

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). And it was not because I believed that 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. 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 its 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 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" (p.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). And 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 (120), facile (88), and misguided (121). The arguments advanced in its support, Evan contends, are based on limited concepts (36), erroneous ideas (64), involve conflation (20), and turn on distinctions that are impossible to maintain (49). And he concludes that the core tenets of Buddhist modernism are philosophically and scientifically indefensible (188) 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 it is advanced by Goenka and presupposed by the Vipassana 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.¹ Nor any well-regarded and philosophically trained Buddhist scholar.² Moreover, according to Evan, a central tenet of Buddhist modernism is that Buddhism is superior to all other religions and, due to its unique rationalism and empiricism, counts as a science and not a religion. While some academic Buddhist philosophers do discuss its methodological features and do reconstruct and defend naturalised 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. 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 a broader problem with cross-cultural Buddhist philosophy in general? Who else counts as a Buddhist modernist beyond those mentioned in the book? What views, arguments and methodological approaches should we include under this heading and similarly dismiss, and which views does Evan think are genuinely worthy of respectful intellectual conversation? Evan clearly has a lot of time for historical Buddhist philosophy and its exposition. But does any positive engagement with Buddhism that seeks to interface with science survive this critique?

To answer these questions, we need to consider the arguments contained in the book. And, to some extent, that is what I will now do. But let me flag from the outset that my response is mixed. Evan is an extremely clear writer. His scholarship in philosophy of biology, cognitive science and Buddhist thought is exceptional. I agree with some of the expositions he provides in relation to these fields. Some of his arguments resonate with some of my own. And I agree with others that I hadn't considered. But I also find that the rhetorical strength with which Evan articulates his views often suggests that he is arguing for much stronger and more restrictive positions than I think his reasons warrant. Indeed, I find that that many of his arguments admit of two interpretations; a moderate version with which I agree and a stronger version with which I do not. And these different versions of his argument have different implications for what counts as an appropriate way to engage with Buddhist philosophy, and thus for who is a target of critique. I will attempt to demonstrate this in what follows, and I will conclude by inviting Evan to clarify which version of his views he intends. I will start, however, by both articulating and endorsing what I take to be the

¹ The Cowherds is an international collective of Buddhist philosophers and scholars. It consists of Amber Carpenter, Georges Dreyfus, Bronwyn Finnigan, Jay L. Garfield, Charles Goodman, Stephen Jenkins, Guy Martin Newland, Graham Priest, Mark Siderits, Koji Tanaka, Sonam Thakchoe, Tom Tillemans, and Jan Westerhoff.

² Aside from Bob Scharf, whom he endorses.

central argument of the book and considering its positive upshot for contemporary Buddhist philosophy.

Evan rejects the Buddhist modernist claim that Buddhism is proven true by modern science. And he argues that the question 'Is Buddhism true?' is the wrong question to ask. One of the main clusters of reasons offered for this claim relates to the diversity of philosophical positions we find in the historical Buddhist tradition. This is also a theme of my own work. The question 'Is Buddhism true?' invites treating Buddhism as a systematic whole. But while all Buddhists sought to be consistent with the Buddha's teaching, there was considerable debate about how they are to be interpreted, what they entail, and what texts should be accepted as authoritative. And these debates are reflected in distinct Buddhist traditions, (*Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, *Vajrayāna*), distinct philosophical schools (*Abhidharma*, *Yogācāra*, *Madhyamaka*, *Pramāṇavāda*), as well as differences amongst thinkers within these traditions and schools. These debates are also shaped by the different cultures and intellectual traditions prevalent in the countries into which Buddhism was transmitted. There is thus no singular 'Buddhist' position on most debated issues by Buddhist philosophers; there are many Buddhist views on many substantive philosophical issues. It follows that one cannot answer the question 'Is Buddhism true?' without first clarifying which interpretation of Buddhism, and which philosophical analysis of it, one has in mind. The question 'Is Buddhism true?' is underdetermined. Evan is right, it is not the right question to ask.

Evan goes further. He argues that Buddhism, if taken as a whole, contains many radical ideas that are typically overlooked by those who argue that Buddhism is proven true by science. He focuses on the idea that liberated awareness (*nirvāṇa*) is unconditioned, non-conceptual, and non-dual. Evan personally denies that such awareness is possible. He also insists that it does not fit easily with modern science. To argue that 'Buddhism' is true, however, requires engaging *all* of it, creating a narrative that justifies *all* Buddhist claims, including this idea of *nirvāṇa*. We might even wonder whether such a comprehensively justifying narrative is possible. Centuries of debate have resulted in a diversity of competing viewpoints. Buddhism, if taken as a whole, is thus inconsistent. How could Buddhism be both internally inconsistent and true? Evan additionally points out that those who claim that science proves Buddhism to be true often exclude karma and reincarnation, as if all else will remain the same. But, he argues, these ideas are so tightly integrated with important Buddhist ideas that their exclusion *does not* leave all else the same but requires constructively re-interpreting Buddhist thought.

What is the upshot of these arguments for contemporary Buddhist philosophy? It is certainly not that Buddhism is wrong and that questions of truth are misplaced. Rather, if one seeks to positively defend Buddhist thought in dialogue with science and other philosophical traditions, one should make clear which Buddhist position one is defending and be reflective and explicit about the extent to which one is reconstructing that position. But to clarify which Buddhist position one is defending requires first understanding that there is a diversity of interpretative options. And it seems that one reason Evan advises engaging with Buddhist philosophy is precisely to gain this perspective. He seems not to have a problem with positive reconstructions of Buddhist positions, or with innovating new forms of Buddhist thought and practice to solve new problems. But attempts to legitimise

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one's viewpoint as reflecting 'the original teaching' of the Buddha are firmly ruled out. "To be inspired by the early Buddhist texts and construct out of them a message for today is one thing; to try to legitimise one's construction by claiming historical veracity for it is another" (20). The former is OK, the latter is not.

So far, I strongly agree. And since I take this to be the main argument of the book, I endorse its central message. But I have some reservations about some of the subsidiary arguments which appear to allow for two interpretations; a moderate version with which I agree and a stronger version with which I do not.

Throughout the book, Evan emphasises the importance of context for appreciating Buddhist thought. But it seems to me that there are two ways to understand his point. Moderately, it is the claim that recognising and understanding the philosophical and historical context of Buddhist ideas is important for understanding those ideas, particularly if those aspect of context are presupposed by Buddhist arguments. More strongly, however, it is the claim that Buddhist ideas do not make sense at all, they lose their meaning entirely, if extracted from their philosophical and historical context. These are not the same claim and have different implications for how one might legitimately engage with Buddhist thought. Consider the following two examples.

Evan calls naturalistic Buddhism the idea that Buddhism is consistent with scientific naturalism if one omits karma and reincarnation. He argues, however, that Buddhist theories of mind "lose their point" if one extracts them from this framework (11). This might be understood as the moderate claim that to understand (all, most, or some) Buddhist ideas about the mind, one needs to recognise that they are tightly integrated with ideas of karma and reincarnation and that to omit them requires some reconstruction. This sounds right. It could be read more strongly, however, as claiming that reconstructions of Buddhist views about the mind that do not also mention and integrate karma and reincarnation have no point and make no sense. But this seems unduly restrictive. There are different degrees with which Buddhist ideas about mind integrate with karma and reincarnation. Some are more tightly connected than others. Surely it is admissible to selectively focus on those that are a bit more distant (such as the possibility of reflexive awareness) and to put this idea into interdisciplinary dialogue without necessarily mentioning, emphasising, including the Buddhist commitment to karma and reincarnation.

Consider also Evan's discussion of the importance of engaging with non-Buddhist Indian philosophical views for appreciating the Buddhist tradition. Evan seeks to refute the Buddhist modernist idea that the Buddhist position of no-self is superior to that of the Brahmanical traditions in classical India which hold that there is a self. And he does so by showing that classical Nyāya philosophers identified two important problems with the Abhidharma Buddhist reductionist analysis of no-self, and that these problems are still significant for contemporary cognitive science (105). The moderate upshot of this discussion is that Buddhism is not the only intellectual tradition with rigorous and important arguments relevant to science. "[T]he Brahmanical self theorists are no less rational and empirical than the Buddhist no-self theorists" (105). Further, if one seeks to defend the truth of Buddhism, it pays to engage and respond to the most pressing objections. And the Brahmanical traditions are important sources of targeted critique. So far, I strongly agree. But Evan draws a stronger moral; namely, that "we need a nonsectarian and cosmopolitan

philosophical perspective to appreciate the Buddhist intellectual tradition in general and its no-self theory in particular.” (105) He claims that “Buddhist philosophy must be seen in the dialectical context of its engagement with the other South Asian philosophical traditions” (105) and that “to privilege the Buddhist view in isolation from its dialectical interdependence with other traditions is to engage in Buddhist apologetics” (117). These remarks suggest that one cannot make sense of the Buddhist idea of no-self, let alone plausibly defend it, if one does not also consider objections raised against it by historical Brahmanical philosophers. But this is unwarranted. Certainly, if Buddhist arguments for no-self *presuppose* Brahmanical ideas then it follows one cannot properly appreciate them without considering those ideas. But just because Brahmanical philosophers had targeted objections does not mean that we cannot understand or appreciate the ideas they target independently. And it does not mean that there is something wrong with putting Buddhist claims into interdisciplinary dialogue with philosophy and science without, at the same time, engaging Brahmanical traditions or, indeed, all other worthy conversational partners that have a stake in the debate. Evan identifies Jonardon Ganeri as a paradigm of the approach he is championing. He writes “I find his cosmopolitan, pan-Indian perspective to be much more productive for cross-cultural philosophy than a strictly Buddhist view” (117). I am also inspired by Ganeri’s work. It is worth noting, however, that his most recent book restricts itself to reconstructing and defending Buddhagosa’s Theravāda Buddhist conception of mind in dialogue with philosophy of mind. And this strikes me as perfectly legitimate. While I strongly agree with the moderate upshot of Evan’s observations, I find the stronger versions unduly restrictive.

I have similar reservations to Evan’s critique of the attitude towards science assumed by naturalistic Buddhism. The question ‘Is Buddhism true?’ assumes a standard of assessment. And naturalistic Buddhists take this to be modern science. According to Evan, the view of science it assumes is a form of realism; that there is “a way the world essentially is in itself independent of any conceptual framework and that the mind can know this world.” (48). Evan claims to be both puzzled and frustrated by the attempt to make Buddhism fit science, so conceived. Puzzled, because he thinks it fails to recognise that the more radical Buddhist ideas undermine this realist assumption. And frustrated because he thinks it is a missed opportunity for “genuine encounter”, which he takes to involve distinct traditions challenging each other by focusing on their points of difference. He also seems to be a bit frustrated that the view of science assumed by naturalistic Buddhism is not the innovative 4E version that he himself champions.

Now, there are some very reasonable points here. First, one should not uncritically assume the current state of modern science (or some image thereof) as one’s standard for assessing what counts as plausible or true. Modern science is neither monolithic nor complete. Its methods, assumptions, positions and arguments are not uncontested. There is much work to be done and much work being done. The possibility of science being radically transformed by an encounter with Buddhist philosophy is entirely missed if you simply exclude, from the outset, those elements that don’t fit with the current state of science. And if one also takes on board the earlier point about making explicit the Buddhist position one is defending, then one should also make sure that the commitments of that position are consistent with the image of science you are making it fit. Evan draws a parallel between his

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4E approach to cognition and Madhyamaka Buddhism. The Dalai Lama is also a Madhyamaka Buddhist. But Madhyamaka is radically anti-foundationalist in its ontological commitments (at least on standard accounts). And so, a scientific naturalism which assumes ontological realism is not going to readily prove *this* form of Buddhism to be true, even if it is possible to omit karma and reincarnation from the story leaving all else the same.

Evan diagnoses the attempt to make Buddhism fit with scientific realism as a symptom of Buddhist modernism and thus poorly motivated. But this is too hasty. There is good reason to think, for instance, that Abhidharma Buddhist philosophers also assumed that there is “a way the world essentially is in itself independent of any conceptual framework and that the mind can know this world.” (48) If this characterises the realism of scientific naturalism, then Abhidharma has this in common. Of course, you might argue, as Evan does, that Abhidharma is problematic and contains normative ideas that are not consistent with science. And you might also argue, as Evan does, that Madhyamaka Buddhism is preferable. But that Abhidharma Buddhism and scientific naturalism have this realist assumption in common is nevertheless a more plausible and charitable source of motivation to attribute the naturalistic Buddhist than simple appeal to authority grounded in a naïve conception of science.

This last issue, in closing, points to a broader theme in Evan's critique of naturalistic Buddhism; namely, whether a “genuine encounter” between Buddhism and science *must* engage their radical points of difference, or whether interdisciplinary dialogue could still be productive if emphasising points of similarity (at least initially). Several remarks Evan makes in the book suggest he thinks the former. And I entirely take his point that encounters which emphasise radical points of difference have the greatest potential for transformation. But it strikes me, that there are other modes of interdisciplinary dialogue that are just as legitimate and also potentially fruitful. One might, for instance, put some aspect of Buddhist thought into dialogue with some existing scientific model and assess the degree of fit. If it is close, one might use this as grounds to explore what other related Buddhist ideas could add to this model or whether subtle differences on the periphery or in the background provide grounds for revision on either side of the dialectic. Or, if there are competing scientific models of some phenomenon, the fact that some Buddhist ideas seem to support one model rather than the other might lend some weight to contemporary discussions. Of course, this won't be decisive. They might be similar or consistent but both false for all that. And one needs to remain mindful that scientific models are models and so whatever warrantability they might ascribe Buddhist views will depend on their theoretical virtues (rather than a proof of correspondence with mind-independent reality). The outcomes of these methodological approaches are also likely to be more modest than the radical transformation Evan envisions. But they nevertheless seem to be equally legitimate modes of interdisciplinary dialogue. And so, I conclude by inviting Evan to clarify which versions of his arguments he intends and to provide some additional justification if he had the stronger forms in mind.