

Book Review

## Why I Am Not a Buddhist

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Part intellectual biography, part philosophical critique, part plea for a renewed Buddhism and science dialogue, Evan Thompson's *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* presents what is arguably the next step in an intellectual trajectory that began with his co-authorship of *The Embodied Mind* (1991) with Francisco Varela (1946–2001) and Eleanor Rosch nearly thirty years ago. In previous publications, Thompson has mounted vigorous promotions of the enactive approach to cognitive science developed by Varela, explaining its philosophical and methodological advantages over other approaches in the field. While the book under review here is not at all a repudiation of that project, it nonetheless provides some critical reflections on it, particularly on how *The Embodied Mind* portrays the relationship between Buddhism and science. The overall aim of *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is to offer some correctives to the way that the Buddhism and science dialogue has developed since the late 1980s, with special attention to the Mind & Life Dialogues hosted by the Dalai Lama. Yet, if the aim of the work is to resituate this dialogue on new grounds, why choose the title Thompson has?

“Since I see no way for myself to be a Buddhist without being a Buddhist modernist, and Buddhist modernism is philosophically unsound,” Thompson states, “I see no way for myself to be a Buddhist without acting in bad faith. That is why I’m not Buddhist” (19). For Thompson, to be a Buddhist modernist is to hold to what he calls “Buddhist exceptionalism,” that 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” (2). For Thompson, Buddhist exceptionalism is not simply mistaken—and therefore should be discarded—but is the obstacle standing in the way of Buddhism’s more genuine contribution to a “modern cosmopolitan community” (2). “Cosmopolitanism, the idea that all human beings belong to one community that can and should encompass different ways of life,” according to Thompson, “provides a better

framework for appreciating Buddhism, and for understanding religion and science, than Buddhist modernism” (2). The six chapters of Thompson’s book critically tackle core concepts of Buddhist modernism and introduce his alternative, cosmopolitan approach to the dialogue between Buddhism and science.

Chapter one explores the myth of Buddhist exceptionalism at the core of Buddhist modernism. Of particular concern for Thompson in this chapter is the notion that Buddhism is a kind of mind science—a claim often made by the Dalai Lama in his engagements with Western scientists and philosophers. Thompson traces this notion historically, finding its origins in the writings of Nyanaponika Thera (1901–1994). He also shows how the notion is premised on the conflation of normative, soteriological concepts with empirical, descriptive ones. This is to say, Buddhist psychological concepts are not scientific (empirical, descriptive) but technologies aimed at achieving certain ends (normative, soteriological). These concepts, therefore, should not be considered as constituting a mind science in the way some Buddhist modernists imagine. To deny the scientific nature of such concepts is *not* to deny their validity or their value, however. For Thompson, just the opposite is the case: they become much more valuable when seen as the polysemous technologies they really are. The upshot here is not to conflate Buddhist concepts with scientific ones, and, following this, not to value Buddhist ideas and practices solely on the basis of their ability to mirror scientific concepts and practices.

Chapter two responds to Robert Wright’s book *Why Buddhism is True* (2018). Wright’s book functions as kind of synecdoche for what Thompson refers to as naturalistic Buddhism, that is, the strategy of Buddhist modernists who desire to validate Buddhist ideas and practices by setting them within a strictly biophysical framework. Wright argues that Buddhism is true insofar as its basic assertions about human existence—our habitual grasping at things in addition to an inevitable sense of dissatisfaction with them—can be confirmed by evolutionary psychology, and that Buddhism can provide scientifically-proven effective technologies (e.g., mindfulness meditation) for regulating these habitual tendencies and reduce the suffering caused by them. Thompson is deeply skeptical of Wright’s use of evolutionary psychology, noting that the field’s guiding assumptions have been shown to be tenuous at best. Rather than evolutionary psychology, Thompson argues that an enactive approach to cognitive science is a better framework for understanding what insights Buddhist ideas and practices can offer the sciences. What Thompson seems to find most objectionable in Wright’s book is the naturalization of nirvana as consisting of a psychological state which can be correlated with brain states. According to Thompson, the richness of nirvana as a concept and the paradoxes it entails for Buddhist thought and practice are eliminated in naturalizing it, depriving the concept of its transformative character. Thompson finds such naturalistic Buddhism deeply unconvincing. Despite this, Thompson recognizes that Wright and he remain convinced that both Buddhist perspectives on the human condition and the prescriptions Buddhism gives based on those perspectives are valid and important. Their disagreement, Thompson notes, is about the substance of the Buddhist perspective and what it offers.

Chapter three focuses on the notion of no-self (*anātman*) and the Buddhist modernist approach to it which holds that “neuroscience and psychology corroborate the truth of no-self. The brain generates the illusion of the self, but no self exists in the brain” (87). I read this chapter as having two main thrusts: (1) Buddhist concepts such as no-self need to be understood within their own philosophical and historical contexts; and (2) there are a number of ways of understanding what a self is or can be, and thus to deny one understanding of the self does not deny an alternate understanding of the self. In the chapter’s first thrust, Thompson explores several interpretations of no-self as it is presented in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, emphasizing that the self which is denied by Buddhists is the *ātman* of the *Upaniṣads*. He then considers critiques of no-self from two first-millennium CE philosophers in the Brahmanical Nyāya school and the Buddhist rebuttals to their critiques. Thompson’s point is to show how Buddhist ideas developed in their South Asian context from a cosmopolitan perspective which recognizes the valid points each side presents. In the chapter’s second thrust, Thompson considers Buddhist modernist appropriations of the no-self views of Thomas Metzinger and Miri Albahari. Both these thinkers hold that a self can *only* be an intrinsically existing substance and, if no such self is to be found, then there is no self *at all*. Thompson considers Metzinger and Albahari too restrictive in what can be considered a self. They make the conceptual error of extrapolating one set of grounds for denial of a self to encompass all possible grounds for an existence of a self. Thompson argues that, from the enactive perspective, we might understand the self not as a substance but as a process, one that supervenes upon a whole host of environmental, bodily, and cognitive parts. Thompson illustrates his understanding of the self as a process by analogy to a dancer and their dance. Just as a dance cannot be distinguished from the dancer, the self cannot be distinguished from its enactment by the host of its parts. The self may not be a substance but, for Thompson, this does not imply that it is an illusion. Thompson’s drawing on insights from Indian philosophy and enactive cognitive science in this chapter exemplifies the kind of cosmopolitanism he will introduce in the sixth and final chapter.

Chapter four deals with what Thompson calls “mindfulness mania” (118) and critiques the phenomenon from a neuroscientific rather than cultural perspective. He asserts that “two misguided ideas about mindfulness meditation are widespread, one is that mindfulness is essentially inward awareness of your own private mind. The other is that the best way to understand the effects of mindfulness is to look inside the head at the brain” (121). These ideas lead, for Thompson, to the fundamentally unstable notion that training your mind can change your brain. This notion is unstable because it is at once *dualist* (your mind is different from your brain) and *materialist* (your mind is effectively no different from your brain). Viewing mindfulness from an enactive perspective, Thompson argues that it should be understood as a series of embodied skills conducted in a social environment. “To be mindful,” Thompson states, “consists of certain emotional and cognitive skills and putting those skills into play in the social world” (130). To illustrate this, Thompson likens mindfulness meditation to parenting; both are a socially structured set of emotional and cognitive skills that certainly involve brains but cannot be reduced to them. We do not judge how well one does at parenting by measuring brain

states but by observing parenting practices and using social norms to guide our evaluation. Mindfulness meditation takes place in a social world and is ineluctably colored by the fact of its embeddedness in that social world. According to Thompson, moving our focus from the individual mind to the social context in which mindfulness practice unfolds can serve as a corrective to mindfulness mania.

Chapter five addresses the rhetoric of “enlightenment” in Buddhist modernism. After providing some genealogical information on how nirvana came to be translated as “enlightenment” among Western academics, Thompson claims that Buddhist modernists have attempted to fit enlightenment into their scientific worldview using a two-pronged approach: to naturalize it as a “rationally comprehensible psychological state” (144), and to romanticize it as a nonconceptual epiphany. As for the first prong, since the canonical texts contain conflicting accounts of the Buddha’s awakening in terms of both content and method, naturalizing it is impossible. As for the second prong, if the awakening experience is nonconceptual, how, then, are conceptual truths to be derived from it without contradicting the experience itself and becoming incoherent? This seems impossible to Thompson. He then claims nirvana is “concept-dependent,” (158) by which he means that, if there were no such concept as nirvana, it would not exist. Nirvana is much like the concept of love, according to Thompson: its meaning shifts with regard to context, it yields various interpretations, and it can be defined in many manners. This does not mean that nirvana is not real; on the contrary, it is real *as a concept* that serves to render meaningful some kinds of experience. The concept-dependent nature of nirvana has three implications. First, enlightenment cannot be entirely nonconceptual; second, seeing enlightenment as a brain state does not work; and third, since enlightenment is concept-dependent, “modern Buddhists need to ask not just what it is but what it could be,” which is to ask “which concept of enlightenment is appropriate and worth labeling here and now?” (164)

The book’s last chapter focuses on the meaning of cosmopolitanism and the conversation between Buddhism and science. It opens with a reflection on the place of Buddhism in what Sheldon Pollock calls the Sanskrit cosmopolis, the South Asian region from Pakistan to Indonesia which flourished throughout antiquity, wherein Sanskrit was the *lingua franca*. This cosmopolis included varying philosophical and spiritual traditions conversing with one another and competing for patronage. Contrasting this cosmopolis with the Roman *imperium*, which forced inclusion and assimilation, Thompson considers the nature of cosmopolitanism as an ethical and intellectual framework. Thompson opts for the partial cosmopolitanism advocated by Kwame Anthony Appiah, which holds that respecting people equally means respecting their particularities, including the cultures and traditions from which they come. Central to Appiah’s partial cosmopolitanism is a form of conversation meant not to convince, but to acclimate one group to another. Thompson then turns to the conversation between Buddhism and science as envisioned by Varela. Thompson tells us that, in starting the conversation, Varela warned against two extremes: the “embellishment attitude,” in which “you stay firmly within science and adorn it with metaphors or language taken from an Eastern

tradition”; and the “justification attitude” in which “you stay firmly within a spiritual tradition, and you use science to validate or justify it” (180). If the conversation can avoid these extremes, Varela noted, it will come up against the divergence in the intention of knowledge between the two. Scientists seek to know in order to control; Buddhists seek to know in order to be free from suffering. Thompson believes that it is in facing up to this divergence that the conversation becomes most inspiring and productive, yet the Mind & Life Dialogues often have not lived up to the ideal Varela set out for them. They have only done so “when the individual representatives of the traditions allow their viewpoints to become unsettled in the service of the conversation” (185). Thompson argues the conversation between Buddhism and science has value precisely in these moments when the Buddhists’ views challenge those of the scientists and/or when scientists open up to learning from the Buddhists. Where the scientists have their grasp on the *facts*, Buddhists are meant to provide the *values*. The cosmopolitan character of this conversation comes out in genuine wisdom and knowledge gained through a respectful and open encounter with difference.

Thompson concludes his work by claiming that “the significance of the Buddhist intellectual tradition for the modern world is that it offers a radical critique of our narcissistic preoccupation with the self and our overconfident belief that science tells us how the world really is apart from how we’re able to measure and act upon it” (189). Buddhist modernism, in his view, serves not to challenge these problematic impulses but simply to reinforce them. And, while Thompson believes that Buddhism itself has the resources to render an internal critique of Buddhist modernism, he poses the question to Buddhists “whether they can find other ways to be modern besides being Buddhist modernists (or fundamentalists)” (189). Though he is not a Buddhist himself, Thompson claims to be a “good friend to Buddhism” and believes that Buddhism is an invaluable resource for the realization of a “viable cosmopolitanism,” neither Eurocentric nor Americentric (189).

As someone who shares Thompson’s critical stance towards Buddhist modernism, I find his careful dissection of its core ideas and tropes useful. However, I am skeptical of the basic claim of the book: that Thompson is not a Buddhist because Buddhist modernism is philosophically unsound. Rather, Thompson is not a Buddhist because, as he states in chapter five, “I don’t regard existence as constituted by ‘taints,’ ‘contaminants,’ or ‘defilements,’ and I don’t share [with Buddhists] the faith in nirvana” (158). Thompson believes *neither* that the predicament of life that the Buddha announced is true, *nor* that the solution the Buddha proposed is real, but Thompson never contends with the Buddhist tradition on these issues in the book. In the final chapter, when discussing the Mind & Life Dialogues, Thompson claims that the genuine points of divergence on the “ethics of knowledge” between Buddhism and science are often “bracketed” in order to continue the conversation with the goal of embellishment or justification (158). It seems to me that Thompson performs a similar sort of bracketing in his book, given that he does not seek to confront the Buddhist tradition on these fundamental issues. If Thompson had taken up this task here, I believe the book would truly be worthy of its title, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*.

While I am sympathetic to Thompson's plea for cosmopolitan, cross-cultural philosophy, I am also skeptical of Thompson's claims about the contribution of Buddhism to a viable cosmopolitanism. I don't believe that they truly stand apart. For Thompson, one of the primary values of Buddhist philosophy is its critique of our overconfidence in the objectivity of science. As I read him, Thompson's account of the Buddhist critique of scientific realism amounts to the position Quentin Meillassoux refers to as correlationism. Correlationism, Meillassoux states, "consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another" (2012: 5). In *The Embodied Mind*, Thompson and his co-authors referred to correlationism as "fundamental circularity" (1991: 3-4). Meillassoux notes that, irrespective of how it is named, this position has been the basic consensus of post-Kantian philosophy, particularly for twentieth century movements such as phenomenology, of which Thompson is very fond. Granted, the brand of scientific realism Thompson finds so abhorrent does have its defenders in philosophical and scientific circles, but Buddhist philosophy, in Thompson's deployment, serves only to buttress what is already an uncontroversial and well-established perspective, one neither novel nor unique to Buddhism. Thompson claims Buddhist philosophy is also valuable for its critique of our narcissistic obsession with the self. However, Buddhist philosophy is even less unique here, as so many religious and philosophical traditions admonish against selfish behavior and offer critical views of the self and its relation to others. So why does Thompson choose the Buddhist version of these otherwise mainstream and uncontroversial perspectives? If we do not share faith in the Buddha's teachings (and certainly Thompson does not), I see no compelling reason for us to choose to apply Buddhist contributions over similar others. Although Thompson certainly tries in his book, I believe the case for a uniquely Buddhist contribution to a viable cosmopolitanism has yet to be made. Perhaps, just perhaps, it should be left to Buddhists to make their own case, and do so on their own terms.

The audience of Thompson's book seems somewhat split: the text is targeted at a general academic audience in its prose and tone, yet the content is addressed to small cadre of Buddhist adepts, scientists, and philosophers invested in advancing the Buddhism and science dialogue. Therefore, it is hard for me to recommend this book to those who are not similarly invested in that dialogue. For those who are, though, whether they are in this small cadre or just watching from the sidelines, I recommend it highly, for, despite my belief that it falls short in certain respects, it provides much needed critical perspective on the dialogue and points to the promise such a dialogue holds if done in the manner Thompson prescribes.

## References

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