assessing what counts as plausible or true. Modern science is neither monolithic nor complete. Its methods, assumptions, positions, and arguments are not uncontested. There is much work to be done and much work being done. The possibility of science being radically transformed by an encounter with Buddhist philosophy is entirely missed if you simply exclude, from the outset, those elements that don’t fit with the current state of science. And if one takes on board the earlier point about making explicit the Buddhist position one is defending, then one should also make sure that the commitments of that position are consistent with the image of science one is making it fit. Evan draws a parallel between his 4E approach to cognition and Madhyamaka Buddhism. The Dalai Lama is also a Madhyamaka Buddhist. But Madhyamaka is radically anti-foundationalist in its ontological commitments (at least on standard accounts). So, a scientific naturalism that assumes ontological realism is not going to readily prove *this* form of Buddhism to be true.

Evan diagnoses the attempt to make Buddhism fit with scientific realism as a symptom of Buddhist modernism and thus poorly motivated. But this is too hasty. There is good reason to think, for instance, that Abhidharma Buddhist philosophers also assumed that there is “a way the world essentially is in itself independent of any conceptual framework and that the mind can know this world” (48). If this characterizes the realism of scientific naturalism, then Abhidharma has this in common. Of course, you might argue, as Evan does, that Abhidharma is problematic and contains normative ideas that are not consistent with science. You might also argue, as Evan does, that Madhyamaka Buddhism is preferable. But that Abhidharma Buddhism and scientific naturalism have this realist assumption in common is nevertheless a more plausible and charitable source of motivation to attribute to the naturalistic Buddhist than a simple appeal to authority grounded in a naïve conception of science.

This last issue, in closing, points to a broader theme in Evan’s critique of naturalistic Buddhism, namely, whether a “genuine encounter” between Buddhism and science *must* engage their radical points of difference or whether interdisciplinary dialogue could still be productive if interlocutors emphasize points of similarity (at least initially). Several remarks Evan makes in the book suggest he thinks the former. And I entirely take his point that encounters that emphasize radical points of difference have the greatest potential for transformation. But it strikes me that there are other modes of interdisciplinary dialogue that are just as legitimate and also potentially fruitful. One might, for instance, put some aspect of Buddhist thought into dialogue with some existing scientific model and assess the degree of fit. If it is close, one might use this as grounds to explore what other related Buddhist ideas could add to this model or whether subtle differences on the periphery or in the background provide grounds for revision on either side of the dialectic. Or, if there are competing scientific models of some phenomenon, the fact that some Buddhist ideas seem to support one model rather than the other might lend some weight to contemporary discussions. Of course, this won’t be decisive. They might be similar or consistent but both false for all that. One needs to remain mindful that scientific models are models and so whatever warrantability they might ascribe to Buddhist views will depend on their theoretical virtues (rather than a proof of correspondence with mind-independent reality). Admittedly, the outcomes of these methodological approaches are also likely to be more modest than the radical transformation Evan envisions. But they nevertheless seem to be equally legitimate modes of interdisciplinary dialogue. So, I conclude by inviting Evan to clarify which versions of his arguments he intends and to provide some additional justification if he had the stronger forms in mind.

NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book.
2. The Cowherds is an international collective of Buddhist philosophers and scholars. It consists of Amber Carpenter, Georges Dreyfus, Bronwyn Finnigan, Jay L. Garfield, Charles Goodman, Stephen Jenkins, Guy Martin Newland, Graham Priest,

Mark Siderits, Koji Tanaka, Sonam Thakchoe, Tom Tillemans, and Jan Westerhoff.

3. Aside from Robert Sharf, whom he endorses.
4. Jonardon Ganeri, *Attention, Not Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Buddhism after Buddhist Modernism: Comments on Evan Thompson’s Why I Am Not a Buddhist

Jonardon Ganeri

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
JONARDON.GANERI@UTORONTO.CA

Evan Thompson’s *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is a devastating and comprehensive critique of the thesis that “Buddhism is not so much a religion as a science of the mind,”¹ or—if one is unwilling to go that far—then at least the thesis that “Buddhism is superior among world religions in being inherently rational and empirical.”² Thompson uses the labels “Buddhist modernism” and “Buddhist exceptionalism” as names for these two formulations of his opponents’ view, what Sanskrit logicians call the *pūrvapakṣa*. While there have been and continue to be influential advocates of this view, I doubt that it will continue to seem attractive with the publication of this book.³

Rather than seeking to legitimize Buddhism with far-fetched claims as to its exceptional status, Thompson recommends a cosmopolitan approach to the relationship between Buddhism and science, a “viable cosmopolitanism that isn’t Eurocentric or Americentric” but in which we “draw from the concepts and vocabularies of many religious and philosophical traditions.”⁴ The relationship between Buddhism and science should be a “conversation,” one whose “guiding image is that of a ‘circulation’ . . . where each one flows into and out of the other, and back again.”⁵ In the final pages of the book, Thompson prioritizes the idea that the main theme of this conversation is “the ethics of knowledge,” the idea that any mode of inquiry is already infused with value. “[T]he conversation between science and Buddhism,” he writes, “has to concern the intentions motivating knowledge. The conversation has to be about the ethics of knowledge and the different forms of human life. What kinds of lives do we wish to lead, and what kinds of knowledge should we seek?”⁶ And Thompson makes the very valuable observation, in the final page of the book and without further elaboration, that “[t]he Buddhist intellectual tradition has the resources to mount its own critique of Buddhist modernism.”⁷ “The question I would pose to Buddhists,” he writes, “is whether they can find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists.”⁸

Having myself argued in favor of the need for a “cosmopolitan turn” in philosophy on many occasions, I am deeply sympathetic to the idea that cosmopolitanism provides a better model for the conversation between Buddhism and science than so-called “Buddhist modernism,” and indeed that it is a better template for the discipline of philosophy as such today.⁹ I, too, am skeptical of the motivating idea that

drives Buddhist modernism's claim that "Buddhism is . . . a science of the mind,"¹⁰ namely, that Buddhist meditation is a sort of internal microscope enabling the meditator to observe, without distortion or transformation, the inner workings of their mind. It was, after all, that very idea that Hubert Dreyfus objected to in his review of the first edition of *The Embodied Mind*, Dreyfus arguing that the book thereby fails in its "attempt to reconcile transformation and discovery."¹¹ In his introduction to the revised 2016 edition of this classic text, Thompson admits this as a flaw in the original presentation and adds the following:

As a philosopher, I also feel duty bound to declare that Buddhist philosophy is every bit as abstract, theoretical, and technical as Western philosophy, so the idea that Buddhist philosophy is somehow closer to direct experience and thereby more immediately phenomenological—as we state at certain points in the text—is misguided. Moreover, being able to be abstract, theoretical, and technical is a strength of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and also of the Indian and Tibetan philosophical traditions overall.¹²

The thought is echoed in this new book, too.¹³ A Buddhist critique of this cardinal tenet of Buddhist modernism would begin, perhaps, with the early Pāli Buddhist theory of *vipallāsa*, or "distortion" (A iv.49).¹⁴ Partially overlapping with the phenomenon cognitive scientists now call "cognitive penetration," distortion is something to which not even the Buddha was immune (M i.359–60), and for normal human beings the most serious form of distortion is that of mistaking pain for pleasure (M i.507). There is, again, in the philosophy of perception of Yogācāra thinkers like Dignāga and Dharmakīrti a Buddhist discussion of the interrelationship between attention and imagination that bears on any claim that introspective attention is, for Buddhists, pristine.¹⁵ The best hope for Buddhists to be modern without being Buddhist modernists is, I would suggest, to draw upon the *full* range of concepts and ideas in Buddhism's immensely rich and diverse intellectual history to engage *on equal footing* in a dialogue with contemporary philosophy of mind and other branches of contemporary philosophy, including contemporary work in the history of philosophy.

So Buddhism is not a first-person "science of the mind" in the way Buddhist modernists would have us believe. Neither is it "exceptional" in its adherence to norms of rational, indeed scientific, inquiry. As any scholar of those Indian philosophical traditions that partly constitute the Sanskrit cosmopolis knows, non-Buddhist schools like Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā are as profoundly committed to rational inquiry as it is possible for a philosophical school to be. One need only attend to the scope of Nyāya, as set out in the opening sūtra of its urtext, the *Nyāya-sūtra*: "The highest good is reached through an understanding of the true nature of [the distinction between] honest, dishonest and destructive debate, of false reasoning, tricks and checks in debate, of [the pattern of sound investigation, whose components are] doubt, purpose, examples, assumed principles, syllogisms, suppositional reasoning and decision, and [finally] of the ways of knowing and the knowables."¹⁶

For the later interpreter Gaṅgeśa, the Nyāya philosophy itself had cosmopolitan ambitions, the teachings intended for the benefit of "the entire world" (*jagat*), including, arguably, women and *śūdras*.¹⁷ Indeed, and somewhat in the same spirit as early Buddhist modernists like Siegmund Feniger (aka Nyanaponika Thera), the Scottish Orientalist James Ballantyne composed a treatise entitled *Synopsis of Science: From the Standpoint of the Nyāya Philosophy*, in which he attempted to demonstrate the scientific nature of the Nyāya system, largely as a way to persuade brahmins that they should study Western science insofar as it is a fulfilment of the scientific ambitions of their own heritage.¹⁸

What, then, might a cosmopolitan conversation between Buddhism and science look like as we move beyond the misguided impulses of Buddhist modernism? There is, of course, another error we must be careful not to fall into, namely, the defining error of Eurocentrism, which is to think of science as a uniquely Western achievement and thus to view any conversation involving Buddhism and science under the rubric of a conversation between East and West. The standard view has been that a scientific conception of systems of public knowledge is a European achievement, and the acceptance of that view is what lends continuing significance to a question first posed by Joseph Needham some fifty years ago: "Why did modern science, the mathematization of hypotheses about Nature, with all its implications for advanced technology, take its meteoric rise only in the West at the time of Galileo? . . . [The question is] why modern science had not developed in Chinese civilization (or Indian) but only in Europe?"¹⁹ Needham, a sympathetic chronicler of the achievements of Chinese intellectual culture, was fully conscious of the fact that "between the first century B.C. and the fifteenth century A.D., Chinese civilization was much more efficient than occidental in applying human natural knowledge to practical human needs,"²⁰ but he took it as uncontroversial that science is a uniquely European accomplishment. Indian intellectual culture does not share with Chinese the alleged emphasis on "practical human needs," and it is, as Thompson emphasizes, "abstract, theoretical, and technical," but it can equally be maintained that its achievements in the period up to the seventeenth century in algebra, spherical astronomy, and linguistics outstripped those of Europe by a considerable margin. Needham's question calls us to ask what Europe had that Asia didn't, and there has been a plethora of proposals as to the lacuna, including the Protestant ethic, the mathematization of nature, and capitalism's facilitation of ties between academia and craftsmen.²¹

There is in all this a "European exceptionalism," as deeply rooted as the "Buddhist exceptionalism" that Thompson decries. Most fundamentally, there is an implicit assumption about what science ought to be. It used to be the case, and was certainly the case in the 1960s when Needham framed his question, that science was conceived of as a purely value-free enterprise, a special mode of inquiry in which values play no part in the determination of research agenda or matters of scientific significance. The aim of science, it was imagined, was to provide a comprehensive description of the truth of nature unconstrained by the limitations of social or political imperatives. Such a view about science is

easily traceable to the first exponents of scientific inquiry in seventeenth-century Europe, who presented themselves as “gentlemen, free and unconstrain’d,” asking questions for the sake of asking questions and unconcerned with the implications for society at large. Needham is right, I think, that no such self-conception of scientific practice ever gained a grip among Chinese or Indian intellectuals. What we should dispute is the idea that this “standard model” of the nature of science is correct as an account of the actual place of science in society. Scientific inquiry is fundamentally value-laden, insofar as it aims at the production of such knowledge as is deemed by an ideal public to be of value to humanity’s ambition to live well.²² So Needham’s puzzle is wrong-headed because in Asia the forms of inquiry aiming at public knowledge were understood all along as constrained by values grounded in the common good.²³

The myth that science is a uniquely European invention, a myth that Needham’s question seems to presuppose and one that is also presumed by those who seek to answer the question by providing explanations in terms of European exceptionalism, has received a much-needed corrective with the publication of Christopher I. Beckwith’s *Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World*.²⁴ Beckwith aims to show that the scientific method “was transmitted . . . to medieval Western Europe from Classical Arabic civilization, and how the Central Asian Muslims had earlier adopted [it] from Buddhist Central Asian civilization.”²⁵ The actual medieval scientific method, he argues, was not the experimental method but rather a recursive argument method known to the Latin West as *quaestiones disputatae*. Its earliest appearance in a text composed in Latin is in Robert of Curzon’s *De usura* (c. 1208–1215), and it was brought into medieval Western Europe with the translation of Ibn Sina’s *Kitāb al-shifā*, the translation from Arabic to Latin prepared in the middle of the twelfth century by Avendauth and Dominicus the Archdeacon. Beckwith traces a second, earlier, transmission, from Central Asian Buddhism to the Arab world, identifying the Bactrian-Gandhāran *Vibhāṣa*, a Sarvāstivāda text from the first-century Kushan empire, as the earliest example of the method.

I would argue, however, that the scientific method’s origins are not in Central Asian Buddhism but lie further back in a Buddhist text from Magadha, what is now central-eastern India. That text is the *Kathāvatthu*, whose author Tissa Mogaliputta (c. 327–247 BCE) supervised the Third Buddhist Council, held at Pāṭaliputra in 253 BCE.²⁶ The Council sought to establish concord by resolving disputed questions of doctrine between the Sthaviravāda and Sarvāstivāda sects. Mogaliputta composed a text whose analytical method took as its starting point various disputed questions and proceeded in a systematic manner to consider the arguments *pro* and *contra*.

The recursive argument method identified by Beckwith has the following structure.²⁷ A topic (T) is presented, usually in the form of a question, “It is asked whether . . .” There then follows a series of subarguments W_1, X_1, Y_1, Z_1 , each of which is *pro* or *contra* the topic. These arguments are followed by another series of subarguments W_2, X_2, Y_2, Z_2 ,

each of which is *pro* or *contra* the preceding arguments. At some point, the author’s view argument (A), an argument in favor or against the topic, is interjected and itself subjected to recursive argumentative scrutiny. Thus, the structure of a recursive argument can be formulated as follows:

$$T : W_1 X_1 Y_1 Z_1 : A : W_2 X_2 Y_2 Z_2 \dots^{28}$$

My point is that the *Kathāvatthu* exhibits exactly such a structure of recursive argument, there called *vādayutti*. There is a given point at issue, for example, “whether a person is a real and irreducible entity” (a fundamental point of controversy among the Buddhist sects in the Third Council). The discussion is then divided into “openings” (*mukkhā*), possible readings of the point at issue. Each such opening proceeds as a separate argument, divided into five stages: the way forward (*anuloma*), the way back (*paṭikamma*), the refutation (*niggaha*), the application (*upanayana*), and the conclusion (*niggamana*). In the *anuloma*, the proponent solicits from the respondent the endorsement of an argument, and then tries to argue against it. In the *paṭikamma*, the respondent turns the tables, soliciting from the proponent the endorsement of the counter-argument, and then trying to argue against that. In the *niggaha*, the respondent, continuing, seeks to refute the subargument that the proponent had advanced against the argument. The *upanayana* and *niggamana* repeat and reaffirm that the proponent’s subargument against the respondent’s argument is unsound, while the respondent’s argument against the proponent’s counter-thesis is sound. One of the various readings of the topic is identified as the author’s view. Schematically, the structure is as follows:

$$T : W_1 X_1 : W_2 X_2$$

$$T' : W_1 X_1 : W_2 X_2$$

$$T'' : W_1 X_1 : W_2 X_2$$

...

What is clear is that this argument method is *recursive* exactly in Beckwith’s sense, and not merely dialogical, because it consists in a set of nested subargumentation strategies *pro* and *contra* the topic.²⁹ So if Beckwith is correct in his claim that a type of *quaestiones disputatae* is the original scientific method, then we can trace the original of that method back to the Third Buddhist Council.

The *Kathāvatthu* became extremely influential in early first millennial Buddhism. The importance given to it is indicated by the fact that it came to be included as one of the seven texts that constitute the canon of the Theravāda Abhidhamma Piṭaka, this despite the fact that it does not purport to record the actual words of the Buddha. Insofar as the author’s view argument here is that of Sthaviravāda, and the principal target is Sarvāstivāda, it is certain that Central Asian Sarvāstivāda will have known of this work.

All this is to agree with Thompson when he says that “[t]he Buddhist intellectual tradition has the resources to mount its own critique of Buddhist modernism.”³⁰ *The Embodied Mind* drew on one set of resources,

Vasubandhu's elaboration and critique of the Abhidharma in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and Nāgārjuna's anti-foundationalist classic, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. I have indicated how another Abhidharma treatise, the *Kathāvatthu*, should be brought into any conversation about Buddhism and science. Insofar as there are already scientific elements available *within* the Buddhist textual corpus, this conversation should not be characterized as one *between* Buddhism and science. Indeed, if what I have argued here is correct, then Buddhism's role in the development of science is itself a good example of the sort of cosmopolitan to-and-fro of ideas that Thompson's book advocates, and of how, as philosophy goes global, it is such entanglements, interconnections, and networks of intellectual exchange that come to the fore.

NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 27.
2. Ibid., 25.
3. For evidence of the continuing appeal, see, for instance, Robert Wright, "Buddhism and Modern Psychology," Coursera, accessed February 7, 2021, <https://www.coursera.org/learn/science-of-meditation#syllabus>.
4. Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 187–88.
5. Ibid., 72–73.
6. Ibid., 183–84.
7. Ibid., 189.
8. Ibid. Given Thompson's evident sympathy for Buddhism and his openness to there being varieties of modern Buddhism that are not Buddhist modernism, the title he chooses for this book strikes me as jarring and inappropriate. Better, perhaps, would have been *Why I Am Not Only a Buddhist*.
9. Jonardon Ganeri, "Blueprint: An Institute for Cosmopolitan Philosophy in a Culturally Polycentric World," accessed February 7, 2021, www.academia.edu/8434737/; Appendix to *Attention, Not Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); "Why Philosophy Must Go Global: A Manifesto," *Confluence: Online Journal of World Philosophies* 4 (2016): 134–41, 164–86.
10. Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 27.
11. Hubert Dreyfus, review of *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, by Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *Mind* 102 (1993): 542–46, at 544.
12. Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), xxiv.
13. Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 43.
14. See Jonardon Ganeri, *Attention, Not Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 138–41. The Sanskrit equivalent is *viparyāsa*.
15. Ibid., 143–46.
16. NS 1.1.1: *pramāṇa-prameya-saṃśaya-prajñāna-drṣṭānta-siddhāntāyava-tarka-nirṇaya-vāda-jāla-viṭāṇa-hetvābhāsa-cchala-jāti-nigrahasthānāṃ tattvajñānaṃ niḥśeṣasādhigamaḥ*.
17. See Jonardon Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 46.
18. James Ballantyne, *Synopsis of Science: From the Standpoint of the Nyāya Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1852/2013).
19. Joseph Needham, *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 16.
20. Ibid., 190.
21. H. Floris Cohen, *How Modern Science Came into the World: Four Civilizations, One 17th-Century Breakthrough* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).
22. See Philip Kitcher's notion of "well-ordered science" in his *Science, Truth, and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).
23. For a fuller development of the claims in this paragraph, see Jonardon Ganeri, "Well-Ordered Science and Indian Epistemic Cultures: Toward a Polycentered History of Science," *Isis* 104, no. 2 (2013): 348–59.
24. Christopher I. Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloisters: The Central Asian Origins of Science in the Medieval World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).
25. Ibid., 1.
26. For discussion of the precise dating of the *Kathāvatthu*, see Charles Willemsen, Bart Dessein, and Collett Cox, *Sarvāstivāda Buddhist Scholasticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Akira Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism from Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 90–91.
27. Ibid., 15–18.
28. Ibid., 16.
29. For more detailed analysis, see my "Argumentation, Dialogue and the *Kathāvatthu*," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 29, no. 4 (2001): 485–93.
30. Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 189.

Throwing Out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson's *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*

Jay L. Garfield

SMITH COLLEGE
JGARFIELD@SMITH.EDU

I. LAUDATORY INTRODUCTION

Evan Thompson has given us another lovely book. Like *Waking, Dreaming, Being*,¹ *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* creatively mixes memoir, philosophy, cognitive science, and cultural commentary to illuminate the interface between religion, science, philosophy, and human life, candidly explaining how Evan got to where he is.² There is a lot to learn from this volume and a lot to enjoy.

Evan and I are used to disagreeing deeply about fundamental issues, but here I find myself in agreement with nearly everything he says. As a fellow veteran of several *Mind* and *Life* Dialogues, I recognize the discomfort with which one emerges from those often very stimulating exchanges that nonetheless fail to be entirely satisfying for the reasons that Evan so ably scouts. And as a fellow non-Buddhist working on Buddhist philosophy, cognitive science, and cross-cultural philosophical dialogue, I recognize the complicated set of pressures that position generates: One is tempted to identify with Buddhism on pain of not being taken seriously by one's religious interlocutors. One is also tempted to distance oneself from practice in order to be taken seriously by one's philosophical interlocutors. And each side encourages the odd enthusiasm for the incoherent mélange of Buddhism and cognitive or physical science that we find in Buddhist modernism. I congratulate Evan on having mapped those tensions with such candor

and care, and on having diagnosed many of the important problems with such acuity.

But while I have not come to bury Evan, nor have I come to praise him. So, I will now put aside my genuine admiration for *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* to take issue with a few strands of Evan's critique. In what follows, I will split hairs, but to quote our late colleague in Buddhist philosophy, Sandy Huntington, "the finer the hair, the more important it is to split it." I want to talk first about naturalism in Buddhism, suggesting that Evan may underestimate the resources for a legitimately naturalistic reading of some Buddhist philosophical traditions. I will then turn to an area in which Evan and I are long friendly antagonists: the idea of no-self, where I will argue that Evan may miss the most important issue in Buddhist critiques of the idea of self. I will then turn to the topic of awakening. There I will suggest that, just as he underestimates the possibility of a naturalistic reading of some Buddhist traditions more broadly, Evan underestimates the possibilities for legitimately naturalistic understandings of awakening by modern Buddhists. I will conclude with some more optimistic thoughts about Buddhist modernism as a religious and social movement, and with an explanation of my own more prosaic reasons for not being a Buddhist.

II. REHABILITATING NATURALISM IN BUDDHISM

There is a lot to like in Evan's discussion of Buddhism and naturalism, and I leave aside the material with which I agree. Evan brings his discussion of Buddhist naturalism to a head with the following remarks:³

I can now . . . say why I think that naturalistic Buddhism is not compelling. Naturalistic Buddhists uncritically accept philosophically problematic forms of naturalism and realism. They fail to see how the deepest and most radical insights of the Buddhist intellectual tradition undermine these ideas. To wit: "the mind is neither within nor without, nor is it to be apprehended between the two." [*Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*] . . . Naturalistic Buddhists proceed as if the mind can be grasped, as if it can be pinned down and identified as essentially the "biological reality" of the brain. . . . The deep question is whether it's possible for science to be mindful of the mind's ungraspability. . . .

Naturalistic Buddhists fail to recognize, let alone appreciate, the fundamental generative enigma at the heart of Buddhism. Robert Sharf puts it this way: "Liberation is impossible, yet it is achieved." (77-78)

Evan argues that the failure here rests on the Buddhist conception of *nirvāṇa* as *unconditioned*, and reads *unconditioned* as entailing that *nirvāṇa* "can't be the result of any cause and specifically can't be the result of any mental cause. But this implies that nirvana can't be the result of following the Buddhist path" (78). It follows, he argues, that there is a fatal inconsistency between being a Buddhist and being a naturalist: One must accept as a Buddhist the possibility of a causeless state and as a naturalist the idea that all phenomena have causal explanations.

The remark quoted above from the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* is used to make a slightly different argument: Naturalists about cognition, Evan argues, see cognitive states as (at most) narrowly supervenient on brain states; most or all Buddhist philosophers of mind see them either as substantially distinct from any physical state or as broadly supervenient; so most or all Buddhist philosophers of mind reject a central plank of naturalism about the mind.

Both of these arguments are unsound. Seeing why they are unsound allows us to appreciate a naturalism that pervades much (though not all) of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. That naturalism offers the prospect for a modernist Buddhism that is both naturalistic and continuous with (some) strands of classical Buddhist thought.

Let us begin with *nirvāṇa*. Any discussion of this issue must begin by acknowledging the many occurrences in Buddhist literature of statements identifying the *causes* of achieving *nirvāṇa*. And these are frequent in both Śrāvākayāna and Mahāyāna texts (although the identification of the precise causes is different). We hear about accumulations of wisdom and merit, about the achievement of perfections, about the Noble Eightfold Path, etc. So, while there are schools (particularly the East Asian schools that revel in paradox) that see the characterization of *nirvāṇa* as unconditioned as contradictory to its being achieved as the result of causes and conditions, this is not universal in Buddhist traditions, and is rather alien to Indian, Tibetan, and Southeast Asian traditions. And this makes sense, given that the principal pillar of Buddhist metaphysics is the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda*, of universal interdependence, one aspect of which is *causal* interdependence.

In these traditions, the term *unconditioned* is meant to indicate one of the following two things: First, once *nirvāṇa* is achieved, no *further* conditions such as supporting conditions are required to sustain it; that is, it is irreversible. Second, once one achieves *nirvāṇa*, one's mind is free from the particular network of conditions that perpetuate *saṃsāra*. Now, we might fight about whether there is such a state, about whether it is possible to enter a state that is necessarily irreversible, etc. And those are interesting philosophical discussions to have within the tradition. But the point is that the term *unconditioned* does not immediately lead to paradox, even in the context of a tradition committed to the universality of interdependent co-origination.

Of course, one might embrace paradox, and that might even be reasonable. But note that even if one does so, that by itself is not a recusal from naturalism *tout court*. This is because the paradox is only generated by juxtaposing the claim that *nirvāṇa* is *unconditioned* with the fact that everything is conditioned, and that practice is its *cause*. While that might seem to require *rejecting* naturalism, it also requires *endorsing* it. So, either way, naturalism *in the sense of a commitment to universal causal explicability* is not undermined by Buddhist theories of *nirvāṇa*.

Now, back to the mind and its supervenience base. Evan is right that some naturalists in the Buddhist modernist camp—most often philosophically naïve neuroscientists

enamored with colorful fMRI images—take psychological states (including those identified in the Abhidharma, and even more improbable candidates, as Evan documents) to be narrowly supervenient, or even to be identical with brain states. And Evan is right both that this is crazy and about why it is crazy.

But that is only one possible position. I have argued elsewhere that a widespread Buddhist position regarding cognitive and affective states is one of very broad supervenience, and that position is well-attested within nearly every Buddhist position, Buddhist modernist neuroscientists to the contrary notwithstanding.⁴ Moreover, as Evan well knows, many of us in the philosophy of cognitive science have independently defended the broad supervenience of psychological states on the physical. And there is nothing non-naturalist about this. Identity theory, reductionism, and narrow supervenience have no monopoly on naturalism. So, even if some neuroscientists who take themselves to be vindicating Buddhists are identity theorists, that does not exhaust the range of naturalistic Buddhist positions.

A naturalistic Buddhism is, as Evan points out, threatened from both sides: One could fallaciously infer from naturalism to an identity theory regarding psychological states and brain states or to the narrow supervenience of the mental on the physical, and so find oneself at odds both with good sense and with Buddhism. Or, one could—as many, but not all, Buddhists do—adopt a strongly dualist position with regard to some psychological phenomena. The position of some with regard to what many Buddhists call *subtle consciousness* comes to mind. Either of these would threaten the naturalistic strain in Buddhist modernism. My point is just that being a Buddhist and being a naturalist entail neither of these problems. There is space between Scylla and Charybdis in this domain, and that is the space that a Buddhist modernist ought to and can occupy.

III. A MORE CHARITABLE READING OF NO-SELF

Evan develops a sustained critique of a blithe acceptance of Buddhist critiques of the idea of a self, and of a blithe acceptance of the idea that this is somehow more *scientific* than a Brahminical self theory positing a substantial *ātman*. I do not have space in this comment to do justice to his entire discussion. And much of it is very compelling. But when Evan concludes that “the Brahminical self theorists are no less rational and empirical than the Buddhist no-self theorists” and that “to single out the Buddhists as more ‘scientific’ is partisan and simplistic” (105), I must part company.

Evan’s principal route to this conclusion is not the endorsement of a Brahminical view. Those views are very hard to square with science, or to defend as “rational and empirical,” and Evan’s direct assessment of those views concedes as much. They are substantialist, and they posit a continuing convention-independent entity that persists through (and beyond) the entity’s biological life, and that functions as a non-natural owner of the psychophysical constituents of a person. Instead, he argues that “the self that Buddhism targets as the object of self-grasping—the self as a personal essence—isn’t the only way to understand the meaning of ‘self,’ so denying that there is this kind of

self doesn’t entail that there is no self whatsoever” (105). That is, he changes the subject, conceding the Buddhist success in targeting the Brahminical conception, and suggesting that we can redefine the English term used to translate the Sanskrit *ātman* so as to deliver a referent other than the one that Buddhists have in mind.

The problem isn’t just that this is an embrace of equivocation. It is that by taking himself to defend the self against Buddhist critiques, Evan distorts classical Buddhist positions, understates the value of Buddhist critiques, and fails in his attempt to locate a problem for Buddhist modernism in this terrain, all of this despite a very sensitive account of the range of positions one might take with regard to the construction of personhood, an account with which I take no issue.

In *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvatāra)*, Candrakīrti (7th c. CE) gets at this point through an example to which Evan refers in another context. He admonishes that a philosopher refuting the existence of a self should not be like a man who is worried that a snake is hiding in the wall of his house and reassures himself of his safety by failing to find an elephant. This is the example that kicks off later Tibetan discussions initiated by Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) about the *object of negation* in Madhyamaka Buddhist analysis. The point of the example is that we must be very careful in identifying the thing the existence of which we are trying to refute, to refute that, and not to refute anything else.

Candrakīrti, as Hume was to do a millennium later, carefully distinguishes the self (*ātman/bdag*) from the person (*pudgala/gang zag*) or mere *I* (*nga tsam*). The former is the object of negation, the target of Buddhist no-self arguments; the latter is the conventional person. To affirm the existence of the former is to fall into the extreme of reification; to deny the existence of the latter is to fall into the opposite extreme, that of nihilism. The metaphysical tightrope that Madhyamaka philosophers try to walk involves not confusing these two: Mādhyamikas deny that there is any convention-independent self of the kind that the orthodox Indian schools accept, which is taken by most Buddhist philosophers—classical and modern—to be a philosophical ramification of our innate sense of our own existence. At the same time, they accept the conventional reality of persons, with the understanding that their existence is merely conventional. Moreover, as Evan himself emphasizes, to exist conventionally, on this view, is not to be non-existent; rather, it is a way of being existent.

When Evan talks about narrative selves, constructed selves, social selves, enacted selves, and embodied selves, he is talking not about the *self* that is the target of the Buddhist analysis, but about the *person* that remains. In doing so, he is correctly drawing our attention to the many dimensions of interdependence that give rise to our identities as *persons*, as *role players*. But when he calls these alternative versions of the *self* that Buddhists attempt to refute—versions that evade that refutation—he confuses the snake with the elephant, substituting the person for the self as the object of negation. He thus effectively concedes the

Buddhist refutation of the self on the one hand, while accusing Buddhists of having failed in virtue of the fact that the *person* survives that critique. But his Buddhist interlocutors, such as Candrakīrti, have no quarrel with the conventional reality of the person. There is, however, good reason to worry about the serpent of the self; it is no straw serpent if Buddhists are even close to being right about our psychology and if many of its ramifications in Western philosophy of mind—classical and contemporary—are pernicious. Clarity requires keeping these conceptually distinct. And neither modern psychology nor modern neuroscience vindicates the reality of the self at which Buddhist critiques are aimed.

The modern Buddhist, then, is correct to assert that the Buddhist position is more in harmony with contemporary psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind than is the Brahminical position, and correct to see no-self not only as one interesting idea that Buddhism brings to the table, but also as a deep insight that can contribute to contemporary conversations. In this respect, modern Buddhism is in harmony both with classical Buddhist thought and with contemporary science.

IV. GETTING WOKE

Evan correctly calls our attention to real muddles in Buddhist modernist thinking about awakening (*bodhi*). But once again, I fear that he goes a step too far in his critique. He writes:

Traditional Buddhists accept the reality of the Buddha's awakening and the possibility of their own awakening as a matter of faith. They have trust or confidence in the Buddha's way of life as a way of leading to awakening. Having this faith is an essential part of what it means to be a Buddhist.

Buddhist modernists, however, try to make awakening consistent with their understanding of the scientific worldview. Many of them use a two-pronged approach. The first prong is to demythologize awakening by turning it into a rationally comprehensible psychological state. The second prong is to romanticize awakening by turning it into a kind of intuitive and nonconceptual epiphany.... Neural Buddhists take a further step and think that we can get a better understanding of such epiphanies or "awakening experiences" by finding their "neural correlates" in the brain.

I think the Buddhist modernist concept of enlightenment is incoherent. Either you embrace faith in awakening and nirvana, which, according to the tradition, transcend conceptual thought . . . or you choose to believe only in what can be made scientifically comprehensible, in which case you have to give up the idea of enlightenment as a nonconceptual and intuitive realization of the "fullness of being" or the "suchness of reality," for these aren't scientific concepts. You can't have it both ways. (143-44)

A great deal of the argument that follows is dedicated to showing that the concept of awakening (or enlightenment, if you prefer that Protestant term) has meaning only in a cultural and conceptual context, and that, like terms such as "love" and "money," cannot denote anything that is not conceptually or culturally determined. With *that* argument, I have no problem. But the central argument I quoted above is a chain of *non sequiturs*.

Let us begin at the beginning where we have a serious equivocation on translation. Evan sometimes translates *śrāddha* as *faith*, sometimes as *confidence*. These are not synonymous in contemporary English. And the choice of which to use is important. In the context of many Buddhist texts, I prefer the latter. In many Buddhist discussions, *śrāddha* is introduced as an attitude regarding belief in that to which one has only indirect cognitive access through the testimony of the Buddha or another highly realized being. These are the relevant contexts in this discussion of awakening. In such cases, *śrāddha* is justified on the grounds that we know the source to be reliable because we can verify their accuracy regarding things to which we do have access. This is thus a reliability argument for the veridicality of a witness. This is *not* the sense of faith parodied by Mark Twain as *belief in what you know ain't so*.

This is important because the claim that Buddhists have *śrāddha* in the Buddha's awakening and in the possibility of their own is *confidence* in this sense, not *faith* in the belief-without-reason sense. But it is the latter sense that animates Evan's claim that "[h]aving this faith is an essential part of what it means to be a Buddhist" (144), despite the fact that it is *confidence* that underlines refuge and so is "essential" to being a Buddhist. While the tension between being a Buddhist and having confidence in science (much of which for most of us is also confidence born of a sense of the reliability of witnesses) might arise on the *faith* reading of *śrāddha*, it is not at all clear that it might or does on the *confidence* reading. One can have confidence in science to tell us about a lot of things, and confidence in the Buddha to tell us about some other things regarding which science is currently silent. This does not, of course, mean that anything in science entails the possibility of awakening, or that anything in Buddhism entails the truth of anything discovered or discoverable by science; that, Evan is correct in saying, is claptrap. But it does suggest consistency with being a Buddhist and having *śrāddha* in science. And that is the core of this aspect of Buddhist modernism as I see it.

Finally, even if *nirvāṇa* and awakening transcend conceptual thought in some sense, this is no reason to think that a belief that they are possible is inconsistent with confidence in the value of science. That would be to commit a crude intentional fallacy. Moreover, nothing in any scientific theory of which I am aware, or in any account in the philosophy of science that I would be prepared to endorse, entails that there are no states or other phenomena that transcend human conceptual capacities. Note, for instance, that Kant, who had immense confidence in science, thought that noumena were beyond our conceptual ken. Schopenhauer thought that the will was. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* thought that the nature of reality was. And they were friends of science as well.

However grand science is, its success does not entail that the human mind is capable of conceptualizing all that there is or, for that matter, that the content of a naturally explicable belief must itself be consistent with naturalism. So, once again, I disagree with Evan: One can be a friend of science and still be confident that it is possible to achieve states of which one cannot conceive. One just can't think that any scientific theory *guarantees* that. Mad-dog Buddhist modernism according to which Buddhism and the one true theory in cognitive neuroscience are equivalent might be out, but not moderate modernism according to which they might be mutually consistent.

V. MODERATE BUDDHIST MODERNISM

So, while much of Evan's critique of Buddhist modernism and more particularly of certain Buddhist modernists is on target, I don't think that it undermines the Buddhist modernist project as a whole. Buddhism, like *all* other religious traditions, gives rise to conceptual tensions, and these are often the tensions that animate debate within the tradition and between Buddhists and their non-Buddhist interlocutors. Modernist Buddhism is continuous with classical Buddhism in this respect. There is no *special* incoherence in this modern movement, just new epicycles on old conceptual difficulties. And there is nothing *exceptional* about Buddhism in this regard. Modernist movements in all religious traditions encounter similar tensions.

These tensions—as Evan grants—do not undermine the fact that Buddhist philosophy is replete with insights and arguments that make it a worthwhile dialogical partner with Western philosophy, just as it has for centuries been a dialogical partner with non-Buddhist Asian philosophies. Nor do they undermine the fact that Buddhism has proven to be a religious tradition that offers insight and the opportunity for personal cultivation to people in the modern era, just as it has for centuries. But nor again does it follow that there is a necessary tension between the Buddhist tradition and science. There is enough in the Buddhist tradition that is of philosophical and religious value and that is consistent with a naturalistic, scientific outlook to allow one to be a Buddhist and a friend of science in good faith. One can be a moderate Buddhist modernist.

What does moderate Buddhist modernism look like? A moderate Buddhist modernist accepts certain core ideas articulated in Buddhist philosophy, such as the Four Noble Truths, the universality of dependent co-origination, the doctrine of the two truths, the three natures, and the notion that the moral ideal encoded in the four *brahmavihāras* is compelling, even if it is not a complete adumbration of morality in the contemporary world. That is already a lot of distinctively Buddhist doctrine. And the moderate Buddhist takes seriously the philosophical arguments developed in the Buddhist tradition for the truth of these doctrines in the way that a good Kantian takes seriously Kant's arguments, or a good Aristotelian takes seriously Aristotle's arguments: She does not simply parrot them, but works through them, amends them, and endorses some version of them.

A moderate Buddhist modernist may take some Buddhist doctrines that were taken literally by many traditional

Buddhists in more metaphorical senses. For instance, the realms of rebirth may be interpreted psychologically; rebirth itself might be taken to indicate a moral continuity between generations, etc. And a moderate modernist may reject some things believed by ancient Buddhists—for instance, Buddhist cosmology—just as serious modern Aristotelians reject Aristotle's cosmology.

And a moderate Buddhist modernist has conviction that science is the best *pramāṇa* we have for a detailed investigation of the physical and psychological world. She takes seriously a kind of naturalism according to which the world is explicable without reference to supernatural forces, that reason and perception are good guides to truth, and that the fact that they are good guides is itself explicable. And finally, a moderate modernist may think that Buddhist philosophy may offer insights into the philosophy of science and that science is an important corrective to Buddhist speculative doctrine. I see nothing incoherent in this outlook.

VI. WHY I AM STILL NOT A BUDDHIST AND WHY I STILL LIKE THIS BOOK

Nonetheless, like Evan, I am not a Buddhist, not even a modernist Buddhist. But for a different reason. I think that religious traditions, like nations or clubs, get to set their own criteria for membership. To respect a tradition is to respect their criteria. You can't just declare yourself a Jew—you have to have a Jewish mom or undergo a conversion ceremony; you can't just declare yourself a Catholic—you have to be baptized. And you can't just declare yourself a Buddhist: You have to take refuge in the Triple Gem. That is, you must take the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha as your only protection from the ills of *saṃsāra*.

And I can't. I don't sincerely believe that buddhahood, Buddhadharmā, and the community of Buddhist practitioners are my only route to a satisfactory life. Others do. I do not regard that belief and its associated practices as irrational; they are just not mine. My reason for not being a Buddhist modernist is hence not that I find it incoherent, as does Evan, but that I can't be a Buddhist. I am just not religious in that sense (although, as many know, I do take the Buddhist philosophical tradition very, very seriously; on the other hand, I am probably more a post-modernist than a modernist).

But I do like Evan's book. It is a penetrating look at the Buddhist modernist movement as we see it today, and a penetrating critique of some of the most problematic aspects of that movement. It is sympathetic, generous, and honest. It is full of insight, and a great read. And it will spur debate. That is a good thing. A good debating partner is hard to find, and I always appreciate Evan Thompson in that role.

NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
2. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book.

3. I quote with a good deal of ellipsis, but I do not think that I thereby distort the sense of the argument.
4. Jay L. Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 108–15.

Free to Be You and Me: Cosmopolitanism, Pluralism, and Buddhist Modernism

Laura P. Guerrero
COLLEGE OF WILLIAM & MARY
LPGUERRERO@WM.EDU

I. INTRODUCTION

Evan Thompson begins his book, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, by noting that “Buddhism is one of humanity’s great religious and intellectual traditions. It is, and deserves to be, a participant in the secular and liberal democratic societies of our modern world. It is, and deserves to be, a contributor to a cosmopolitan community” (1).¹ He goes on to state, however, that “[n]evertheless, the dominant strand of modern Buddhism, known as ‘Buddhist modernism,’ is full of confused ideas” (1). As the adverb “nevertheless” indicates, Thompson’s view is that Buddhist modernism’s confusions make it antithetical to cosmopolitanism. He claims that these confusions “need to be discarded if Buddhism is to take its rightful place as a valuable contributor to a modern cosmopolitan community” (2). He thus concludes the book by suggesting that Buddhists “find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists” (189).

It is ironic that Thompson characterizes his argument against Buddhist modernism as a “positive ... argument for cosmopolitanism” (21) because his book actually undermines the pluralistic values that are at cosmopolitanism’s core. Even if Buddhist modernism is confused in the ways that Thompson argues it is, it still can, and should, have a valued seat at the cosmopolitan table. By disparaging Buddhist modernists and characterizing them as unworthy conversation partners, Thompson fails to demonstrate cosmopolitan respect for the many people who are Buddhist modernists.

II. BUDDHIST MODERNISM AND COSMOPOLITANISM

Buddhist modernism, Thompson explains, “downplays the metaphysical and ritual elements of traditional Asian Buddhism, while emphasizing personal meditative experience and scientific rationality” (15). He adds that it “presents itself as if it were Buddhism’s original and essential core” (15) and as “exceptional” (1) in the sense of being “superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical” (2) or in the sense that it “isn’t really a religion but rather is a kind of ‘mind science,’ therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation” (2). Since, according to Thompson, Buddhist modernism cannot justifiably claim to be Buddhism’s essential and original core, claim scientific confirmation, or jettison religious elements, he concludes that Buddhist modernism “distorts both the significance of

the Buddhist tradition and the relationship between religion and science” (188) and is “philosophically and scientifically indefensible” (189). These confusions, Thompson argues, are antithetical to cosmopolitanism.

The cosmopolitanism that Thompson takes himself to be defending is the one articulated and defended by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Cosmopolitanism, as Appiah understands it, involves having universal concern for all people while at the same time respecting cultural and religious differences among people. For Appiah, while we ought to think of ourselves as part of a global humanity, it is important that at the same time we retain and celebrate the cultural differences that the variety of our histories, environments, and stories has shaped. Appiah points out that “[h]umanity isn’t, in the relevant sense, an identity at all . . . engagement with strangers is always going to be engagement with particular strangers” (98). People are always already culturally embedded individuals who carry with them the conceptual and cultural ideas associated with their particular history. Showing universal concern for all of humanity thus necessarily requires showing concern and respect for particular individuals and their particular identities.

Thompson’s claim that Buddhist modernist confusions “need to be discarded if Buddhism is to take its rightful place as a valuable contributor to a modern cosmopolitan community” (2) is troubling from a cosmopolitan perspective because [1] it generalizes Buddhism as one monolithic tradition that has one (i.e., “its”) rightful place within a cosmopolitan community when in fact there are many Buddhisms that will occupy different places within a global cosmopolitan community; [2] it introduces the idea that there is a “rightful place,” and thus a single right and wrong way for Buddhists to participate in a cosmopolitan community, when in fact there are many appropriate ways for diverse communities to participate; and [3] it presents the notions of “rightful place” and “valuable contributor” as barriers to inclusion by instructing one of those groups, namely, Buddhist modernists, to change their views (presumably so as to be right) in order to be considered valuable contributors (suggesting they are not currently valuable) when in fact there are no such barriers to inclusion. Constructive participation in a cosmopolitan community requires only a willingness to understand and respectfully converse with diverse others. In suggesting otherwise, Thompson undermines the pluralistic values that are at cosmopolitanism’s core.

III. MANY RIGHTFUL PLACES FOR BUDDHISMS

With respect to point [1], Thompson acknowledges that there are many forms of Buddhism that have evolved and changed over its history, especially as Buddhisms took root in culturally different places. He claims that he is not arguing that Buddhist modernism is any less authentic a form of Buddhism than any other form. Yet Thompson still envisions a “rightful place” for Buddhism and singles out Buddhist modernism for failing to take it. Given the extraordinary diversity among Buddhists, especially in the United States, it is difficult to make sense of what the “rightful place” for a Buddhist could be. In *A New Religious America*, Diana

L. Eck presents the diversity of Buddhisms in the US and notes that “Buddhism in America today is experiencing its own internal struggles with pluralism as cultures and generations express their different understandings of what it means to be Buddhist” (150). She describes the challenges that pan-Buddhist organizations face in trying to achieve consensus about what is of central importance to the Buddhism that they all share. If pan-Buddhist groups, which often organize with the explicit purpose of representing themselves in cosmopolitan exchanges, struggle to determine what the Buddhist position should be in those discussions, Thompson is certainly not in a position to decide it either. Part of respecting another’s identity in cosmopolitan exchanges is allowing each participant to determine for themselves what their identity is and how to represent it. Appiah explains, for example, that “[i]t is up to those who want to sail under the flags of Christianity or of Islam to determine (and explain, if they wish to) what their banners mean” (147). Likewise, it is up to Buddhists to decide for themselves what is original or insightful in Buddhism and how to represent that to others. Given the wide variety of Buddhisms, they will likely occupy many “rightful” places in cosmopolitan exchanges.

IV. EXCEPTIONALISM IS NOT A BARRIER TO A GOOD COSMOPOLITAN CONVERSATION

Thompson’s assessment of what Buddhism’s rightful place is seems related to his assessment of Buddhist modernism as confused, which brings us to point [2]. The idea seems to be that any Buddhist tradition can take its rightful place at the cosmopolitan table so long as it is not confused in ways that make it antithetical to cosmopolitanism. The two confusions that Thompson explicitly cites are claims to historical veracity and exceptionalism. Thompson complains that Buddhist modernists, like religious fundamentalists, attempt to legitimize their form of Buddhism by claiming that it uniquely reflects the true core of the Buddha’s teachings when no such claim of historical veracity can be substantiated (20). He further complains that Buddhist modernism is anti-cosmopolitan because “[i]ts partisan Buddhist exceptionalism undermines its universalistic rhetoric” (172). Buddhist modernists, like most Buddhists, claim to be universally concerned about all sentient beings. However, Thompson argues that insofar as Buddhist modernism takes itself to be “exceptional,” i.e., superior to other worldviews, it thereby undermines its claims of universal concern. In both of these instances, Thompson takes Buddhist modernists’ partiality and commitment to the truth of their own worldview as rendering them incapable of participating in cosmopolitan discussions in the right kind of way. He claims that “[a] genuine encounter is one in which each tradition gets to challenge the other’s assumptions, positions, and arguments” (77), that “conversation destabilizes one’s background assumptions and commitments” (180), and that participants ought to “allow their viewpoints to become unsettled” (185). Thompson complains that Buddhist modernists resist having their views unsettled and so are bad cosmopolitan conversation partners (11-12, 185-86).

The problem with this view is that most Buddhist traditions (and other religious and ideological traditions for that matter)

claim historical veracity and many of their adherents are committed to the truths of their particular tradition. Contrary to what Thompson suggests, these attitudes are not the exclusive purview of anti-cosmopolitan fundamentalists. Here Thompson is picking up on Appiah’s mistaken notion that fallibilism is a requirement of cosmopolitanism. Appiah assumes that only those who are less than fully committed to the truth of their own worldview could respect others who believe differently than they do. Appiah is concerned that those who “think that there is one right way for all human beings to live” cannot respect or be tolerant of people who do not share their commitments (even if they can, or care to, understand them) (144). However, as he himself highlights in his book (chapter 5, “The Primacy of Practice,” 69–85), in practice people are often willing to engage and get to know one another, to work together for the common good of the community—locally or globally—even if they think those with whom they share that community are woefully wrong in their worldview commitments. As the interfaith work of Diana L. Eck and Eboo Patel demonstrates, for example, many committed religious people—including a wide variety of Buddhists—are actively engaged in pluralism-building projects (both inter- and intra-religiously) despite being committed to the exclusive truth of their own traditions. Such people are not fallibilists, yet they are some of the most active and inspiring builders of a pluralist community. Thus, fallibilism is not a necessary cosmopolitan commitment. To insist that it is would exclude a large number of otherwise willing and valuable participants from the cosmopolitan project.

Eck (2001) and Patel (2016) can help us see why it is a mistake to see ideological commitment as antithetical to cosmopolitanism. They both draw an important distinction between diversity and pluralism that allows them to draw further distinctions among various different ways that individuals can respond to diversity. These distinctions allow us to see that ideological commitment is not the defining feature of fundamentalism.

For Eck and Patel, diversity is just a fact. Any place in which a variety of people with different worldviews, histories, religions, and/or cultures live is diverse. Diversity is neither positive nor negative and it can exist, as with Buddhism in the U.S., within traditions as well as among them. Pluralism, on the other hand, is a particular way to engage that diversity, one that involves, in Patel’s words, “the energetic engagement of diversity toward a positive end” (92). “Pluralism,” Eck explains, “is not a given but must be created” (70). It requires the sustained efforts of individuals and communities to engage difference, religious or otherwise, with the goal of generating understanding, building community, and promoting the common good.

Cosmopolitanism, as Appiah characterizes it, clearly has this kind of pluralism as its end. Yet Appiah often conflates diversity with pluralism in giving his account of cosmopolitanism. He says, for example, that “cosmopolitanism isn’t hard work” because living in association with people who are different from ourselves is simply a fact of our lives, given the ways people have historically moved and traded (xx). Here Appiah equates cosmopolitanism with what Eck describes as diversity,

as simply a fact about us. In other places, Appiah clearly presents cosmopolitanism as a goal and an achievement. Appiah's characterization of cosmopolitanism as "an adventure and an ideal," for example, fits better with Eck's characterization of pluralism as an achievement (xx). In a similar vein, Appiah says that "[t]here is a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge," specifically, the challenge of balancing universal concern for all people and respect for their particularity (xv). A cosmopolitan society is here presented by him as a diverse society that thus faces the problem of figuring out how to engage diversity in positive ways that foster respect and concern, reflecting the challenges of achieving pluralism as a goal.

Distinguishing between diversity and pluralism is helpful because it creates a space for identifying alternative ways one might engage diversity other than pluralism and can thereby help us understand fundamentalism as a particular kind of response. Eck and Patel categorize various approaches to diversity. One can adopt an exclusionary approach that does one of the following: (i) build barriers between people, amplifying differences and disagreements in scornful and antagonistic ways; (ii) use violence in an attempt to eradicate difference; or (iii) build bunkers to insulate one's own worldview from interaction with and influence from diverse others. Alternatively, one can (iv) adopt an assimilationist approach that is simply indifferent to and dismissive of the distinctive aspects of other worldviews that are valued by their members without actively excluding others through antagonism, violence, or bunker-building. Fundamentalism, on this more nuanced view, has less to do with what a person believes, or the commitments they hold, and more to do with a person's adoption of exclusionary behaviors and attitudes. The problem is not that fundamentalists think their view is exclusively right, but that they use that conviction to justify acting in ways that disparage, exclude, and/or harm other groups. Many similarly committed people do not share these fundamentalist attitudes or engage in these exclusionary behaviors but rather adopt a pluralist approach, as the work of Eck and Patel (among others) shows.

Productive engagement of diversity thus does not require that participants go into the exchanges desiring to challenge their own commitments or those of others. In fact, Appiah explicitly says that the point of cosmopolitanism is not to engage in this kind of debate. He says that

... we go wrong if we think the point of conversation is to persuade, and imagine it proceeding as a debate, in which points are scored for the Proposition and the Opposition ... practices and not principles are what enable us to live together in peace ... it's enough that it helps people get used to one another. (84-85)

The point of cosmopolitanism, for Appiah, is getting used to one another so that we can live together in peace. For Patel, this involves gaining appreciative knowledge about, having positive attitudes toward, and building relationships with diverse others—even, and especially, with those with whom we fundamentally disagree (100-103). Getting to

know and appreciate others in this way is difficult in the context of debate.

It is also worth remembering that cosmopolitan exchanges often occur across unequal power dynamics that make the destabilization of the participants' background assumptions and commitments more precarious for some groups than for others. Spurious appeals to reason have also been used historically by those in power to dismiss colonized and/or racialized others as irrational, something Appiah seems to be responding to in his book (42-43). Appiah's conversation model mitigates the threat marginalized groups, such as Asian Buddhist modernists, might otherwise justifiably feel in entering into cosmopolitan exchanges.

V. WHO IS TO JUDGE?

I have shown [1] that there is reason to doubt that there is one rightful place for Buddhism in a cosmopolitan community and [2] that a commitment to the exceptionalism of Buddhist modernism is not sufficient to accuse Buddhist modernists of not being cosmopolitan in the right, valuable kind of way. That Thompson introduces the notions of "rightful place" and "valuable contributor" as barriers to inclusion invites some very difficult questions about who Thompson envisions is the judge of what a tradition's rightful place is or what its value is to a global cosmopolitan community. This brings us to point [3]. Rightful according to whom? Valuable to whom? Troublingly, Thompson often writes as if the cosmopolitan perspective constituted some acultural, ahistorical, and neutral view from nowhere from which to arbitrate among diverse participants. He writes, for example:

Cosmopolitan thinkers move across different religious, scientific, philosophical, and artistic traditions and explore the presuppositions and commitments of those traditions. Cosmopolitanism offers a perspective from which to adjudicate the complex relationship between religion and science. It provides a better way for us to appreciate Buddhism's originality and insights than Buddhist modernism. (21-22)

Here Thompson characterizes cosmopolitan thinkers as those who can move across and explore different traditions as if they themselves were not part of any tradition. He characterizes cosmopolitan views as ones that "interweave ideas and insights from multiple traditions" (117), further suggesting that cosmopolitan thinkers have no roots of their own. What role does Thompson envision the cosmopolitan thinker's own history, assumptions, culture, and religious orientation play in how they move across and explore the views of others? In how they interweave ideas and insights? He writes in a way that suggests that cosmopolitan thinkers have somehow transcended their own cultural identities and that those identities play no role at all. However, cosmopolitan thinkers are always, as Appiah emphasizes, particular historical and cultural individuals (98). The nature of the conversations cosmopolitan thinkers engage in—how those diverse individuals engage and explore one another's identities—is negotiated through the conversations and engagements themselves, which

are always embedded in the particularities, perspectives, and commitments of the people who participate in them.

In presenting cosmopolitanism as a kind of neutral perspective, what Thompson is in effect doing is masking his own view as an author, which is not acultural or ahistorical. Under the guise of “the cosmopolitan thinker,” he presents himself as being in a better position to judge the value and correctness of a particular Buddhist tradition than Buddhists themselves and then uses this assessment to call into question the value of the contributions these particular Buddhists make to cosmopolitan conversations. Instead of treating Buddhist modernists as equal cosmopolitan conversation partners, Thompson puts himself in the false position of a neutral judge. In doing so, he obscures the role his own historical and cultural identities play in his “adjudication” and “appreciation” of Buddhism.

VI. CONCLUSION

We can achieve cosmopolitan pluralism only when we engage diverse others as equal and respected conversation partners, allowing each participant to represent their identity as they see fit and allowing the terms of the discussion to be negotiated by all participants, not dictated by a few. From a cosmopolitan perspective, while Thompson is certainly entitled to disagree with a Buddhist modernist’s views and to articulate his reasons, as he does in the book, he is not entitled to disparage Buddhist modernists, either as Buddhists or as cosmopolitans. That response shares more in common with exclusionary approaches to diversity than it does with the pluralism of cosmopolitanism.

NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book unless the context indicates otherwise.

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Some Questions for Friends of Buddhism

Sonam Kachru
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA
SK3HP@VIRGINIA.EDU

I

When Bertrand Russell delivered his talk “Why I Am Not a Christian” on March 6, 1927, at Battersea Town Hall, England was an overwhelmingly Christian country. When Kancha Ilaiah wrote *Why I Am Not a Hindu* and (after much struggle) published it in 1996 in India, the vast majority of the population considered itself Hindu. The subtitle of

Ilaiah’s book is “A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy.”¹ The title *Why I Am Not an X* can suggest a critique of X, where X, by the lights of the author, is a majority standpoint, associated with deleterious social and epistemic effects. Surely, Thompson does not feel this way about Buddhism in North America?

As happens so often in this excellent book, Thompson has anticipated his reader’s questions.² He knows that Buddhism is not in the majority and that it has no such coercive power. More importantly, while it may not make much sense to speak of its being scientifically true—for many reasons outlined in the book—he does not wish to censure it for that or for being a religion. On the contrary, he criticizes those who would not allow Buddhism to be a religion.

In the hands of another critic, this could well be damning. Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, who worked in either the sixth or seventh century CE, criticized the Buddhist category of omniscience (and perfection more generally) because it was unintelligible. It did not make sense to him as a possibility since the world does not admit of the infinite perfectibility of capacities. Nor did it make sense to him as an ideal—why would one want the Buddha to be able to respond automatically to the wishes of his auditors without intention or thought? In Kumārila’s memorable phrase, it could seem attractive as an ideal “only to a devotee.”³ Thompson, like Kumārila, wishes to emphasize the normativity of Buddhist concepts. Unlike Kumārila, Thompson’s emphasis is an act of philosophical friendship.

In this book, friends don’t let contemporary Buddhist friends be Buddhist modernists. According to Thompson’s careful use of this historiographical category, Buddhist modernism is a stance, a mode of interpreting what it means to be Buddhist, plotted along three axes: exegetical, epistemological, and comparative. Exegetically, unfettered by traditional chains of transmission and methods of contesting exegeses, it claims privileged access to what the Buddha, a person of history, really meant and what he took to be essential to his tradition. Epistemologically, it claims that these essential claims of the Buddha are true in the following sense: They either are supported by or coincide with the findings of modern science. And, comparatively, it claims that Buddhism is uniquely so supported.

I have three questions about this iteration of “Buddhist modernism” and how to use it. I acknowledge Thompson’s point that Buddhist modernism, as he motivates the category in this book, is not the only way to be Buddhist in a modern world and that his critique applies largely to European and American Buddhist modernism (20-21). Out of sympathy with many of his concerns and arguments in the book, my questions seek to clarify the distinctive contours of Thompson’s target.

II

B. R. Ambedkar’s modern form of Buddhism is constituted by the reinterpretation of what he took to be the historical Buddha’s teachings. It does so with the help of arguably modern vocabularies, saliences, and patterns of emphases. Thus, we find talk of (social) justice, inequality, rights, and

so on, attributed to the Buddha as the meanings of his sentences or as the aims of his actions. Ambedkar thought that any religion in the modern world would have to be consistent with science. He sometimes expressed the belief that Buddhism was so consistent and perhaps uniquely so. So far, so modernist, by the lights of many historians of Buddhism and even, perhaps, by Thompson's lights. But Ambedkar's position is not as textually naïve as the Euro-American Buddhist modernism with which Thompson is concerned.

At times, Ambedkar could resist *identifying* what the Buddha taught with modern concepts. He sometimes claimed only *continuity*, saying, in effect, that in an Indian context what the Buddha taught was poised (though not uniquely so) to serve as a precondition for the applicability and intelligibility of modern concepts in the life of Indian citizenry, given that it had already served the role of a religious precondition for political reformation with the Mauryans. Call this the Continuity Thesis. At other times, he did speak as if one could assign modern concepts as *the meanings* of the Buddha's utterances.⁴ Call this the Identity Thesis.

While Ambedkar could speak as if such identification were a *fait accompli*, he could also maintain that doing so required work. Basing himself on a long line of colonial-era Indian Buddhists, he employed traditional scholastic modes of reconstructing scripture to get at his preferred meanings. It takes the following form: The Buddha must have meant X when he said Y, because Y, what Y *prima facie* appears to mean, either is or entails something that is inconsistent with what we hold to be true.

Ambedkar's Continuity Thesis is part of his sophisticated historiographical commitments. One knows how to evaluate these. Ambedkar's Identity Thesis is trickier. Consider that it can be (though it need not be) treated as a sincere expression of faith. The ascription of reconstructed content to the Buddha guided by what one takes to be true is a mode (though not the only mode) of practicing doctrinal innovation long used by Buddhists *as part* of being Buddhist; it is not a tool to conceal faith, but to express what it consists in: Reconstruction collapses the distance between what the Buddha appears to have said then and what Buddhists might need him to say now and what they trust him, as it were, to have anticipated.

My first question is this: What do we do when the content is new but the means of ascribing content to the Buddha and justifying such ascription is traditional? Why should content count for more than method? Ambedkar's Buddhism is admittedly distant from premodern Buddhism. But so too, in the ninth century, was any Buddhist magician in the courts of Pāla Bengal from Linji Yixuan. How should we measure epistemic distance?

Perhaps our ascription of exegetical accuracy has to do not with items of belief taken piecemeal but with a whole pattern of (possibly inferentially linked) commitments with which reconstructed content (*R*) must interact. Think of the number of commitments with which *R* might be *prima facie* inconsistent and how one deals with inconsistency.

Are premodern reconstructions different in that they are inconsistent with fewer commitments, and/or they can allow for the reinterpretation of *prima facie* inconsistent commitments in line with *R*, whereas modernism, less like a lens filter and more like a broom, either is unwilling to make or cannot make any room for reinterpretation, sweeping out a very great number of traditional commitments in the process? That might show that, despite appearances, there has been change even in the reconstructive stance.

Does Thompson think this is something like what has happened? If so, does this have to do with the source for the content of the reconstructions (say, contemporary science or political culture), or the background for the attitudes of those doing the reconstructions? And, further, one might surmise, perhaps this change in the reconstructive stance has to do with the interaction between Buddhism and the knock-on effects of the Reformation, given its emphasis on the regimentation and salience of beliefs, the attenuation of sources for belief, and the rationalization of everyday life?

If the answer to the last question is "yes," what would that allow us to say? Changes in stances do happen as part of the history of religions. Protestantism may be severe, but it is no less a form of Christianity than is Catholicism. Were we to try and provide criteria for right-headed rather than wrong-headed changes to patterns of commitment, we'd better steer clear of the Buddhist modernist's game of identifying what is and what is not essential to Buddhism. If one believes (as I do) that there is not really any Buddhism, only Buddhists, this is not easy to do.

III

Buddhist exceptionalism about the self, says Thompson, takes the form of maintaining that "cognitive science indicates that the Buddhist no-self view is right and that other religious or philosophical views of the self are wrong" (87). But isn't there a more basic form Buddhist exceptionalism might take? One might claim that there are very few non-Buddhist premodern and/or non-scientific models which, firstly, emphasize broadly cognitive experiences, functions, and factors as a domain of theoretical and practical interest and which, secondly, eschew a self as the owner of experiences or the agent of (overt or mental) activity. The Cārvāka premodern naturalists also did not believe in a self. But they didn't believe in the mental as a domain of interest. Whether right or not, Buddhist models of selfless experience, particularly as enshrined in Buddhist scholastic (Abhidharma) interpretive schemas, are as radical as they are distinctive, rejecting even the grammar of natural language sentences as a guide to the intelligibility of experience. Where else, apart from some interpretations of contemporary science, do we find such radical revisionism enshrined as a collective norm?

I agree with Thompson that Buddhist scholasticism is a normative enterprise bound up with exegesis of scripture. But traditionally, the status of selflessness as a truth bound up with normative considerations, as distinct from a narrowly empirical truth, may entail its being exceptional. Here's how. Against modernist Buddhists, some traditional Buddhists claim that the truth of selflessness, unlike that of

impermanence, is not narrowly empirical. I mean this: The fact of impermanence is available to all individuals. One does not need Buddhism to experience it. Not so the fact of there being no self, the availability of which is thought to require, firstly, a Buddha's revelation; secondly, a tradition making available the Buddha's words under the right interpretation; and thirdly, access to that tradition by virtue of one's historical and social location.⁵ Why? Because, the argument goes, the doctrine so profoundly goes against the grain of our habits of experience, as enshrined in our categories, our language, and our cultural institutions, that, without a Buddha's prodding, it is almost impossible to get into view under the right interpretation (as something other than nihilism, for example).

Dharmakīrti did think that there is another sense in which selflessness is natural: Once taught to see it, we will not easily lose sight of it. This is so, Dharmakīrti argues, because of his belief that the mind is typically truth-tracking unless primed otherwise by affective and cognitive conditioning.⁶ But even Dharmakīrti would not think that, absent Buddhist texts and tradition as a horizon, one could expect simply to have glimpsed what the Buddha meant by there being no self.

Hence the exceptionalness of no-self as a doctrine. For traditional Buddhist philosophers, recognizing such exceptionalness created pressure to develop and debate meta-conceptual models and concepts designed to address the nature and intelligibility of common-sense-revising metaphysical claims. These tools are arguably useful even when thinking of this age's revisionary claims. Could Thompson be at all inclined or willing to concede that Buddhists in modernity would not entirely be without justification were they to emphasize the comparative exceptionalness of Buddhism as a religion on this score? I think it would not be inconsistent with his interest in encouraging the following questions: "What do we find in Buddhism that we don't find in other traditions? . . . How can debating with Buddhists . . . invigorate our thinking?" (85).

IV

Is the modern period a unique source for the bad faith Thompson associates with Buddhist modernists?

Consider that "science" need not be confined to the cooperative and defeasible enterprise that values prediction and explanation. As Thompson notes, it is the Buddhist modernists who reify contemporary empirical science (45-46). More capaciously understood, Buddhism has not had to wait for the modern period to interact with what we would call science nowadays; it has long overlapped and contributed to the history of medicine, for example, or linguistics, even as it did with premodern sciences such as alchemy and astrology. One premodern public epistemic culture to which Buddhists have contributed and to which Thompson alludes (50) is of particular interest to me. I have in mind the cultivation of epistemology as a discipline in South Asia, beginning late fifth/early sixth century CE, pursued as a multigenerational endeavor in which claims made by individuals belonging to different traditions—such as "Inference occurs when X, Y, and Z"—were taken

account of and debated using a public vocabulary, one available to all and not rooted in the scriptures of any tradition. This theoretical discipline is concerned with the knowledge necessary for successful activity on the part of a new kind of individual, on the basis of whom a particular notion of rationality became available.

By a new kind of individual, I mean the idealized rational actor who wants to know how to maximize the chances of success in activity. Such an actor is thought to possess a complement of logical tools and rely on epistemic criteria in their decision-making process. Rationality is defined as what makes sense for this ideal-type subject to believe and to do to maximize success.⁷ (Such an ideal agent may prove to be distinct in kind from the normatively thicker notion of a sage, or someone possessing wisdom, at least insofar as the ideal of a sage may at times be articulated with the help of tradition-specific vocabularies and values.)

Here's the point. It was open to a Buddhist philosopher to claim the following: (1) that they could express some (if not all) of the commitments that mattered to being Buddhist in those "public" terms (though this could be challenged, as by Kumāṛila, among others, as we have seen); (2) that they could defend Buddhist claims that were not initially evident as being, in fact, rational; and (3) that, for the purposes of social standing and debate, they could identify with only those publicly rationalizable claims while keeping other claims, as it were, off the table.

My question to Thompson is this: Would such appeal to a public epistemic culture to make claims about Buddhist discourse and in an attempt to justify it involve "false consciousness," as does Buddhist modernism, given its appeals to empirical science on Thompson's account? It feels odd to say so, independent of the success of such a venture. But if not, wherein lies the difference?

V

Consider the title of Thompson's book. What is the connection between being an X (or wanting to be an X) and X's being true? The Buddhist modernist does not look elsewhere than science for truth. Does Thompson?

He actually wants us to give up on asking "Is Buddhism true?" (85). That, and the questions he would have us orient ourselves with—questions such as "What does Buddhism have to teach us?" (85)—will work for the cosmopolitan friend of Buddhism. But what of the modern Buddhist today who does not wish to be denounced as a Buddhist modernist in the pejorative sense? Are there respectable routes to Buddhism other than heritage or (merely) aesthetic or psychological varieties of preference?

Truth, narrowly understood, has to do with the relationship between things we say and think and the way the world is. Premodern Buddhist philosophers could recognize this while seeing that there is another valence to truth, particularly evident when speaking, for example, of the reason to pursue a religion, including thereby the overriding beauty or power it may involve, or the eloquence one's smallest gestures may achieve when one is taken apart and put together again through training in a way of life taken

to express some truth or reality. Is there any room for a modern Buddhist to speak like this? This larger sense of truth concerns more than the relation between an individual and a chosen way of life. Authenticity, which is Thompson's suggestion for the norm operative in the reconfiguration of one's life that Buddhists have in mind in speaking of awakening (82), may not go farther than that. Truth in the larger sense concerns the normative claims someone's being Buddhist may press on another. That's a distinctive way to chart the range of things being Buddhist can come to collectively mean outside of any one person's head or life.

I'd like to hear Thompson say more about truth and authenticity, or what, in place of truth, might play a comparable normative role for modern Buddhism. Finishing this extraordinary book, I was left to wonder whether any such norm could be consistent with modern Buddhists, as individuals, practicing the kind of effortless cosmopolitanism Thompson so consistently exemplifies. I don't know: Is what is good for friends of Buddhists always good for Buddhists?

NOTES

1. Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996).
2. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 22. Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book unless the context indicates otherwise.
3. Kei Kataoka, "Kumārila's Critique of Omniscience," *Indo Shishoshi Kenkyu* 15 (2003): 35–69, at 57.
4. For the Continuity Thesis, perhaps the easiest point of access is B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (London: Verso, 2014), 224–25. On Ambedkar's hermeneutic method as a modern Buddhist, see Knut A. Jacobsen, "Revivals of Ancient Religious Traditions in Modern India: Sāṃkhya and Buddhism," *Temenos* 54, no. 1 (2018): 63–77, at 69–71.
5. Steven Collins, *Wisdom as a Way of Life: Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 18.
6. See verse 210 and then verse 206 in *Pramāṇavārttikam*, ed. Rahula Sankrityayana (Patna: Bihar and Orissa Research Society, 1938), 47 and 46.
7. I draw on Vincent Eltschinger, "Turning Hermeneutics into Apologetics: Reasoning and Rationality under Changing Historical Circumstances," in *Scriptural Authority, Reason and Action: Proceedings of a Panel at the 14th World Sanskrit Conference, Kyoto, September 1–5, 2009*, ed. Vincent Eltschinger and Helmut Krasser (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2013), 71–146, at 73–76. This essay builds on Sara L. McClintock, *Omniscience and the Rhetoric of Reason: Santaraksita and Kamalasila on Rationality, Argumentation, and Religious Authority* (Boston: Wisdom, 2010).

sites of productive conversation between Buddhists and scientists, suggesting that, at their best,

the dialogues have lived up to the ideal of a conversation guided by the ethics of knowledge. This happens when the individual representatives of the traditions allow their viewpoints to become unsettled in the service of the conversation. The conversation itself becomes a form of knowledge—a collective mode of knowing—with its own ethics of mutual respect and getting to know one another. (185)

This is the ideal of cross-cultural dialogue. If conversations among individuals, or among representatives of different ways of thinking, can lead to the unsettling of respective viewpoints and become "a collective mode of knowing," participants in such conversations not only get to know one another more deeply, but also collectively make new discoveries and produce new kinds of knowledge.

This, I think, highlights the broader point that Thompson makes in his book. Buddhist traditions, he argues, have a lot to offer to the world, but they need to be understood and appreciated in terms of the broader contexts in which they have existed and continue to exist, with all of their nuances and complications. To fail to recognize such contexts and nuances is to essentialize Buddhism, which can lead to the mistaken view that Buddhist traditions are somehow superior to, more rational, or more scientific than other traditions. This mistaken view, Thompson argues, is the hallmark of so-called Buddhist modernism. The antidote to Buddhist modernism, Thompson contends, is cosmopolitanism, which he defines as "the idea that all human beings belong to one community that can and should encompass different ways of life" (2). By understanding Buddhist traditions in light of cosmopolitanism, one can appreciate and learn from Buddhist thought, and engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue that can lead to genuinely new forms of knowledge.

What I appreciate about *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is that it actively participates in a cosmopolitan project by considering and inviting interlocutors of its own. Thompson's writing is exceptionally clear, and his book is well suited to sparking conversations among readers from different backgrounds, which has the potential to lead to new and different collective forms of knowing. By encouraging discussion, this book is engaging in precisely the kind of thing that we ought to be doing when we do philosophy, especially when we engage in cross-cultural philosophy.

I wish to begin my comments here by admitting that I genuinely enjoyed this book, and I found myself nodding in agreement with much of it. But in the spirit of cosmopolitanism, and because I have been invited to offer a *critical* response to Thompson's work, I will offer two of my own (admittedly minor) critiques of this book. First, I will address Thompson's treatment of the Buddhist no-self doctrine in chapter 3. Then, I will consider his overall framing of the book. While I do not disagree with many of the points that Thompson raises about Buddhist modernism

Thompson Is Not a Buddhist, But What about the Rest of Us?

Constance Kassor

LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY

CONSTANCE.E.KASSOR@LAWRENCE.EDU

In the final chapter of *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*,¹ Evan Thompson describes the Mind and Life Dialogues as

and its problems, I do think that he could have been a bit clearer about just who this book is intended for.

My first point of critique is Thompson's third chapter, "No Self? Not So Fast." The Buddhist theory of no-self is, as Thompson rightly points out, a topic that has received considerable attention from Buddhist modernists, as well as from non-Buddhist thinkers who engage with Buddhist philosophy. In brief, Thompson frames the no-self theory as follows: "[T]here's nothing in your physical and psychological makeup that amounts to or qualifies as a real inner subject and agent. There's the feeling of self, but no real self to match the feeling. So, the self is an illusion" (87). Thompson goes on to say that Buddhist modernists cite neuroscience and psychology in attempts to give scientific credence to the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, and to suggest that other theories about selves are, therefore, wrong.

The Buddhist modernist view, Thompson argues, is simplistic in part because of the ways that we think about selves in Euro-American philosophy and cognitive science. He writes that a full story of the Buddhist account of selflessness "should take account of other ways of thinking about the self, especially in philosophy today, and it should consider the criticisms leveled at the Buddhist viewpoint by other classical Indian philosophers" (88). While I agree with the second part of Thompson's assertion here (that we must consider other classical Indian philosophers if we are to fully understand Buddhist no-self theories), I do not agree with the first part (that we need to consider still other ways of thinking about the self if we are to fully understand Buddhist no-self theories).

I will begin with my point of agreement. In order to fully understand and appreciate the Buddhist doctrine of no-self, or *anātman*, one must also understand and appreciate Indian Buddhists' interlocutors who espouse a view of a self, or *ātman*. In the context of this conversation, when Buddhists negate the existence of the self, they negate something very specific: a permanent, stable, unchanging essence. This essence is presumed to be the thing that makes me who I am, independent of my mind or my body. Early Buddhist debates with non-Buddhist interlocutors interrogate this specific concept of self as essence. Buddhists do not, however, reject the idea that we have an innate *sense* of self, a feeling of what it is like to be me. Thompson points out that Buddhists make a distinction between the self—*ātman*—and the sense of self, or the person—*pudgala*—and that, according to Buddhist philosophers, the former is an illusion, whereas the latter is a construction.

This is the crux of the classical Buddhist no-self doctrine. But Thompson goes on to suggest that it is better, for our present purposes, to think of the self as a construction as opposed to an illusion, because English-speaking Euro-American philosophers and cognitive scientists don't think about selves in terms of essences. He writes, "the self that Buddhism targets as the object of self-grasping—the self as a personal essence—isn't the only way to understand the self, especially in the context of cognitive science and philosophy today. So, denying that there is this kind of self

doesn't entail that there is no self whatsoever" (91). It is true that there are many different ways of understanding the self, but classical Buddhist arguments of no-self only focus on this specific idea of self as essence. To conflate this specific point of argument with broader understandings or definitions of selves is to confuse the point of the Buddhist argument altogether.

This is where I disagree with Thompson. After concisely and skillfully unpacking some of the nuances in the debates around self as *ātman* between Indian Buddhists and other classical Indian philosophical traditions, he then states that Euro-American philosophers and cognitive scientists talk about the self in terms of "an embodied and socially embedded subject of experience" (105). This is a perfectly acceptable way for some people to define a self, but this is not the self that Buddhists refute. The "embodied and socially embedded subject of experience" (105) is closer to the sense of self—the *pudgala*—with which many Buddhists do not take issue. Thompson reasons that "[i]n our contemporary context, . . . the distinction [between *ātman* and *pudgala*] seems forced, given the many and varied meanings of the word 'self' in philosophy and psychology" (113-14). As a result, he wishes to reframe the discussion and talk about selves as constructions rather than as illusions.

Here is the problem with Thompson's view: If we wish to be truly cosmopolitan and involve Buddhist philosophy in the debates around selves, then we need to be clear about the distinctions that Buddhists make, and understand how Buddhist philosophers define the term "self." In other words, in order to fruitfully engage with Buddhist philosophical ideas about selves, we must demand that there be specificity in terms of the distinction between *ātman* and *pudgala*. To fail to do so is to give too much credit to "our contemporary context" (more on that below), and to discount real terminological distinctions that are actually very important in Buddhist philosophy.

This is an issue that I often find myself reiterating when I teach introductory undergraduate courses on Buddhist thought: Many of my students struggle with appreciating Buddhist arguments against the self, simply because they don't conceive of selves in terms of essences. They argue, "Well, I don't think of myself as a permanent essence. I think of myself as a constantly changing subject of experience. So what's the big deal?" In order to help students to fully appreciate the nuances of classical Buddhist no-self arguments, I must remind them of the broader philosophical contexts in which these South Asian philosophers lived and debated, and get clear on the distinction between *ātman* and *pudgala*. The no-self theory targets something specific, and it is a mistake to move that target. By arguing that "selves" are constructions rather than illusions, Thompson seems to suggest that Euro-American philosophers, cognitive scientists, and those influenced by Buddhist modernism are incapable of understanding this terminological nuance, simply because "self" can mean so many different things in English. But if I can expect undergraduates who have never previously encountered Buddhist thought to be able to grasp this nuance, surely we can expect professional philosophers to do the same.

Now to my larger point about the book, which might not be a critique of Thompson's work, as much as it is an encouragement or invitation for readers of this book. *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is, first and foremost, a rejection of Buddhist modernism. Buddhist modernists try to superimpose a scientific sort of perspective onto Buddhist traditions, which results in distorting Buddhism, science, and religion. Thompson's aim is not to suggest that conversations between Buddhism and science are impossible—in fact, he is sympathetic and open to these kinds of discussions—but to suggest that, instead of taking a modernist approach, we ought to take a more cosmopolitan approach to understanding Buddhism. My question, though, is this: Who, specifically, are the “we” to whom Thompson is referring? Cosmopolitanism considers multiple perspectives, which is a useful and necessary kind of approach when one engages in cross-cultural philosophical discussion. But in considering multiple perspectives, one must also be aware of one's own positionality.

Of course, Thompson is exceptionally clear about his own perspective in this book. As evidenced by his autobiographical introduction, his position is a particular one. And he specifies that his critical arguments apply specifically to European and American flavors of Buddhist modernism. But there are times throughout the book where he shifts a bit too easily from talking about his own perspective, background, and experience to making claims about “our contemporary context.” I appreciate Thompson's self-reflective approach in this book, and I suspect that his perspective is one with which many readers of *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* might very well identify. But there are many different positions from which to approach Buddhism, and from which to approach conversations between Buddhist ways of thinking and other traditions. If the main thrust of this book is to argue for cosmopolitanism, then the intended audience of this book ought to be made explicit.

Thompson seems to be talking to Euro-American philosophers, cognitive scientists, and other highly educated North American and European academics. Perhaps convert Buddhists can be included in this intended audience as well. For such audiences, cosmopolitanism is likely a good way to understand Buddhist philosophy. But is this the best approach for *everyone* interested in interrogating Buddhism? What about, for example, Asian American Buddhist practitioners born into Buddhist families? Or Buddhist monastics or other Asian academics whose education took place in Buddhist countries? Is Thompson's book intended for them? Is cosmopolitanism the best approach for these groups of people as well?

As Thompson points out in his conclusion, in the Buddha's time, there were many different philosophical traditions and groups of people talking, debating, and thinking together. There was a certain kind of cosmopolitanism in India 2,500 years ago, and there is room for a kind of cosmopolitanism now in contemporary discussions of Buddhist philosophy and other traditions. And while I am sympathetic to most of Thompson's claims throughout this book, I think that it is necessary for us, as readers, to turn the lens back on ourselves.

While Thompson admits that his reasons for this book's title are a nod to Bertrand Russell's “Why I Am Not a Christian,” I can also understand and appreciate why he would choose to use the first person in the title of this book. It is, in part, a reflection on his own positionality with respect to the Buddhism-vs-science debates with which he has been involved for the entirety of his philosophical career. But in sliding from “I” to “we” so freely throughout the book, I fear that Thompson is too easily assuming that his own experience aligns with the experiences of others who engage with his writing.

Thompson makes a compelling case for why *he* is not a Buddhist. He is not a Buddhist because he is not a Buddhist modernist. He is a philosopher and, as he puts it, someone who wishes to be “a good friend to Buddhism” (2, 189). So perhaps our task, as readers of this book and potential participants in cosmopolitanism ourselves, ought to be to consider who we are in these debates and discussions, and why. By considering our own positionality with regard to contemporary Buddhism-vs-science debates in light of cosmopolitanism, perhaps we can allow for our own viewpoints to become unsettled as well, and contribute to collective modes of knowing alongside Thompson.

NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book.

Deconstructing Buddhist Modernism Without Postmodern Orientalism?

Abraham Velez de Cea

EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
ABRAHAM.VELEZ@EKU.EDU

I. WHAT I LIKE ABOUT THOMPSON'S BOOK

I am not a scientist or a philosopher of science and I cannot state whether Evan Thompson's critique of Robert Wright's use of evolutionary psychology to legitimize the truth of Buddhism has merit. Similarly, I am not qualified to judge whether embodied cognitive science offers a better framework than evolutionary psychology for relating science to Buddhism as Thompson suggests. As a scholar of Buddhism, however, I can say that I agree with Thompson's critique of a naturalistic conception of nirvana as a mere psychological state, that is, as a mental state whose subject or possessor experiences feelings without being conditioned by craving. Nirvana is described in Buddhist texts not only in psychological terms but also as a reality beyond causes and conditions, thus transcending *samsara*. I also agree with Thompson when he asserts that nirvana “entails a total reconfiguration of our existence as governed by the norm of authenticity, not simply a change to our mental states and traits as psychology conceives of them” (82).¹

I enjoy Thompson's understanding of the early Buddhist doctrine of no-self and his objections to reductionist

interpretations of no-self in classical Indian thought and contemporary analytical Buddhism. Thompson rightly explains that the Buddhist notion of no-self targets a particular conception of the self as a personal essence that is in control of the aggregates and that is permanent and unconditioned. Rejecting this particular understanding of the self, however, “doesn’t entail that there is no self whatsoever” (91, 105). Thompson brilliantly demonstrates that the Buddha’s doctrine of no-self in the *Nikāyas* does not presuppose “a pure awareness or pure consciousness that transcends the aggregates and isn’t conditioned by them” (93). Yet Thompson does not endorse reductionist interpretations of the doctrine of no-self, that is, interpretations that reduce the self to a mere illusion. For Thompson, viewing the self as an illusion rests on a tendentious concept of the self as “an unconstructed personal essence or independent thing” (113). According to Thompson, and I agree with him, not all philosophers conceive the self in that way. Some philosophers conceive the self as a developmental and social construction. Rather than seeing the self as an illusion, Thompson prefers to see it as “a multifaceted construction, made out of different kinds of self-awareness” (113). This understanding of the self as a construction, Thompson contends, is compatible with the existence of selfless states and the illusory sense of self as if it were “an unchanging and independent personal essence” (114). I find Thompson’s comparison of the notion of self as “a multifaceted construction” (113) with the Buddhist concept of a person (*pudgala*) intellectually stimulating and potentially capable of igniting new discussions about this neglected and often misunderstood Buddhist concept.

As a scholar of Buddhism, I appreciate Thompson’s critique of simplistic interpretations of mindfulness. Thompson rightly states that “Buddhism offers multiple and sometimes incompatible conceptions of mindfulness” (120). I sympathize with Thompson’s proposal to understand mindfulness from the standpoint of “‘4E cognitive science,’ according to which cognition is embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive” (131). Thompson is right when he suggests that mindfulness cannot be reduced to “an essentially inward awareness of your own private mind” (121) or “a kind of private introspection of a private mental theater” (138). I find his conception of mindfulness as “the metacognition and internalized social cognition of socially constituted experience” (138) more plausible than neurocentric and brainbound interpretations that superimpose mindfulness onto brain areas.

Despite agreeing and sympathizing with many ideas and interpretations of Thompson, I have reservations about the fundamental argument of his book and about his main constructive proposal. In what follows, I limit myself to three friendly objections, which can be summarized in this way: Thompson (1) holds a problematic view of Buddhist modernism, (2) advances a problematic reason for not being a Buddhist, and (3) makes a problematic suggestion to adopt cosmopolitanism.

II. PROBLEMATIC VIEW OF BUDDHIST MODERNISM

My first friendly objection to Thompson is that his critique of Buddhist modernism is based on questionable assumptions about this “dominant strand of modern Buddhism” (1). Thompson assumes that “Buddhist exceptionalism is an inherent part of Buddhist modernism” (16) or that “Buddhist modernism typically goes together with Buddhist exceptionalism” (28). Although he does not state it explicitly, Thompson also assumes that neural Buddhism is one of the “core tenets” of Buddhist modernism (188-89).

However, assuming that Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism are inherent parts of Buddhist modernism is problematic. As Thompson himself points out, Buddhist modernism is an “older and broader movement” (15). As a movement, Buddhist modernism has many expressions. I do not deny that some contemporary Buddhist modernists believe in both Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism, but this does not imply that all Buddhist modernists hold either of these views or that Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism are inherent parts of Buddhist modernism.

Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism seem typical of secular Buddhists in Europe and North America. But they are not thereby core tenets of Buddhist modernism. Buddhist exceptionalism can also be considered typical of Protestant Buddhists and Buddhist fundamentalists in Asia. But again, Buddhist modernism is broader than both Protestant Buddhism and Buddhist fundamentalism. It is simply not the case that all people who hold modernist ideas about the Buddha and Buddhism are Buddhist fundamentalists, Protestant Buddhists, or secular Buddhists, and it is simply not the case that all Buddhist modernists, whether in Asia or the West, advocate Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism.

The multiple expressions of Buddhist modernism may show family resemblances, but they are not necessarily identical across countries, cultures, and Buddhist traditions. Thompson himself acknowledges a distinction among different types of Buddhist modernism when he states that his critique applies to “Buddhist modernism in Europe and North America, since Asia is evolving its own unique forms of Buddhist modernism” (20). Because Buddhist modernism is not monolithic, assuming that it possesses an ideological essence constituted by Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism does not do justice to the doctrine of Buddhist modernism.

In order to demonstrate that it is possible in principle to hold modernist ideas about the Buddha and Buddhism without advocating Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism, I will discuss the case of the Dalai Lama. That the Dalai Lama does not advocate the first belief of Buddhist exceptionalism—namely, that “Buddhism is superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical” (2)—can be inferred from his book *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths*.² There the Dalai Lama distinguishes among ethical, cultural, and doctrinal levels of religion. He admits that religions are ultimately different at the level of doctrines but suggests

that they are similar at the level of ethics. He elaborates as follows: “[O]n this level, the purpose of all religions remains the same: to contribute to the betterment of humanity, to create a more compassionate and responsible human being. Not only are the ethical teachings of the religions essentially the same, the fruits of love and compassion are the same as well” (151). For the Dalai Lama, no religion is superior to others at the ethical level. It is true that the Dalai Lama understands Buddhist ethics as rational and empirical, but that does not make him a Buddhist exceptionalist with regard to the ethics of religions. With regard to the doctrinal level, and referring specifically to diverse Buddhist teachings, the Dalai Lama affirms that “a Buddhist cannot say, when relating to the Buddha’s teaching, ‘this is the best teaching,’ as if one can make such evaluations independent of the specific contexts” (155). This seems to imply that, for the Dalai Lama, one cannot claim that a particular form of Buddhism is uniquely superior to others in absolute and universal terms. Similarly, when the Dalai Lama says that Buddhism is better than other religions, he qualifies his statement in a way that avoids Buddhist exceptionalism: “For me Buddhism is the best, but this does not mean that Buddhism is the best for all” (158).

That the Dalai Lama does not advocate the second belief of Buddhist exceptionalism—namely, that “Buddhism isn’t really a religion but rather is a kind of ‘mind science,’ therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation” (2)—can be inferred from Thompson’s book. Thompson refers to the Dalai Lama’s distinction between “Buddhist science” and “Buddhist religion” (48-49). Thompson contends that the Dalai Lama’s distinction is not possible, but this is not the point that concerns us here. What is relevant here is that, for the Dalai Lama, Buddhism is not just a science of the mind because he also acknowledges the religious dimension of Buddhism.

That the Dalai Lama does not advocate neural Buddhism can be inferred from the fact that he believes in *Prāsaṅgika-Mādhyamika* philosophy. Buddhist philosophies of mind in general reject materialist or reductionist standpoints; therefore, they cannot agree with attempts to reduce nirvana or mindfulness to brain states or brain training. Whether the Dalai Lama believes that the doctrine of no-self has been corroborated by Western science is something that I do not know. A traditional Buddhist, even one with modernist ideas like the Dalai Lama, does not seem to need the validation of science in order to believe in the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. This, however, does not mean that traditional Buddhists with modernist ideas like the Dalai Lama disregard what contemporary science has to say about their beliefs. Quite the opposite; the Dalai Lama once affirmed that he would be willing to stop believing in rebirth if science disproved it.³ The rational, empirical, and open-minded attitude that the Dalai Lama instantiates when he says that he is willing to change his beliefs if proven wrong is not a modernist tactic to enhance the prestige of Buddhism among Westerners. Nor is it a consequence of the influence of modern Western values and attitudes. The Dalai Lama has obviously been influenced by his encounter with Western modernity, but it would be an exaggeration to credit the West for the rational, empirical, and open-minded attitude that the Dalai Lama demonstrates.

European and American scholars who deconstruct Buddhist modernism and go as far as to claim that it is a Western creation or invention are engaging in what I would call “postmodern Orientalism.” Like Orientalists of the past, deconstructionists of Buddhist modernism project into Buddhism their own postmodern assumptions about what is “real” and “authentic” Buddhism. Rather than emphasizing the idealized Buddhism of texts and its rational, ethical, empirical, and pragmatic aspects as Orientalists of the past did, postmodern Orientalists emphasize now a myriad of particular and different manifestations of “anthropological Buddhism” or “Buddhism in practice.” The problem with this new emphasis on “real” and “authentic” Buddhism in practice is that it legitimizes an alternative and equally normative interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism that I would call “Buddhist postmodernism.” Thompson does not advocate Buddhist postmodernism, but his book seems to have been influenced by the negative view of Buddhist modernism characteristic of postmodern Orientalists. Whether Buddhist postmodernism offers a better interpretation of the Buddha and Buddhism than Buddhist modernism is not our concern here. Likewise, whether Buddhist modernism represents a projection of modern Western values into Buddhism or the rediscovery of genuine and neglected trends within Buddhist traditions is not the point of this response. What concerns us here, and that’s also my point, is that the Dalai Lama’s understanding of Buddhism allows us to conclude that it is possible in principle to be a traditional Buddhist with modernist ideas without advocating Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism.

III. PROBLEMATIC REASON FOR NOT BEING A BUDDHIST

My second friendly objection to Thompson is that the primary reason he gives for not being a Buddhist is problematic. Thompson presents a dilemma between being a traditional Buddhist and being a Buddhist modernist. His reasoning is straightforward. He cannot be a traditional Buddhist and, for him, Buddhist modernism is “full of confused ideas” (1) and “riddled with philosophical problems” (16); therefore, he cannot be a Buddhist. I provide two quotes to illustrate his reasoning:

Since I didn’t want to join a traditional Theravāda, Zen, or Tibetan Buddhist monastery, the only way to be a Buddhist was to be a Buddhist modernist. But Buddhist modernism is riddled with philosophical problems. (16)

Since I see no way for myself to be a Buddhist without being a Buddhist modernist, and Buddhist modernism is philosophically unsound, I see no way for myself to be a Buddhist without acting in bad faith. That is why I’m not a Buddhist. (19)

Needless to say, Thompson’s journey is unique and his reasons for not being a Buddhist deserve the utmost respect. I am simply suggesting that his reasoning for not being a Buddhist is problematic. The problem with Thompson’s reasoning is that it presupposes a false dilemma between being a traditional Buddhist and being a Buddhist modernist.

The dilemma is false because Buddhist modernism is not necessarily separated from traditional Buddhism. In fact, many traditional forms of Buddhism, whether Theravāda, Zen, or Tibetan, contain modernist elements as well as individuals with modernist views of the Buddha and Buddhism. It does not seem reasonable to present traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism as mutually exclusive as Thompson does. Donald S. Lopez argues thus: "Unlike previous forms of national Buddhism, this new Buddhism does not stand in a relation of mutual exclusion to these other forms. One may be a Chinese Buddhist and also be a modern Buddhist. Yet one may also be a Chinese Buddhist without being a modern Buddhist."⁴

The dilemma between traditional Buddhism and Buddhist modernism is also a false dilemma because it fails to do justice to the complexity and the multifaceted nature of each. Neither traditional Buddhism nor Buddhist modernism is monolithic. Traditional forms of Buddhism, like all other religious traditions, have multiple dimensions, including experiential, ritual, mythic, doctrinal, social, and material dimensions. There are many Buddhist traditions with each one exhibiting multiple variations of the aforementioned dimensions. Moreover, Buddhist traditions have different kinds of practitioners, not all of them with the same ideas, level of understanding, commitment, or spiritual development. Similarly, Buddhist modernism has many forms and expressions, at least as many forms and expressions as traditional Buddhism. Given that there are many ways of being a traditional Buddhist and many ways of being a Buddhist modernist, and given that some of those ways might be interrelated, Thompson's dilemma between being a traditional Buddhist and being a Buddhist modernist is, at the very least, simplistic.

I share with Thompson a critical attitude towards certain aspects of traditional Buddhism as well as his skepticism about "Americanized" approaches to Buddhism. Like Thompson, I have never been able to see myself joining a traditional Buddhist monastery and I have always been skeptical of "Americanized" forms of Buddhism. But being unable to join a traditional Buddhist monastery or having reservations about "Americanized" Buddhism did not prevent me from being a Buddhist. In other words, having a critical attitude towards "Americanized" Buddhism and objecting to certain aspects of traditional Buddhism need not lead someone away from Buddhism. It may lead someone away from Buddhism like in the case of Thompson, or it may not lead someone away from Buddhism like in my own case.

From the fact that someone cannot be a traditional Buddhist, it does not follow that that person can only be a Buddhist modernist, and from the fact that someone disagrees philosophically with Buddhist modernism, it does not follow that that person must be a traditional Buddhist. There is a wide spectrum of possibilities between being a Buddhist modernist and being a traditional Buddhist, including the possibility of being a Buddhist with both traditional and modernist ideas such as the Dalai Lama. It is simply not the case that there are just two options to choose from in the contemporary Buddhist landscape: either in Asia or in Europe and North America.

IV. PROBLEMATIC SUGGESTION TO ADOPT COSMOPOLITANISM

My last friendly objection to Thompson's book is that his constructive proposal for Buddhists—namely, to discard Buddhist modernism in order to adopt cosmopolitanism as a framework to better appreciate Buddhism and its relationship with science—is problematic. The first problem with cosmopolitanism is that it is not a universal, objective, neutral, or value-free framework that can be adopted by Buddhists without contradicting key Buddhist ideals. Following Kwame Anthony Appiah,⁵ Thompson advocates a "partial cosmopolitanism" that affirms "our need to be partial to particular people and groups" (174-75). I wonder how this ethical ideal of Appiah's brand of cosmopolitanism can be reconciled with the Buddhist ethical ideals of universal compassion and loving-kindness, which in their most advanced manifestations are accompanied by equanimity or emotional impartiality towards particular people and groups.

Thompson summarizes Appiah's cosmopolitanism as follows: "He argues that the values worth living by are many, not one; different people and societies can and should embody different ways of life; we ought to care about the welfare of the individuals engaged in those different ways of life" (21). Again, I fail to understand how the pluralism about ultimate ethical value and way of life that Appiah's cosmopolitanism entails can be adopted by Buddhists without contradicting mainstream Buddhist ethics. For instance, can Buddhist traditions accept ethical values and ways of life that contradict the ethical standards and the ideals of human flourishing exemplified by buddhas and bodhisattvas? More specifically, can any Buddhist accept, as a matter of principle, ethical egoism and a way of life that fosters greed and selfishness? Cosmopolitanism, in contrast, seems to be able to accept ethical egoism and ways of life that foster greed and selfishness as long as they allow people to harmonize two kinds of cosmopolitan ethical commitments: those toward all human beings and those toward particular human lives, communities, and traditions (174-75).

Whereas cosmopolitanism is a particular and historically conditioned way of thinking about ethics and political philosophy, Buddhist modernism is a particular and historically conditioned way of understanding or speaking about the Buddha and Buddhism. Neither Buddhist modernism nor cosmopolitanism provides a universal hermeneutical framework. That is why they can only appreciate Buddhism and understand the relationship between religion and science from their respective situated and limited perspectives or horizons of understanding.

The second problem with Thompson's proposal is that he portrays cosmopolitanism as "respecting and valuing our differences, including our felt attachments to different communities and traditions" (175). However, is it not inconsistent with the tolerant and pluralist spirit of cosmopolitanism to ask Buddhist modernists, or any kind of Buddhist for that matter, to abandon their beliefs about the Buddha and Buddhism? Do not those beliefs make Buddhist modernists different from other types of

Buddhists? How is it possible to speak about “respecting and valuing our differences” and at the same time request Buddhist modernists to abandon the way of thinking that makes them different and unique as Buddhists?

In conclusion, I sympathize with the pluralist, tolerant, and dialogical spirit of cosmopolitanism, and I reject Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism as well as their assumptions about religion and science. However, I do not think that it is accurate to conflate Buddhist modernism with either Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism, and I do not believe that cosmopolitanism is fully compatible with Buddhism. Cosmopolitanism has its own set of assumptions, values, and truth claims. As such, cosmopolitanism competes with the assumptions, values, and truth claims of other philosophical and religious traditions, including those found within Buddhism. Modernist interpretations of the Buddha and Buddhism might be right or wrong, better or worse than others, but disagreeing with Buddhist modernism is not a powerful reason for not being a Buddhist any more than disagreeing with liberal Christianity is a powerful reason for not being a Christian.

NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book unless the context indicates otherwise.
2. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Toward a True Kinship of Faiths: How the World's Religions Can Come Together* (New York: Harmony Books, 2010).
3. Tenzin Gyatso, “Our Faith in Science,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/12/opinion/our-faith-in-science.html>, accessed February 22, 2021. In this op-ed, Tenzin Gyatso, aka the 14th Dalai Lama, writes: “If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change. In my view, science and Buddhism share a search for the truth and for understanding reality. By learning from science about aspects of reality where its understanding may be more advanced, I believe that Buddhism enriches its own worldview.”
4. Donald S. Lopez, *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), xxxix.
5. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007).

Buddhist Modernism: Let's Be Suspicious But Not Because It Lacks Faith

Louise Williams
UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME
LOUISE.A.WILLIAMS.573@ND.EDU

I. OVERVIEW

Evan Thompson's *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* might be better titled *Why I Am Not a Buddhist Modernist*. Readers who open this book thinking they will get some general insight into why one would reject Buddhism at large are likely to be disappointed. Instead, Thompson focuses on a distinctly contemporary flavor of the tradition: Buddhist modernism. This flavor is committed to what Thompson identifies

as Buddhist exceptionalism. “Buddhist exceptionalism,” Thompson writes, “is the belief that Buddhism is superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical, or that Buddhism isn't really a religion but rather is a kind of ‘mind science,’ therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation.”¹ While Thompson doesn't explicitly discuss how those committed to Buddhist exceptionalism might go about distinguishing Buddhism from other religions, it is suggested in the text that a major player is the role of faith. Here the thought is that religious worldviews usually rely on faith as a key component of the traditions, but, according to Buddhist exceptionalists, Buddhism has no such commitments. Buddhist modernists, according to Thompson, are largely focused on reinterpreting core Buddhist insights using empirical facts without any reliance on faith. Ultimately, Thompson rejects Buddhist exceptionalism and thus Buddhist modernism.

In what follows, I will first briefly review the general shape of Thompson's argument. I will then take issue with two points Thompson makes throughout the text. The first is Thompson's view about the relationship between Buddhist modernism and traditional forms of Buddhism. Thompson denies that we can respond to the Buddhist modernist by claiming the view is not authentically Buddhist. I argue that this general strategy has much more promise than Thompson suggests. My second critique is about Buddhist modernism's relationship to faith. While Thompson critiques Buddhist modernism on the grounds that it lacks the required faith-based beliefs, I argue that faith in future science is foundational to Buddhist modernism. This may be a way for the modernist to push back against Thompson's core criticisms.

At no point throughout the book does Thompson lay out exactly what would be required for him to identify as a Buddhist. However, we are given enough information to identify two major requirements for any flavor of Buddhism that would be palatable to Thompson:

- (1) The account maintains coherency given the larger Buddhist worldview.
- (2) The account does not rely on any faith claims.

One challenge for any flavor of Buddhism is that the Buddhist worldview is quite complex. It is critical for Thompson, and I assume for anyone else philosophically inclined, that any palatable version of this tradition can maintain internal coherency with the Buddhist picture as a whole. This leaves room for new interpretations of key aspects of the Buddhist tradition, but it rules out ad hoc reinterpretations since those are very likely to clash with other philosophically significant elements of the worldview.

While Thompson focuses much of the text on Buddhist modernism, the second major element listed above applies more broadly. I think that Thompson's rejection of Buddhism at large comes much more from this concern about faith claims than the specific reasons he rejects Buddhist modernism. I take it that Buddhist modernism is the only flavor of Buddhism that attempts to be free of faith claims and that is why Thompson engages so extensively

with it. However, it appears that any Thompson-friendly flavor of Buddhism would need to be free of any claims based in faith.

One way to understand Thompson's book is that it focuses extensively on the first requirement at the expense of the second. Thompson points out two major problems for the Buddhist modernist and the first requirement. To begin with, while the Buddhist modernist largely attempts to reinterpret key elements of the Buddhist tradition in empirical terms, they often misunderstand the empirical data that they are attempting to map onto Buddhist concepts. A second major challenge for the Buddhist modernist is reconciling their novel interpretations of key Buddhist concepts with the larger Buddhist picture. According to Thompson, either many of the interpretations on offer from the Buddhist modernist are too underdeveloped or they are a direct threat to foundational elements of the Buddhist worldview.

As to the second requirement, Thompson argues that faith is a foundational component of the Buddhist worldview. Thompson points out that many Buddhist modernists understand faith in very simplistic terms. This further exacerbates the modernist's problem since, according to Thompson, faith is foundational to the Buddhist worldview. Buddhist modernism's attempt to do away with faith threatens its internal coherence. As it turns out, Thompson is exceedingly skeptical that any flavor of Buddhism could meet this second requirement while simultaneously meeting the first requirement.

II. LET'S BE SUSPICIOUS

If the Buddhist modernist is not really a Buddhist, then the modernist is not responsible for being consistent with the general Buddhist worldview. Since many of Thompson's critiques of Buddhist modernism point to its inconsistency with this larger worldview, he pushes back against this strategy of separating Buddhist modernism from "authentic" forms of Buddhism. According to Thompson, the major challenge of attempting to sort through flavors of Buddhism in this way is the sheer diversity found within the tradition. One of the key ways that Buddhism has spread throughout the world is by incorporating elements of local traditions and maintaining high levels of flexibility. Although Thompson doesn't go into the philosophic foundation of this flexibility, we might connect this strategy to *upaya* or "skillful means."² Here the bringer of Buddhism meets folks wherever they are in their current understanding with the aim of bringing them slightly closer to truth. Given the important role of *upaya* within the Buddhist world, it seems like sorting out what counts as "authentic" Buddhism from "inauthentic" is a lost cause.

Instead of attempting to separate the real Buddhists from the fakers, I propose that we can sort flavors of Buddhism by the degree of suspicion we should reasonably hold for their claim to be Buddhist. Qualities like consistency with the Buddhist worldview will factor into where any particular supposedly Buddhist account will fall on this spectrum. On this view, our goal is not to separate the authentic Buddhists from the fakers, but to determine how suspicious we should be of a tradition's claim to be Buddhist. If this is a viable way to sort out flavors of Buddhism, then Thompson's

critiques of the modernist's inconsistency with the tradition help inform where Buddhist modernism should fall on the spectrum. The modernist does not escape from Thompson's critiques simply by falling out of the category of Buddhism. Instead, their inconsistency may contribute to our reasons to reject the claim that the view is in fact Buddhist.

There are several factors we might consider in evaluating where a particular flavor should land on our suspicion spectrum. One factor is how much the account pays respect to key philosophical issues within the Buddhist worldview. If the tradition appears to be formulated without regard to major debates, then we should be more suspicious of it. Here we can imagine rejecting this criterion on the grounds that there are ancient traditions, perhaps ones that we should hold with very little suspicion, which were formulated without regard to major debates. Of course, identifying which specific traditions would meet this criterion would require some debate on its own, but even if such traditions exist, we would need to unpack the details of a given tradition's access to information about such major debates. Since Buddhist modernism has been developed in the modern world, we know the founders of this tradition by and large had access to information surrounding major debates within Buddhism. This is a direct result of the increased availability of quality translations of important texts and the general ease of access to information that the Internet provides. Obviously, ancient traditions had a much more difficult time accessing all of the relevant philosophical debates; we should, therefore, evaluate their status in a different way than we do the Buddhist modernist. If we evaluate each flavor of Buddhism given the resources of the founders, then we can easily overcome this objection.

Another reason we might be suspicious of a flavor's claim to be Buddhist is that the flavor is actively causing harm to the Buddhist tradition at large. A core insight of the Buddhist tradition is that we should strive to reduce suffering. This means any tradition that is actively causing harm to other traditions is failing to live up to this value. This should make us more suspicious of their claim to be Buddhist.

There are two major reasons to think that Buddhist modernism should land on the very suspicious side of the spectrum. I'll briefly lay them out here and then go into more detail in what follows. First, many of the tenets of Buddhist modernism seem to be articulated in complete ignorance of centuries-long debates within the Buddhist tradition. Second, many of the moves of the Buddhist modernist reek of cultural appropriation. This cultural appropriation causes harm to the Buddhist tradition at large. Since this violates a core insight of the Buddhist tradition (i.e., live so as to reduce suffering and not to cause harm), we have more reason to be suspicious of Buddhist modernism.

Thompson does a good job in the text supporting this first reason. At one point, he takes nearly a dozen pages to explore basics of the major debates within Indian philosophy.³ This is necessary because Buddhist modernism is so poorly developed that it fails to be sensitive to many of these key philosophical debates. Throughout the book, Thompson points out that the answers that the Buddhist

modernist provides are so underdeveloped that they cannot respond to obvious questions. If those promoting Buddhist modernism were more aware of the foundational philosophical debates, they could see that their answers fall short. Thompson argues that this undermines the coherency of the Buddhist modernist position. I think that is correct, but I think it also gives us good reason to be suspicious of whether Buddhist modernism is actually Buddhist.

Another problem Buddhist modernism faces is in the way it uses key concepts from the Buddhist tradition. One way we can understand Buddhist modernism is a bunch of largely white, Western folks decontextualizing key insights from the Buddhist tradition and dressing them up in the clothes of science. Thompson quite convincingly argues that Buddhist modernism decontextualizes these insights from foundational philosophical debates in the name of interpreting the main claims of Buddhism in empirical terms. If cultural appropriation involves taking elements from a tradition without regard to the meaning of these elements from within the tradition, then this certainly seems like a case of cultural appropriation. If you think that cultural appropriation of Buddhist ideas causes harm to Buddhism, then it appears that Buddhist modernism causes harm to the Buddhist tradition. One reason we might think this move causes such harm is that it promotes an incoherent version of the account as representative of what Buddhism is. This may cause harm by discouraging folks from investigating other flavors of Buddhism or, even more egregiously, it may lead to discriminatory behavior toward Buddhists on the basis that their views are silly. This should minimally give us more reason to be suspicious of Buddhist modernism's claim to be Buddhist.

Now a Buddhist might object to this cultural appropriation claim. There is a concern that if we accuse Buddhist modernism of cultural appropriation, it may turn out that many of the flavors of Buddhism are also guilty of cultural appropriation. However, presumably one can take the perspective of a non-Buddhist in evaluating Buddhist modernism's relationship to less controversial flavors of Buddhism. While a Buddhist might find the modernist's strategy palatable, in part because of things like *upaya*, the non-Buddhist might find it problematic. For those of us non-Buddhist white folks who have a long legacy of causing harm through mechanisms like cultural appropriation, we should be especially sensitive to the problems surrounding this kind of strategy. If we find it morally objectionable to decontextualize insights from a rich philosophic tradition, then this alone might be grounds to maintain suspicion of Buddhist modernism's claim to be Buddhist. Cultural appropriation might reasonably be grounds to think that this is a novel account that is designed to serve the goals of the authors of the tradition and not to participate in the Buddhist tradition at large.

III. FAITH IN FUTURE SCIENCE

Thompson argues that a key element of any coherent flavor of Buddhism is faith. He argues that Buddhist modernism fails to be coherent in part because of its proponents' abandonment of faith. I argue against Thompson that Buddhist modernism does not abandon faith, but rather

replaces the traditional Buddhist kind of faith with faith in future science. If this is right, then the reason the Buddhist modernist account is incoherent is not because of a failure to incorporate faith into their system, but because it fosters faith in a way that does not support the philosophical structure of the Buddhist picture. This has a further implication for Thompson's argument. It seems that part of Thompson's motivation for engaging with the Buddhist modernist is because it is a flavor of Buddhism that does not rely on faith. It turns out that the Buddhist modernist fails to live up to that claim, so the door is still open for a more coherent version of Buddhism to be articulated that is truly independent of any faith claims.

So why think that Buddhist modernism is committed to a kind of faith? Well, the modernist attempts to read all of the key claims of the Buddhist tradition in empirical terms. However, we know that currently science is not complete. In fact, Thompson points out several situations where the claims that the modernist makes about how to make sense of empirical data are insufficiently supported by our current evidence. For example, in evaluating the modernist's understanding of the no-self doctrine, he states that "cognitive science doesn't show that the self is an illusion."⁴ However, Buddhist modernism is dependent on the notion that we can understand key Buddhist ideas in purely empirical terms. The only way we can know that Buddhist ideas can track empirical evidence is if we are confident about what the future evidence will be. Thus, the Buddhist modernist has faith that the products of future science will continue to track with Buddhist ideas.

Since Buddhist modernists have faith in future science and in the tracking relationship between the products of future science and Buddhist ideas, one of Thompson's major critiques against Buddhist modernism is in jeopardy. Thompson says that faith plays a foundational role in the Buddhist philosophic system and that the modernist's abandonment of faith threatens the coherence of the entire picture. In order to know if this critique holds, we need to know if faith in future science can do the kind of philosophic work that Thompson believes traditional Buddhist faith does. Unfortunately, Thompson doesn't explore the concept of faith in sufficient detail for readers to evaluate whether the modernist kind of faith can play this role. Without further explanation, we might be tempted to think that Buddhist modernism is not actually in trouble when it comes to coherency, because Buddhist modernists can just interpret the faith claims of more traditional flavors of Buddhism as faith in future science.

If I am right, and if Buddhist modernism is actually committed to a kind of faith, then two things happen. First, any Buddhist modernist who believes their view is superior on the grounds that it is devoid of faith claims is mistaken. Thompson suggests that developing a flavor of Buddhism that is completely devoid of faith claims is an explicit goal of the modernist. The modernist strives to remove all faith claims as a direct result of their commitment to Buddhist exceptionalism and their general goal to separate Buddhism from other religions. If the main reason we are drawn toward Buddhist modernism is its promise to abandon any claims based in faith, which Thompson seems to think

is an appealing aspect of the account, then we may not have much motivation for accepting Buddhist modernism over other flavors of Buddhism. Second, we need to know whether the kind of faith promoted by the Buddhist modernist can do the work of the more traditional kind of faith found within Buddhism. Thompson's book does not give us enough details about faith in the traditional role to really evaluate this second question.

NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 1-2.
2. Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahayana Buddhism*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2003).
3. Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 93–104.
4. *Ibid.*, 89.

Replies to Critics

Evan Thompson

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
 EVAN.THOMPSON@UBC.CA

I would like to thank my interlocutors for reading and responding to *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*.¹ Their rich and stimulating essays raise many points and intersect in complex ways, so doing justice to them requires a lengthy response. I have organized my response according to the main topics the essays address. Each section heading lists the authors I discuss in that section. When I engage with a particular author, I highlight their name in bold typeface.

I. MY TITLE AND AUDIENCE [FINNIGAN, GANERI, KASSOR, VELEZ, WILLIAMS]

Several authors comment on my title. It dismays **Finnigan**; **Ganeri** suggests the book might better have been called *Why I Am Not Only a Buddhist*; **Williams** thinks it should have been called *Why I Am Not a Buddhist Modernist*. When my friend and Buddhist Studies colleague, Robert Sharf, read the manuscript, he joked that it should have been called *How to Be a Better Buddhist*.

The issue of the title is related to my reasons for writing the book, my identity as an author, the social context of my writing, and the book's purpose and intended audience—matters about which a number of critics raise concerns (**Finnigan**, **Kassor**, **Velez**, **Williams**).

The Introduction gives my personal story so the reader will know how I came to be involved with Buddhism and my motivation for writing the book. I will not repeat the details of that story here. Suffice it to say that, over the course of almost four decades in North America, Europe, and occasionally India, I have been involved in the dialogue between Buddhism, especially Buddhist philosophy and meditation, and Western philosophy and the cognitive and brain sciences. In the past two decades, this work has included participating in the Mind and Life Dialogues

with the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan Buddhist scholars and religious teachers, helping to design and serving as the academic chair and a faculty member of the Annual Mind and Life Summer Research Institute, being one of the core faculty members of the Annual Zen Brain Retreat (now Varela Symposium) at the Upaya Zen Center, and attending intensive Buddhist meditation retreats designed especially for scientists. Because of my participation in these events, those who attended them and many of my academic colleagues assumed that I was a Buddhist. Apparently, the assumption was that I would not have gotten so immersed in these activities unless I had been a Buddhist. So people were generally surprised when I said that I was not a Buddhist, and they wanted to know why not. This was how the title of my book first came to me: I felt called upon to explain why I am not a Buddhist. I realized that the explanation would have to include describing how I grew up in a North American countercultural milieu that was strongly influenced by American and Asian Buddhist teachers, how at various times I came close to becoming a Buddhist, and what held me back from taking this step. I would need to discuss Buddhism, religion, and science, which increasingly I came to think were often mischaracterized in the dialogues in which I was participating. Indeed, it was precisely because my experience and personal history were intersecting with larger philosophical and cultural issues about Buddhism, religion, and science that I thought the book was warranted. Although I did not conceive of the book as a memoir, I had to tell my personal story in the Introduction and return to it in the last chapter to make clear both the context of and the motivation for my writing.

Nevertheless, **Kassor** thinks I “could have been a bit clearer about just who this book is intended for.” The book is intended for anyone who is interested in modern Buddhism in general and the Buddhism-science dialogue in particular. It is addressed specifically to European and American Buddhist modernists (as I write on 20-21), so the target of my critique is not (quoting **Kassor**) “Asian American Buddhist practitioners born into Buddhist families” or “monastics or other Asian academics whose education took place in Buddhist countries,” except to the extent that their thinking partakes of the Buddhist modernist ideas I criticize (see the ideas listed in (i)-(iii) in the following section). Many people interested in the Buddhism-science dialogue will likely share some of my experiences. For example, a large number of students, scholars, scientists, and Buddhist teachers from many countries have now attended the Mind and Life Summer Research Institute since it began in 2004. Of course, there will also be differences among us. Certainly, my childhood immersion in North American “spirituality” and my subsequent experience as an academic will be different from the experiences of my Asian partners in the Buddhism-science dialogue. One point of the dialogue, however, has been to get to know one another, and that happens when people share their experiences and perceptions, which I do in the book.

Although most of the book concerns the Buddhism-science dialogue, I also use this dialogue as a lens for looking at the relationship between science and religion, so the book is also intended for people concerned about this relationship.

Finally, although I did not address the book specifically to philosophers, I tried to make it a worthwhile contribution to anglophone cross-cultural philosophy.

Philosophers especially will recognize the allusion to Bertrand Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian" in my title. The allusion came to me as an afterthought after I had already conceived my title for the reasons just mentioned. I comment on my title in relation to Russell's in the last paragraph of my Introduction (22), but let me reiterate and expand on those comments here.

Unlike Russell, who completely rejects Christianity, I am not trying to persuade anyone not to be a Buddhist. I am also not concerned to argue against religion. Instead, I am giving a philosophical critique of "Buddhist modernism," which is a culturally prevalent form of Buddhism today, especially but by no means exclusively in the West.² Buddhist modernism typically involves what I call "Buddhist exceptionalism," the idea that Buddhism is or contains a "mind science," and so occupies a special (unique and superior) position in the encounter between science and religion. My aim is to show that Buddhist modernism, especially Buddhist exceptionalism, suffers from philosophical problems and needs serious reform. I aim to correct misconceptions about Buddhism and the relationship between science and religion, and to describe my own cosmopolitanist philosophical perspective.

Let me emphasize that my aim is not to convince Buddhists not to be Buddhists or to argue more generally that one should not be a Buddhist. I never argue against anyone's affiliating themselves with Buddhism. My reasons for not being Buddhist (given as part of my personal story in the Introduction) are not offered as reasons to convince others not to be Buddhist. (This point is relevant to **Velez's** section "Problematic Reason for Not Being a Buddhist.") My cosmopolitanism explicitly upholds the importance of the Buddhist tradition and its presence in the world today. I have learned an enormous amount from Buddhist texts, from Buddhist scholars, and from living Buddhist teachers and communities. I believe that the world is a richer and better place thanks to Buddhism. It is no part of my message that the conversation between science and Buddhism, or between Buddhist philosophy and other philosophical traditions, precludes one's being a Buddhist. Instead, my message is that Buddhist modernism now impedes these conversations. This brings me to my critics' responses to my critique of Buddhist modernism.

II. BUDDHIST MODERNISM [GANERI, GARFIELD, GUERRERO, KACHRU, VELEZ, WILLIAMS]

Scholars use the term "Buddhist modernism" to refer to a broad movement beginning in the nineteenth century that reinterpreted Buddhism using modern ideas from Asian Buddhist reformers and European Orientalist writers, and the conversation between them. My critique targets the following contemporary Buddhist modernist ideas: (i) "Buddhist exceptionalism," the idea either that Buddhism is not essentially a religion but rather is essentially a philosophy, way of life, therapy, or "mind science," or that Buddhism is superior to other religions in being especially

rational and empirical in its doctrines and practices; (ii) "neural Buddhism," the position that cognitive science, especially neuroscience, has corroborated the Buddhist view that there is no self, that mindfulness meditation practice consists in training the brain, and that awakening or enlightenment is a brain state or has a unique neural signature; and (iii) the idea that awakening or enlightenment is a nonconceptual experience outside language, culture, and tradition. I argue that all these ideas are mistaken: (i) and (ii) rest on misconceptions about Buddhism, religion, and science, whereas (iii) involves philosophical confusions about the relationship between what is conceptual and what is nonconceptual in experience.

Let me begin with what Buddhist modernism is and is not. **Kachru** gives an excellent description of what it is:

Buddhist modernism is a stance, a mode of interpreting what it means to be Buddhist, plotted along three axes: exegetical, epistemological, and comparative. Exegetically, unfettered by traditional chains of transmission and methods of contesting exegeses, it claims privileged access to what the Buddha, a person of history, really meant and what he took to be essential to his tradition. Epistemologically, it claims that these essential claims of the Buddha are true in the following sense: They either are supported by or coincide with the findings of modern science. And, comparatively, it claims that Buddhism is uniquely so supported.

Now to what Buddhist modernism is not. Contrary to **Williams**, Buddhist modernism cannot be accurately described as just "a bunch of largely white, Western folks decontextualizing key insights from the Buddhist tradition and dressing them up in the clothes of science." Rather, Asian Buddhists have been central to the creation and propagation of Buddhist modernism from the nineteenth century down to the present time.³ Buddhist modernism, generally speaking, is not a case of a dominant culture appropriating elements from a disadvantaged minority culture. On the contrary, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Asian Buddhist modernists did precisely the opposite: They took Western ideas from Protestant theology, romanticism, transcendentalism, existentialism, empiricism, and pragmatism and used them to recast Buddhism. This is not to say that Orientalism, exoticism, and cultural appropriation are absent from Buddhist modernism. But it would be a mistake to think that Buddhist modernism is just a product of these things. Buddhist modernism was never exclusively Western or Asian; from its inception, it has always been a transcultural hybrid. It is also important to remember that Buddhism from the beginning has been a missionary religion and constantly seeks expansion. So it continually evolves and takes on new cultural forms. Buddhist modernism is one of the latest iterations in Buddhism's ongoing transmission and transformation.

Williams suggests that Buddhist modernism can be regarded as not really or authentically Buddhist. I cannot accept this suggestion. (Ironically, as **Kachru** notes, the attempt to specify what is and what is not essential to

Buddhism is a Buddhist modernist game.) As **Garfield** writes, religious traditions get to set their own criteria for membership, so it is not for me or any other philosopher analyzing things from the armchair to say who is and who is not a Buddhist. Every Buddhist modernist I discuss in the book identifies as a Buddhist and is recognized as a Buddhist by other Buddhists. Buddhist modernism is not reducible to cultural appropriation for the reasons already given. There is no single “Buddhist worldview” with which to evaluate Buddhist modernism; rather, there are numerous Buddhist worldviews across many cultures and historical periods. **Williams** writes that many Buddhist modernist tenets “seem to be articulated in complete ignorance of centuries-long debates within the Buddhist tradition,” but it is unclear how she understands the referent of the term “the Buddhist tradition,” given that Buddhism contains many traditions with divergent viewpoints. Her statement can also be applied to premodern Buddhist cultures and historical periods; for example, certain classical Indian Buddhist debates were unknown to medieval East Asian Buddhists.

Velez reads me as thinking that Buddhist modernism has an “ideological essence.” But this is not what I think. In retrospect, I probably should have stated this explicitly in the book. Buddhist modernism is not a philosophical theory or religious doctrine defined by a set of theses or tenets. It is a broad cultural movement having many variants. It has no unique essence but rather is constituted by clusters of traits or properties. Not every Buddhist modernist possesses every Buddhist modernist trait. For example, many Buddhist modernists are not neural Buddhists. I focus on neural Buddhism because it is a recent and highly visible trend in contemporary North American Buddhist modernism. In general, there is a frequency distribution of Buddhist modernist traits. The crucial point, however, is that Buddhist exceptionalism, my principal target, is widespread and typical among them.

Let me say more about what I mean by “Buddhist exceptionalism.” The analogy is with “American exceptionalism.” This term does not mean simply that the United States is different from other countries or that it is unique. Every country or nation is unique in some respect. Rather, the term means that the unique features of the United States make it superior and not subject to analysis or understanding in terms of the political and sociological frameworks that apply to other nations. Similarly, “Buddhist exceptionalism” does not mean simply that Buddhism is different from other religions or that it is unique. Every religion is unique and different from every other religion in some respect. Rather, Buddhist exceptionalism is the idea that Buddhism is an exception among religions in being inherently rational and empirical according to scientific standards. Buddhism is held to be epistemically superior, to stand apart from other religions, and to not be analyzable in terms of concepts such as faith or supernatural agency that apply to other religions. Buddhist exceptionalism belongs to the historical origin of Buddhist modernism in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as part of a clever conceptual and rhetorical strategy for countering European colonialist Christianity. It runs throughout certain strands of modern Japanese Zen that became popular in the West. It is found in numerous

twentieth- and twenty-first-century Asian and Western Buddhist authors (many of whom I cite). It continues to exert a very strong influence on the Buddhism-science dialogue today.

Velez offers the Dalai Lama as an example of a Buddhist modernist who is not a Buddhist exceptionalist. This conception of the Dalai Lama, however, is simplistic. It simplifies a complicated situation in which Buddhist exceptionalism plays a significant role. For example, as I discuss in the book (48-50), the concept and rhetoric of “Buddhist science” is prominent in the Dalai Lama’s presentation of Buddhism to scientists and philosophers at the Mind and Life Dialogues.⁴ The Dalai Lama appears to believe that Buddhism is true and that science will prove it is true (or at least will prove the truth of certain fundamental Tibetan Buddhist beliefs). **Velez** misses the point when he writes, “for the Dalai Lama, Buddhism is not just a science of the mind because he also acknowledges the religious dimension of Buddhism.” The point is precisely that the Dalai Lama asserts that Buddhism, despite having a religious dimension, *is also a science of the mind*, and he does not (to my knowledge) characterize any other religion this way. The Dalai Lama may not think that Buddhism is ethically superior to other religions, but presumably he thinks—or at least it follows from what he says—that Buddhism is epistemically exceptional, that it is unique and superior in its knowledge by virtue of being or having a mind science, and one that Western science will eventually confirm.

I certainly believe that Buddhist epistemological theories and contemplative practices are *unique* in various respects, but I do not think they are *exceptional* in being *scientific* and *for that reason superior* to the epistemological theories and contemplative practices of other religious traditions (such as Thomist or Nyaya epistemology, or Christian or Hindu contemplative practices).

Although I agree with **Velez** that “it is possible in principle to be a traditional Buddhist with modernist ideas without advocating Buddhist exceptionalism or neural Buddhism,” I am not convinced that the Dalai Lama demonstrates the point in the case of Buddhist exceptionalism. In any case, it certainly seems logically possible to be such a Buddhist. Indeed, I write at the end of the book: “The question I would pose to Buddhists is whether they can find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists (or fundamentalists)” (189). To rephrase the question in terms that may be more acceptable to **Velez**: Can Buddhists find other ways to be modernist without being Buddhist exceptionalists? **Velez** says they already have, but I am not convinced by his example, and in any case, Buddhist exceptionalism continues to be a prominent and typical Buddhist modernist trait. So my statement that Buddhist exceptionalism is an inherent part of Buddhist modernism is a true empirical generalization, even though there may be occasional counterexamples or it may be possible to remove the former from the latter.

Guerrero writes that I am “not entitled to disparage Buddhist modernists.” I agree. As far as I can see, however, I do not disparage them, and I certainly do not intend to disparage them. I do not belittle or denigrate them. I

do not regard them as of little worth. On the contrary, I acknowledge the creative power of Buddhist modernism as a cultural, religious, and intellectual movement in Asia and the West from its inception down to the present day. I describe the huge role that it has played in creating the science-Buddhism dialogue. I present individual Buddhist modernists in charitable and sometimes sympathetic terms. I describe how they have enriched my own life and work. At the same time, I disagree with Buddhist modernism, particularly in its contemporary Euro-American forms. I take issue with many of its ideas, which I argue are philosophically unacceptable and now hinder the Buddhism-science dialogue and cross-cultural philosophy, despite having been productive in earlier decades. Every one of my arguments consists of fair criticism and is not derogatory. If **Guerrero** thinks otherwise, she needs to identify specific passages and explain why she thinks they are disparaging to Buddhist modernists.

Finnigan writes that academic Buddhist philosophers rarely defend Buddhist exceptionalism. This is true. Nevertheless, Buddhist exceptionalist elements do find their way into academic Buddhist philosophy where they often go unremarked and are uncritically accepted by readers. For example, Mark Siderits, whose work I greatly admire, writes in *Buddhism as Philosophy*:

Buddhism is, then, a religion, if by this we mean that it is a set of teachings that address soteriological concerns. But if we think of religion as a kind of faith, a commitment for which no reasons can be given, then Buddhism would not count. To become a Buddhist is not to accept a bundle of doctrines solely on the basis of faith. And salvation is not to be had by just devout belief in the Buddha's teaching... Rather, liberation or nirvana . . . is to be attained through rational investigation of the nature of the world. As we would expect with any religion, Buddhist teachings include some claims that run deeply counter to common sense. But Buddhists are not expected to accept these claims just because the Buddha taught them. Instead they are expected to examine the arguments that are given in support of these claims, and determine for themselves if the arguments really make it likely that these claims are true. Buddhists revere the Buddha as the founder of their tradition. But that attitude is meant to be the same as what is accorded a teacher who has discovered important truths through their own intellectual power.⁵

Every sentence in the preceding passage except the first one expresses Buddhist modernist revisionism, is historically problematic for premodern Buddhist philosophy, and is conceptually problematic from the perspective of contemporary philosophy of religion. First, Buddhism is presented as not requiring faith. As I argue in my book, however, this is questionable and depends on how faith is understood and on what kind of Buddhist one is. Siderits describes faith in exclusively fideist terms as entirely independent of or opposed to reason, but this is not the only conception of faith in monotheistic religions or the philosophy of religion (see my response to **Garfield**

below). Second, Siderits ignores the forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism in which liberation can be attained only through devout belief in and devotion to the Buddha conceived as a cosmic, deity-like savior. Hence, being a Buddhist may indeed require faith—and sometimes only faith—in the Buddha. Third, for many Buddhists, including the Mahāyāna philosophers Siderits discusses, it is not the case that liberation is to be attained through rational investigation of the world; rational investigation is not sufficient and may not even be necessary. Rather, liberation requires a kind of nonconceptual insight or gnosis attained through nondiscursive types of meditation. In some cases, rational investigation may help to prepare the way for such insight, but it is arguably not strictly necessary, at least according to some Buddhist thinkers. Of course, one could argue that such meditative insight qualifies as rational, but this move looks like special pleading. I am inclined to think that such insight is best described as arational rather than rational or irrational. Finally, although the rhetoric of Buddhist philosophers is to encourage critical examination of the Buddha's teachings, it nonetheless remains unthinkable to contradict the Buddha's words. Hence, new teachings of the Buddha have to be unearthed or received in heavenly realms, teachings that are taken to supersede earlier ones (as in the case of the philosopher Asaṅga and Mahāyāna Buddhism in general). In addition, the Buddha's cognition is considered to be supramundane (world-transcendent) and (according to some Buddhists) omniscient. Hence, to determine for oneself whether the Buddha's arguments are likely to be sound requires accepting the testimony of others in a way that passes the buck back to the transcendent insight of the Buddha (or to the insight of someone the tradition considers to be a fully awakened being). The Buddhist modernist project of sanitizing premodern Buddhism, specifically premodern Buddhist philosophy in the case at hand, combined with Buddhist exceptionalism, influences even academic Buddhist philosophy.

To be clear, I have no problem with revisionism *per se*. On the contrary, I think that the project of rationally reconstructing classical Indian Buddhist philosophy in contemporary terms is worthwhile and important, and I myself have contributed to this effort.⁶ Siderits is one of the finest analytical philosophers pursuing this project. *Buddhism as Philosophy* is an excellent work.⁷ What I object to, again, is the unnecessary Buddhist exceptionalism that gets attached to this project. Buddhist exceptionalism in academic philosophy distorts premodern Buddhist philosophy and treats other religious philosophical traditions unfairly. Medieval Islamic, Christian, and Hindu philosophers are no less rational than medieval Indian Buddhist philosophers, and their philosophies are just as much capable of modern revision and rational reconstruction in contemporary terms.

These points are relevant to another question **Finnigan** raises about whether I think it is possible to reconstruct Buddhist views of the mind without mentioning karma or rebirth, since I write that "Buddhist theories of the mind lose their point if they're extracted from the Buddhist normative and soteriological frameworks" (13). Here the issue is whether it is possible to articulate a Buddhist normative and soteriological framework without the notion of karma or rebirth. This issue arose in my recent exchange

with Amod Lele, who presents a version of “eudaimonistic Buddhism” that has this aim.⁸ I would not say that it is impossible to do this, but I think it is much harder to do than Buddhist modernists usually realize for the reasons I give in my exchange with Lele.⁹

Kachru asks about the “distinctive contours” of my Buddhist modernist target in his rich and admirable essay. One of his questions arises out of reflection on B. R. Ambedkar’s modern form of Buddhism. Ambedkar radically reinterprets Buddhism, jettisoning karma, rebirth, the Four Noble Truths, and enlightenment, while recasting the Buddha’s teachings to be about justice and social equality. **Kachru** reads Ambedkar as sometimes speaking as if the modern meanings he articulates had only a “continuity” with those of the Buddha’s statements, and sometimes speaking as if there were an “identity” of meaning between the Buddha’s statements and modern concepts. Yet Ambedkar uses “traditional scholastic modes of reconstructing scripture to get at his preferred meanings.” **Kachru** asks: “What do we do when the content is new but the means of ascribing content to the Buddha and justifying such ascription is traditional? Why should content count for more than method?”

I agree that both content and method should count. **Kachru** describes Ambedkar as using traditional (premodern) exegetical methods to formulate his version of Buddhist modernism, but I submit that Ambedkar also uses traditional methods in the service of a modernist methodological framework, namely, thinking that the methods of philology and textual history enable one to bypass the Indian Buddhist tradition altogether and get back to what the Buddha as “a person of history” actually thought. So this makes Ambedkar’s method, like his content, modernist, even if it is also partly traditional.

Ambedkar uses his traditional-cum-modernist method to argue that Buddhism is the most rational and scientific of the religions, and hence is the best religion for the modern world, so his Buddhist modernism exhibits the Buddhist exceptionalist trait. For this reason, he could be seen to fall within the contours of my critique. Nevertheless, his Buddhist exceptionalism occurs in a very different context from the one of concern to me, and for that reason I cannot apply my critique to him. My context is the contemporary Buddhism-science dialogue and European and North American Buddhist modernism. Ambedkar’s context is India’s political struggle for independence, his campaign for social equality, especially for Dalits, and his vehement criticism of orthodox Hinduism for its caste ideology and discrimination. Needless to say, my book speaks to none of these concerns or their ongoing reverberations in India today. So it would be presumptuous of me to extend my argument to Ambedkar’s version of Buddhist modernism.

Kachru asks how we are to measure epistemic distance—between Ambedkar’s modern Buddhism and premodern Buddhism, between the Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism of the Bengali Pala Empire and Linji Chan Buddhism in the ninth century, and so on. I have no general answer to this question other than to say that I agree with **Kachru** that it would not be a matter of taking beliefs severally but rather

of examining whole patterns of intertwined commitments along with styles of reasoning and discursive practices. I would not want to try to “provide criteria for right-headed rather than wrong-headed changes to patterns of commitment,” if that meant providing general criteria that are supposed to function invariantly across all contexts. Context matters. Again, my argument is not with revisions, reforms, or changes of stance in and of themselves. Rather, it is with certain particular forms they have taken in Buddhist modernism, particularly in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue. I would not wish simply to extrapolate my evaluative criteria outside the context of that discussion.

Kachru asks whether my objections to Buddhist modernist attempts to legitimize Buddhism using science apply to attempts to legitimize it using the rational norms and rules of debate of a public epistemic culture of the sort we see in South Asia beginning in the sixth century of the common era. “Public” in that context meant not based on the scriptures of any tradition and using rules of inference and conceptual vocabularies available and agreed to by all. Given a contemporary version of such a public epistemic culture, what is the difference between using its epistemic resources, which of course would include empirical science, to argue for Buddhism and the Buddhist modernist appeals to science that I reject?

The difference is that, in the former case, the debate would be taking place in the space of epistemology, or rather philosophy, and hence it would be understood and recognized that whether scientific theories and data are relevant to any given issue is itself something open to debate. One could not take science for granted as the definitive framework for understanding or promoting Buddhist concepts. One could not assume the truth of philosophical positions such as naturalism, physicalism, or scientific realism; instead, one would have to argue for them. The debate would also be taking place in the space of what I call the “ethics of knowledge,” where we ask, “What kinds of lives do we wish to lead and what kinds of knowledge should we seek?” (183-84; see also **Ganeri**). Most importantly, such a public epistemic culture would necessarily be reflexive; it would be concerned with its own nature, status, and conditions of possibility (as was the South Asian public epistemic culture of the sixth century onwards).

For these reasons, my answer to **Kachru** is “no, my objections would not apply in this case.” On the contrary, arguments for Buddhism would be entirely acceptable, indeed welcome. These arguments could appeal to science, especially if the history and nature of science were reconceived in the way **Ganeri** forcefully presents. The parties would always know and respect the fact that the move of appealing to science could be challenged, that justification for it could be demanded, so there could be no reliance on the kind of scientific rhetoric that permeates much of contemporary Buddhist modernism.

Indeed, when I ask whether Buddhists “can find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists (or fundamentalists)” (189), my hope is that the Buddhist

intellectual tradition can participate in helping to create a new kind of modern public epistemic space, one that respects science and religion, but does not try to justify religion using misguided ways of appealing to science, as contemporary Buddhist modernists do. As **Ganeri** writes, "The best hope for Buddhists to be modern without being Buddhist modernists is, I would suggest, to draw upon the full range of concepts and ideas in Buddhism's immensely rich and diverse intellectual history to engage on equal footing in a dialogue with contemporary philosophy of mind and other branches of contemporary philosophy, including contemporary work in the history of philosophy." One reason I wrote my book is to try to reorient the Buddhism-science dialogue in precisely this direction. It is why I describe myself as trying to be "a good friend to Buddhism" (2, 189). I take **Ganeri** to be doing the same kind of thing when he shows a way of bringing the *Kathāvatthu* into the conversation between Buddhism and science.

Taking this step—trying to create a new kind of public epistemic culture for religion, philosophy, and science, and drawing from the full range of the Buddhist intellectual tradition to help do so—would be to work toward precisely the kind of pluralistic cosmopolitanism that I uphold in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* and that **Ganeri** eloquently describes in his essay. The Sanskrit philosophical cosmopolis to which **Kachru** refers, that I mention in my book (170-72), and that **Ganeri** foregrounds in his essay and many of his books is an inspiring example of a cosmopolitan public epistemic culture. Those who promote such cultures recognize and value the plurality of viewpoints, and they value exchanges and debates among traditions, either as a way of honing one's own tradition or as a way of remaining open to the thought that one's beliefs and commitments may need revision given further evidence and what the exchanges and debates themselves may bring to light. These are the reasons for the last sentence of my book: "A viable cosmopolitanism would be Buddhism's greatest ally" (189). With these thoughts we arrive at the topic of cosmopolitanism.

III. COSMOPOLITANISM [GANERI, GUERRERO, VELEZ]

Guerrero takes issue with the assumptions and convictions that she perceives in my advocacy of cosmopolitanism and my criticism of Buddhist modernism, and argues that I undermine the pluralistic values at the core of cosmopolitanism. Unfortunately, she misreads me, makes inferences from what I write that do not follow and misattributes them to me, and describes me as believing things I do not believe. Getting into view the important questions she raises about cosmopolitanism requires clearing away a large amount of misunderstanding.

Guerrero begins by saying that when I write, "Nevertheless, the dominant strand of modern Buddhism, known as 'Buddhist modernism,' is full of confused ideas" (1), the word "nevertheless" indicates that I think (in her words) "Buddhist modernism's confusions make it antithetical to cosmopolitanism." This is incorrect. The word "nevertheless" simply signals that Buddhist modernism contains confused ideas *in spite of the fact* that Buddhism is one of the

world's great intellectual traditions. There is no implication that Buddhist modernism is *mutually incompatible* ("antithetical") with cosmopolitanism. I never assert or imply this. Indeed, Buddhist modernism can be described as a cosmopolitanist form of Buddhism. I quote David McMahan who makes that point (20). I suggest that the Dalai Lama's aim to modernize Buddhism and promote it as a positive cultural force involves a cosmopolitan worldview (54). My discussion of Francisco Varela and his pioneering role in the Buddhism-science dialogue indicates that he was both a Buddhist modernist and a cosmopolitanist. I describe the *Mind and Life Dialogues* as an effort at a cosmopolitanist conversation that sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails. So it should be evident that my view is not that Buddhist modernism and cosmopolitanism are antithetical, but rather that Buddhist modernism falls short as a form of cosmopolitanism, and that the kind of cosmopolitanism I argue for provides a better way of appreciating the value and importance of the Buddhist tradition, particularly in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue, than does Buddhist modernism.

Guerrero writes, "By disparaging Buddhist modernists and characterizing them as unworthy conversation partners, Thompson fails to demonstrate cosmopolitan respect for the many people who are Buddhist modernists." I have already explained why I think it is wrong to say that I disparage Buddhist modernists. It is also wrong to say that I characterize them as unworthy conversation partners. Why would I converse with them throughout the book if I thought they were unworthy of conversation? Take Robert Wright's *Why Buddhism Is True*,¹⁰ which I devote a chapter to. I present his arguments, state my sympathy for some of his ideas, and express my admiration for his book (84-85), while making clear why I fundamentally disagree with him.¹¹ Or consider Francisco Varela. I emphasize the distinctive and philosophically rich aspects of his Buddhist modernism, which had a strong influence on me, while also pointing out that some of his ideas rest on questionable Buddhist modernist assumptions (181-82). Finally, it is not the case that I fail to show respect for Buddhist modernists. I show due regard by attending to them and taking them seriously. Showing respect to someone in the sense of giving them due regard is consistent with arguing that they are wrong or confused. To respect someone can also mean admiring them or holding them in high regard. I indicate that I have respect in this sense for certain individual Buddhist modernists (Stephen Batchelor, Francisco Varela, and Robert Wright).

Guerrero accuses me of treating Buddhism as one monolithic tradition and of thinking that Buddhism has only one "rightful place" in a cosmopolitan community. This accusation is based on misreading my first two paragraphs. She cites my use of the singular terms "Buddhism," "rightful place," and "valuable contributor." Given what I go on to say in the Introduction, however, to say nothing of the rest of the book, it should be clear that these singular terms are functioning as collective nouns. "Buddhism" denotes the various ways people can be Buddhists. Since I discuss a variety of divergent Buddhist viewpoints from various historical periods and cultures, the statement that I treat Buddhism as one monolithic tradition is inaccurate. "Rightful

place” and “valuable contributor” denote the various ways that Buddhists deserve to be participants in and can be valuable contributors to a cosmopolitan community. My claim is that Buddhist exceptionalism is an impediment to Buddhists being able to be participants in and valuable contributors to a cosmopolitan community, particularly in the context of the Buddhism-science dialogue. (**Guerrero** and I disagree about this claim, as I discuss below.)

Guerrero says that I characterize the cosmopolitanist position as an “acultural, ahistorical, and neutral view from nowhere from which to arbitrate among diverse participants,” and that I describe cosmopolitan thinkers “as if they themselves were not part of any tradition,” as having “no roots of their own,” and as if they had “somehow transcended their own cultural identities and . . . those identities play[ed] no role at all.” She also writes, “In presenting cosmopolitanism as a kind of neutral perspective, what Thompson is in effect doing is masking his own view as an author.”

I reject all of this. **Guerrero** infers something that does not follow from what I write and misattributes it to me. That cosmopolitan thinkers move across different traditions and explore the presuppositions and commitments of those traditions does not entail that they do not belong to any tradition. On the contrary, one does these things while belonging to one or more traditions. One may belong to them at the same time or at different times, and one may belong to them in different ways. More precisely, one can do these things only by belonging to a tradition. Traditions always necessarily make up how we understand and interpret the situations in which we find ourselves. It is no part of my thinking, and it does not logically follow from anything I write, that cosmopolitanist thinkers stand outside of each and every one of the traditions, that they have no roots of their own, or that they have transcended their cultural identities. I do not present cosmopolitanism as an acultural, ahistorical, and neutral perspective. On the contrary, I present it as having multiple cultural and historical sources and traditions, and as involving commitments to various values, particularly the ones that make possible the kind of public epistemic culture described above. Finally, I cannot help but find shocking the statement that I mask my own view as an author, given that I describe my personal history and my role and perspective in the Buddhism-science dialogue as the viewpoint from which I am writing.

Let me turn to what I perceive to be the three substantial philosophical issues **Guerrero** and I disagree about. The first issue concerns Buddhist exceptionalism. **Guerrero** thinks that Buddhist exceptionalism is no barrier to constructive participation in cosmopolitanism, because such participation “requires only a willingness to understand and respectfully converse with diverse others.” In my view, however, a willingness to understand and respectfully converse with others is only minimally sufficient for starting and maintaining a conversation. Conversations evolve once they are up and running. In the anglophone world, the Buddhism-science dialogue has been going on since the 1970s, and the religion-science conversation since the nineteenth century. Buddhist exceptionalism functions as a serious impediment in these conversations.

It functions as an impediment to good conversation and constructive participation in cosmopolitanism. Although the Buddhism-science and religion-science conversations can be kept going in the face of Buddhist exceptionalism, they inevitably become biased and distorted. Compare: American exceptionalism is not necessarily a barrier to conversations about international social and political issues, but it is a serious impediment and needs to be removed for the conversations to happen in honest and beneficial ways. **Guerrero** treats the issue of conversation in abstract terms, but I contextualize it in actual, ongoing conversations, such as the Mind and Life Dialogues. Although Buddhist exceptionalism is clearly not a barrier to these conversations and other ones about Buddhism, religion, and science, it is an obstacle to progress and mutual understanding, and needs to be jettisoned for the conversations to move forward in honest and beneficial ways (a position **Ganeri** also supports).

The second issue concerns fallibilism. **Guerrero** writes that Kwame Anthony Appiah is mistaken to think that fallibilism, the commitment to understanding our beliefs as always revisable, is a requirement of cosmopolitanism. Her argument is that most traditions, including Buddhist ones, are committed to the truths of their particular tradition, and since cosmopolitanism requires only a willingness to understand and converse respectfully with others, it does not require being less than fully committed to the truth of one’s own worldview.

I am not sure, however, that it is correct to characterize fallibilism as being less than fully committed to the truth of one’s own beliefs. A lot depends on how one understands truth, commitment, and openness to being wrong or epistemic humility. It may be possible to be fully committed to the truth of one’s beliefs, in light of what one takes oneself to know or to have good reasons to believe, and to be open to the possibility that nevertheless one’s beliefs could turn out to be wrong and need revision.

Guerrero reads me as following Appiah’s fallibilism, though I do not explicitly discuss this matter. Appiah builds fallibilism into his conception of cosmopolitanism, but I am not sure whether he makes it a logical requirement for any cosmopolitanism. It seems that he could allow for the possibility of forms of philosophical cosmopolitanism in which at least some of the participants, maybe all of them, are not fallibilists, even if he thinks they should be fallibilists because their cosmopolitanism would be better if they were. In any case, although my personal way of being cosmopolitanist is fallibilist, I would not make fallibilism a logical or conceptual requirement of cosmopolitanism. For example, it seems coherent to believe in the truth of one’s own tradition and in the value of there being a public epistemic culture, in the sense discussed above, in which traditions converse and debate with one another and work toward common ends, including that there be such a public epistemic culture. As I noted above, entering into debate in such a public space can simply be a way of intellectually honing one’s own tradition. Nevertheless, if one conceives of the conversation as itself a form of knowledge (185), as instantiating a social and collective way of cognitively navigating the world, then one will conceive of it as more

than just sharing ideas and getting to know one another (as in the usual conception of interfaith dialogue), and one will be prepared to have one's positions and arguments challenged, as well as one's background assumptions and commitments destabilized (77, 180, 185). For these reasons, there will be significant epistemic and social pressure toward some kind of fallibilism, at least for certain elements of one's tradition, if not its core convictions.

The third issue concerns who is supposed to be "the judge of what a tradition's rightful place is or what its value is to a global cosmopolitan community." In my view, the question "Who is to judge?" cannot be answered in general, abstract terms. In the particular case at hand—contemporary Buddhist modernism and the Buddhism-science dialogue—the judges are Buddhist modernists themselves and those whom they address, as well as the participants in the Buddhism-science dialogue. I do not intend to set myself up as a "neutral judge" of these conversations. Instead, I take myself to be a participant in them and to be arguing in that setting that Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism do not make valuable contributions and are bad ways of participating in the conversations. Buddhist exceptionalism, let us recall, is not the position that Buddhism is unique or even that it is "true." It is that Buddhism is uniquely rational and empirical by scientific standards, and for that reason superior to other religions. This claim is demonstrably false on both historical and conceptual grounds, and embodies confused thinking about the relationship between religion and science. For these reasons, Buddhist exceptionalism and neural Buddhism are unacceptable by the criteria to which Buddhist modernists themselves typically appeal, namely, historical veracity, conceptual coherence, and scientific evidence.

These points also serve to answer one of **Velez's** questions about cosmopolitanism: "[I]s it not inconsistent with the tolerant and pluralist spirit of cosmopolitanism to ask Buddhist modernists . . . to abandon their beliefs about the Buddha and Buddhism? . . . How is it possible to speak about 'respecting and valuing our differences' and at the same time request Buddhist modernists to abandon the way of thinking that makes them different and unique as Buddhists?" It is possible to do this because much of Buddhist modernist thinking, particularly Buddhist exceptionalism, is untenable by Buddhist modernists' own lights, that is, by their own criteria of truth, rationality, and evidence, and the cosmopolitanist values they espouse.

Velez also asks "how the pluralism about ultimate ethical value and way of life that Appiah's cosmopolitanism entails can be adopted by Buddhists without contradicting mainstream Buddhist ethics." Appiah's pluralism, however, stipulates that the values have to be worth living by, and it is open to Buddhists to argue that certain values are not worth living by and should not be accepted, even by those who are not Buddhists. For example, Buddhists—and not just Buddhists—can and should argue that "ethical egoism and a way of life that fosters greed and selfishness" are not worth living by and cannot be harmonized with "two kinds of cosmopolitan ethical commitments: those toward all human beings and those toward particular human lives, communities, and traditions."¹² Cosmopolitanism provides

a general normative framework for traditions to co-exist while engaging one another in a public epistemic space (as **Ganeri** also discusses), but it does not specify the particular values worth living by (except those entailed by the existence of such a public space and the respect for traditions it requires); those values have to be worked out in conversation and debate.¹³ Clearly, Buddhist ethical traditions are fundamentally important and have many valuable contributions to make to such conversations.

IV. NO-SELF [FINNIGAN, GANERI, GARFIELD, KACHRU, KASSOR]

Kachru wonders whether I might be willing to concede that Buddhist modernists are justified in emphasizing the exceptionalism of Buddhism in the case of its no-self doctrine. The doctrine is not held by any other tradition, it goes against the grain of our ordinary habits of experience, and its philosophical elaborations entail a radical revision of our cognitive framework. He refers specifically to the no-self doctrine understood according to the "Buddhist scholastic (Abhidharma) interpretive schemas," and asks, "Where else, apart from some interpretations of contemporary science, do we find such radical revisionism enshrined as a collective norm?"

I would argue that we find a comparable kind of radical revisionism in Sāṃkhya philosophy.¹⁴ According to Sāṃkhya, our habitual belief in a personal, agentic self is an illusion; there is really only the transformation of energetic nature; and the theoretical framework for specifying the elements and principles of nature's transformation is radical and revisionary in the sense of going against the grain of our ordinary habits of experience and everyday cognitive framework. Of course, Sāṃkhya also posits the existence of a transcendent consciousness, but this consciousness is not an agent or a person, and it is misleading to call it a subject, since it is beyond subject and object. The positing of such a consciousness is not an obstacle to being radical in the sense under discussion.¹⁵ So I submit that Sāṃkhya is radical like Abhidharma. Furthermore, if we use the term "scientific" to mean a system of public knowledge for analyzing experience and investigating the world (see 50-51 and **Ganeri**), then Sāṃkhya is also "scientific."

Garfield disputes my statements that "the Brahminical self theorists are no less rational and empirical than the Buddhist no-self theorists" and that "to single out the Buddhists as more 'scientific' is partisan and simplistic" (105). But he does not read these assertions in the way I intend them. There are two distinct issues here. One issue is who qualifies as scientific in the sense of using rational argument and empirical evidence to support their position. Another issue is which scientific theories or positions are better supported by argument and evidence. **Garfield** conflates these two issues and addresses only the second one. Let me take them one by one.

I argue that it is a mistake—a typical Buddhist modernist one—to assert that the Buddhists are scientific, whereas the Brahminical theorists are not. Both are scientific in the sense that they appeal to reason and evidence. As **Ganeri** writes: "Neither is it [Buddhism] 'exceptional' in its

adherence to norms of rational, indeed scientific, inquiry. As any scholar of those Indian philosophical traditions that partly constitute the Sanskrit cosmopolis knows, non-Buddhist schools like Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā are as profoundly committed to rational inquiry as it is possible for a philosophical school to be.¹⁷ It is false to say—as Buddhist modernists sometimes do—that the Brahminical theorists are less rational and empirical because they rely on scripture and testimony, whereas the Buddhists rely only on perception and inference. The situation is far more complicated. Some Brahminical philosophers reject testimony as a source of knowledge, and some Buddhists accept it; Brahminical philosophers who accept Vedic scripture know that they cannot appeal to it in their debates with Buddhists; it is unthinkable for Buddhists to contradict their own scriptures; and the debate about what constitutes a “knowledge source” (*pramāṇa*) is itself a “scientific” (epistemological) debate.

What about the second issue? Is it the case that the Buddhist no-self theory is better supported by argument and evidence, particularly in light of science today, as Buddhist modernists typically claim? That depends on how we understand the question. If we restrict it to whether science supports the inference that there is no self, in the precise but also restrictive sense of an unchanging and enduring substantial personal essence that is either a subject of experience or an agent of action, then the answer is “yes” (as I say in the book). But one of my key points, which **Garfield** and **Kassor** ignore, is that the question cannot be so restricted if we are asking about how to evaluate Buddhist versus Brahminical theories in relation to science and contemporary philosophical theories of the self. When the question is whether the Buddhist theory, which includes not just the denial of a self but also the Abhidharma no-self theory of how the mind works, is better supported by evidence, then simply negating the existence of a substantial personal essence does not decide the matter. Part of the issue, especially in the Indian philosophical context, is to explain how the mind and body work without a self as a principle of unity. Scientific theories and models are about explanation, and negating the existence of something does not suffice for explanation. The Brahminical Nyāyāyikas argue (correctly in my view) that the Buddhist Abhidharma reductionist model faces severe problems in accounting for what we would call perceptual binding and the apparent synchronic and diachronic unity of consciousness, and they propose an alternative model that is arguably better at explaining these phenomena than the Abhidharma Buddhist one.¹⁸ Furthermore, when certain Buddhists take steps to explain these phenomena by introducing constructs such as the “storehouse consciousness” (*ālayavijñāna*) and “reflexive awareness” (*svasaṃvedana*), they are accused by other Buddhists and Brahminical philosophers of smuggling a self in by the back door. In short, when we look at the issue from the perspective of evolving rival explanatory theories and models of the mind, it is facile to say that the Buddhist no-self theory is better supported by evidence and argument than the Brahminical ones. Rather, there is a complex dialectical situation in which there are evolving strengths and weaknesses on both sides (as I say on 51-52, 100-105).

Finnigan and **Kassor** assert that we can understand the Indian Buddhist ideas about no-self apart from the objections Brahminical philosophers raise to them and that we can put the Buddhist ideas into dialogue with contemporary philosophy and science without at the same time engaging the Brahminical ideas. Of course, I agree that this can be done, and it is fine for certain purposes. But it is not as good as understanding the Indian Buddhist ideas in their historical and dialectical context, and putting that larger dialectical framework into dialogue with contemporary philosophy and cognitive science. Doing this is especially important for thinking about a concept as rich and multifaceted as the concept of self. This is why I single out **Ganeri’s** *The Self* as a paradigm.¹⁹ **Finnigan**, however, points out that **Ganeri’s** more recent book, *Attention, Not Self*,²⁰ “restricts itself to reconstructing and defending Buddhaghosa’s Theravāda Buddhist conception of the mind in dialogue with the philosophy of mind.” **Ganeri’s** treatment of Buddhaghosa is rich and fascinating, though I have some doubts about certain methodological and interpretive aspects of it.²¹ I see Buddhaghosa as writing first and foremost as a scriptural exegete, translator, and commentator. This does not mean that his texts are not rich in philosophical content. But unlike, say, Vasubandhu or Dharmakīrti, he is not writing under the dialectical pressure of needing to address rival Buddhist or non-Buddhist philosophical systems. For this reason, I do not find him as inspiring as a philosopher. I am more drawn to the way **Ganeri** interweaves many Buddhist, Cārvāka, and Nyāya ideas in *The Self* than I am to the reconstruction of the singular Buddhaghosa.

Garfield takes me to be arguing against the Buddhist no-self view and says that I change the subject and equivocate when I write, “the self that Buddhism targets as the object of self-grasping—the self as a personal essence—isn’t the only way to understand the meaning of ‘self,’ so denying that there is this kind of a self doesn’t entail that there is no self whatsoever” (105). **Kassor** makes basically the same complaint.

Garfield and **Kassor** misunderstand my argument. I am not concerned to argue against the Buddhist denial of the self, in the precise and restrictive sense that Buddhists target, and I distinguish the various senses of “self” precisely to prevent equivocation. Indeed, I make the point myself that “from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, my argument that the self is a construction can be taken as an argument for the claim that the person is a construction” (113).²² The two principal claims of chapter three “No Self? Not So Fast” of my book are that it is facile to think that the Buddhist no-self theorists are superior to the Brahminical self-theorists in being more scientific, or rational and empirical (for the reasons given above), and that cognitive science does not indicate that the self is an illusion; it suggests that it is a construction (88-89). So when Buddhist modernists say otherwise, they are being simplistic and sloppy.

One reason why it is wrong to make the statement “Cognitive science shows that the self is an illusion” is that many cognitive scientists would be unwilling to restrict the meaning of the word “self” in the way that Buddhists do, and they also would not be willing to draw the self-versus-

person distinction in the way that Buddhists do. Indeed, some would regard an insistence on Buddhist usage as tendentious and partisan. The statement “Cognitive science shows that the self is an illusion” does not capture how many cognitive scientists themselves actually speak, so when Buddhist modernists say things like that, they are being careless and misleading. The statement expresses Buddhist modernist rhetoric, not careful reflection about a complicated scientific and philosophical terrain.

Garfield, it seems, does think that cognitive science indicates that the self is an illusion, if we understand “self” in the precise and restrictive sense that Buddhists target (the so-called object of negation). (**Kassor** may also think this, though she does not say so explicitly.) But caution is required here. Cognitive science provides no reason to think that there exists a self in the sense of an enduring (wholly present in each moment), substantial, personal essence. So cognitive science does not support the belief in such a self. For this reason, we are entitled to say the belief is false. Now, that belief, as just articulated, is an intellectual one. If we say it is an illusion, we are using “illusion” in an extended, metaphorical sense to say that the belief is false or distorted. But the Buddhist object of negation—the self as a personal essence—is not primarily the content of an intellectual belief; it is considered to be our default sense of self and the prime motivator of our behavior. The Buddhist claim is that we feel there to be such a self, but there is none, so that self is an illusion. Does cognitive science support this viewpoint? Does cognitive science indicate that our default sense of self and the prime motivator of our behavior is the feeling of self as a personal essence? I argue that it does not, for various phenomenological and psychological reasons (see 108-109). **Garfield** and **Kassor** do not address these reasons. Given that cognitive science has not established that our experiential sense of self is as the Buddhists say it is, it is unacceptable to declare that cognitive science indicates that the self—in the precise and restricted Buddhist sense—is a pervasive experiential illusion that structures our mental lives.

It is crucial to remember the point of my argument here. Again, I am not trying to refute the Buddhist no-self view. Instead, I am concerned to show that appealing to science to justify it does not work. The Buddhist modernist position that science unequivocally establishes the truth of the Buddhist no-self view is unacceptable. This does not mean that the Buddhist view is false or that there are no other philosophical, normative, or soteriological reasons in its favor. What I object to is the lax rhetoric of invoking science in the place of careful philosophical analysis and attention to what science actually indicates.

V. FAITH [FINNIGAN, GARFIELD, WILLIAMS]

When I argue that having faith is a crucial part of being a Buddhist, **Garfield** takes me to mean “faith in the belief-without-reason sense.” But I am not using “faith” in this restricted fideist sense, according to which faith is independent of or opposed to reason. As noted earlier, this is not the only conception of faith in monotheistic religions or the philosophy of religion. Generally speaking, “faith” means trust. Religious faith is a kind of trust that ventures beyond all the ordinary available evidence. In theism,

religious faith is trust in God; in Buddhism, it is trust in the Buddha and the reality of awakening or *nirvāṇa*. *Nirvāṇa* transcends conceptual thought, sense perception, and the conditioned world, hence trusting in *nirvāṇa* entails going beyond the evidence available to the unawakened mind. So when Buddhist modernists say that faith is absent in Buddhism, unlike in other religions, they are wrong.

Garfield’s response is that the kind of faith that is crucial for Buddhists is confidence (his preferred way of translating *śrāddha*), which he understands “as an attitude regarding belief in that to which one has only indirect cognitive access through the testimony of the Buddha or another highly realized being.” Such confidence can be justified by verifying the accuracy of the source regarding things to which we do have access, and inferring on that basis that the source is reliable.

Garfield does not face up to the problem here. Although we know how to apply the procedure he describes within the empirical world, we are now being asked to extend it beyond that sphere to testimony about the transcendent. What warrants that extension? It cannot simply be that we are confident about the source regarding things to which we have access in the empirical world. Rather, extending our confidence to the reality of the transcendent requires a different kind of trust, namely, faith.

Notice, also, that theists can make the same move. Some Christian philosophers argue that faith is a kind of knowledge based on experiences arising from the exercise of a distinct cognitive capacity for sensing the divine.²¹ Suppose that the person who reports having such experiences is reliable regarding things to which we have access. According to **Garfield’s** criterion, we can infer that the person is reliable and that we can be confident in their testimony about the reality of the divine.

Garfield might object that naturalists have no good reason to believe in such a special cognitive capacity for sensing the divine. But the same objection can be made to the Buddhist: Naturalists have no good reason to believe that there is such a thing as awakening or the realization of *nirvāṇa*.

In short, whether one calls it faith or confidence, the Buddhist relies on trust in something that goes beyond the available evidence and lies outside the sphere of naturalism. So Buddhist exceptionalism gets no purchase here.

I agree with **Garfield** that, as a Buddhist, “[o]ne can have confidence in science to tell us about a lot of things, and confidence in the Buddha to tell us about some other things regarding which science is currently silent.” But the issue I am addressing is not whether the Buddhist can have both faith in *nirvāṇa* and confidence in science. I am not claiming that those two things are inconsistent. **Garfield** accuses me of *non sequiturs*, but he does not reconstruct my argument properly. My objection is to Buddhist modernists who try to have their cake and eat it too by propounding the following ideas: Buddhists do not need faith (trust in things that go beyond the available evidence and reside

outside the sphere of naturalism); Buddhists believe only in what is scientifically comprehensible; Buddhists can believe in awakening and *nirvāṇa*. One cannot believe all three ideas at once (unless you try to naturalize *nirvāṇa* as just a psychological state of well-being or a transpersonal mystical experience, but that move amounts to rejecting any traditional understanding of *nirvāṇa*). **Garfield** does not come to grips with this argument, and he slides back into Buddhist exceptionalism in thinking that Buddhists do not need the kind of faith that other religions do.

Williams interprets me as thinking that, for modern Buddhism to be acceptable, it should not rely on any faith claims. But I am not concerned to argue against faith, and I never suggest that it is wrong for Buddhists to have faith in the Buddha or *nirvāṇa*. Rather, my concern is to show that Buddhist modernists, in claiming not to rely on faith but only on scientific naturalism, are not entitled to maintain a belief in or commitment to the realization of *nirvāṇa*. To repeat the argument just made: If one is a scientific naturalist, then one is in no position to be able to put one's trust in something that utterly transcends the naturalistic framework, as *nirvāṇa* does (unless, again, one naturalizes *nirvāṇa* as just a psychological state of well-being or a transpersonal mystical experience). To be clear, I think it is perfectly fine for modern Buddhists *both* to place their confidence in science for matters on which science is authoritative *and* to have faith (trust) in the reality of *nirvāṇa*; my objection is to Buddhist modernists who think that they can dispense with such faith, be scientific naturalists, and believe in awakening or *nirvāṇa* in any traditional sense, all the while asserting that Buddhism is exceptional (unique and superior) among the religions in being rational and empirical in this way. Such thinking is confused and incoherent.

Williams argues that Buddhist modernists actually do rely on faith, but it is faith in future science. She says this places my critique of Buddhist modernism in jeopardy, and it leaves open the question of whether this kind of faith in future science "can do the work of the more traditional kind of faith found within Buddhism."

These ideas, however, do not affect my critique. The kind of faith at issue is trust in something that falls outside the scope of scientific naturalism, namely, awakening or *nirvāṇa*. As I argue, concepts such as *awakening*, *liberation*, and *nirvāṇa* are not operationalizable (34). They are soteriological, not scientific, and thinking that there could be a scientific validation of soteriological concepts is a category mistake. So it is a conceptual confusion to think that faith in future science—ordinary epistemic confidence in future science—can do the work of the more traditional kind of faith found within Buddhism, i.e., trust in that which transcends all conceptuality and all conditionality, and guarantees complete and irrevocable mental peace.

Finnigan says that I deny that nondual or nonconceptual awareness is possible, and hence that liberation or *nirvāṇa* is possible. If this were the case, then faith in liberation or *nirvāṇa* would be misplaced. But this is not my position. I never deny the possibility of a nondual or nonconceptual mode of awareness, and I never deny the possibility of

liberation or *nirvāṇa*. Instead, I point out that there is no single, univocal, traditional understanding of what *nirvāṇa* is. I also argue that whether any nondual or nonconceptual awareness counts as "awakening," "liberation," or "*nirvāṇa*" is concept-dependent. There are two questions here: Is nondual or nonconceptual awareness psychologically or phenomenologically possible, and if it is, does it constitute liberation or *nirvāṇa*? The second question, I argue, cannot be answered by referring only to the intrinsic character of the nonconceptual experience; it depends also on the role that such an experience plays in the religious tradition and conceptual system.

VI. NATURALISM [COSERU, FINNIGAN, GARFIELD, KACHRU]

I begin with what "naturalism" means in this discussion. It means "scientific naturalism," the position that science provides the best account of reality.²² Scientific naturalism has two components, one ontological and one methodological.²³ The ontological component is physicalism, the thesis that everything that exists, including the mind, is completely physical in its nature and constitution. The methodological component is the thesis that the methods of empirical science give science a general and final authority about the world, and therefore science should be epistemically privileged over all other forms of investigation. Scientific naturalism is a philosophical thesis, not a thesis belonging to any of the empirical sciences themselves.

Garfield interprets me as arguing that there is a "fatal inconsistency" between being a Buddhist and being a naturalist, but that is not what I argue. I acknowledge that there are ways of making the two logically consistent. Instead, I argue that there is a very strong tension between them, and that naturalistic Buddhists severely underestimate what needs to be done to reconcile them, because they typically do not appreciate how radical the Buddhist ideas are.

There are basically two ways to reconcile being a Buddhist and being a naturalist. One way is to relegate the core Buddhist soteriological concepts and commitments to their own proper sphere (religion, faith) while giving science authority about the empirical world. This is a kind of "nonoverlapping magisteria" strategy, or rather a "partially overlapping magisteria" strategy, since it allows for intersection in the areas of logic, epistemology, and philosophical psychology. The other way is to try to naturalize the Buddhist soteriological concepts and commitments, substituting an empirical psychological construct of "well-being" for *nirvāṇa*, eliminating or radically reinterpreting the ideas of karma and rebirth, and so on. "Naturalistic Buddhists" such as Robert Wright take the second route.²⁴

Garfield targets two lines of thought in my description of the tension between naturalistic Buddhism and traditional Buddhism. He misreads both.

One line of thought arises from my quoting Robert Sharf's statement, "Liberation is impossible, yet it is achieved,"²⁵ which I say is "the fundamental generative enigma at the heart of Buddhism" (78). The thought is that liberation is

achieved—that is the whole point of Buddhism—but that it is impossible, because liberation is the realization of *nirvāṇa*, *nirvāṇa* is the “unconditioned,” and so it cannot be the result of any cause, specifically that of following the Buddhist path. Sharf’s discussion describes how the Chan tradition foregrounds this conundrum, refuses every attempt at rationally solving it, including the one **Garfield** delineates, and leaves it as an inescapable *dialetheia*, which itself is taken as constitutive of awakening. **Garfield** interprets me as arguing, first, that the enigma is a genuine paradox and, second, from the genuineness of the paradox to the impossibility of naturalistic Buddhism (because naturalists allow only causally conditioned states, whereas *nirvāṇa* is an unconditioned state). But I do not make this argument. Rather, I highlight the enigma so that I can discuss the ways in which traditional Buddhists recognize and respond to it, including the kind of response **Garfield** gives, but I take no stand on these responses or on whether the enigma is an irresolvable paradox. In particular, I do not assert the genuineness of the paradox as a premise in an argument for the inconsistency of Buddhism and naturalism. So **Garfield’s** assertion that I make an unsound argument is incorrect. Rather, my argument is that naturalistic Buddhists do not recognize the problem at all, and thus they do not grasp the radical character of Buddhist thinking and severely underestimate the tension between traditional Buddhist ideas and naturalism.

The other line of thought arises from my quoting the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*: “[T]he mind is neither within nor without, nor is it to be apprehended between the two,” which I use to illustrate the point that, for Mahāyāna Buddhists, the mind exceeds, escapes, or transcends any attempt to grasp it, including grasping that it is ungraspable. Naturalistic Buddhists, however, especially neural Buddhists, proceed as if the mind could be grasped, particularly in terms of the brain. **Garfield** misunderstands the issue here as one about supervenience. He takes me to be asserting that naturalistic Buddhists are committed to the view that mental states narrowly supervene on brain states, and he rightly states that this is incorrect: A naturalistic Buddhist can and should adopt a wide supervenience conception of the mind-brain relation. But my complaint is not about narrow supervenience and **Garfield’s** response is beside the point.²⁶ *Vimalakīrti’s* statement about nonduality is not a wide supervenience thesis. My complaint is that naturalistic Buddhists ignore the Mahāyāna Buddhist understanding of the mind as radically ungraspable. Naturalistic Buddhists treat the mind as a comprehensible cognitive system that can be grasped in naturalistic terms, whereas, for Mahāyāna Buddhists, the mind is ungraspable. For naturalistic Buddhists, there is no transcendence and the mind is fathomable in entirely naturalistic terms; for Mahāyāna Buddhists, the mind is transcendent and unfathomable. **Garfield** takes me to be arguing from the purported falsity of narrow supervenience to the falsity of naturalistic Buddhism. That argument is indeed invalid, but it is not my argument. My argument is that, as a form of Buddhism, naturalistic Buddhism is superficial because it ignores the radical challenge posed by Mahāyāna Buddhist thinking about the mind. This is why the conclusion of my argument beginning with *Vimalakīrti’s* statement about nonduality is the following one: “If one takes the Buddhist viewpoint

seriously, the deep question isn’t whether Buddhism can be made consistent with scientific naturalism. The deep question is whether it’s possible for science to be mindful of the mind’s ungraspability and what that would mean for scientific thinking and practice” (78).

This question arises when we are thinking specifically about the relationship between the Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective on the mind and scientific naturalism. Of course, there are other Buddhist perspectives, such as the Abhidharma perspective. **Finnigan** says I am “too hasty” in not allowing for a convergence between Abhidharma realism and scientific realism. But I explicitly allow for this convergence (see 72-73). When I describe the “circulation” between Buddhism and cognitive science that Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and I explored in *The Embodied Mind*, I make the point that one can enter this circulation from different Buddhist philosophical perspectives (73-74).²⁷ Varela, Rosch, and I explored two entry points, one from the Abhidharma perspective and the other from a Mahāyāna (Yogācāra and Madhyamaka) perspective. The Abhidharma philosophers, though realist, are nonetheless radical compared to the standard naturalistic picture of the mind, because they go beyond even the wide supervenience of the mental on the physical by holding that subject and object, mind and world, are thoroughly relational.²⁸ Naturalistic Buddhists, especially those who rely on evolutionary psychology (see my response to **Coseru** below), do not conceptualize the mind in this radically relational way, so there remains a significant discrepancy between their frameworks, despite agreement about realism.

Finnigan wonders whether what I call a “genuine encounter” between Buddhism and science “*must* engage their radical points of difference or whether interdisciplinary dialogue could still be productive if interlocutors emphasize points of similarity (at least initially).” Of course, emphasizing points of similarity is fine for certain purposes. But it is not fine if it obscures deeper differences and makes it difficult or impossible to talk about them. At this stage of evolution in the Buddhism-science dialogue, emphasizing just points of similarity does not go far enough. We need to engage the differences for the reasons given above (see the sections on cosmopolitanism and no-self).

Coseru disputes my criticisms of evolutionary psychology and argues that evolutionary psychology is an appropriate framework for relating Buddhism to science. He makes four points in response to my critique. I am not persuaded by any of them.

First, he thinks my criticism that evolutionary psychology treats the organism as a passive recipient of selection pressures implies that I am mistakenly treating explanations that appeal to evolution and explanations that appeal to adaptive behavior and learning as competing ones, whereas these explanations are compatible and operate at different levels. But I do not make this mistake and **Coseru** misses the point of the criticism. The criticism is that it is incorrect to see *evolution*, as evolutionary psychologists do, as fundamentally a matter of solving adaptive problems, as if environmental problems pre-existed the organisms

and could be specified independently of them. A more sophisticated view of organism-environment coevolution is required, as we see in niche construction theory, evolutionary developmental biology, and gene-culture coevolution theory. The irony here is that the organism-environment coevolution perspective fits much better with Buddhist philosophical psychology, as we argued in *The Embodied Mind*, than does evolutionary psychology.²⁹

Second, **Coseru** thinks that my placing greater emphasis on cultural transmission than evolutionary psychologists do “begs the question” of how our cultural abilities originated if not from evolution. This objection, however, confuses the need for evolutionary explanation with the version of evolutionary explanation that evolutionary psychologists give. My argument is against the latter, not the former, as I make clear. Niche construction theory, gene-culture coevolution theory, and cultural evolutionary psychology are much more impressive research programs for explaining our cultural abilities than evolutionary psychology.³⁰

Third, **Coseru** thinks that my critique of the “massively modular” view of the mind favored by evolutionary psychologists “glosses over a rich history of debate,” and that “the question of the modularity of the mind is far from settled.” These points are fair. My concern in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is not to give a detailed assessment of these debates, and the question of modularity remains open. Still, I think the evidence from computational neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, neurobiology, and complex systems theory speaks strongly against the modular viewpoint, especially the form it takes in evolutionary psychology.

Fourth, **Coseru** thinks that the criticisms I cite of evolutionary psychology made by philosophers of biology and evolutionary biologists mistakenly paint evolutionary psychologists as genetic determinists (who think that human behavior is directly controlled by an individual’s genes). This is mistaken. The specific criticisms that I summarize on pages 69-70 do not assume that evolutionary psychologists are genetic determinists. Instead, the criticisms target a certain style of adaptationist reasoning prevalent in evolutionary psychology.

Since I wrote my book, another important critique of evolutionary psychology has appeared.³¹ This critique makes a strong case that evolutionary psychology does not have the resources to match hypothesized ancestral (Pleistocene) cognitive structures with present-day ones in the right way to formulate and test evolutionary psychology hypotheses. The conclusion is that evolutionary psychology is not a proper scientific theory. This critique reinforces my claim that evolutionary psychology is not the right framework for relating scientific theories of the mind to Buddhist ideas.

In the second part of his response, **Coseru** focuses on Madhyamaka. I argue for a two-way exchange between cognitive science and Buddhist philosophy, including Madhyamaka as a key player. **Coseru** interprets me as proposing that Madhyamaka should be the overarching philosophical perspective in the Buddhism-science exchange. That is not my view, however. I invoke

Madhyamaka in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* mainly for the purpose of illustrating the radical nature of certain key Buddhist ideas that naturalistic Buddhists overlook. I would not propose Madhyamaka as the decisive perspective for the Buddhism-science dialogue. Which Buddhist philosophical perspective is relevant depends on the issue being discussed and is for Buddhist thinkers themselves to decide. My proposal is that the whole evolving tradition of Buddhist philosophy—Abhidharma, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and Buddhist epistemology (the *pramāṇa* theorists), in all their intertwinings and elaborations down to today—should be part of the two-way exchange in the Buddhism-science dialogue. I take it that **Coseru** would agree with this proposal.³²

Kachru draws attention to my statement that asking “Is Buddhism true?” (as Robert Wright does) is not the right question to ask (85). I make this comment at the end of my chapter on Wright’s *Why Buddhism Is True*. “Truth,” in that context, means scientific truth—truth understood as a correspondence or isomorphism between scientific models and phenomena. As **Kachru** writes, there is “another valence to truth, particularly evident when speaking, for example, of the reason to pursue a religion, including thereby the overriding beauty or power it may involve, or the eloquence one’s smallest gestures may achieve when one is taken apart and put together again through training in a way of life taken to express some truth or reality.” I agree with **Kachru** that there is room for a modern Buddhist to speak of truth in this sense. “Truth” means more than just scientific truth. **Kachru** is right that I appeal to the idea of authenticity in this connection. Here I am influenced by two Buddhist modernist thinkers, Stephen Batchelor, in his first book on Buddhism and existentialism, and Nishitani Keiji.³³ These writers do not try to justify Buddhism by appealing to scientific truth; instead, they articulate Buddhism, particularly Zen, as a response to the demands of authenticity, of facing up to the question of how we choose to lead our lives given our lack of any fixed nature or essence and in the face of our inevitable death. This is why I write in the book that if we’re going to recast the Buddhist idea of liberation in modern terms, then we should understand it as involving “a total reconfiguration of our existence as governed by the norm of authenticity, not simply [as] a change to our mental states and traits as psychology conceives of them” (82).

VII. CONCLUSION

If you have made it this far, you may be thinking that I really should have called my book *Why I Am Not a Buddhist Modernist* (despite that not being a very catchy title). So let me take this opportunity to state explicitly something that I only allude to in the book (see 80-82, 158).³⁴

I submit that the driving philosophical engine of Buddhist thought is the following set of propositions: All conditioned and compounded things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self (the so-called three marks of existence); and *nirvāṇa* is unconditioned peace. Another formulation is the so-called four seals (which, according to Tibetan Buddhism, minimally identify a view as Buddhist): Everything conditioned and compounded is impermanent; everything contaminated (by the mental afflictions of

beginningless fundamental ignorance, attachment, and anger) is suffering; all phenomena are devoid of self; and nirvāṇa (unconditioned cessation of affliction) is peace.

The fundamental reason I am not a Buddhist is that I cannot find a way to accept these propositions, including their modernist renditions, and my philosophical project does not include trying to reformulate them in acceptable modernist terms. Nevertheless, I believe that unless one grapples with the radical philosophical and existential challenge that these propositions pose to our usual ways of thinking and being—especially to the modernist project of searching for well-being in the form of happiness and psychological well-adjustment—one has not really heard what the Buddhist tradition has to say. Moreover, as a philosopher, I believe it is important to confront these propositions and the arguments for them, and to think through them deeply for oneself.

NOTES

1. Evan Thompson, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020). Parenthetical page references in the text are to this book.
2. For an overview of Buddhist modernism, see David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also the additional references in *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, 193, note 16. For recent North American developments, see Ann Gleig, *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).
3. Prominent Asian Buddhist modernists include Anagarika Dharmapala, S. N. Goenka, D. T. Suzuki, Chōgyam Trungpa, and Thich Nhat Hanh, among others.
4. See also my discussion of the Dalai Lama in Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), chapter 3.
5. Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2007), 7.
6. A recent example is Evan Thompson, "What's in a Concept? Conceptualizing the Nonconceptual in Buddhist Philosophy and Cognitive Science," in *Reasons and Empty Persons: Mind, Metaphysics, and Morality: Essays in Honor of Mark Siderits*, ed. Christian Coseru (London: Springer, 2021).
7. See my review of *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction*, by Mark Siderits, *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 3 (2012): 413–15.
8. For an index to the complete exchange, see Amod Lele, "An Index to the Thompson-Lele Correspondence," *Love of All Wisdom: Philosophy Through Multiple Traditions* (blog), June 4, 2020, <http://loveofallwisdom.com/blog/2020/06/an-index-to-the-thompson-lele-correspondence/>.
9. See Evan Thompson, "Clarifying Why I Am Not a Buddhist: A Response to Amod Lele," *The Indian Philosophy Blog*, April 25, 2020, <https://indianphilosophyblog.org/2020/04/25/clarifying-why-i-am-not-a-buddhist-a-response-to-amod-lele-guest-post-by-evan-thompson/#comments>; "Cherry Picking the Bodhi Tree: A Response to Lele," *The Indian Philosophy Blog*, June 9 2020, <https://indianphilosophyblog.org/2020/06/09/cherry-picking-the-bodhi-tree-a-response-to-lele-guest-post-by-evan-thompson/>; "Losing the Thread: A Response to Lele," *The Indian Philosophy Blog*, August 11, 2020, <https://indianphilosophyblog.org/2020/08/11/losing-the-thread-a-response-to-lele-guest-post-by-evan-thompson/>.
10. Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).
11. As a result of reading my book, Robert Wright invited me to be on his podcast, where we had a convivial two-hour conversation. See Robert Wright, interview with Evan Thompson, *Meaning of Life TV*, podcast video, April 28, 2020, <https://meaningoflife.tv/videos/42741>.
12. Indeed, this argument is especially important to make today, given the global environmental crisis. Ethical egoism, greed, and selfishness threaten not just all human beings—the human community altogether. They also especially threaten poor and vulnerable human communities and traditions, as well as other forms of life, and therefore they are fundamentally unjust. See Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Let me also take this occasion to note that one of the serious limitations of cosmopolitanism is its anthropocentrism; its explicitly stated concern is only for the human good, and not for the good of other forms of life, such as nonhuman animals and the planetary biosphere. The need to enlarge cosmopolitanism to include nonhuman animals within its purview is a theme in Martha Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).
13. Velez also wonders how "partial cosmopolitanism," which affirms our need to be partial to particular people and groups, "can be reconciled with the Buddhist ethical ideals of universal compassion and loving-kindness, which in their most advanced manifestations are accompanied by equanimity or emotional impartiality towards particular people and groups." Although Mahāyāna Buddhism especially emphasizes these ideals, Mahāyāna Buddhists generally also recognize that compassion and loving-kindness have to be cultivated, at least initially, in partial ways, especially for lay Buddhists. Indeed, lay Buddhists in Mahāyāna Buddhist cultures are hardly ever expected to practice the absolutely impartial compassion of the bodhisattva. It is also worth pointing out that the "competing cosmopolitanisms" of Chinese Buddhism versus Confucianism (to which I refer on 171) also faced this issue, with the Confucians arguing that the Buddhists did not respect the value of filial piety, because they encouraged people to leave their families and become monks. For a contemporary philosophical defence of the Neo-Confucian view of the self and the value of partiality in benevolence against the Mahāyāna Buddhist view of universal compassion, see Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
14. See Mikel Burley, *Classical Sāmkhya and Yoga: An Indian Metaphysics of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).
15. Some contemporary Buddhists, notably Thanissaro Bhikkhu, interpret the Pali Buddhist suttas (*Nikāyas*) as affirming the reality of a similar pure, absolute, and unconditioned consciousness (see 93–94, 203, note 7). I find their reasons for this interpretation unconvincing. Nevertheless, the positing of such a consciousness would arguably still leave most, if not all, of the Abhidharma radical revisionism in place.
16. See Arindam Chakrabarti, "I Touch What I Saw," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 1 (1992): 103–16.
17. Jonardon Ganeri, *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
18. Jonardon Ganeri, *Attention, Not Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
19. See Evan Thompson, "Jonardon Ganeri's Transcultural Philosophy of Attention," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 101, no. 2 (2020): 489–94.
20. Nevertheless, and despite Kassor's demand for "specificity in terms of the distinction between *ātman* [self] and *puṅgava* [person]" when we engage Buddhist philosophy, simply transposing the Buddhist distinction between self and person onto cognitive science and contemporary philosophy will not work. Consider the concept of the "minimal self," understood as a basic, non-metacognitive self-awareness and as the sense of being a subject and an agent grounded on the body. This concept is central to phenomenological philosophy of mind, embodied cognitive science, and certain lines of investigation in cognitive neuroscience. The minimal self is not a person or sufficient for personhood, so it is not a *puṅgava*. It suffices, however, for a basic functional and experiential self-versus-other distinction, so it warrants being called a kind of self. Does it fall within the scope of what the Buddhist no-self view negates? That is not easily determined and depends on which Buddhist philosopher one asks. It would fall within the scope of the so-called object of negation for Candrakīrti, so if embodied cognitive science is right, then Candrakīrti is wrong, and hence science does not

support his Buddhist view. Yogācāra Buddhist philosophers, however, can accommodate the phenomenology of the minimal self with their ideas of “reflexive awareness” (*svasamvedana*) and “storehouse consciousness” (*ālayavijñāna*) (ideas Candrakīrti rejects), but these Buddhist philosophers would object to applying the term “self” to these kinds of consciousness. Nevertheless, as I mentioned above, the fact that other Buddhists and Brahminical philosophers accuse them of returning to a self viewpoint in new terminological guise is telling. In suggesting that respecting the terminological distinction between *ātman* and *pudgala* will establish the scientific or philosophical credentials of the Buddhist no-self view, Garfield and Kassor are being lax and are simplifying a complex dialectical terrain, not just in the Indian context but also in how we relate that context to cognitive science.

21. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
22. I focus on scientific naturalism in its standard or orthodox sense. I am not considering radical or revisionary forms of naturalism, such as idealism, panpsychism, and Whiteheadian process metaphysics.
23. See David Papineau, “Naturalism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, last modified April 3, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/naturalism/>.
24. Amod Lele also takes this route, though in a different way from Wright. See notes 8 and 9.
25. Robert Sharf, “Chan Cases,” in *What Can’t Be Said: Contradiction and Paradox in East Asian Philosophy*, ed. Yasuo Deguchi, Jay L. Garfield, Graham Priest, and Robert Sharf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), chapter 5.
26. When I write that naturalistic Buddhists proceed as if the mind could “be pinned down and identified as essentially the ‘biological reality’ of the brain” (77-78), it may sound like I am saying that they have a narrow supervenience view of the mind-brain relation. But that is not what I mean. Rather, I mean that naturalistic Buddhists seek to understand the mind fundamentally in terms of the workings of the brain, whether that be in a narrow (internalist) or wide (externalist) explanatory framework. Consider that, on a wide supervenience view, the brain remains the critical node in the extended cognitive system and the minimal supervenience base for consciousness. It is the naturalistic conception of the mind as entirely comprehensible in mundane, empirical terms, not narrow versus wide supervenience, that creates the tension with Mahāyāna Buddhist thought.
27. Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991 / revised edition, 2016).
28. “For the Abhidharma, what we call the ‘mind’ is a collection of interactive processes, some physical and some mental, that arise together with what we call the ‘object’ of cognition. In cognitive science language, what we call the ‘mind’ is a collection of interactive processes that span and interconnect the brain, the rest of the body, and the environment, and what we call the ‘object’ of cognition is defined by these interactive processes” (73).
29. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, chapter 9.
30. For cultural evolutionary psychology, see Cecilia Heyes, *Cognitive Gadgets: The Cultural Evolution of Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
31. Subrena E. Smith, “Is Evolutionary Psychology Possible?” *Biological Theory* 15, no. 1 (2020): 39–49.
32. Readers interested in a more detailed response to Coseu should consult my response to his “The Middle Way to Reality: On Why I Am Not a Buddhist and Other Philosophical Curiosities,” both forthcoming in *Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions*.
33. Stephen Batchelor, *Alone with Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism* (New York: Grove, 1983); Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. Jan Van Bragt (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).
34. I draw here from “Clarifying Why I Am Not a Buddhist.”

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

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The *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies* is sponsored by the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies to report on the philosophical work of Asian and Asian American philosophy, to report on new work in Asian philosophy, and to provide a forum for the discussion of topics of importance to Asian and Asian American philosophers and those engaged with Asian and Asian American philosophy. We encourage a diversity of views and topics within this broad rubric. None of the varied philosophical views provided by authors of newsletter articles necessarily represents the views of any or all the members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies, including the editor(s) of the newsletter. The committee and the newsletter are committed to advancing Asian and Asian American philosophical scholarships and bringing this work and this community to the attention of the larger philosophical community; we do not endorse any particular approach to Asian or Asian American philosophy.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

- 1) **Purpose:** The purpose of the newsletter is to publish information about the status of Asians and Asian Americans and their philosophy and to make the resources of Asians and Asian American philosophy available to a larger philosophical community. The newsletter presents discussions of recent developments in Asians and Asian American philosophy (including, for example, both modern and classical East-Asian philosophy, both modern and classical South Asian philosophy, and Asians and Asian Americans doing philosophy in its various forms), related work in other disciplines, literature overviews, reviews of the discipline as a whole, timely book reviews, and suggestions for both spreading and improving the teaching of Asian philosophy in the current curriculum. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies. One way the dissemination of knowledge of the relevant areas occurs is by holding highly visible, interactive sessions on Asian philosophy at the American Philosophical Association’s three annual divisional meetings. Potential authors should follow the submission guidelines below:
 - i) Please submit essays electronically to the editor(s). Articles submitted to the newsletter should be limited to ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA submission guidelines.
 - ii) All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. Each submission shall be sent to two referees. Reports will be shared with authors. References should follow *The Chicago Manual Style*.

- iii) If the paper is accepted, each author is required to sign a copyright transfer form, available on the APA website, prior to publication.
- 2) **Book reviews and reviewers:** If you have published a book that you consider appropriate for review in the newsletter, please ask your publisher to send the editor(s) a copy of your book. Each call for papers may also include a list of books for possible review. To volunteer to review books (or some specific book), kindly send the editor(s) a CV and letter of interest mentioning your areas of research and teaching.
- 3) **Where to send papers/reviews:** Please send all articles, comments, reviews, suggestions, books, and other communications to the editor: A. Minh Nguyen (atnguyen@fgcu.edu).
- 4) **Submission deadlines:** Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1, and submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.
- 5) **Guest editorship:** It is possible that one or more members of the Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies could act as guest editors for one of the issues of the newsletter depending on their expertise in the field. To produce a high-quality newsletter, one of the co-editors could even come from outside the members of the committee depending on his/her area of research interest.