

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

CHAPTER THREE: NO SELF? NOT SO FAST

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

CHAPTER FOUR: MINDFULNESS MANIA

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

CHAPTER FIVE: THE RHETORIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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

CHAPTER SIX: COSMOPOLITANISM AND CONVERSATION

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

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

NOTES

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

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

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I. INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III. MADHYAMAKA AND THE REAL WORLD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOTES

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

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On Being a Good Friend to Buddhist Philosophy

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

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

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

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