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Why I Am Not a Buddhist by Evan Thompson (review)

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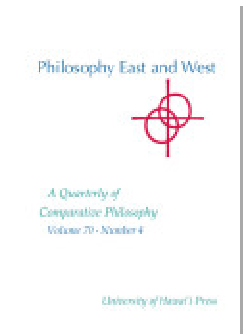

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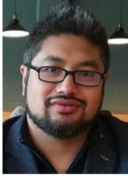
BOOK REVIEW

Why I Am Not a Buddhist. By Evan Thompson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. x + 230. Hardcover $26.00, ISBN 978-0-300226-55-3.



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On 6th March 1927 at Battersea Town Hall, Bertrand Russell delivered a lecture on atheism to the National Secular Society, which was then published as the essay, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (1953). This title is echoed by the title of Evan Thompson's new book, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*. The book offers a timely philosophical critique of Buddhist exceptionalism, which is the view that Buddhism stands apart from other religions in virtue of its being supported by modern science.

Thompson's critique is informed, sophisticated, and charitable. This reflects his considerable experience, which includes being introduced to Buddhism at the Lindisfarne Association in his childhood, studying Buddhist philosophy, taking part in meditation retreats from different Buddhist disciplines, and working with the Mind and Life Institute. Throughout his intellectual journey, he has engaged with several prominent Buddhist teachers, scholars, and scientists, including the Dalai Lama, translator Robert Thurman, and neurobiologist Francisco Varela. Accordingly, Thompson considers himself to be "a good friend to Buddhism" (p. 2). Nonetheless, as a philosopher, he argues that modern Buddhist exceptionalism is unsound, and so finds himself unable to identify as a Buddhist without acting in bad faith.

Buddhist exceptionalism in the present day is exemplified by writers such as Robert Wright (2017), Sam Harris (2014), and Stephen Batchelor (2015). Among the claims made by such proponents are that Buddhism is not really a religion but a science of the mind, that modern science can validate Buddhism, and that Buddhism is wholly rational. Thompson repudiates all of these claims. Not only does he argue that they distort Buddhism, but also that they distort science.

The claim that Buddhism is not really a religion but a science of the mind rests on the assumption that Buddhism does not rely on faith. Instead, proponents of Buddhist exceptionalism suggest it relies on empirical observation of the mind. However, Thompson argues that this is mistaken. Just as Christian faith consists of trust in the instruction of Jesus Christ, Buddhist faith consists of trust in the instruction of the Buddha. Many of the teachings of the Buddha, Thompson notes, are not empirical, but normative and soteriological. That is to

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say, they “evaluate the world according to the desired goal of liberation” (pp. 36–37). Accordingly, they cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed through impartial observation, but can only be interpreted and assessed relative to a particular normative outlook. Moreover, Thompson notes that adherents of Buddhism traditionally assume the cognition of the Buddha to be infallible, thus shielding the teachings of the Buddha from falsification and undermining the claim that they are empirically testable. Insofar as Buddhism is characterized by faith in a spiritual teacher, an instruction for practice, a normative framework for interpreting the world, and the soteriological goal of transcendence, it is very clearly a religion.

The claim that modern science can validate Buddhism rests on the assumption that mindfulness can reveal the real nature of the mind, which in turn is assumed to be corroborated by scientific evidence. Proponents of Buddhist exceptionalism often suppose that this scientific evidence is provided by neurobiology and evolutionary psychology. However, Thompson notes that there is tension between the notion of mindfulness as the impartial disclosure of how the mind really is and the notion of mindfulness as a process that shapes the mind according to a valued standard. Accordingly, he criticizes the suggestion that mindfulness reveals the seemingly continuous flow of perception actually to be comprised of a series of successive phases:

> But how do we know that everyday active perception is really made up of a sequence of single phases as opposed to being a continuous flow that gets turned into a sequence of short-lived phases as a result of practicing bare attention while sitting still or deliberately walking very slowly (as one does in the practice of modern Theravāda “insight meditation”)? (p. 33)

Mindfulness, then, cannot be said to reveal the real nature of the mind if the very act of mindfulness changes the mind. Thompson contrasts this with scientific observation, which is supposed to discern a phenomenon without altering it. For example, he notes that a “scanning electron microscope doesn’t alter the structure and workings of a cell, and an optical or radio telescope doesn’t alter stars and planets” (p. 32).

Thompson’s critique of mindfulness is incisive and compelling. However, his portrayal of scientific observation is more arguable. Contrary to the view that scientific observation discerns a phenomenon without altering it, influential work in the philosophy of science has noted that science often discerns a phenomenon by altering it. For example, Ian Hacking (1983) notes that physicists discern the fractional electrical charges of quarks by spraying them with positrons or electrons to increase or decrease the charges. Hence, scientific observation is sometimes only made possible through experimental intervention. Thompson does concede that the act of observation can change the observed phenomenon

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at the scale of quantum mechanics, but observations can also change the observed phenomena at other scales. Biochemists observe antigens by reacting them with antibodies that change their chemical properties, neurobiologists observe neural responses by engaging participants in tasks that change their neural activities, and psychologists observe behavioral dispositions by manipulating environmental conditions in ways that change how the participants behave. In scientific observation, then, the instrument of observation and the object of observation are not always as independent as Thompson suggests.

Another objection to the claim that modern science can validate Buddhism, alluded to earlier, is that many of the teachings of the Buddha are not empirical, but normative and soteriological. Proponents of Buddhist exceptionalism sometimes portray the attainment of enlightenment as a psychological state that can be scientifically validated, for example, by observing specific neural activity in the enlightened person's brain. In response, Thompson argues that the Buddhist notion of enlightenment is not acontextual, but is dependent on a particular conceptual framework that involves various normative and soteriological assumptions. That is to say, features of the conceptually structured social world in which the person is situated place constitutive conditions on the meaning of enlightenment. Therefore, enlightenment cannot be adequately characterized as a psychological state which can be empirically revealed, but can only be understood in the context of a socially situated conceptual framework.

Given that Buddhist practice depends on a particular interpretive framework, it is not something that can be validated empirically through scientific investigation. Rather, the interpretive framework influences how the empirical data get characterized. Importantly, Thompson notes that it guides practitioners to interpret such data "in ways that conform to and confirm Buddhist doctrine" (p. 43). And so, meditation does not reveal conditioned things to be impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not self, but informs practitioners to interpret their observations of things in terms of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not self.

Thompson also provides a sustained critique of evolutionary psychology as a scientific framework for Buddhism. As noted above, proponents of Buddhist exceptionalism sometimes draw on evolutionary psychology to corroborate Buddhist doctrine. For example, craving has been suggested to be an adaptive psychological disposition and Buddhist meditation has been suggested to be a way of subduing this evolved disposition. However, Thompson argues that evolutionary psychology is unsound, and so fails to serve as an appropriate scientific framework for Buddhism. Here, evolutionary psychology does not simply refer to the view that the mind is influenced by evolution, but refers more narrowly to a research programme that rests on some specific presuppositions. These include the presuppositions that minds are massively modular, that these modules are adaptations, and that these adaptations evolved due to selective

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pressures in the Pleistocene Epoch. Thompson repudiates these presuppositions and argues that evolutionary psychology misrepresents the process of evolution. First, it neglects to take into account the dynamic and reciprocal ways in which organisms and their environmental resources interact with one another. Second, it neglects to take into account the crucial roles of social and cultural factors in shaping minds across generations. Indeed, Thompson wonders whether "our present desires and delusions owe more to capitalism and neoliberalism than to natural selection" (p. 83). Third, contemporary neurobiology and cognitive psychology undermine the presupposition that the minds are massively modular and instead indicate that cognitive processes are highly interactive. Fourth, evolution can occur due to various other processes aside from natural selection, and so not all traits are adaptations.

Having rejected evolutionary psychology, Thompson proposes that embodied cognitive science can serve as a better scientific framework for Buddhism. Embodied cognitive science, he notes, "investigates how cognition is influenced by and made up of bodily activity and interactions between the organism and its environment" (p. 71). Under this approach, cognition is characterized as "the enactment or bringing forth of a lived world of meaning and relevance in and through embodied action" (p. 71). Accordingly, cognition is not confined to the brain, but is a dynamic process that encompasses the organism, its environment, and the reciprocal interaction between them.

Nonetheless, although Thompson endorses embodied cognitive science as a better theoretical framework than evolutionary psychology, he ultimately thinks that it is misguided to use science for the purpose of validating Buddhism. This is because the claim that modern science can validate Buddhism uncritically assumes scientific realism, whereas an important feature of Buddhist thought is that it provides a powerful critique of scientific realism. For example, the Buddhist claim that the mind cannot be grasped through empirical investigation seems to undermine the scientific approach to studying cognition. Hence, science cannot be used to validate Buddhism if Buddhism itself undermines science. Instead of science being used to validate Buddhism, Thompson recommends that science and Buddhism ought to engage in a critical dialogue with each other, in order to learn what Buddhism can learn from the scientific project and what science can learn from the Buddhist critique of scientific realism.

The claim that Buddhism is wholly rational is intended by proponents of Buddhist exceptionalism to imply that it stands apart from other religions with respect to its logical coherence and responsiveness to evidence. Contrary to the suggestion that Buddhism is logically coherent, Thompson notes that Buddhist doctrine contains some contradictions and paradoxes. A contradiction that has already been mentioned is the tension between the notion of mindfulness as the impartial disclosure of how the mind really is and the notion of mindfulness as a process that shapes the mind according to a valued standard. Another contradiction concerns the path to liberation, or *nirvāṇa*. The Buddhist path, we

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are told, is supposed to lead to the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. Buddhist doctrine also states that *nirvāṇa* is unconditioned, uncaused, and eternal. However, if *nirvāṇa* is uncaused, then it follows that *nirvāṇa* cannot be the result of following the Buddhist path. In order to deal with this paradox, some adherents of Buddhism emphasise the importance of faith in the Buddha. Given that *nirvāṇa* does not seem to be possible according to ordinary reasoning, practitioners must have faith in the Buddha's testimony that the attainment of *nirvāṇa* is possible. Again, Thompson notes that this emphasis on faith undermines Buddhist exceptionalism's claim that Buddhist is not really a religion but a science of the mind.

A further contradiction, which Thompson examines in detail in Chapter Three, is the Buddhist view of the self. A prominent doctrine in Buddhism is the doctrine of *anātman*, which is commonly translated as "not self". Proponents of Buddhist exceptionalism often interpret this as a claim that the self is just an illusion. Moreover, they suggest that the supposed illusory nature of the self is validated by modern science. For the following reasons, Thompson argues that much of this is mistaken.

First, Thompson notes that the doctrine of *anātman* has been interpreted in different ways throughout the history of Buddhism. Indeed, there are numerous scholars who consider *anātman* to amount to the denial of the self. However, another philosophical perspective, endorsed by the monk Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (1993), is that the Buddha taught that the five aggregates do not constitute the self but also acknowledged the existence of an unconditioned self that is distinct from the five aggregates. There is also the view that *anātman* is supposed to be a practical strategy to free oneself from attachment, rather than a metaphysical claim about whether there is a self.

Second, regardless of how the doctrine of *anātman* is interpreted, it presupposes an overly simplistic notion of "self". The term "self", Thompson notes, is ambiguous. While the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* might be suggested to deny a certain notion of "self", there are other defensible notions of "self" which it does not take into account. For example, in the phenomenological literature, there are, among others, minimal, narrative, interpersonal, and extended notions of "self", which are not addressed by the doctrine of *anātman*.

Thompson himself supports the notion of "self" as a multifaceted construction, although he makes it clear that its being constructed does not amount to its being illusory. There is, however, another philosophical notion of "self" that the doctrine of *anātman* also fails to take into account. This is illustrated by Thompson's discussion of Nyāya philosophy's objection to *anātman*:

> When I say "Hello", I not only cause you to hear my words, I also cause myself to hear them. One cause has two effects. One effect belongs to the causal series we call "me", and the other belongs to the causal series we call "you". The Nyaiyāyikas charge that there's no way to ground this distinction between "me" and "you", even as just a way of

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> talking, on causal relations alone. They charge that there's no way to pick out which series of events makes up one person versus another, when all we have to work with are discrete, impersonal events, related as cause and effect. (pp. 100–101)

In some respect, this objection resembles the modern conceivability argument for dualism in the philosophy of mind, inasmuch as it suggests that subjectivity is an extra fact that is not captured by the causal structure of the world. Thompson interprets the objection as presenting two related problems. First, it presents the problem of how to demarcate a specific person from the entire causal network of physical and mental events. Second, it presents the problem of how to account for the unity of a person's experience. I suggest that there is another related way of interpreting this objection, which is as a problem of first-person individuation.

First-person individuation pertains to the subjectivity of consciousness. Unlike a physical process, a phenomenal experience is not an impersonal event that occurs in a neutral objective space, but is experienced from a given first-person subjective point of view. An experience is necessarily experienced by an experiencer. The philosopher Dan Zahavi (2014) illustrates this with a thought experiment. Consider two twins, Mick and Mack, who are both gazing at a white wall. While their experiences are both qualitatively white, they differ from each other with respect to the first-person perspectives to which they are respectively individuated. While one experience is given to a first-person perspective particular to Mick, the other experience is given to the first-person perspective particular to Mick. If Mick then turns away from the white wall and looks at a red door, there would not then be a red experience and a white experience occurring together in an impersonal space. Rather, the red experience would be given to the first-person perspective particular to Mick, while the white experience would be given to the first-person perspective particular to Mack.

The identity of a conscious subject, then, essentially consists of its first-person individuation. The trouble for the Buddhist is that a description of impersonal events and relations does not capture this first-person individuation of experience. After we describe the entire causal network of impersonal events and relations, we would still need to account for why a certain part of that causal network is experienced from a first-person point of view particular to Mick and why another part of that causal network is experienced from a first-person point of view particular to Mack. Merely appealing to causal relatedness is insufficient, as a further assumption needs to be made that first-person subjectivity is also present. And so, if we understand selfhood as consisting of the first-person individuation of a conscious subject, then we can take it as true that the self exists. The self, in this minimal sense, is simply the first-person individuated conscious subject. Under this interpretation, it can be argued that the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* is false because it fails to account for this first-person individuation that is fundamental to conscious experience. This would lend support to Nyāya philosophy's objection that talk of impersonal causal events cannot account for the distinctions between "me", "you", and the countless

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plurality of other conscious subjects that exist.

In Chapter Four, Thompson offers a more extensive critique of the modern fascination with mindfulness. As already noted above, he is critical of the claim that mindfulness reveals the mind as it really is. He is also critical of the claim that the best way to study the benefit of mindfulness is to look inside the brain. Drawing on his preferred framework of embodied cognitive science, he argues that mindfulness is not merely a brain process, but is an activity at the level of the whole person, the conceptually structured social environment, and the reciprocal interaction between them. Moreover, the aim of mindfulness practice is dependent on a socially situated conceptual framework that involves various normative and soteriological assumptions. Therefore, the benefit of mindfulness cannot be studied simply by looking at the brain, but can only be understood by looking more broadly at its role within this social context.

Thompson contends that the attempt to locate mindfulness in the individual's brain "reinforces selfish individualism—all you really need to deal with is your own mind, not the larger social setting" (p. 131). This echoes the recent critique of modern mindfulness by Ronald Purser (2019), who argues that mindfulness has recently been appropriated as a tool of neoliberal capitalism. The influence goes in both directions. In one direction, neoliberal capitalism has promoted the marketing of mindfulness as a commodity. In the other direction, this commodified version of mindfulness serves to reinforce the harmful rhetoric of neoliberal capitalism, including its misguided assumption that any hardship that one endures is solely due to inadequate individual effort. This decontextualisation of the individual from the wider interpersonal setting fails to acknowledge the extents to which people's choices and behaviors are constrained and shaped by the structures and hegemonies of the social environments in which they are situated. Moreover, the attempt to locate the source of all hardship within the individual directs attention away from addressing the social conditions and injustices that contribute to such hardship, thus leading us to accept things that morally we ought not to accept. This is not to deny that mindfulness can have beneficial effects for individuals, but rather to say that these effects can only be properly evaluated by also considering the social, cultural, and political values that inform modern mindfulness practices.

The book does not merely offer a negative thesis, namely its argument against Buddhist exceptionalism, but also offers a positive thesis, which is its argument for cosmopolitanism. Following the work of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006), Thompson endorses the view that respecting all beings as moral equals can and should include recognizing them "as individuals with ties to different communities and traditions" (p. 175). Accordingly, the most charitable way to appreciate Buddhism is not to extol it as a superior belief system. Rather, the most charitable way to appreciate Buddhism, Thompson argues, is to understand its contribution to our society alongside the contributions of other intellectual traditions. Historically, Buddhist thought was

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not formulated in a vacuum, but through dialectical exchanges with other important philosophical traditions, including Vedānta philosophy, Nyāya philosophy, and Jain philosophy. Understanding the contributions of these traditions can help us better understand the contribution of Buddhism, just as understanding the contribution of Buddhism can help us better understand the contributions of these traditions. In the modern day, the danger of exalting Buddhism above other religions is demonstrated by the rise of Buddhist nationalism in Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, where the rhetoric of Buddhist superiority has been used to reinforce dubious ethnocentric assumptions and has led to violent persecutions of people from Muslim communities. As Thompson notes, the paradox is that this "partisan Buddhist exceptionalism undermines its universalistic rhetoric" (p. 172).

To sum up, *Why I Am Not a Buddhist* is an excellent work of philosophy. Thompson demonstrates a formidable understanding of the topic and his honest critique shows great intellectual courage. Anyone interested in Buddhism would do well to engage with this timely and compelling book.

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