

***Why I Am Not a Buddhist.* By Evan Thompson. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2020. 230 pages. \$15.29 (cloth). ISBN: 0300226551.**

**Gereon Kopf**

Luther College, University of Iceland, Tōyō University

In his recent book, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*, Evan Thompson ventures to examine Buddhist modernism, Buddhist exceptionalism, and neural Buddhism. Specifically, Thompson identifies as the goals of his book the desire to present a “philosophical critique of Buddhist modernism” (p. 19) and to argue “for cosmopolitanism, the idea that all human beings belong to a single human community” (p. 21). To Thompson, these two goals are intrinsically intertwined since Buddhist modernists seem to conflate science, especially neuroscience, with what is referred to as Buddhist mindfulness practices. He contextualizes and grounds his two-pronged project in his own autobiography through his various encounters with and his attraction to Buddhism. Thompson adamantly resists any attempt to search for an essence of Buddhism or to claim that Buddhism, traditional or contemporary, is monolithic. He clarifies that, unlike Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), whom he acknowledges as the inspiration for the title of this volume, he does not argue against religion or Buddhism, though he does share with Russell the attitude that “we want to stand upon our own two 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” (from Russell’s *Why I Am Not a Christian*, quoted by Thompson on p. 22). He believes that certain aspects from the Buddhist tradition/s “contribute to this effort in the cosmopolitan world” (p. 22). At the same time, he comes to the conclusion that “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. This why I am not a Buddhist” (p. 19). The bulk of the book focuses on arguing against Buddhist exceptionalism, the belief that an

imagined pure Buddhism anticipated science and is thus superior to other religious traditions.

In chapter 1, Thompson successfully exposes the myth of Buddhist exceptionalism. He commences the chapter with a wonderful allegory, asking his readers to imagine how they would react to titles such as *Christian Biology* and *Why Christianity Is True*. He then proceeds to explore how in the current anglophone world, Buddhism is depicted as somewhat more rational than the Abrahamic traditions, more accepted by intellectuals and scientist, even by representatives of the new atheism such as Richard Dawkins. Following David L. McMahan, the author of *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*,<sup>1</sup> he identifies this phenomenon as a particular feature of Buddhist modernism. He traces this movement back to popularizers of Buddhism in the anglophone world such as D.T. Suzuki (1870–1966), early European converts to Buddhism such as Nyanaponika Thera (1901–1994), and first-generation scholars of Buddhist studies such as Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843–1922). Thompson illustrates how a focus on philosophical and psychological elements in the Buddhist tradition led them to describe “Buddhism” as empirical and rational. However, he rightly objects, concepts such as “*nirvāṇa*” and “enlightenment” (Skt. *bodhi*) are soteriological beliefs and not verifiable hypotheses. Buddhist texts, Thompson argues, require faith. In the same way, he critiques the strategy of the Dalai Lama to artificially distinguish between “Buddhist religious practice” and “Buddhist science” (p. 48). He further counters the claims by Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche and B. Alan Wallace that Buddhist practice is scientific with “I disagree. Buddhist theories of mind are based on textual traditions that purport to record the remembered word of the Buddha ... Buddhist insights into the mind aren’t scientific discoveries” (p. 43). While recognizing that meditation is a skill and empirical, he draws a clear demarcation line between “experiential tests” and “experimental tests” (p. 45). At the same time, Thompson expresses incredulity that Buddhist modernists adhere to an encrusted definition of science as “experimental tests” and resist “the philosophical step of revamping their conception of science” (p. 47). Thompson ends this chapter with a historical critique of the term “Buddhist science” and comes to

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1. David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

the conclusion that the term is misleading and mostly serves as a rhetorical device of Buddhist exceptionalism.

In chapter 2, Thompson tackles the question whether or not Buddhism is true. In short, to Thompson, this question is a “nonstarter.” There is no one single form of Buddhism. In this chapter, Thompson is interested in the claims that “science corroborates the ‘core ideas’ of Buddhism and hence that Buddhism ‘is true’” (p. 57). Again, he starts by inviting the readers to imagine how they would respond to the claim that science confirms the “core ideas” of Christianity. In particular, Thompson engages Robert Wright’s *Why Buddhism Is True*. After acknowledging the rather self-aware caveats Wright mentions in his introduction, Thompson focuses on Wright’s central claim that “modern psychology corroborates the Buddhist view that there is no ‘CEO self’” (p. 61). Thompson concludes that “‘Why Buddhism is true’ thus turns out to mean ‘Why some core ideas of modern American, naturalistic Buddhist thought can be made consistent with evolutionary psychology’” (p. 62). Thompson critiques Wright’s method, especially his reliance on evolutionary psychology, which, Thompson argues, is at odds with neuroscience. He compares his own “enactive approach” to Wright’s and identifies similarities and differences. While both reject the notion of a “CEO self,” the “enactive approach” employs a “‘circulation’ between Buddhism and cognitive science where one flows into and out of the other, and back again” (pp. 72–73). Using the Madhyamaka doctrine of “emptiness” (Skt. *śūnyatā*) as a model, Thompson and his colleagues concluded in *The Embodied Mind* that all cognition, including scientific cognition, “is the bringing forth of a world and a mind through embodied action. Not the representation of an independent, outside world” (p. 75).<sup>2</sup> The takeaway of this approach is that the encounter between science and Buddhism has to be reciprocal, it cannot be assumed “that science is the only way to be rational” (p. 76). The “critical dialogue partner” of cognitive science in this reciprocal dialogue must be Buddhist philosophy, “not mindfulness meditation as a modern self-help therapy” (p. 77). These three principles constitute the central features of any dialogue between Buddhism and cognitive science. Naturalized Buddhism, on the other hand, not only minimizes or ignores the leap of faith “core ideas” in Buddhism such as *nirvāṇa*

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2. Francisco J. Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and Evan Thompson, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

require, but also denies the “fundamental generative enigma at the heart of Buddhism” that, in Robert Sharf’s words, “liberation is impossible, yet it is achieved” (p. 78) or that “if enlightenment is innate why aren’t we enlightened?” (p. 79). At the end of the chapter, Thompson concludes that “to argue Buddhism is true, Wright strips Buddhism of its most radical and arresting ideas, the ones that challenge our narcissism, cultural complacency, and scientific triumphalism” (p. 85).

Chapter 3 provides an exciting journey into the Buddhist conception of “no-self” (Skt. *anātman*). Thompson argues that even though he once embraced the belief of neural Buddhism that the self is an illusion, he has since distanced himself from this view because the Buddhist versions of “no-self” are diverse and more complicated and cognitive science claims that the self is a “construction,” not an illusion. Thompson skillfully explains that the early Buddhist conception of “no-self” first and foremost rejected the *Upaniṣadic* conception of *ātman* as the permanent controller of the psychosomatic aggregates of persons. In this chapter, Thompson engages in a sophisticated study of the *Nikāyas* and concludes that “the *Nikāyas* provide strong evidence for taking the Buddha’s teaching to be that there is no self (according to the Vedic-Brahmanical criteria of selfhood). The denial of the self is made on empirical grounds” (p. 95). Later writings such as the *Abhidharma* texts claim that “being a person, like a chariot, is only ‘conventionally real’” (p. 99). Thompson convincingly argues that the denial of the conception of self in the form “I believe that there is no self” constitutes a “performative self-contradiction” (p. 96). Thompson follows the *Nyāya* critique that early Buddhism is unable to explain “how the various qualities that we perceive ... are bound together” (the ‘binding problem’) and how “distinct perceptions” are “subjectively taken as united in a single subject” (the problem of the “unity of consciousness”) (p. 102). Thompson agrees with the Buddhist rejection of a substantial self and with the *Naiyāyikas* on the need for a unifying principle. He also rejects contemporary literature on this subject that claims “that we habitually take ourselves to be” a separate self (p. 108). Utilizing phenomenological research and the early Buddhist distinction between *pudgala* (“person”) and *ātman*, Thompson concludes that “I prefer to speak of the self as being a construction, and the part of the self that involves the impression of an unchanging and independent essence as being an illusion” (p. 114).

Chapter 4 provides a much-needed damper to what Thompson calls “mindfulness mania.” As a scholar and practitioner of Buddhist meditation, I found this chapter desperately needed and particularly refreshing. He equally rejects both discourses that disparage “Buddhist modernistic conceptions of mindfulness in favor of traditional ones” (p. 120) and those that promulgate the “misguided ideas ... that mindfulness is an essentially inward awareness of your own mind” (p. 121). Mindfulness cannot be reduced to neurological activity in the same way in which good parenting cannot be reduced to neurological activity even though “it’s conceivable that unique patterns of brain activity correlate with being a good parent” (pp. 129–130). Buddhist critiques of the mindfulness industry are that mindfulness has a social component and involves and nurtures compassion. The problem, Thompson diagnoses, is to reduce mindfulness solely to brain activity when, in fact, it is embodied, enacted, extended, and embedded as the “4E cognitive science” introduced in *The Embodied Mind* suggests. “Mindfulness meditation is the metacognition and internalized social cognition of socially constituted experience” (p. 138). Mindfulness mania, on the other hand, is fed by the desire of neural Buddhism to reduce the Buddhist tradition to mindfulness meditation, and mindfulness to neural activity.

Chapter 5 investigates the “rhetoric of enlightenment” and, in short, argues that it does not describe a psychological state but rather constitutes a soteriological category. Thompson traces this rhetoric back to Max Müller (1823–1900), one of the first scholars of Buddhology in the English language. Thompson brings to the fore the Eurocentric nature of the “rhetoric of enlightenment” when he discussed how Müller compared the Buddhist rejection of the “Vedic ritual” to Europe’s emergence and liberation from medieval Christianity. The “striking discrepancy” between the European enlightenment and Buddhist modernism lies in the conception of the self. While Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) understood enlightenment as the assertion of one’s own moral agency, Buddhist modernists “typically describe enlightenment as the realization that there is no autonomous self or agent” (p. 142). The former emphasizes “freedom of the self” the latter “freedom from the self” (p. 143). Buddhist modernists “demythologize,” decontextualize, and “romanticize” enlightenment (p. 144). The upshot of his rather detailed discussion is that the descriptions of “enlightenment” in the Buddhist scriptures are diverse and inconclusive. Moreover, the

very notion that enlightenment is “non-conceptual” is paradoxical. On the contrary, categories such as “enlightenment” and “*nirvāṇa*” are “concept-dependent” (p. 164) and imply a *language game*. Finally, these concepts cannot be reduced to brain states as neural Buddhism seems to imply.

In chapter 6, Thompson reveals why the attempt of some Buddhist modernists to conflate science and Buddhist practices bothers him. He introduces cosmopolitanism as the philosophical position that supports and embraces his vision of cognitive science. In this chapter, Thompson explores the story of Upaka, who was skeptical of Buddha’s awakening, and considers various conceptions of cosmopolitanism, especially Sheldon Pollock’s notion of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, as well as the versions put forth by Samuel Scheffler, Martha Nussbaum, and Antonio Appiah. In this volume, he settles for Appiah’s “partial cosmopolitanism” (p. 174) as “conversation” (p. 176): “We need to be respectful of the particularity of human lives and this requires respecting and valuing our differences, including our felt attachments to different communities and traditions” (p. 175). With this model he returns to Francisco J. Varela, who claimed that both his scientific and Buddhist lineages affected his personal and his professional life. His experimental work “was an original scientific investigation of perception inspired by meditative experience and informed by Buddhist philosophy” (p. 179). Both lineages should enter into a healthy and equal conversation. This is where Varela distinguished himself from other approaches that privilege one dialogue partner over the other. Thompson sees this attitude confirmed by Donald S. Lopez, Jr., who suggested that both Buddhism and science have to bring their ideological assumptions into the conversation for it to be honest and fruitful. Buddhist philosophy, Thompson argues, “offers a radical critique of our narcissistic preoccupation with the self and our overconfident belief that science tells us how the world really is in itself apart from how we are able to measure and act upon it.” He concludes, “I am not a Buddhist, but I wish to be a good friend to Buddhism. A viable cosmopolitanism would be Buddhism’s greatest ally” (p. 189).

I appreciate Thompson’s critical and sophisticated use of Buddhist philosophy, cognitive science, and Appiah’s cosmopolitan ethics; these are three pillars of my own work. It is rare to encounter works on the intersection of Buddhist studies and philosophy, on the one side, and cognitive science and philosophy of mind, on the other, by authors

comfortable in diverse fields of study. He makes a convincing case for the embodied and interpersonal character of the mind and self as well as for the conversational nature of Appiah's "partial cosmopolitanism." In its persuasive rejection of Buddhist exceptionalism, neural Buddhism, "mindfulness mania," and the belief that Buddhist doctrines such as "enlightenment" can be scientifically verified, this book is timely, engaging, and important. Thompson's discussion provides the perfect starting point for any conversation about the relationship between science and religion, about what religion is and religions are; about how we best form a cosmopolitan community; about how we produce the knowledge applicable and valuable to all members of the cosmopolitan community; and how we can contribute to this community without giving up our specific communal and also individual identities. Therefore, I highly recommend this volume not only to individuals but also to book clubs and for academic courses interested in or dedicated to one or more of these topics.

In the final section of my review, I would like to critically engage Thompson's argument. First, I am a bit confused about the title, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*. Granted, the title is catchy and evokes the famous work of Bertrand Russell (1872–1970). However, Thompson himself admits that his project does not parallel Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*. As mentioned above, his answer to this question is "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" (p. 19). It is not clear to me why being a Buddhist modernist is the only way for Thompson to be a Buddhist. As he suggests, there are many different ways of being a Buddhist in the contemporary world. More importantly, if there is no essence to Buddhism, if there is no authentic Buddhism, as Thompson asserts, then I am not sure why it matters whether or not "I am a Buddhist." Russell argued against a specific understanding of Christianity and religion in order to introduce rationalism as the language that unites humanity. Thompson argues against Buddhist modernism and for a cosmopolitan worldview; it seems that Thompson is not a Buddhist because he is a cosmopolitan. It appears his argument rejects the very notion of essentialized identities and, by implication, identity politics in general. Ironically, similar views can be found in some East Asian strands of Buddhism. This sentiment reverberates a long line of Buddhist philosophers, including early Mahāyāna nominalists



who claimed that all labels are empty (Skt. *śūnya*), and Chan iconoclasts who considered Buddhist identity to be an attachment that has to be discarded. Linji (d. 866) famously suggested “[w]hen you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.”<sup>3</sup> It does not matter whether or not one identifies as “Buddhist.” What matters, to use Derek Parfit’s (1942–2017) catch phrase, is what one does and believes.

A second question pertains to the relationship between Buddhism and science. If there is no essence to Buddhism, then why is Buddhism necessarily opposed to science? I wonder if the reason for such a rhetoric lies in the implicit or explicit equation of religion and, by implication, Buddhism with a certain set of doctrines and a reliance on faith that is opposed to rationality. It is certainly true that the “eightfold correct path” and some Buddhist texts evoke the notion of the “correct view” (Skt. *samyag-dṛṣṭi*). It is also true that some Buddhists (whom Jan Nattier refers to as “import Buddhists”) identify the belief in “enlightenment” and others (whom she calls “export Buddhists”)<sup>4</sup> the belief in “reincarnation” as the *shiboleth* of Buddhist identity. However, there are Buddhists philosophers, practitioners, teachers, and scriptures who contest these claims on the basis that all truth claims are inherently “empty.” Without a central authority in Buddhism this dispute cannot be solved meaningfully. Contemporary theories in Buddhist studies and religious studies call the attempt to reduce religion in general and Buddhism in particular to doctrines and truth claims into question. It is possible to be a Buddhist without believing in enlightenment and/or reincarnation as it is possible to affirm these truth claims without being a Buddhist. If anything, the attempt to reduce Buddhism to specific doctrines is a hallmark of modernism. Moreover, if religion is defined from a non-essentialist standpoint, as, for example Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) does, it does not conflict with science. True truth claims are true whether they are religious or not, false truth claims are false whether they are religious or not. As Nishida points out in his rarely cited “Lectures on Religious Studies,” “scholarship and morality protect the empirical world. Scholarship and morality purify religion. It is impossible for the advancement of scholarship to harm religion.

3. T. 1985.47.498b.

4. Jan Nattier, “Buddhism Comes to Main Street,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1997): 72–80.



On the contrary, scholarship deepens and purifies religion.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, Nishida’s conception of “religion” does not imply an institutional authority, an agreed upon creed or even simply truth claims, practices or rituals, and cultural habits. For him, religion is the attempt to see one’s own self vis-à-vis the horizon of totality. Essentialist notions of religion and science will lead to the rejection of either “religion” or “science” or to Stephen Jay Gould’s rather uncomfortable NOMA (Non-Overlapping Magisteria) doctrine.

The title *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* implies two options: “being a Buddhist” and “not being a Buddhist.” I am not convinced that this alternative is exhaustive. It is, for example, possible to be a Buddhist in some contexts and not to be a Buddhist in other contexts. Discourses on hybrid identities and multiple belongings have introduced the idea that belonging is not a matter of all-or-nothing. This attitude can be seen at play in many places in East Asia and is expressed in the doctrine of the “three teachings” (Ch. *sanjiao*). For example, in Japan, it is accepted to be a Buddhist at the funeral of a family member or at New Year’s Eve, a Shintō practitioner at the coming-of-age ceremony of one’s children and on New Year’s day, a Confucianist in specific social situations, and a Christian at one’s wedding, all without rejecting the scientific worldview. The question “Are you a Buddhist?” assumes an underlying essentialist framework implying a yes-or-no alternative. Similarly, throughout this particular work, whether he discusses religious identity, the relationship between science and religion, the distinction between scientific and moral traditions, or the choice between first-person and third-person approaches, Thompson assumes a binary framework. This is surprising since neurophenomenology as envisioned by Varela and Thompson constitutes, in my mind, the most creative and productive attempt to overcome the problem of dualism in philosophy of mind and cognitive science. To me, it is no exaggeration to claim that the work of Varela and Thompson in this particular field has been visionary, inspiring, and ground-breaking. Certain East Asian Buddhist philosophers, however, especially those grounded in the Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan/Zen traditions, challenge us to go a step

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5. Kitarō Nishida, *Nishida kitarō zenshū* [*Complete Works of Kitarō Nishida*], 20 volumes (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1988), 15:333–334. Gereon Kopf, trans., “Neither Dogma, nor Institution: Nishida on the Role of Religion,” *Eastern Buddhist* 35, nos. 1–2 (2003): 219–240.

further and question essentialism and binary thinking (but not logic!) altogether. In their writings, they propose a conceptual framework that allows us to approach and solve, for example, Ray Jackendoff's "mind-mind problem" as formulated in the *Embodied Mind*<sup>6</sup> in a creative and innovative manner not only by means of an intentional and systematic correlation of the "careful description of moment-to-moment experiences" and "hidden patterns of brain activity" as it is practiced by Varela's neurophenomenology,<sup>7</sup> but also in radically new and previously not imagined ways. It thus prepares us anew to "pursue an epistemological critique of science" (p. 47). In addition, such a framework provides the language to conceptualize Scheffler's "moderate" and Appiah's "partial" cosmopolitanism in that it proposes to theorize the "non-obstruction" (Ch. *shishiwuai*) of the local and the global. It contests the assumption that we have to choose between specific traditions, on the one side, and our common humanity on the other.<sup>8</sup>

This attempt at continuing the conversation Thompson began in his wonderful book should not distract from but rather highlight the importance, quality, and brilliance of *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*. It forces us into uncomfortable but nevertheless indispensable conversations about religion, science, and the production of knowledge. I value this volume as an effort to replace identity politics, especially the one introduced by modernism, with a vision of cosmopolitanism that allows for difference and nurtures conversation. Today, one year after this volume was published, such a vision seems to be more necessary than ever.

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6. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, 52.

7. Evan Thompson, *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), xix.

8. See, e.g., Gereon Kopf, "Ambiguity, Diversity, and an Ethics of Understanding," *Culture and Dialogue* 1, no. 1 (2011): 21–44.