

Throwing out the Buddha with the Offering Water: Comments on Evan Thompson's *Why I am Not a Buddhist*

APA Pacific Division Meetings 2020

Jay L Garfield

1. Laudatory Introduction

Evan Thompson has given us another lovely book. Like *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, it creatively mixes memoir, philosophy, cognitive science, and cultural commentary to illuminate the interface between religion, science, philosophy, and human life, candidly explaining how Evan got to where he is. There is a lot to learn from this volume, and a lot to enjoy.

Evan and I are used to disagreeing deeply about fundamental issues, but here find myself in agreement with nearly everything he says. As a fellow veteran of several *Mind and Life* conferences, I recognize the discomfort with which one emerges from those often very stimulating exchanges that nonetheless fail to be entirely satisfying for the reasons that Evan so ably scouts. And as a fellow non-Buddhist working on Buddhist philosophy, cognitive science, and cross-cultural philosophical dialogue, I recognize the complicated set of pressures that position generates: one is tempted to identify with Buddhism on pain of not being taken seriously by one's religious interlocutors. One is also tempted to distance oneself from practice in order to be taken seriously by one's philosophical interlocutors. And each side encourages the odd enthusiasm for the incoherent *mélange* of Buddhism and cognitive or physical science that we find in Buddhist modernism. I congratulate Evan on having mapped those tensions with such candor and care, and with having diagnosed many of the important problems with such acuity.

But while I have not come to bury Evan, nor have I come to praise him. So, I will now put aside my genuine admiration for *Why I am not a Buddhist* to take issue with a few strands of Evan's critique. In what follows, I will split hairs, but to quote our colleague in Buddhist philosophy, Sandy Huntington, "the finer the hair, the more important it is to split it." I want to talk first about naturalism in Buddhism,

suggesting that Evan may underestimate the resources for a legitimately naturalistic reading of some Buddhist philosophical traditions. I will then turn to an area in which Evan and I are long friendly antagonists: the idea of no-self, where I will argue that Evan may miss the most important issue in Buddhist critiques of the idea of self. I will then turn to the topic of awakening. There I will suggest that, just as he underestimates the possibility of a naturalistic reading of some Buddhist traditions more broadly, Evan underestimates the possibilities for legitimately naturalistic understandings of awakening by modern Buddhists. I will conclude with some more optimistic thoughts about Buddhist modernism as a religious and social movement, and with an explanation of my own more prosaic reasons for not being a Buddhist.

2. Rehabilitating Naturalism in Buddhism

There is a lot to like in Evan's discussion of Buddhism and naturalism, and I leave aside the material with which I agree. Evan brings his discussion of Buddhist naturalism to a head with these remarks (for the purposes of time, I quote with a good deal of ellipsis, but I do not think that I thereby distort the sense of the argument.):

I can now... say why I think that naturalistic Buddhism is not compelling. Naturalistic Buddhists uncritically accept philosophically problematic forms of naturalism and realism. They fail to see how the deepest and most radical insights of the Buddhist intellectual tradition undermine these ideas. To wit, "the mind is neither within nor without, nor is it to be apprehended between the two." (*Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*) ... Naturalistic Buddhists proceed as if the mind can be grasped, as if it can be pinned down and identified as essentially the "biological reality" of the brain.... The deep question is whether it's possible for science to be mindful of the mind's ungraspability...

Naturalistic Buddhists fail to recognize, let alone appreciate, the fundamental generative enigma at the heart of Buddhism. Robert Sharf puts it this way: "Liberation is impossible, yet it is achieved." (77-78)

Evan argues that the failure here rests on the Buddhist conception of *nirvāṇa* as *unconditioned*, and reads *unconditioned* as entailing that *nirvāṇa* "can't be the result of any cause and specifically can't be the result of any mental cause. But this implies

that nirvana can't be the result of following the Buddhist path." (78) It follows, he argues, that there is a fatal inconsistency between being a Buddhist and being a naturalist: one must accept as Buddhist the possibility of a causeless state, and as a naturalist the idea that all phenomena have causal explanations.

The remark quoted from the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* is used to make a slightly different argument: Naturalists about cognition, Evan argues, see cognitive states as (at most) narrowly supervenient on brain states; most or all Buddhist philosophers of mind see them either as substantially distinct from any physical state or broadly supervenient; so most Buddhist philosophers of mind reject a central plank of naturalism about the mind.

Both of these arguments are unsound. Seeing why they are unsound allows us to appreciate a naturalism that pervades much (though not all) of the Buddhist philosophical tradition. That naturalism offers the prospect for a modernist Buddhism that is both naturalistic and continuous with (some) strands of classical Buddhist thought.

Let us begin with *nirvāṇa*. Any discussion of this issue must begin by acknowledging the many occurrences in Buddhist literature of statements identifying the *causes* of achieving *nirvāṇa*. And these are frequent both in śrāvakayāna and Mahāyāna texts (although the identification of the precise causes are different). We hear about accumulations of wisdom and merit, about the achievement of perfections, about the eightfold path, etc. So, while there are schools (particularly the East Asian schools that revel in paradox) that see the characterization of *nirvāṇa* as unconditioned as contradictory to its being achieved as the result of causes and conditions, this is not universal in Buddhist traditions, and is rather alien to Indian, Tibetan, and Southeast Asian traditions. And this makes sense, given that the principal pillar of Buddhist metaphysics is the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda*, of universal interdependence, one aspect of which is *causal* interdependence.

In these traditions the term *unconditioned* is meant to indicate one of two things: first, that once *nirvāṇa* is achieved, no *further* conditions—such as supporting conditions—are required to sustain it; that is, it is irreversible. Second, once one has achieved *nirvāṇa* one's mind is free from the particular network of conditions that perpetuate *samsāra*. Now, we might fight about whether there is such a state, about whether it is possible to enter a state that is necessarily irreversible, etc. And those are interesting philosophical discussions to have within the tradition. But the point is that the term *unconditioned* does not immediately lead to paradox, even in the context of a tradition committed to the universality of interdependent co-origination.

Of course one might embrace paradox, and that might even be reasonable. But note that even if one does so, that by itself is not a recusal from naturalism *tout court*. This is because the paradox is only generated by juxtaposing the claim that *nirvāṇa* is *unconditioned* with the fact that everything is conditioned, and that practice is its *cause*. While that might seem to require *rejecting* naturalism, it also requires *endorsing* it. So, either way, naturalism *in the sense of a commitment to universal causal explicability* is not undermined by Buddhist theories of *nirvāṇa*.

Now, back to the mind and its supervenience base. Evan is right that *some* naturalists in the Buddhist modernist camp—most often philosophically naïve neuroscientists enamored with colorful fMRI images—take psychological states (including those identified in the Abhidharma, and even more improbable candidates, as Evan documents) to be narrowly supervenient, or even to be identical to brain states. And Evan is right both that this is crazy, and about why it is crazy.

But that is only one possible position. I have argued elsewhere that a widespread Buddhist position regarding cognitive and affective states is one of *very* broad supervenience, and that position is well-attested within nearly *every* Buddhist position, Buddhist modernist neuroscientists to the contrary notwithstanding. Moreover, as Evan well knows, many of us in the philosophy of cognitive science have independently defended the broad supervenience of psychological states on

the physical. And there is nothing non-naturalist about this. Identity theory, reductionism, and narrow supervenience have no monopoly on naturalism. So, even if some neuroscientists who take themselves to be vindicating Buddhists are identity theorists, that does not exhaust the range of naturalistic Buddhist positions.

A naturalistic Buddhism is, as Evan points out, threatened from both sides: one could fallaciously infer from naturalism to identity or to narrow supervenience, and so find oneself at odds both with good sense and Buddhism. Or, one could—as many, but not all Buddhists do—adopt a strongly dualist position with regard to some psychological phenomena. The position of some with regard to what many Buddhists call *subtle consciousness* comes to mind. Either of these would threaten the naturalistic strain in Buddhist modernism. My point is just that being a Buddhist and being a naturalist entail neither of these problems. There is space between Scylla and Charybdis in this domain, and that is the space that a Buddhist modernist ought to and can occupy.

3. A More Charitable Reading of No-self

Evan develops a sustained critique of a blithe acceptance of Buddhist critiques of the idea of a self, and of a blithe acceptance of the idea that this is somehow more *scientific* than a Brahminical self-theory positing a substantial *ātman*. I do not have time or space in this comment to do justice to his entire discussion. And much of it is very compelling. But when Evan concludes that “the Brahminical self theorists are no less rational and empirical than the Buddhist self-theorists” and that “to single out the Buddhists as more ‘scientific’ is partisan and simplistic” (105) I must part company.

Evan’s principal route to this conclusion is not the endorsement of a Brahminical view. Those views are *very* hard to square with science, or to defend as “rational and empirical,” and Evan’s direct assessment of those views concedes as much. They are substantialist, and they posit a continuing convention-independent entity that persists through (and beyond) one’s biological life, and which functions as a non-natural owner of the psychophysical constituents of a person. Instead, he argues that “the self that Buddhism targets as the object of self-grasping—the self as

a personal essence—isn't the only way to understand the meaning of 'self'. So, denying that there is this kind of self doesn't entail that there is no self whatsoever." (*Ibid.*) That is, he changes the subject, conceding the Buddhist success in targeting the Brahminical conception, and suggesting that we can redefine the English term used to translate the Sanskrit *ātman* so as to deliver a referent other than the one that Buddhists have in mind.

The problem isn't just that this is an embrace of equivocation. It is that by taking himself to defend the self against Buddhist critiques, he distorts classical Buddhist positions, understates the value of the Buddhist critique, and fails in his attempt to locate a problem for Buddhist modernism in this terrain, all of this despite a very sensitive account of the range of positions one might take with regard to the construction of personhood, an account with which I take no issue.

Candrakīrti (7th c) in *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvatāra)* gets at this point through an example to which Evan refers in another context. He admonishes that a philosopher refuting the existence of a self should not be like a man who is worried that a snake is hiding in the wall of his house and reassures himself of his safety by failing to find an elephant. This is the example that kicks off later Tibetan discussions initiated by Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) about the *object of negation* in Madhyamaka Buddhist analysis. The point of the example is that we must be very careful to identify the thing the existence of which we are trying to refute, to refute that, and not to refute anything more.

Candrakīrti, as Hume was to do a millennium later, carefully distinguishes the self (*ātman/bdag*) from the person (*pudgala/gang zag*) or *mere I (nga tsam)*. The former is the object of negation, the target of Buddhist no-self arguments; the latter is the conventional person. To affirm the existence of the former is to fall into the extreme of reification; to deny the existence of the latter is to fall into the opposite extreme, that of nihilism. The metaphysical tightrope that Madhyamaka philosophers try to walk involves not confusing these two: Mādhyamikas deny that there is any convention-independent self of the kind that the orthodox Indian

schools accept, which taken by most Buddhist philosophers—classical and modern—to be a philosophical ramification of our innate sense of our own existence. At the same time, they accept the conventional reality of persons, with the understanding that their existence is merely conventional. Moreover, as Evan himself emphasizes, to exist conventionally, on this view, is not to be non-existent; rather it is a way of being existent.

When Evan talks about narrative selves, constructed selves, social selves, enacted selves, and embodied selves, he is talking not about the *self* that is the target of Buddhist analysis, but about the *person* that remains. In doing so, he is correctly drawing our attention to the many dimensions of interdependence that give rise to our identities as *persons*, as *role players*. But when he calls these alternative versions of the self that Buddhist attempt to refute, versions that evade that refutation, he confuses the snake with the elephant, substituting the person for the self as the object of negation. There is good reason to worry about the serpent of the self; it is no straw serpent if Buddhists are even close to right about our psychology, and many of its ramifications in Western philosophy of mind—classical and contemporary—are pernicious. Clarity requires keeping these conceptually distinct.

The modern Buddhist, then, is *correct* to assert that the Buddhist position is more in harmony with contemporary psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind than is the Brahminical position, and correct to see no-self not only as one interesting idea that Buddhism brings to the table, but also as a deep insight that can contribute to contemporary conversations. In this respect, modern Buddhism is in harmony both with classical Buddhist thought and contemporary science.

4. Getting Woke

Evan correctly calls our attention to real muddles in Buddhist modernist thinking about awakening (*bodhi*). But once gain, I fear that he goes a step too far in his critique. He writes:

Traditional Buddhists accept the reality of the Buddha's awakening and the possibility of their own awakening as a matter of faith. They have trust and confidence in the Buddha's way of life as a way

of leading to awakening. Having faith is an essential part of what it means to be a Buddhist.

Buddhist modernists, however, try to make awakening consistent with their understanding of the scientific worldview. Many of them use a two-pronged approach. The first prong is to demythologize awakening by turning it into a rationally comprehensible psychological state. The second prong is to romanticize awakening by turning it into a kind of intuitive and nonconceptual epiphany. ... Neural Buddhists take a further step and think that we can get a better understanding of such epiphanies or “awakening experiences” by finding their “neural correlates” in the brain.

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... 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 and 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. (143-144)

A great deal of the argument that follows is dedicated to showing that the concept of awakening (or enlightenment, if you prefer that Protestant term) has meaning only in a cultural and conceptual context, and which, like terms such as “love” or “money,” cannot denote anything that is not conceptually or culturally determined. With *that* argument, I have no problem. But the central argument I just quoted is a chain of *non sequiturs*.

Let us begin at the beginning, where we have a serious equivocation on translation. Evan sometimes translates *śrāddha* as *faith*, sometimes as *confidence*. These are not synonymous in contemporary English. And the choice of which to use is important. In the context of many Buddhist texts, I prefer the second. In many Buddhist discussions *śrāddha* is introduced as an attitude regarding belief in that to which one has only indirect cognitive access through the testimony of the Buddha or another highly realized being. These are the relevant contexts in this discussion of awakening. In such cases, *śrāddha* is justified on the grounds that we know the source to be reliable because we can verify his/her accuracy regarding things to which we do have access. This is thus a reliability argument for the veridicality of a

witness. This is *not* the sense of faith parodied by Mark Twain as *belief in what you know ain't so*.

This is important, because the claim that Buddhists have *śrāddha* in the Buddha's awakening and in the possibility of their own is *confidence* in this sense, not *faith* in the belief-without-reason sense. But it is the latter sense that animates Evan's claim that "having faith is an essential part of being a Buddhist," despite the fact that it is in fact *confidence* that underlines refuge, and so is "essential" to being a Buddhist. While the tension between being a Buddhist and having confidence in science (much of which for most of us is also confidence born of a sense of the reliability of witnesses) might arise on the *faith* reading of *śrāddha*, it is not at all clear that it does on the *confidence* reading. One can have confidence in science to tell us about a lot of things, and confidence in the Buddha to tell us about some other things regarding which science is currently silent. This does not, of course mean that anything in science *entails* the possibility of awakening, or that anything in Buddhism entails the truth of anything discovered by any science; that, Evan is correct in saying, is claptrap. But it does suggest consistency with being a Buddhist and having *śrāddha* for science. And that is the core of this aspect of Buddhist modernism as I see it.

Finally, even if *nirvāṇa* and awakening transcend conceptual thought in some sense, this is no reason to think that a belief that they are possible is inconsistent with confidence in the value of science. That would be to commit a crude intentional fallacy. Moreover, nothing in any scientific theory of which I am aware, or in any account in the philosophy of science that I would be prepared to endorse entails that there are no states or other phenomena that transcend human conceptual capacities. Note for instance that Kant, who had immense confidence in science, thought that noumenal were beyond our conceptual ken. Schopenhauer thought that the will is. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* thought that the nature of reality is. And they were friends of science as well.

However grand science is, its success does not entail that the human mind is capable of conceptualizing all that there is, or for that matter that the content of a naturally explicable belief must itself be consistent with naturalism. So, once again, I disagree with Evan: one can be a friend of science, and still be confident that it is possible to achieve states of which one cannot conceive. One just can't think that any scientific theory *guarantees* that. A mad-dog Buddhist modernism according to which Buddhism and the one true theory in cognitive neuroscience are equivalent might be out, but not moderate modernism according to which they might be mutually consistent.

5. Moderate Buddhist Modernism

So, while much of Evan's critique of Buddhist modernism and more particularly of certain Buddhist modernists is on target, I don't think that it undermines the Buddhist modernist project as a whole. Buddhism, like *all* religious traditions, gives rise to conceptual tensions, and these are often the tensions that animate debate within the tradition and between Buddhists and their non-Buddhist interlocutors. Modernist Buddhism is continuous with classical Buddhism in this respect. There is no *special* incoherence in this modern movement, just new epicycles on old conceptual difficulties. And there is nothing *exceptional* about Buddhism in this regard. Modernist movements in all religious traditions encounter similar tensions.

These tensions—as Evan grants—do not undermine the fact that Buddhist philosophy is replete with insights and arguments that make it a worthwhile dialogical partner with Western philosophy, just as it has for centuries been a dialogical partner with non-Buddhist Asian philosophers. Nor do they undermine the fact that Buddhism has proven to be a religious tradition that offers insight and the opportunity for personal cultivation to people in the modern era, just as it has for centuries. But nor again does it follow that there is a necessary tension between the Buddhist tradition and science. There is enough in the Buddhist tradition that is of philosophical and of religious value that is consistent with a naturalistic, scientific outlook that once can be a Buddhist and a friend of science in good faith: one can be a moderate Buddhist modernist.

What does a moderate Buddhist modernism look like? A moderate Buddhist modernist accepts certain core ideas articulated in Buddhist philosophy, such as the four noble truths, the universality of dependent co-origination, the doctrine of the two truths, the three natures, and that the moral ideal encoded in the four *brahmavihāras* is compelling, even if it is not a complete adumbration of morality in the contemporary world. That is already a lot of distinctively Buddhist doctrine. And the moderate Buddhist takes seriously the philosophical arguments developed in the Buddhist tradition for the truth of these doctrines in the way that a good Kantian takes seriously Kant's arguments, or a good Aristotelian take seriously Aristotle's arguments: she does not simply parrot them, but works through them, amends them, and endorses some version of them.

A moderate Buddhist modernist may take some Buddhist doctrines that were taken literally by many traditional Buddhist in more metaphorical senses. For instance, the realms of rebirth may be interpreted psychologically; rebirth itself might be taken to indicate a moral continuity between generations, etc... And a moderate modernist may reject some things believed by ancient Buddhists, for instance Buddhist cosmology, just as serious modern Aristotelians reject Aristotle's cosmology.

And a moderate Buddhist modernist has conviction that science is the best *pramāṇa* we have for a detailed investigation of the physical and psychological world. She takes seriously a kind of naturalism according to which the world is explicable without reference to supernatural forces, that reason and perception are good guides to truth, and that the fact that they are good guides is itself explicable. And finally, a moderate modernist may think that Buddhist philosophy may offer insights into the philosophy of science and that science is an important corrective to Buddhist speculative doctrine. I see nothing incoherent in this outlook.

6. Why I am still not a Buddhist and why I still Like this Book

Nonetheless, like Evan, I am not a Buddhist, not even a modernist Buddhist. But for a different reason. I think that religious traditions, like nations or clubs, get to set their own criteria for membership. To respect a tradition is to respect their criteria.

You can't just declare yourself a Jew—you have to have a Jewish mom or undergo a conversion ceremony; you can't just declare yourself a Catholic—you have to be baptized. And you can't just declare yourself a Buddhist: you have to take refuge in the triple gem. That is, you must take the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha as your only protection from the ills of *samsāra*.

And I can't. I don't sincerely believe that buddhahood, Buddhadharma, and the community of Buddhist practitioners are my only route to a satisfactory life. Others do. I do not regard that belief and its associated practices as irrational; they are just not mine. My reason for not being a Buddhist modernist is hence not that I find it incoherent, as does Evan, but that I can't be a Buddhist. I am just not religious in that sense (although, as many know, I do take the Buddhist philosophical tradition very, very seriously, although I am probably more a post-modernist than a modernist).

But I do like Evan's book. It is a penetrating look at the Buddhist modernist movement as we see it today, and a penetrating critique of some of the most problematic aspects of that movement. It is sympathetic, generous, and honest; it is full of insight, and a great read. And it will spur debate. That is a good thing. A good debating partner is hard to find, and I have always appreciated Evan Thompson in that role.