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#### 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.

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## Replies to Critics

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I would like to thank my interlocutors for reading and responding to *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> Siderits is one of the finest analytical philosophers pursuing this project. *Buddhism as Philosophy* is an excellent work.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

**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 *Kathāvattu* 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*,<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.” 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 Nyāyīyikas 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> **Finnigan**, however, points out that **Ganeri’s** more recent book, *Attention, Not Self*,<sup>18</sup> “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.<sup>19</sup> 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).<sup>20</sup> 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-















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