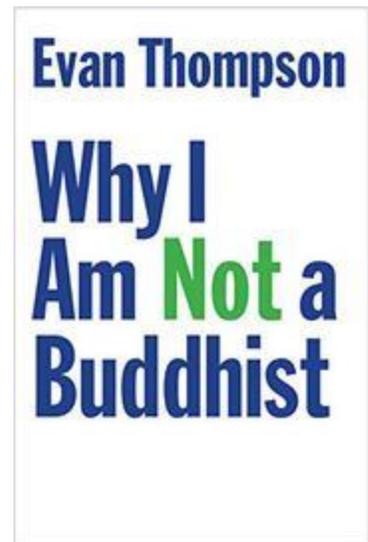


Buddhism: Exceptional or Useful?

A Review of Evan Thompson's *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*

Blaine Snow, Summer 2021

I'm a huge fan of philosopher Evan Thompson and have followed his work for nearly three decades. His efforts to establish an embodied mind approach in cognitive science over the last 30 years is groundbreaking and promises to point the way to an effective resolution of the age-old mind/nature conundrum in Western thought. He continues a lineage of thinkers who established mid-century systems theory and cybernetics from Wiener, Von Bertalanffy, Ashby, McCulloch, Von Foerster, and Bateson, to Maturana and Varela whose autopoiesis theory led to the establishment of the enactivist approach and eventually to the so-called "4e View" in cognitive science which sees mind and life as emergent, embedded, embodied, and enactive (see my "Embodied Cognition" book list¹ on Goodreads.com). Thompson has also been at the forefront of the encounter between the sciences and consciousness studies which has often included dialogue between science and Buddhism. I give Thompson's books and views the highest ratings. But as a student of Buddhism for four decades, I find *Why I'm Not a Buddhist* to be an uneven work and rather unfair to Buddhism.



Echoing Bertrand Russell's 1927 essay *Why I Am Not a Christian* (and numerous other *Why I Am/Am Not* books), *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is part autobiography and part cultural critique. In it, Thompson explains why he cannot identify as a Buddhist due largely to what he sees as a widespread favoritism of Buddhism among many scientists and academics. He calls this favoritism "Buddhist exceptionalism" and describes it as a set of beliefs and ideas such as "Buddhism is superior among the world's religions in being inherently rational and empirical," or "it isn't so much a religion as it is a philosophy or way of life," or "it's an applied mind science" (24-25). Primary to this Buddhist exceptionalism is the idea that Buddhism, among the world's religions, is uniquely suited to engage with science.

Thompson presents his Buddhist exceptionalism as the most conspicuous aspect of (what is called) *Buddhist modernism*, a historical amalgam of Western cultural influences and traditional Buddhist ideas and practices that has developed over the past 200 years of cultural interaction between Western and Buddhist countries (see McMahan's *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 2012). Contemporary Buddhism whether Zen, Tibetan, Insight, Theravadin, or other, is of a mix of modernist and traditional Buddhist ideas and values. Much of the book aims to show how these subcultures of Buddhist modernism are full of misguided and confused ideas, particularly regarding relations between science and religion. Here's Thompson explaining the relations between a) modern Buddhism, b) Buddhist modernism, c) Buddhist exceptionalism, and d) Buddhist fundamentalism:

Modern Buddhism is caught up in these bad extremes, from Buddhist fundamentalism in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to universalizing Buddhist modernism across the world. Modern Buddhism became cosmopolitan through Buddhist modernism, which opposed itself to local and traditional forms of Asian Buddhism. Buddhist modernism, however, is mired in philosophical confusions, especially about religion and science, as we've seen. Its partisan Buddhist exceptionalism undermines its universalizing rhetoric (172).

¹ https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/79442.Embodied_Cognition

Mutual Validation or Mutual Challenge?

One of the book's goals is the reframing of Buddhism as more a religion than a philosophical system, which is his attempt to counteract the historical reverse emphasis among scientists, intellectuals, and Buddhist teachers and scholars. Thompson wants everyone to think that Buddhism is primarily grounded in religious belief and that, although it is also a sophisticated system of philosophy, ultimately it relies on nonscientific religious beliefs rather than empirical and objective knowledge. The fact that he sees it as ultimately grounded in religious belief runs counter to his identity as a philosopher and scientist and so contributes to his inability to identify as Buddhist.

To paint a simplistic picture of Buddhism as similar to other leap-of-faith religions is unfair. In fact, what Thompson doesn't say is that Buddhism could just as well be described as being grounded in *direct first-person experience that is based in rigorous dialectical reasoning and analysis* rather than in "religious belief." At the entry level it is true that Buddhism, like all religions, requires faith and belief. But as one progresses, Buddhist study and practice become more and more about the wisdom that issues from complete relinquishing of all faith, beliefs, ideas, and concepts whatsoever – all mental grasping – including the concepts of "enlightenment," "nirvana," "perfection," even "Buddha" himself. It is the only "religion" with a philosophical psychology whose goal is to meticulously deconstruct the ego and its self-defeating desires, including the desire to believe in its founder. What other religion teaches the wisdom of a phrase such as, "If you see [Buddha] on the road, kill him"? It also promotes its own psychology-based self-obsolence such as when it teaches its followers that eventually the entirety of the teachings will be rendered obsolete, that they must be mentally released and left behind (as in the parable of *The Raft*)? These and other aspects of Buddhist philosophy show the folly of trying to categorize Buddhism as merely a faith-based religion. They also show why, to many westerners, it does seem exceptional.

The book contains many examples of what Thompson considers Buddhist exceptionalism and he uses them to show how people try to use science and Buddhism to confirm, prove, or validate each other. He devotes a whole chapter to pointing out the problems in Robert Wright's book, *Why Buddhism is True*, and calls out numerous other teachers for their Buddhist exceptionalism such as B. Alan Wallace, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, Nyanaponika Thera, S.N. Goenka, Sam Harris, and even the Dalai Lama. Thompson does make some significant points, but in each case, he wants the reader to see how each of these teachers utilizes science to confirm, prove, or otherwise validate Buddhist ideas. Therein lies Thompson's main target: the specific ways in which such favoritism is inappropriate.

Thompson's criticism of Buddhist exceptionalism goes like this: you cannot equate religion with science; you cannot use science to *validate, justify, or prove* Buddhism or vice versa. The modes of knowing and validation in science and religion are fundamentally incommensurable. However, since Buddhism is clearly more than a religion, and since it is also a sophisticated rational *philosophy* that is unlike anything in Western religion, Thompson does accept that we can use Buddhism as a means to *challenge* science. That is, we can use Buddhism and science to *challenge or inform* each other. This is exactly what he has been doing much of his professional life. Thus, we have two modes of science-Buddhism dialogue: 1) mutually validating engagement and 2) mutually challenging engagement. For Thompson, the latter is acceptable while the former is not. Here are two examples from the text discussing these forms of dialogue:

"[Robert] Wright takes scientific naturalism for granted and *uses it to explain and justify* modern mindfulness meditation (my italics). He doesn't use Buddhism to scrutinize philosophical assumptions about science. We use Buddhism to recast our understanding of science and the world it investigates. Our guiding image is that of a 'circulation' between Buddhism and cognitive science where each one flows into and out of the other, and back again. Each one affects and draws forth changes from the other" (72).

“Buddhists uses science to embellish Buddhist teachings, and scientists use Buddhism to embellish scientific theories. And both Buddhists and scientists—and especially Buddhist scientists—use science to justify Buddhism” (185).

Although Thompson doesn’t identify it as such, his mutual validation criticism is part of a convergence model of science and Buddhism that is assumed by many who engage in such mutual validation. Others have also argued against the convergence model (See Bernard Faure’s “A Gray Matter: Another look at Buddhism and neuroscience,” *Tricycle*, Winter 2012²). I happen to agree that, along with the incommensurability argument, whatever people think convergence is –establishing common ground, agreement, mutual validation, perhaps eventual unification, etc. – the better model is the “circulation” one that Thompson advocates in the quote above. I also agree that human knowledge is better served when these two modes of knowing remain separate but can challenge the assumptions of the other.

While one can agree with the incommensurability argument and with the inappropriateness of using science and Buddhism to validate each other, Thompson’s criticism doesn’t stop there. The exceptionalism offense in his view goes beyond mutual validation to *choosing Buddhism in the first place* since, as Thompson argues, other religions are equally capable of challenging science:

“Although it’s unquestionably true that Buddhism possesses a vast and sophisticated literature on the mind, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam also possess sophisticated philosophical and contemplative writings about the mind. These writings build on the rich and intricate heritage of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic thought. Buddhist texts aren’t less metaphysical than the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic ones.” (37).

“Buddhist modernism presents Buddhism as uniquely suited to the modern world, but we can sanitize any religion in this modernist way. Consider Christian humanism, which stresses the humanity of Jesus, unites Christian ethics with humanist principles, promotes science, calls attention to the Judeo-Christian and ancient Greek sources of scientific ideas such as the ‘laws of nature.’ Or consider Liberal Judaism, which regards the *Torah* as written by human beings, not written by God and given to Moses on stone tablets and emphasizes the progressive Jewish Intellectual tradition” (29).

If other religions are equally fit to challenge science, then why are scientists and philosophers uniquely attracted to Buddhism as a partner? Could it be that there are good reasons it is exceptional? Rather than explain *why* Buddhism has become the chosen partner for philosophy and cognitive science, rather than discuss what is special about Buddhist philosophy such that it has the ability to challenge science and western thought unlike any other world religion, Thompson criticizes those who use science to prove the validity of Buddhism while allowing his own use of Buddhism to dialogue with science. Since he criticizes the exceptionalism of others while engaging in his own, his charge borders on hypocrisy. This is especially so since, after equating Buddhism with other world religions as all having “rich philosophical traditions,” he has singled out and worked with Buddhism for most of his career. What’s not exceptional about that? Where’s all his work with Christianity and science? The issue shouldn’t be whether Buddhism (or any system) is exceptional or not but rather, is it *useful*? Clearly Buddhism is useful to science, or it wouldn’t have become the worthy partner to science that so many, including Thompson, have made it.

Reclaiming Autonomy

Beyond Thompson’s issues over the science-Buddhism engagement, the autobiographical part of the book suggests some personal reasons for his disowning of a Buddhist identity. Judging from the life experiences he recounts and the peculiar mix of criticism and admiration he expresses for Buddhism, implicit in his essay appears to be a personal renunciation of Buddhism, seemingly as a result of having it handed to him in childhood by his parents and the spirituality of their Lindisfarne community, of pre-

² Thanks to *Tricycle* editor James Shaheen for this reference.

defined space and opportunity to explore on his own, of influences of having been surrounded by scholar-intellectuals who in effect preselected Buddhism for him, but also, later, of observing various unhealthy expressions of Buddhism such as those of Chogyam Trungpa and the embrace thereof by his mentor Francisco Varela (ch.6, note 34, 215-216). Proclaiming his disidentification with Buddhism thus has a dual purpose: to call attention to what he sees as unhealthy favoritism but also to regain his spiritual autonomy. The life experiences he shares coupled with the book's praise-and-disparage language around Buddhism make it difficult not to notice this.

Discomfort With Nondual Enlightenment

Further evidence of Thompson's disconnect with Buddhism is revealed in his disjointed presentation of Buddhist nonduality, the central and paradoxical philosophical principle-insight of Mahayana Buddhism, otherwise known as the philosophy of emptiness and The Doctrine of the Two Truths. If there is any aspect of Buddhism that makes it exceptional from the perspective of western thought, it is the philosophy of nonduality.

Based on views expressed in this and his previous book, *Waking Dreaming and Being*, Thompson appears comfortable with *conceptual* nonduality (73-75) expressed as a philosophical principle but uncomfortable and critical of *experiential* nonduality (144-145) when expressed as first-person nonconceptual insight or wisdom. His criticism of first-person nonconceptual insight or transcendent wisdom is rather odd considering that he has worked so long and hard to include the validity of first-person phenomenological consciousness into cognitive science.

Thompson's charge that the idea of enlightenment is incoherent since it is unverifiable by science is the most conspicuous example in the book of his own science exceptionalism, suggesting that (at least in this part of the book) science is the ultimate arbiter of valid knowledge. Since the core claim of enlightened mind is direct (first-person) apprehension of nondual emptiness in addition to indirect conceptual understanding of the nonconceptuality of emptiness (i.e., of philosophical paradox), what Buddhist philosophers would say to Thompson's incoherence charge is that nondual awakening stands beyond the ken of the worldframe of science and its ability to judge, and that it only appears incoherent because science and western philosophy don't have the range to judge beyond dualistic concepts.

"I think the Buddhist modernist concept of enlightenment is incoherent. Either you embrace faith in awakening and nirvana, which, according to the tradition, transcend conceptual thought—and hence can't be legitimized (or delegitimized) by science—or, you choose to believe only in what can be made scientifically comprehensible, in which case you have to give up the idea of enlightenment as a nonconceptual intuitive realization of the 'fullness of being' or the 'suchness of reality,' for these aren't scientific concepts. You can't have it both ways. Religion and science may be able to coexist, depending on the attitude they take to each other, but science can't legitimize religion, and they can't be merged into one" (144).

"You can't have it both ways" only if you're a science fundamentalist. If you are a cosmopolitan as he later advocates, or if you are a nondualist, then other validation-legitimation avenues are available for making coherent that which science cannot. The Tibetan tradition for example is unbelievably rich and nuanced with regard to teaching, confirming, and validating what is paradoxically unverifiable (in a dualistic sense). They have tried and true ways of verifying nondual cognition or awakening. Further evidence of his discomfort with the idea of enlightenment is when he claims it contributes to anti-intellectualism and irrationalism or that appeals to Buddha's original teachings are akin to religious fundamentalism:

"Buddhist modernist rhetoric of enlightenment as a nonconceptual experience outside language and tradition has reinforced anti-intellectualism and irrationalism" (188-189).

“Trying to go back to the ‘original teachings of the Buddha’ is a typical Buddhist modernist move (and one that Buddhist modernism shares with the equally modern phenomenon of religious fundamentalism)” (20).

Seriously? He’s saying that one of the world’s most highly refined philosophical critiques of the human mind equates with the irrationality and fanaticism of monotheistic fundamentalism? Such an outrageous conflation is an indication that he feels any form of nonduality is an existential threat to one’s identity as a philosopher who operates in the world of dualistic concepts.

And, with statements like the following, even his understanding of enlightenment as conceptual nonduality seems somewhat shaky in this book:

“If enlightenment is supposed to be a psychological state, then its content must be clearly specifiable, but there’s no consensus in Buddhism about exactly what the content of the awakening experience is...” (145).

These are typical wrong ideas about enlightenment: a) that it is a *state* and b) that it has specifiable content, but also c) that there is no consensus around it. If, as Mahayana Buddhism teaches, enlightenment is nondual, then no single state or mark or characteristic, quality, or aspect can indicate or specify it. This is *exactly* what the *Heart Sutra* teaches. It has no specific content, except all content. By being non-specifiable, it is specified. It is ironic, paradoxical, nonconceptual, trans-conceptual, post-conceptual. It is both/and: ultimate-conventional, pure-impure, infinite-finite, form-formless, intelligible-ineffable, being-nonbeing, nothing-everything, emptiness-fullness, affirmation-negation, even dual-nondual. Nondual realization is not for the faint of heart – rather, it is the *ultimate conceptual endgame*. Don’t take my word for it, ask Uncle Ludwig.³

Think for a moment: is the state of all states itself a state? Enlightenment-as-ultimate cannot be a specifiable state; it turns on itself; it has no specific content other than self-referential nonspecifiability-ineffability-nonconceptuality. *That*, paradoxically, IS its specific content. And, it necessarily *has to* be like this: if enlightenment were specifiable, it wouldn’t be “Ultimate” because anything specifiable is already delimited by conditions, metaphysical or otherwise. Thus, you don’t agree or not agree with the philosophy of nonduality; you either get it or you don’t. Properly understood, there’s nothing specific to agree on in the first place. Middle Way Buddhist philosophy, specifically *Prasangika Madhyamaka*, is very clear on this. Nondual enlightenment is not about specifiable agreements – this can be agreed upon, that cannot – or other dualistic notions: it’s about fundamental insight into the nature of the mind and how it works, which, paradoxically, means complete letting go of mental-philosophical concept grasping.

There’s abundant consensus in Mahayana Buddhism about the nature of awakened mind as nondual emptiness and dependent origination. There exist many very careful and precise conceptual characterizations of it. One is Japanese scholar Gadjin Nagao’s *The Foundational Standpoint of Madhyamika Philosophy*. Another is C.W. Huntington’s *The Emptiness of Emptiness*. Needless to say, non-Buddhist philosophers are naturally uncomfortable with this ultimate philosophical endgame since concepts and thinking are what they’re trained to do. But this is precisely why so many scholar-intellectuals are attracted to Buddhism, including Thompson, and the primary reason why they see it as exceptional compared to other religious systems.

And finally, in Buddhism it goes without saying that enlightenment would be nothing without *compassion*. Despite all the wisdom talk of nonconceptuality, paradox, emptiness, and the philosophy of nondual enlightenment, rarified and nuanced as it is, it is still limited by grammar, conceptuality, even

³ Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that is, whose latter work in its own way approached nondual understanding and showed the ultimate self-referencing of philosophical and conceptual language games.

intuition and metaphor. Crucially, Buddhism teaches that *the indispensable partner* of such nondual wisdom is deep abiding compassion – they are the proverbial two wings of the bird of enlightened mind. Thompson has almost nothing to say about the importance and role of compassion to Buddhist awakening in his book – the word doesn’t even appear in the index. But from the beginning, Buddhism has taught that the highest truth requires the deepest compassion, that for *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi*—unexcelled complete enlightenment—it is Great Compassion alone that brings Perfect Wisdom to ultimate fruition.

Cosmopolitanism and Enactive Cognitive Science

The final chapter on cosmopolitanism somewhat redeems the rest of the book. Who, these days, wants to be committed to defending a single worldframe whether it’s Buddhism, or science, or postmodernism, evangelical Christianity, Marxism, feminism, shamanism, or atheism? How antiquated. Thompson rejects single worldframes in favor of cosmopolitanism, a global-pluralistic worldview that allows multiple players to forge deeper, broader, more inclusive frameworks of understanding and action. Each worldframe adds its own perspectives and usefulness with respect to the others. It is clear that Thompson’s true home is here, that he really isn’t a science fundamentalist or advocate of any one worldframe. With cosmopolitanism, science can be science, Buddhism can be Buddhism, and each can challenge and inform the other.

Chapter six discusses a few historical instances of world cosmopolitanism comparing ancient Indian Sanskrit cosmopolitan culture (voluntaristic) with Roman Latin cosmopolitan culture (coercive) (171) and continues surveying contemporary views of different philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Samuel Scheffler. Thompson states his preference for the conversation-based cosmopolitanism of African philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah as outlined in his book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. He then discusses applying Appiah’s conversation model to the Buddhism-science dialogue by recounting ideas Francisco Varela shared in a series of lectures he gave in the late 1970s. Among other things, Varela focused on “the fundamental difference in motivation and method between science and Buddhism” bringing attention to “the intentions motivating knowledge” and the critical importance in such dialogues of “an ethics of knowledge” (183-184). Thompson states:

“Scientific accounts aren’t the only ones we live by; we also and more fundamentally live by moral and ethical accounts, which scientific accounts presuppose and can’t directly establish” (187).

It is with this larger ethical framework in mind that the book comes to an end in the admission that science needs worthy partners such as Buddhism or other ethical systems.

To those of us who know his work in cognitive science, it is a bit disappointing that Thompson doesn’t connect cosmopolitanism to his project of enactive cognitive science where third-person science knowledge circulates with first-person phenomenal experience, particularly as it is informed by the Buddhist tradition. It seems to me there are important cosmopolitan connections to be made between Asian Buddhist nonduality and western enactive cognitive science, how they interweave, cross-fertilize one another, and contribute to a richer and more comprehensive response to the human condition. Interestingly, Thompson himself suggests as much in a quote from the introduction to the revised edition of his book *The Embodied Mind*:

“Moreover, without Madhyamaka philosophy and the reflexive application of the enactive approach to science itself, we will miss the radical transformative possibilities of the science-Buddhism circulation, and specifically the prospect of a different way of being in the world and doing science beyond our habitual cognitive reifications” (xxix).

Final Thoughts

Evan Thompson is more of a friend to Buddhism than this book makes him out to be. For years he has brought sophisticated Buddhist ideas into dialogue with issues in Western philosophy and cognitive

science and greatly elevated the level of conversation and mutual understanding. A great many of us have benefited from his work, his lectures and presentations, and his writings (see *The Embodied Mind* and *Mind in Life*). In this book he wants us to also see how certain aspects of the larger dialogue and the culture that it's part of are sometimes unhealthily biased. Despite its uneven presentation, his essay highlights some important aspects of these unhealthy currents in discussions of the relationship between science and Buddhist modernism.

I can attest to some of the bias and excess Thompson describes as I have witnessed them at Mind & Life Institute conferences, at the Upaya Zen Brain conferences, and in various other online forums and discussions. It appears to me that neuro-Buddhism and its enthusiasm for establishing a brain science around mindfulness and compassion meditation are some of the areas of Buddhism modernism where Thompson's charges of exceptionalism hold most true. Beyond academic scholars and researchers, Buddhist teachers themselves as well as students and practitioners need to be cautious about some of the excesses Thompson points out.

In sum, there are significant reasons why Buddhism has become the most valuable partner among world religions for dialogues with science in general and cognitive science in particular. Most of the people who participate in that dialogue already perceive that science and Buddhism each provide their own valued window into the mystery of human experience. When it comes to challenging science, Buddhism is simply more useful than other religions, largely because of its incredibly intricate and highly refined philosophical system and accompanying methods of investigation. As stated in this review, religious Buddhism is not what philosophers (and other thinkers) have chosen as a vehicle to dialogue with science. Rather, it is philosophical, dialectical, and phenomenological Buddhism. And all of these, despite fundamental differences in their languages and modes of inquiry, have rigorous methods of argumentation, analysis, and verification. So, in many ways, the exceptionalism Thompson describes in his book is highly justified.