

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 37 | Issue 4

Article 12

10-1-2020

Evan Thompson, WHY I AM NOT A BUDDHIST

Louise Williams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Williams, Louise (2020) "Evan Thompson, WHY I AM NOT A BUDDHIST," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 37 : Iss. 4 , Article 12.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2020.37.4.12

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol37/iss4/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Why I Am Not a Buddhist, by Evan Thompson. Yale University Press, 2020. Pp. i + 230. \$18 (hardcover).

LOUISE WILLIAMS, University of Notre Dame

While the title of Evan Thompson's *Why I Am Not A Buddhist* suggests that this book will give some reasons to broadly reject Buddhism, it turns out the majority of the text is focused on the failures of a specific contemporary flavor of the tradition: Buddhist modernism. This flavor, sometimes called neural Buddhism or secular Buddhism, is committed to what Thompson identifies as Buddhist exceptionalism:

Buddhist exceptionalism is the belief that Buddhism is superior to other religions in being inherently rational and empirical, or that Buddhism isn't really a religion but rather is a kind of "mind science," therapy, philosophy, or way of life based on meditation (2).

Although not explicitly stated, Thompson suggests that one of the major ways that Buddhist modernism manifests this commitment to Buddhist exceptionalism is through associating religion with claims made on the basis of faith. Thus, much of Buddhist modernism is focused on illustrating that all Buddhist claims can be grounded in empirical facts rather than claims grounded in faith. Clearly there are other ways that one might distinguish between religion and these other categories ("mind science," therapy, philosophy, or a way of life based on meditation), but from the way Thompson characterizes Buddhist modernism this seems to be the focus. Ultimately, Thompson rejects Buddhist modernism.

For Thompson, we can see that any palatable version of Buddhism has to meet two key criteria. First, it has to have enough philosophical machinery to answer a variety of pressing questions, many of which are grounded in internal concerns about the Buddhist worldview. Second, it has to accomplish this without depending on any faith claims. According to Thompson, Buddhist modernists' attempt to remove faith from the Buddhist tradition is the right general move, but their particular execution leaves us with a version of Buddhism that is incapable of meeting the first requirement. Toward the end of the book, Thompson remarks that he is skeptical that any flavor of Buddhism could meet both of these criteria. On Thompson's view, removing faith from Buddhism means simultaneously removing the foundation of much of the philosophical machinery holding the entire system up. Thus, we can understand the main reason that Thompson is not a Buddhist is because of his broad rejection of faith claims.



In general, Thompson's book does a good job cashing out exactly what Buddhist modernism is and some of its major pitfalls. I am quite sympathetic toward the specific reasons Thompson gives for Buddhist modernism's inability to provide satisfactory accounts of key concepts within the Buddhist tradition. In this review, I touch on Thompson's reasoning regarding three major concepts in Buddhism: no-self, mindfulness meditation, and Enlightenment.

I think a more surprising aspect of Thompson's text is that he identifies faith as having such a foundational role in the Buddhist tradition. Perhaps it is just the prevalence of Buddhist exceptionalism, or the general suspicion many folks express toward religions that are better known for their reliance on faith, but Buddhism definitely does not have a reputation for its reliance on faith. I think a major shortcoming of the text is that the discussion of faith is largely underdeveloped. There are two obvious points about faith that deserved more attention in the text. First, why think that the way to distinguish Buddhism from religion is through removing faith from the Buddhist tradition? This seems to be the move that the Buddhist modernist is attempting to pull off, but we are not given any clear reasons to think that this is the right way to distinguish Buddhism from other religions. Second, on what grounds does Thompson reject the faith claims of Buddhism? To this second point, Thompson reports that he does not believe the relevant faith claims, but he does not explain why that is the case. I suspect that doing so would have required a more elaborate discussion of what faith means in the Buddhist tradition. Such a discussion would have been helpful in unpacking Thompson's main answer to why he is not a Buddhist.

Internal Problems with Buddhist Modernism. Much of Thompson's book is dedicated to exploring ways in which Buddhist modernism's attempt to read every aspect of the Buddhist tradition as empirically demonstrable leads to an incoherent version of Buddhism. In general, Thompson has two major strategies for accomplishing this. At times, Thompson provides in-principle reasons to think that Buddhist modernism's account fails. Other times, Thompson argues that his own way of understanding key aspects of the Buddhist tradition are more successful than the reading provided by the Buddhist modernist. As we know, Thompson is not a Buddhist, but he does take a lot of inspiration from Buddhism, and may even go so far as accepting components of the Buddhist picture for his own worldview. The strongest parts of this discussion are when Thompson points out in-principle problems with the Buddhist modernist account. Thompson has developed several fascinating, although somewhat controversial, ways of understanding key claims from the Buddhist tradition. In this book, Thompson's main goal is not to explain his positive account, so the brief overview he gives is often a bit underdeveloped. Readers who are unfamiliar with Thompson's work may find themselves perplexed at his explanations in this text. I think that Thompson does a better job explaining his account

in his other works where presenting them is his main focus. Since this text is largely an exploration of why Buddhist modernism is false, I will restrict my review here to the in-principle problems Thompson puts forward for the account.

One of the defining features of the Buddhist account is the claim that there is no self. The Buddhist modernist's interpretation of the no-self doctrine is that the self is an illusion that is *created* by the brain. Thompson gives two major reasons that this interpretation fails for the Buddhist modernist: (1) it is overly simplistic and (2) "cognitive science doesn't show that the self is an illusion. . . . Rather, it indicates that the self is a construction" (89). The first point has to do with the complex history around the development of the Buddhist philosophical system. This is especially focused on debates with non-Buddhist traditions who accuse the tradition of being a kind of nihilism about the self. Buddhist modernism fails to recognize any of the nuance of this debate and thus presents a very underdeveloped version of the no-self doctrine. Because the modernists' version of no-self is so thin, it ultimately undermines the coherence of the account. The second point has to do with Thompson's preferred way to understand evidence from cognitive science. As I said earlier, I am bracketing Thompson's positive account for purposes of this review.

Another major tenet that Buddhist modernism attempts to account for is mindfulness meditation. Buddhist modernism argues that mindfulness meditation is supposedly superior to any non-Buddhist forms of meditation because Buddhist mindfulness meditation "exists purely in the head" (139). Mindfulness meditation, according to the Buddhist modernist, is supposed to be something that can be measured and evaluated through the tools of neuroimaging. Thompson argues that this is a fundamental misunderstanding of what mindfulness meditation is. For Thompson, mindfulness meditation does not merely exist "in the head," any more than parenting exists inside the brain. Mindfulness meditation "consists of certain emotional and cognitive skills and putting those skills into play in the social world" (130). Here Thompson accuses Buddhist modernism of feeding into a kind of selfish individualism which many Buddhists object to. It suggests that "all you really need to deal with is your own mind, not the larger social setting" (131). Ultimately, this individualism is "counter to the whole point of the Buddhist tradition" (131). Meditation is not about you going alone to manipulate your brain in certain ways. Meditation is about training yourself to become aware of different societal and environmental elements of the inner and outer world.

The goal of Buddhism is to help folks escape the cycle of suffering and reach Enlightenment. Every form of Buddhism must have some way to make sense of this goal state. As with all major concepts in the tradition, Buddhist modernism strives to explain Enlightenment in purely scientific

terms. They opt for understanding Enlightenment as a kind of psychological state. Thompson's major objection to this strategy has to do with what that psychological state amounts to. In order to evaluate whether we can coherently make sense of Enlightenment as a purely psychological state, we need to know, in some detail, the contents of that psychological state. For example, is it conceptual or nonconceptual? Answers to these questions can have profound philosophical implications when we look at the view as a whole. We need to know a lot of details in order to evaluate (1) if it makes sense to understand Enlightenment in terms of a psychological state and (2) if this reading produces a sufficiently robust state that we can maintain Enlightenment as the goal state of the entire tradition.

One of the major challenges for the Buddhist modernist here, according to Thompson, is related to the complex history of this problem within the Buddhist tradition. It is notoriously difficult to get a specific explanation of what Enlightenment amounts to across the Buddhist world. There is no consensus among various flavors of Buddhism that it is even possible to specify the content of Enlightenment let alone what that content might actually be. Buddhist modernists largely ignore these nuances from the tradition. Thus, they fail to give any kind of robust explanation as to why we should think that Enlightenment can be specified in the way required in order to evaluate their view.

Faith in Buddhism. It is in this discussion of Enlightenment that Thompson's core insight about the nature of faith comes out the clearest. It is uncontroversial that the goal of Buddhism is to reach Enlightenment. We have to have a starting point for why we should seek out this goal state. After all, if it turns out that Enlightenment is kind of ho-hum, no one would ever have the prerequisite motivation to pursue the Buddhist path. Although Thompson doesn't say this explicitly, I take it that the Buddhist modernist might think that the reason one should pursue the Buddhist path is because it is supported by empirical science. Thompson dedicates a chapter in his book to *Why Buddhism is True* by Robert Wright (Simon and Schuster, 2017) as an example of this kind of thinking. He ultimately dismisses this approach for two major reasons. First, he argues that asking whether Buddhism is right or wrong is not the right kind of question to ask. Second, the particular view put forward by Wright is heavily dependent on a bunch of contentious philosophy of science issues. If Thompson's arguments throughout the book are right, we can see that this general strategy falls a bit short. Reading the Buddhist tradition in purely empirical terms fails to give us the robust philosophical machinery needed to support the Buddhist path.

Instead, Thompson argues that the main reason one should pursue Enlightenment is because one has faith that such a state is real and attainable. According to Thompson, this claim is the foundation to a lot of core philosophical insights from the Buddhist tradition. Thompson argues that

without this core foundation, there is no way to support the philosophical machinery that constitutes the Buddhist worldview.

Buddhist modernists' commitment to Buddhist exceptionalism, along with their assumption that faith-based claims are unacceptable to a flavor of Buddhism that is distinct from religion, means that Buddhist modernism cannot accept any faith-based claims in their system. Thompson suggests that this problem for the Buddhist modernist is a general problem for any version of Buddhism that fails to accept the foundational role of faith in the system. Thompson himself reports that he does not accept these faith-based claims about the reality of Enlightenment. He is skeptical that any coherent form of Buddhism could be articulated without these claims, and thus he cannot be a Buddhist.

Overall, Thompson's book is an interesting exploration of why one might not accept the Buddhist worldview. His answer is fundamentally if you don't have faith in things like the reality of Enlightenment, then you cannot be a Buddhist. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the book is a bit too narrowly focused on Buddhist modernism. I generally find this flavor of Buddhism to be unpalatable because it tends to ignore the rich history of the Buddhist tradition before its recent encounters with science. It feels a bit too steeped in what I call the "Buddhist Buffet" problem where we cherry-pick bits from various traditions that match nicely with our own prejudices and slap the label "Buddhism" on it. I take it Thompson would reject my reasoning on the grounds that concerns about whether this is "authentically Buddhism" are generally misplaced since Buddhism is always an evolving tradition. But I found his arguments against analyzing traditions in terms of authenticity largely unconvincing.

If Thompson is right and Buddhism is importantly a faith-based tradition, which I am sympathetic to, then this is good news for scholars in philosophy of religion. If such scholars were wary of engaging with Buddhism because they were unsure of its relationship to religion, faith appears to be a clear bridge concept worthy of exploration. I'd recommend Thompson's book for folks who are interested in unpacking some of the problems with one of the more popular forms of Buddhism today, but not for those looking for a broader analysis of Buddhism. For philosophers of religion, I would especially recommend checking out Paul Williams's *The Unexpected Way: On Converting from Buddhism to Catholicism* (T. & T. Clark, 2002) as a complement to Thompson's book. Williams ultimately rejects Buddhism in favor of Catholicism not on the grounds of faith but largely because of Buddhism's commitment to no-self.