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Non-Buddhism

Preface

Buddhism is a magnificent creation. It is truly (to say it in a Buddhist idiom) a brilliant *mandala* wrought of the most precious jewels, exuding a healing fragrance, distilling a pain-dispelling nectar. Buddhism is a juggernaut of compassion, thundering throughout the world, crushing the endless sorrows that consume sentient beings. Ever since the Buddha set it in motion two-and-a-half millennia ago, Buddhism has been trumpeting the warning that our world, like our minds, is an inferno. It has never ceased to marshal its considerable apparatus of concepts and practices in the human struggle to quench that fire. More recently and closer to home, Western Buddhism has continued this grand project, skillfully calibrating its firehose to target more effectively our lives and our times.

And yet, as we have seen, something is amiss. Something is at work within Western Buddhism not only to hinder but to *pervert* its course. In Part 1, I made several points about this perversion or reversal: (i) it occurs at the micro level of foundational Buddhist concepts; (ii) it is intrinsic in that it is constituted (as reversal) by values posited from within Buddhism itself; (iii) it alters Buddhism's identity as a science or theory of immanent and materialist "own experience" to that of a conjurer of a transcendent and idealist "worldview"; (iv) it transforms Buddhism from a bold bearer of the good (?) news about the human Real into an apostle of a New Age apocalypse¹; (v) as such, the reversal constitutes a misturning, a maneuver performed in the spirit of enlightenment, of, that is to say, a deeper and fuller clarification of its ostensible discoveries about human being, only in the end to have us stand face to face with a contradiction or a platitude posing as wisdom.

I called this reversal a conceptual parapraxis for reasons that bear on the next step toward my critique of Western Buddhism. The term itself belongs to

psychoanalysis. Why not just use a Buddhist term, such as *paravritti* (*parāvṛtti*), as David Loy did earlier? After all, the two terms, connoting as they do something like the reversion of an action, are similar enough. The reason that I use the psychoanalytic term should be clear with a quick review of how the Buddhist term functioned within Loy's argument. Recall that he employed it to mark the transformational reversion from no-self as "the festering hole at my core" toward "a life-healing flow which springs up spontaneously." From where might it spring? Bear in mind, too, that Loy is illuminating the Buddhist Real of subjectivity without essence, substance, or any other stabilizing basis; so, unlike Morton, he is cautious not to posit some Thing, however shimmering and ephemeral, as the source of the life-healing flow. Thus, all he can really offer is that it springs from "I-know-not-where."

While such language of an unknowable-x-that-the-teacher-nonetheless-knows is a standard authoritarian move in obscurantist mystical rhetoric, it does not in itself disqualify the move. From Plotinus to Freud, from Hegel to Beckett, the discourse of the Real is permeated by a mood of impossibility. Lacan, for instance, speaks of the Real as "the essential object that isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail."² Does a statement like this differ all that much from Nansen's famous teaching to the wandering Joshu that while "not knowing is most intimate," ultimately "the way is not a matter of knowing or not knowing"?³ Alenka Zupančič refers to this seemingly "inherent impossibility" of either *knowing* or *not-knowing* (which is still dualistically coupled to *knowing*) the Real/way as "immanent inaccessibility." She continues:

The point of Lacan's identification of the Real with the impossible is not simply that the Real is some Thing that is impossible to happen. On the contrary, the whole point of the Lacanian concept of the Real is that *the impossible happens*. This is what is so traumatic, disturbing, shattering—or *funny*—about the Real. The Real happens precisely as the impossible.⁴

With the examples I gave of Western Buddhist treatments of no-self, suffering-desire, and emptiness, I tried to show that there, too, *the impossible happens*. The decisive difference, however, is that in Western Buddhism it happens through the banishment of the Real—the very Buddhist-appointed Real—itself. The Real-concept once installed is ordered to about face, to double back, to reverse course and retreat *posthaste*. In its place is installed a more consoling, cooperative, affirmative—if even more *impossible*—happening, such as "a life-healing flow," real pleasure and happiness, or an infinite plenitude. With psychoanalysis, to

draw a contrast, the Real as productive non-object, the Real as that “lacking any possible mediation,” is “the object of anxiety *par excellence*.”⁵ The difference is consequential. Where Western Buddhism flinches and shores up against the full implications of its thought, psychoanalysis follows the evidence farther into its murky circuit. For Western Buddhism, the flinch entails a healthy adaptation to reality, the alleviation of stress, and even the end of suffering. Of course, it also means collusion with a political and economic status quo that, like it, places the blame for success or failure, happiness or misery, on the degree to which the individual is able to recognize his or her vulnerability, adapt to the circumstances, and master resilience through an internalized practice of mindful letting go. For psychoanalysis this means the perpetuation of the disease. For our capacity for enlightened living is forged not within the furnace of an individual consciousness, but within the severe circuitry of the social nexus. Whereas Western Buddhism shares with psychoanalytic practice the belief that it is “a search for truth,” only the latter admits: “and the truth is not always beneficial.”⁶

As Loy highlighted, the Western Buddhist result does indeed follow from a *paravritti*, from a reversion or a turning around. The turning, along with its result, however, is of the nature of a *parapraxis* because it constitutes a *recoiling* that concludes in a *reversal of judgement* such that the original state of affairs *does not take effect*.⁷ What does take effect is that the critical reader, like the astute psychoanalyst and, perhaps, the attentive meditator, suspects that a second, undesired, sense is being added to the intended one.

To explain the purpose of Part 2, I would like to emphasize several points here. These points will be elaborated on in Chapter 5.

1. Western Buddhism *thinks*. Western Buddhism represents a momentous effort, sustained over centuries and in multiple cultural contexts, to understand and improve our human condition.
2. Its thinking, however, is *not sufficient*. It is not merely the case that Western Buddhist thought exhibits the kinds of contradictions, aporia, parapraxes, and so on, that I have been attempting to demonstrate. All grand systems of thought arguably do so; and that is not in itself invalidating. The fact of insufficiency, however, in the case of a unitary authoritarian form of thought like Western Buddhism, is, in a quite particular sense, seriously disabling.
3. This is good news! Not only does this fact not spell the doom of Western Buddhism, it *augurs a form of thought* that corresponds more closely to the “vital potentialities of humans” that Buddhism itself labors to articulate.

4. It is crucial to bear in mind, however, that this new form of thought is *not a new iteration of Buddhism*. It involves, rather, an attempt to answer the question posed at the very outset of this book: What are we to make of Western Buddhism? Toward this end, we leave Western Buddhism as it is and take it seriously, but in both cases treat it as raw human cultural material rather than on the (sufficient) terms that it itself demands.
5. As Marjorie Gracieuse warned us, such an endeavor is not easy. Like forcefully unarming a hostage-taker, it requires a “wresting.” As my usage, however cursory, of ideas from philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature, and so on, were intended to demonstrate, what is required for our wresting is an extra-Buddhist *supplement*, a form of thought outside the sphere of Buddhism’s overly determinate, self-positing, influence.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, I have found that the work of the contemporary French thinker François Laruelle offers unusually effective tools for dismantling authoritative forms of thought, excising their motherlodes of sufficiency, and depotentializing their subjugating force. Equally, however, Laruelle offers tools for reconstituting humanly useful “fictions” or “fabulations” from this dismantled material. It is to those tools that I now turn to.

François Laruelle and non-philosophy

I think it is safe to say that anyone who has read him will agree: François Laruelle (born 1937) is exceedingly difficult. Starting with its enigmatic name—for “non-philosophy” means neither *not philosophy* nor *everything but philosophy* nor *anti-philosophy*—Laruelle’s thought “sticks out, like an unwanted tangled root or an unmovable stone waiting for philosophers and theorists to trip up on.”⁸ His general strangeness is a stump well enough for this tumble. If that doesn’t get them, his audacious experimentation in formal and methodological invention and conceptual innovation probably will.⁹ But what trips them up without fail is the unclassifiable nature of his thought—unclassifiable, that is, “within the now familiar and moribund debates.”¹⁰ Laruelle is not interested in dethroning prior philosophical systems and installing his own, superior version. He is not maneuvering to outflank the generals of philosophy arrayed on the battlefield of contested thought. Neither is he a guru, enrapturing us with gnomic utterances on the meaning of life or compassionately pointing out the mysterious presence of primordial consciousness. This is disorienting because the normal procedure for figures like Laruelle—ostensible paragons of Wisdom—is precisely to do these

kinds of things. Fortunately, Laruelle is also exceptionally insightful and, pardon the pun, inciteful. Certainly, for anyone struggling to defuse the hidden munitions ticking beneath authoritative systems of thought, his work proves to be a toolbox of surgical concepts and practices. And it is to that end I employ them here.

It is futile if not outright absurd to offer a summation of Laruelle's massive, complex, and ever-mutating oeuvre; and it is well beyond the scope of this book to present the substantive introduction that his thought deserves.¹¹ Instead, beginning in this chapter and culminating in the final section of Part 3, I use certain Laruellean concepts in conjunction with the problematic of Western Buddhism (I already did this to a degree in the previous three sections). To say this in a Laruellean idiom, I conjugate the two forms of thought, Western Buddhism and non-philosophy, but do so "outside their disciplinary incarceration as terms in themselves."¹² Or, even more descriptively, I crash these two disciplines together as in a quantum particle collider for knowledge. The first, somewhat staid, image suggests the emergence of a new, enriched grammar, one that enhances thought and enables fresh resonances, metaphors, sounds, and utterances. As we progress, the neologism "non-buddhism" will prove a useful term for this new syntax. The second image also suggests that some new, previously inconceivable, material appears in the world. This image works in ways that are instructive for further understanding Laruelle's, and my, basic objective. First, we must admit that this is a violent image: two objects colliding with such savage force that a hitherto unmanifest entity emerges from the opaqueness of space into our world. It is not incidental or a mere tic of style that Laruelle's work is permeated by such a vocabulary of violence and power: collision, insurrection, victims, the philosophical arsenal, one blow without remainder, vengeance, resistance, weapons of last defense, amputation, defensive ultimatum, invalidation in a single blow, the persecuted heretic, the Murdered, the hypothesis of murdered men, eye for an eye, wholly burnt humans, ideal cadavers, black universe, the black substance that flows through the veins of history, the end of the world. The reader may be muttering to herself: for God's sake, man, could any language be *less* applicable to Buddhism? Is employing such ideas not, well, overkill? For readers acculturated to the benign countenance of Western Buddhism it must indeed appear so. Yet, bear in mind that Laruelle himself derives this language *not* from an investigation into world history or radical politics, but from one into *philosophy*, a fairly docile subject. So, what is it about philosophy—and Buddhism—that justifies such language? We can turn again to Marjorie Gracieuse for the short answer. Recall her image of *wresting vital potentialities of humans from the artificial forms and static norms that subjugate them*. Buddhism may indeed be a magnificent human construction; yet

it is never anything *but* a human construction. This fact should be obvious. And it is obvious to anyone who does not subscribe to its unitary program. The point here is that Buddhism does not offer itself as yet another option in the crowded supermarket of human knowledge. It offers itself as a singularly enlightening presentation of preeminent human knowledge per se. It is therefore as a matter of necessity that Western Buddhism institute its “artificial forms and static norms” as sufficient to that end of preeminent knowing. A central task of such institutions, as discussed earlier, is the formation of particular kinds of subjects who interact with the world in quite particular ways. The task, in other words, is ideological interpellation, capture, *subjugation*. This is not to suggest bad faith or foul play. In the case of Western Buddhism, it is typically a matter of being interpellated into a supposedly natural, empirical, phenomenologically verifiable cure: “The teaching of Buddhism is nothing special. It is just our human way.”¹³ It is this seductive lure of a natural remedy, this conjuring of a curative fantasy, that prompts Laruelle to declare that his practice of non-philosophy is “an act of defense, not of intolerance; the defense of a certain human universality against ... a tradition that is believed to place it in danger.”¹⁴ The danger, as we will see, involves the shrouding of a transcendental hallucination over the inalienable in-human, as Laruelle names the person without adventitious metaphysical representations—a concept that is, one would think, mightily appealing to Western Buddhists. A project of suspending the authority of dangerous, subjugating thought, of unmasking it as but an alluring hallucination, of acting always from the side of the generic human and against that of worldly authority—is this not equally the project of Western Buddhism? Western Buddhism is nothing if not a practice for human liberation. It is, moreover, always performed, as Laruelle says of non-philosophy, *ad hominos*, with its sight set on humans. The Buddha himself said that he attained emancipation not in some transcendent state or realm but “in this six-foot body, with its mind and its conceptions.”¹⁵ And next to its vocabulary of violence, non-philosophy, like Buddhism, speaks of liberation, freedom, and emancipation. At times, in fact, it speaks with an almost embarrassingly religious exuberance: resurrection, salvation, justice, grace, gnosis, the Future Christ, peace, and utopia.

On this incongruous note, I now affix the harmonious airs of Western Buddhism to the atonal clash of non-philosophy.

A science of Buddhism

I mentioned in the Introduction that I see Western Buddhism as *a critique subsumed within an ideology subsumed within a faith*. In viewing it in this

manner, I am in line with a certain strain of Western Buddhist rhetoric, if not intention. We saw, for instance, that B. Alan Wallace distinguishes between “a worldview with a metaphysical belief” and the exploration of one’s “own experience.” This is a distinction between forms of knowledge and practice that encourage a (rationally) ungrounded faith in transcendent efficacy, and forms that offer an *organon*, an immanent means or instrument, for arriving at knowledge. Classically, an organon consists of, individually or in combination, a set of mathematical or logical principles, rigorously rational inquiry, or properly scientific investigation. Laruelle, who seeks to establish with his method “a universal organon of thought, more than a simple hypothesis,” insists that this device possess a “double fecundity: theoretical and practical.” As a theoretical device, the organon of non-philosophy, for instance, enables knowledge of “the functioning and the dynamic of a philosophy or the philosophical tradition.” Crucially, it does so only after having paid the “ransom” of abandoning what Laruelle calls “decision” (discussed below). This simple payment ensures that non-philosophy never confuses its *description* of philosophy for philosophy itself. As this prohibition suggests, the organon “is in a perpetual state of producing novelty; of opening and rectifying a specific space of knowing.” This, the practical function of the organon, means that the organon becomes an instrument for the transformation of philosophy’s *usage*. So, an organon is an instrument of thought that enables a critical intervention into an object, event, reality, etc., yet leaves that object *as it is*. As a theoretical device an organon exposes the workings of the object. As a practical device it modifies the ways in which the object might be used.¹⁶

Although it does not use this nomenclature, Western Buddhism clearly views itself as an organon. In fact, an argument with ample textual evidence could be made that a *defining feature* of Western Buddhism is precisely this self-identification as an organon par excellence. Interestingly, however, it sees itself as an organon that rejects each of the senses just given. The *locus classicus* of this identity for Western Buddhists is the *Kesamutti Sutta*, better known in contemporary Western Buddhist circles as the *Kālāma Sutta* after the Buddha’s interlocutors in the text, the people known as the Kalamas. The oft-cited passage reads:

I have advised you as I have not to go by unconfirmed reports, by tradition, by hearsay, by scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on superficial appearances, by delighting in opinions and speculation, by the appearance of plausibility, or because you think *This person is our teacher*. Kalamas, when you know for yourselves [then you should reject or embrace those teachings].¹⁷

On the face of it, this statement can be understood as a radical rejection of what Laruelle calls the World. That is, the Buddha calls for a refusal of “a tradition that is believed to place [the human] in danger” because of its delusory seduction and affective capture.¹⁸ The Buddha calls, moreover, for a refusal at the very root of this danger, namely the coercive views of the community, the consoling ruminations on one’s own self-serving interests, authoritative influence, or the various doctrinal presentations in which the danger is encoded. The text’s refusal goes even further, rejecting the tools that define the great organon of Western thought, Aristotle’s own *Organon*: logical and inferential reasoning. What, then, remains as a means, as an organon, of arriving at valid knowledge of the human condition? The answer, of course, is *to know for yourself*.

Nourished by the Enlightenment, Romantic, and Protestant values that I mentioned in the Introduction, the admonishment *to know for yourself* has become for Western Buddhists “the Buddha’s Charter of Free Inquiry.”¹⁹ Most significantly, it is a charter that warrants the correspondence of Buddhism and science. A recent article in *Scientific American* illustrates the easy logic of this relationship. The title of the article asks “Is Buddhism the Most Science-Friendly Religion?” (Its answer is *yes*.)

This teaching [the quote above from the *Kālāma Sutta*] is widely (and appropriately) seen as supporting free inquiry and an absence of rigid dogma, an attitude entirely open to empirical verification and thus, consistent with science. Moreover, the Kalama Sutra fits quite comfortably into the Western scientific tradition: The Royal Society of London, whose full name was the Royal Society of London for the Improvement of Natural Knowledge, and which was the world’s first and for a long time the foremost scientific society, has as its credo, *Nullius in verba*: “On the words of no one.”²⁰

Nullius in verba, reject dogma, embrace empirical investigation, *attanā jāneyyātha*, and know for yourselves. As theology once did, science currently serves as the supreme pontiff of the master discourse on knowledge. In assuming Buddhism’s close kinship with modern science, the Western Buddhist logic on display here, of course, rejects its affinity to theology.²¹ My contention that Western Buddhism is *a critique subsumed within an ideology subsumed within a faith*, assumes a somewhat more complex situation. Consider, for example, that scientific methodology, in fact, *embraces* nearly all of the strategies rejected by the *Kālāma Sutta*, including the accumulated trials of tradition and experimental speculation. Consider also that the *Kālāma Sutta* glosses *knowing for yourself* as *being accepted by the wise*. Consider that the Western Buddhist correlation of

knowing for yourself with meditation or mindfulness is supplanted in the text by ethical and affective trainings. Finally, consider that ultimately what you know when you *know for yourself* is precisely the contents of the Buddha's teachings. Considering all of this, how can we avoid the conclusion that what we have here is indistinguishable from an over-determining subject-forming ideology founded on a faith? Yet, as Donald Lopez observes, the fact remains: "There is clearly something about *Buddhism* that has sustained its long conjunction with the word *science*."²²

What might this "something" be? I have been arguing throughout this book that Western Buddhism possesses consequential *Real* concepts for critiquing "own experience," or, in a Buddhist idiom, for *seeing things as they are*. I have also attempted to demonstrate, on the basis of several concrete examples, how Western Buddhist figures exhibit a curious habit of evading the full consequences of these concepts. I am arguing that this habit is not merely an occasional lapse. It is, rather, a defining feature of Western Buddhist identity. The outcome of this habitual evasion is effectively to nullify the concepts' theoretical or critical function, rendering Western Buddhism as little more than a one-dimensional self-help fix. This critical function can, I believe, be recovered (if that is the right word). But a nonnegotiable requirement of this attempt is that we avoid the creation of yet another iteration of Buddhism. To fulfill this essential condition we must perform operations on Buddhism that render it unrecognizable to Buddhists of any and all varieties. We must, for instance, depotentialize Buddhism's sufficiency as a unitary system of thought, as that is, the integral, self-relating network of premises, postulates, and practices called *Buddhism*. As Laruelle says:

*We begin by supposing that [Buddhism] does not exist or no longer exists, at least in the sufficient and authoritative mode and manner in which it presents itself, i.e., as a rational yet transcendental fact that teleologically controls the possible operations on it.*²³

In Part 3 we will explore what happens to Western Buddhist materials once we have cancelled this mode and disabled this control. The point here is that taking this attitude serves the crucial function of suspending the principle of sufficient Buddhism. This suspension, in turn, creates the basic condition for treating Buddhism as "a whatever material,"²⁴ to treat it as Buddhism-without-sufficiency, or, in other words, as *non-buddhism*.

In taking this attitude we are producing an effect that Western Buddhism itself constantly gestures toward yet, being fixated on preserving its sufficiency,

repeatedly fails to realize. (Western Buddhism itself, to repeat, offers concepts that tend toward immanence before they mysteriously misturn toward metaphysics and transcendence.) Following Laruelle, it is precisely this effect that I am equating with “science.” It is crucial to recognize, however, that the science that Laruelle has in mind is not that of, say, biology or physics, *per se*. Nor is it the application of the iterative process of scientific method (observation, hypothesis, experiment, etc.). “Science” names for Laruelle, rather, a quite particular *attitude*, both in the sense of a manner or disposition of thought and a position, cognitive and affective, in relation to the Real. More specifically, science is “a practice of *thought*,” an experimental practice that operates, like Occam’s razor, “in the name of a real simplicity and of a real poverty of thought.”²⁵ I imagine that many people who have attempted to follow the tedious tessellation of the Western Buddhist dispensation appreciate such an experiment. The necessity of such a paring practice is, after all, a familiar theme of that teaching itself. We find a pronounced rhetoric of simplification in, for instance, both traditionally oriented Zen forms and contemporary secularized meditation and mindfulness forms. We will return to this similarity in a moment. I mention it here to provide the reader with some contextual footing for Laruelle’s further statement about the function of poverty in his concept of science:

Science is in essence a simple and minimal thought. This is not the result of a philosophical reduction or a metaphysical ascesis: a simplicity of essence but not of structure, which holds in suspense the complexity of division, of abyss, and of autoreflection that is [Buddhism’s].²⁶

Science, as a manner of thinking, as a “science-thought,” is valuable to my critique in its (science’s) very “essence” rather than in its comprehensive procedural particulars. What is this essence? First of all, it is important to note that this essence lies within science itself—it is not the result of operations performed on science by some ostensibly superior external discipline. Laruelle has in mind the numerous “philosophy of science” iterations, in which philosophy and philosophy alone possesses the means to think for a mechanically unthinking science.²⁷ For our purposes, we might want to bear in mind Western Buddhism’s attempts, going back to its formative days in Asia, to reduce science to a servant of Western Buddhism’s own need for sufficiency. This need usually revolves around a “science of mind” trope in which Buddhism supplies the supplement that enables science to think in the manner necessary for a true and truly holistic science, namely, “contemplatively.”²⁸ By contrast, Laruelle insists that science’s essence already lies within science. Specifically, it lies in the fact that not only

does science think, but it “thinks the Real all-at-once, without dividing it and without dividing itself.”²⁹ Science-thought is the means to thinking *emptiness*, for example, all the way through to that for which it but serves as a first name, the Real. Such thinking, *as practice*, moreover, has real-world effects in terms of, for instance, subject formation and ideology construction. The far-reaching claim being made here is that science-thought is “the pragmatico-theoretical thought adequate to the One such as it is *according to the One*.”³⁰ Most readers recognize that this simple essence is in sharp contrast to Western Buddhism’s complex essence as *Buddhist-thought*, to, that is, its interminable dividing of its One (or emptiness, no-self, things-as-they-are, the Dharma, etc.) into categories and phenomena that inject *Buddhism itself* back into the Real. So injected, a Western Buddhist looks into the One and sees reflected back none other than *Western Buddhism*. This complex mixing of the Real or One with Western Buddhist postulates creates the “abyss” and “autoreflexion” that Laruelle refers to. We will consider this matter in more detail later. The point here is that, like an abyss, there is virtually no bottom to this self-reflecting proliferation of Buddhist claims on the Real, or indeed on the person and on the world. The result is, again, what Laruelle refers to as “the World,” the empirical world seen through the “artificial forms and static norms” that constitute Western Buddhism. A “science-thought” is thus “at bare minimum the refusal of thinking *in accordance with the World*.”³¹

A Western Buddhist practitioner is by definition a person who thinks *in accordance with Western Buddhism*. That may sound like a truism. Recall, however, that this same figure claims to speak in the final instance *in accordance with emptiness*, with the self-void, with radical contingency, with the Real. We could sum up the manner in which the Western Buddhist thinkers, in the previous chapter, failed to fulfill the promise of the first names they cited by pointing out that they insisted on thinking *about* the Real rather than *from* the Real. We know from their examples—examples which I am arguing are symptomatic of the principle of sufficient Buddhism—what it is like to think *about* the Real: it is to decide always, and in advance, on *Buddhism*. The significant contrast between *Buddhist-thought* and *science-thought*, as well as the formidable stakes that both share, should be clear. It should also be clear that the latter, unlike the former, is “a thought that moves beyond itself, beyond the vicious circle of deciding upon itself to the thought that practices vision-in-One.”³²

I said earlier that this scientific attitude, in suspending the principle of sufficient Buddhism enables a Buddhism-without-sufficiency. Following Laruelle, we can now simply refer to this form of thought-practice as non-buddhism. From this point forward I employ this neologism to refer to a *science of Buddhism*. The

value of such a term is integral to this critique: it enables us to leave Buddhism as it is, hence, not pretending to create yet another new, improved product; it abrogates the “teleological controls” of the Buddhist masters, who reflexively steer Buddhism toward a transcendent World-making; it enables us to reverse that trajectory back toward a generic human immanence; and it frees us to imagine and formulate new usages for the mutated Buddhist material.

I can imagine that many readers are thinking that the spirit of what I am suggesting *already* animates Western Buddhism. Clearly, hints of a non-buddhism in the sense I am articulating can be spotted throughout Buddhist traditions from the earliest days. The Buddha himself might be viewed as a figure who mutated rather than abolished Vedic material, thereby inaugurating a *non-vedic* precursor to a possible non-buddhism. A few pieces of evidence that suggest such a line of reasoning might be that he reconfigured Vedic cosmogony as a twelve-fold chain of dependently originating phenomena; he made figurative the literal power of the *devas*, and transferred its domain from the earthly, atmospheric, and heavenly spheres to the consciousness of the meditating human; he internalized the sacrificial fire as a potential quality of the mind; he bestowed radically new meanings on crucial concepts such as *tevijja*, *karma*, *dharma*, *brahmin*, *ārya*, *satya*, and many more. The canonical Buddha even inscribes the basic spirit of this *non* into his own teachings. In the most famous instance, he cautions his followers not to attach the raft of the teachings onto their backs once they have “attained the other shore,” or realized those teachings in their own lives. Doing so, they would merely burden themselves with the superfluous weight of *Buddhism*.³³ Zen thought is perhaps the best example of the continuation of this *non* spirit at the root of Buddhism’s founding. Most readers may be familiar with the basic tropes, such as *if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him*; *true meditation is non-meditation*; *a finger pointing to the moon*; *[the Buddha’s teaching is] vast emptiness, nothing holy*. Regardless of what Linji, Dogen, Huineng, and Bodhidharma/Shenhui, respectively, intended by their utterances, in contemporary circles they are offered as proof of a kind of self-deconstructing non-buddhism, in the sense that I have indicated. This view is not uncommon in Western Buddhism. It typically serves an attempt to present Buddhism as something wholly other than a sufficient (read: a religious or philosophical) system, and as something that can only be understood as “universal.” Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Mindfulness movement, offers the paradigmatic example of this rhetorical move when he explains that in shifting out of an explicit Buddhist framework, he “wanted to offer instead [of Buddhism] a kind of translation of a universal understanding or approach that

was never really about Buddhism.”³⁴ It would be too cumbersome to offer a more detailed evaluation of the merits of this general claim. In place of that, I suggest that a ready-to-hand litmus test for readers to apply in all instances of a claim to Buddhist self-deconstruction is to ask whether Buddhism thereby forfeits its principle of sufficiency. Recall that the price of *not* doing so, of preserving sufficiency, is “the impossibility for [Western Buddhism] to constitute a rigorous, non-circular thinking of itself, one which would not beg the question, that is to say, a theory.”³⁵

“Theory,” here, is synonymous with “science.” With the rudiments of a science of Buddhism in place, we can return to the crucial question of the Real. I hope to have demonstrated that Western Buddhism does not permit the full force of each Real articulation to which it itself lays claim. I have further suggested that while this refusal enables Western Buddhism to maintain its integrity as a sufficient system of thought and practice, it simultaneously compromises that very integrity by condemning Western Buddhism to a recursive circularity. Yes, *Buddhism thinks*. But in what manner? Based on its treatment of emptiness and no-self in the hands of its human representatives, for example, it appears incapable of thinking beyond its own self-articulation. Based on the confidence of these representatives, “Buddhism” appears unaware that it confuses the Real with what Laruelle terms its *pretension*, with its own concocted mixtures (premises, postulates, beliefs, etc.), mixtures, moreover, that Western Buddhism is bound, as sufficient thought, to infuse with the Real. Laruelle further argues that such thinking ultimately constitutes “a transcendental hallucination of the Real.”³⁶ What would it take to avoid this result? Would this not be a result that Buddhism, that self-proclaimed organon of *things as they are*, itself aspires to? The first task toward this end is be to interrupt the circular and iterative process that, following Laruelle, we call “buddhistic decision.”

Decision

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Friedrich Nietzsche famously, if enigmatically, declares: “I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.”³⁷ He apparently means that when we adopt the World-weaving language of a form of thought such as Western Buddhism, “we immediately find ourselves in the midst of a system of fetishism.” The fetishism involves the embrace of seductive concepts that have metaphysical explanatory power. What they explain, however, is an ostensible “true world,” proffered always at the cost of the “apparent world.”

Speaking to a readership that holds dear a “stupendous concept of ‘God’”—itself a fetishistic explanatory concept—Nietzsche implicates “unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause, materiality, and being” in the seduction. That is, if we hold these terms to name qualities pertaining to actual or potential objects in the world, then the Christian notion of “God” becomes rational, and thus follows unproblematically. In his theatrical fashion, Nietzsche declares that in a future world, “a thousand times more enlightened” than ours, people will resist the seduction of the fetish, concluding instead that “these categories could not be derived from experience—on the contrary, the whole of experience rather contradicts them.” In an even less enlightened world than ours, people believed that the sun revolved around the earth. And why should they not have held such a view? After all, they saw it with their very own eyes. Similarly, in the matter of metaphysical concepts, “it is our language itself that pleads most constantly in their favor.” The “error and deceptiveness of things” is thus a result of grammar because it follows from being “under an invisible spell” whereby the positing of a noun together with a predicate engenders belief in the reality of the object thus named as the compelling force, the subject, of that predicate.³⁸ Much like the Buddha, Nietzsche attacks this linguistic bewitchment even at the level of the “I.” For example, in positing *I think, therefore I am* as an unassailable bulwark against doubt, Descartes’s “belief in grammar,” Nietzsche tells us, forces him into the error of taking the subject of the sentence, *I*, as the true and necessary condition of that which is conditioned, *think*.³⁹ Nietzsche, ever the exemplary psychologist, notes that we may indeed *feel* as though we have willed a thought (and hence established the certitude of the *I*/soul), but this feeling only occurs in retrospect. It follows from our “habit of ignoring and deceiving ourselves about this duality by means of the synthetic concept of the ‘I.’” This subjective feeling and the habit it engenders unleashes “a whole chain of erroneous conclusions, and, consequently, false evaluations” about the very nature of “thinking,” such that it is compelled by a substance (the subject *I*) endowed with certain properties of agency (the predicate *think*).⁴⁰ If an analysis of the mere grammatical function of *I* reveals such serious fissures in the construction of what Nietzsche calls a “moral-optical delusion”⁴¹ and Laruelle, “a transcendental hallucination,” or simply a “World,” how much more destabilizing will a rigorous investigation into the rules and patterns—the general “syntax”—that comprise that World’s system be? Note that Nietzsche is not required to investigate the ontological status of the concepts that he names (identity, permanence, etc.). He is able to raise the specter of implausibility at the very level of “the first conditions of the metaphysics of language,” or at that point where such explanatory concepts

burrow into the roots of grammatical reasoning. In providing the example that he does (God), Nietzsche signals the enormity of what is at stake. In approaching the matter grammatically rather than conceptually, he, furthermore, is able to reveal that “the ‘true world’” has been erected on a contradiction of the “real world.” This, he says, is “a symptom of *degenerating* life” because it unveils our refusal to confront what Althusser called, nearly a century later, “the real conditions” of our existence. Nietzsche continues:

There is no sense in spinning yarns about another world, provided, of course, that we do not possess a mighty instinct which urges us to slander, belittle, and cast suspicion on this life: in this case we should be avenging ourselves on this life with a phantasmagoria of “another,” of a “better” life.⁴²

The problem, of course, is that we *do* possess such a mighty instinct. What makes this drive toward the phantasmagoric so delusive is that its trigger is concealed in the very structure of our language. In similar fashion, when Laruelle speaks of the “transcendental hallucination of the Real” he is not making an ontological statement. He is, rather, pointing to a “grammatical” confusion. Like Nietzsche, he therefore employs a linguistic concept to capture this confusion: “amphiboly” or “amphibology.” This term denotes an ambiguity of meaning arising from an uncertain grammatical construction rather than from the import of words themselves. A famous example of an amphiboly is no less than the Second Amendment to the United States *Constitution*, which states: “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” We know from subsequent commentary that that the right to bears arms does not pertain exclusively to state militias; it is in fact extended to private citizens. But the grammatical formation of the statement arguably invites such a conclusion. A more humorous example comes from Groucho Marx: “One morning, I shot an elephant in my pajamas.” The amphiboly, the unclear referent of “in my pajamas,” sets up the punchline: “How he got into my pajamas I’ll never know.” We saw instances of Western Buddhist amphibology earlier, where, for example, the Buddhist concept of “no-self” is confused, and thereby seamlessly substituted, for the Real self-void. This substitution is a decisive operation in the positing of the specific Buddhist World. It is the operation “by which the Real is substituted by the transcendental or by thought.” Later, the ubiquitous term *The Dharma* will be nominated as the transcendental pivot on which this syntactical operation turns in Western Buddhism. My purpose here is to introduce the amphibology that we term “buddhistic decision” as “endless circular intersubstitution,” as an “unstoppable

movement of circularity.” As we have seen in our Western Buddhist examples, this circularity “is not marked by reciprocity but rather radical asymmetry.” The superior term is invariably the Buddhist postulate while the “inferior term in this asymmetry is the Real.”⁴³

The simplest sense of buddhistic decision can be gleaned from that last statement. In this sense, decision is simply *choosing* Western Buddhism’s term over the Real term. An interpellated Western Buddhist is thus a person who always, perhaps even reflexively, decides on the Buddhist term. Again, while this statement may appear tautological, it is not at all self-evident from Buddhist rhetoric, whereby a Western Buddhist must necessarily decide *for the Real* (as emptiness, no-self, suffering, etc.), of which her tradition’s term is, at best, but an inferior first name. We all know the rudiment of decision in this sense. The economist H. A. Simon defines it as: “the process at the end of which each moment one chooses one [option among] alternatives.” The simplicity of that formulation, of course, masks the complexity of decision making, involving as it does psychological, economic, and numerous other factors. Yet, this is a process in which we all continually engage, and an endpoint at which we continually arrive. We know, too, how consequential a choice is both collectively, in the continuation or dissolution of a World, and individually, in the creation of a life. Simon thus adds that “The series of decisions that determine behavior during a given amount of time can be called a strategy.”⁴⁴ Deciding on Western Buddhism is a strategy. It involves desiring the promise of the Western Buddhist term, choosing the Western Buddhist resolution of the amphiboly, and speaking and acting—living—in accord with that syntax.

We can understand this process as the psychological or affective aspect of decision. The personal reasons that drive people to choose the Western Buddhism strategy are of course infinitely varied and complex. I just mean to suggest that among these reasons is the shared one of an emotionally charged *desire*. Ironically, given its rhetoric of desire, Western Buddhism elicits many desires in its subjects. It is in fact a veritable desiring-machine. Some objects of its desire-production are explicit, such as enlightenment, awakening, happiness, non-judgmentalism, equanimity, and the plethora of neuroscientific promises of reduced stress, a healthier brain, increased wellbeing, and so on. Some are implicit, covert, or unacknowledged, such as consummate plenitude, unscathed transmigrating, spiritual superiority, cosmic embrace, and so forth. Psychologist Nietzsche, of course, already hinted at this desirous-emotional charge behind the masking of “the real world” with his choice of the term “fetishism.”

The role of personal desire in deciding on the specific terms and overall strategy of Western Buddhism is certainly an interesting and important element in considering the nature of buddhistic decision. We have to leave it behind, however, in order to discuss an aspect that, being less subjective, is more consequential for the present critique. Following Laruelle, we consider this aspect to be an “operation” internal to the very workings of Western Buddhism. The term “workings,” of course, like its synonyms “structure” and “system,” conceals the infinite details that comprise the system. I address this point in a moment. I make it here in order to throw light, once again, on the fact that “Western Buddhism” names a matrix of *production*. Yes, Western Buddhism *works*. But how does it work? It works to effectively produce exactly whatever it is programmed to produce,⁴⁵ for example, concepts that articulate a World; anthropotechnical practices that enact and inculcate that World; institutions that preserve these concepts and practices and generate a charismatic aura around them; interpersonal relations that elicit and sustain desire for the lived effect of the World’s promised charism; subjects who embody, fashion, and reproduce that World. Decision is the operation that enables all such production necessary to erect and preserve the specific World called *Western Buddhism*. We can therefore consider this internal operation to be Western Buddhism’s “Principal and formalized invariant or structure.”⁴⁶ As we will see in Part 3, without this invariant “Western Buddhism” will name not, as it in fact currently does, an integral system of thought and practice, but a chaos of mere *chôra*, or of human cultural material rendered ideologically inert (and hence interpretively up for grabs). Significantly, Western Buddhism itself is unconscious of this operation; it could “not indicate it without also simultaneously ... affecting its own identity.”⁴⁷ This is why I claimed in the Introduction that Buddhism *necessarily* lacks a consequential self-critique. A Buddhism that is aware of its decisional operation, is no longer a *Buddhism*. Such a Buddhism would be a *non-buddhism*, possessing an altogether other identity. This point is important to mention here because it gives a sense of the definitive function served by buddhistic decision. Now, with these introductory remarks, we can look at one of Laruelle’s technical definitions of decision:

The philosophical Decision, variable according to the philosophers, corresponds to a certain invariant, explicit, or repressed distribution of transcendental and empirical functions. Compared to an ensemble of facts known as “empirical,” or a “technico-experimental” work, etc., the philosopher reactivates the decision of the question of the essence of phenomena, which he considers fundamental. He makes a double distinction, that of the empirical

and the *a priori*, whatever it be; then that of the *a priori* and the transcendental, which is an ascent such that he calls it beginning, origin, substance, Being, etc., but which is always presumably authentic reality, equipped with transcendental functions (in a broad sense) ... Decision is an operation of transcendence which believes (in a naïve and hallucinatory way) in the possibility of a unitary discourse on reality.

As I mentioned earlier, the term *x-buddhism* serves to account for that which is “variable according to the [Buddhists],” to, that is, those representatives of the extraordinarily divergent forms of thought and practice that are burrowed within the term “Buddhism.” In order to explicate Laruelle’s definition, it is necessary to say more about the meaning of this term.⁴⁸ The nomenclature that I have been using in this book, *Buddhism* and its major subcategory *Western Buddhism*, denotes an abstract, and abstractly static, whole. An analysis of this whole would reveal it to be an assemblage of cultural-doctrinal systems (doctrine, religion, philosophy, ritual, mythology, fashion, aesthetics, architecture, politics, etc.) that claim an overarching authority concerning human knowledge. The term *x-buddhism* aims to capture two crucial and incontrovertible facts about this abstract whole: (i) it splinters into innumerable variables (as some *x*), and yet, somewhat counterintuitively (ii) it repeats itself incessantly (as *Buddhism*). Concerning the first point, we could study each variable *x*. Such a study would be both diachronic and synchronic, historical and comparative. It would enable us to compile an exhaustive descriptive catalogue of Buddhist communities, graphing their relations and tracing their divergences. In so doing, we would discover differences concerning, for instance, each *x*’s version of the means and end of the whole’s, of *Buddhism*’s, grand authority, in all of its minute detail. From such a study we would begin to see that the whole, Buddhism, breeds virtually interminable interpretation not only of the world, but of *itself*. Thus, Buddhism fractures into unending modifiers while simultaneously retaining its identity. Laruelle terms this enclosed recursive quality “auto-position,” and highlights its importance by dubbing it “the highest formal act of the philosophical Decision.” The act is “formal” because it concerns the “objectification of [*x-buddhism*] itself”⁴⁹—the result of the fracture is always some *form*. Buddhism posits Buddhism. (In a recurring theme of this book, this sentence appears self-evident until we recall that Buddhism claims to posit not the World but the world, not itself but *the Real*, *reality as it is*, *things as they are*, *thusness*.) This self-positing conceit of some given form of Buddhism, some *x-buddhism*, also carries a spatial sense. Here, auto-position means that the *x-buddhism* occupies “the dimension of ideal transcendence” over all other forms of thought. This

position ensures that Buddhism remains external to, over and above, the realms of knowledge—the nature of consciousness, phenomena, causality, personhood, science, etc.—over which it inevitably prevails. Such transcendence, of course, also further ensures the force of the principle of sufficient Buddhism. As our second point articulates, the obligation to maintain sufficiency means that auto-position entails “repetition of a more or less differentiated Same.” This “Same” results from the “certain invariant” that Laruelle refers to in the definition above. That is, a study of the x -variables would generate clues as to the very function that is producing such difference-of-the-same. After all, each modifier indicates membership in the single set, *Buddhism*. “Decision” is the cut in each x that determines its identity as a member of the set. At the same time, it is that which constitutes the identity of the set as a whole as “an operation of transcendence which believes (in a naïve and hallucinatory way) in the possibility of a unitary discourse on reality.”

It is this “operation of transcendence” that establishes Western Buddhism as a form of faith rather than of “first-science” or even of knowledge. In Laruelle’s trenchant formulation, one that should ring true to Buddhist ears, this operation marks each x -buddhism as “a faith, with the sufficiency of faith, intended by necessity to remain empty but which necessarily evades this void by its repopulation with objects and foreign goals provided by experience, culture, history, language, etc.”⁵⁰ As such, if Western Buddhism currently comprises knowledge, it is necessarily a visionary form of knowledge. If it comprises a science (even in Laruelle’s denuded sense) it is a visionary form of science. If Western Buddhism is to contribute otherwise to human knowledge, the repudiation of the principle of sufficient Buddhism is unavoidable. This repudiation, in turn, requires the annulment of buddhistic decision. Our task now is then to investigate that which instigates this vision, or, as Laruelle calls it, this hallucination, in the first place, namely, the “repressed distribution of transcendental and empirical functions.”

I said that each x is marked by a cut that determines its identity as a member of the *Buddhism* set. In keeping with this fractal imagery, we can now view the entire edifice of Buddhism as possessing this same cut. “Decision” thus indicates a *scission* between Buddhism’s “transcendental and empirical functions.” So, in order to discern Buddhism’s identity, we need to perform not an *analysis*, based on its self-imagined unitary nature, but rather what Laruelle calls a *dualysis*, based on its unacknowledged, because unconscious, split nature. It is this scission that creates the gap we saw at work earlier, when, for instance, the Real first name “self-void” became confused for the Buddhist vision of “no-self.”

It is within this gap, in other words that the amphiboly occurs, permitting the frictionless (mis)turn from the Real to the hallucinated material. I think the clearest way to see this function in Buddhism is to consider the role played by the concept of *The Dharma*.

An ubiquitous term from the founding of Buddhism, The Dharma is “the sum total of the ways in which the Buddha and his disciples after him tried to communicate . . . the experience of Enlightenment to others.” To the uninitiated observer this totality is extraordinarily complex. To the practitioner, however, “it is really very simple.” For, “the Dharma is nothing other than the means to this experience.” It is, in other words, “*the way to Enlightenment*.”⁵¹ As its very root meaning denotes, The Dharma literally *establishes, supports, sustains, and preserves* the decisional operation that defines Buddhism.⁵² In the several instances that we have come across it in the present text, additional meanings of this extremely multivalent term are apparent. When Kabat-Zinn speaks of his Mindfulness doctrine as a “translation of a universal understanding,” he is invoking the ancient Indian sense of The Dharma as the cosmic principle of truth and order, somewhat comparable to the Christian idea of *logos*. Buddhist teacher Stephen Batchelor echoes this meaning when he speaks of “the dharma” as comprising a “universal set of values” that is impervious to the endless bickering of those (non-Buddhist) practitioners who deal in mere “truth-claims.” Unlike such claims, “which will inevitably conflict with other truth-claims . . . dharma practice is not about being ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’”⁵³ The reason, of course, is that The Dharma is also the fundamental force animating *proper conduct, duty, right, justice*. It is, in short, the Universal Law, the obeying or flouting of which determines the ultimate character of one’s life, life after life. When Batchelor calls for “a *praxis-based*, post-metaphysical vision of the dharma,” furthermore, he is invoking an additional meaning of The Dharma, namely, as signifying *the Buddha’s teaching*. We saw earlier that Ken Jones means the same thing when he insists that his socially conscious engaged Buddhism is “firmly based on the core tenets of the Dharma.” In Buddhist discourse, however, this sense of the term as *teaching* carries with it the former sense; hence, the Buddha’s teaching is *that which is grounded in the cosmic order*. Buddhist teachers, from the Buddha on, can thus speak grandly of “the eternal and timeless dharma,” which infuses with the lifeblood of enlightenment the dharma-gates, dharma-lineages, dharma-transmissions, dharma-talks, dharma-heirs, dharma-names, dharma-friends, dharma-body, dharma-protectors, dharma-realms, in short, the treasury of the true dharma eye, of the universal Buddhist dispensation. (Note that our terms are

singular—*The Dharma, the teaching, the dispensation*—further indicating the unitary nucleus active within Buddhism’s plural *x* forms.)

In terms unintended by Sangharakshita’s conventional presentation above, I, too, view the function of The Dharma as being “very simple.” The Dharma is, namely, simply the pivot on which the empirical-transcendental axis turns. It is simultaneously the warden of reality’s inventory and the guarantor of that inventory’s warranty. This dual function means that The Dharma must necessarily split reality. The totality of minute elements that comprise some *x*-buddhist teaching is intended, of course, to constitute a perspicuous, indeed an “enlightened,” description of the immanent world. (Additional meanings of *dharma* as *atomic constituents of reality* and *elemental properties of experience*, are apparent here.⁵⁴) These features are thus held to be empirically verifiable. As such, the *x*-buddhist teaching assumes the attitude of a science: it faithfully tracks phenomena. It does so, moreover, at the risk of its own sufficiency since a science-thought is perpetually testing, adjusting, eliminating, reformulating, etc., even its most fundamental hypotheses and conclusions. This gesture, finally, requires that the teaching hover unfailingly near the Real, looking out toward the world. We know, however, that this last requirement is not met. The misturnings that we witnessed are the result of a reflexive, specifically *Buddhist*, impulse to turn back toward the origin of the concept, toward precisely The Dharma. The Dharma is thus the “*a priori*” that Laruelle mentions in our definition. It is the prior “authentic reality” that ensures the verity of the posited empirical claims of *x*-buddhism. Significantly, however, unlike the presumably immanent, thus empirically verifiable, features of that teaching (suffering-desire, self-void, nihility, etc.), the guarantor is posited ideally, and thus “equipped with transcendental functions.” One of these functions is, as I have already said, that of cosmic underwriter for the teaching. This function, however, is fulfilled at the cost of other, further debilitating, ones. In order to guarantee the necessary warrant of sufficiency, The Dharma must mix its transcendental idealism into its ostensibly immanent materialism. *Mixture*, being “characteristic of specifically [buddhistic] unitary syntaxes,” is, in fact, a “first name for the [buddhistic] Decision.”⁵⁵ This intermixture of immanent and transcendent features is responsible for the unscientific “visionary” nature of Buddhist knowledge. *Śūnyatā* as “pure meta-sign and empty element” constituting “the precondition for [some given *x*-buddhism’s] effective functioning,” to return to Eagleton’s formulation, must not be permitted to remain immanently empty. Mixed with the tessellation of postulates that constitute it as a properly *dharmic*, hence transcendental, term, *x*-buddhist *emptiness* becomes, as Timothy Morton

informed us above, a near-miraculously, if inconstant and “shimmering,” productive *fullness*. It is in this manner that decision implicates Western Buddhism in perpetual auto-position and auto-donation: Buddhism is that which posits *Buddhism* and gives *Buddhism*. If it fashioned itself as “a faith, with the sufficiency of faith,” we would not have to bother with a critique since a faith requires no justification for positing and giving itself: it requires only faith. Western Buddhism, however, as the progeny of the “Knower of the World” (*lokavidū*), fashions itself as a rigorous organon of *things as they are*, and so requires the scrutiny that only a science-thought enables.⁵⁶ Laruelle thus offers a key to further “dualysis” with the following description of decision.

We will say that Philosophical Decision is the Idea of a *relative-absolute whole*. Its most encompassing and least detailed mechanism can in effect be described ... as a structure in 2/3 terms, as a Dyad + One.⁵⁷ ... First, an identity of 2/3 (insofar as the third term, synthesis, is immanent to the dyad, philosophy being in need of itself). Second, a 3/2 identity (insofar as the term of synthesis is transcendent to the dyad, philosophy being in excess to itself).⁵⁸

This “fractional matrix in 2/3 terms” (read as “two three,” not “two thirds”) is the “most universal invariant trait” of Buddhism. In the most general terms, we can therefore say that it constitutes the *absolute* aspect of the buddhistic decisional whole. At the same time it produces the algorithmic function within Buddhism that initiates the recursive procedure out of which a virtually infinite sequence of x-buddhisms might be generated. As such, it also constitutes decision’s *relative* aspect. We can consider this *relative-absolute whole* in more specific terms, whereby the “matrix” might operate as follows. I nominate *saṃsāra* (*S*) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (*P*) as the most viable Buddhist candidates for the dyad because of their role as succinct and acute descriptors of the Buddhist World.⁵⁹ *S* means “the world,” empirical reality as a circular maelstrom of being. The individual beings who inhabit the world are driven into potentially endless transmigration by the forces of desire and ignorance. As such, *S*, as the popular Buddhist trope has it, is an ocean of suffering. *P* means “contingency,” the causal, or better, conditioning, mechanism that determines both the being’s perpetuation in *S* (rebirth and suffering) and, potentially, its cessation (*nirvāṇa*).⁶⁰ As “the heart of the Buddha’s doctrine,” *P* is “the central principle of the Buddha’s teaching, constituting both the objective content of its liberating insight and the germinative source for its vast network of doctrines and disciplines.”⁶¹ The canonical formula for this mechanism goes: “When this is, that is; this arising, that arises. When this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases.” In its Western

Buddhist usage, *P* thus denotes the interdependent, mutually conditioned, nature of all phenomena.⁶² As conditioned being (*S*) and conditioning Being (*P*), this dyad can be seen as the definitive (absolute) Buddhist scaffolding on which the minute (relative) *x* particulars are mounted. *S* is the world given to our senses. It is the unimaginable agglomeration of beings, from infinitesimal subatomic particles to oceans and mountains and planets and galaxies, and to the teeming crush of bacterial, animal, and human organisms that populate them to the immense multiversal receptacle that contains it all, from brute matter to enlightened sentience, swirling and undulating eternally, each element arising, persisting, conjugating with interminable other forms, dissolving, then disappearing. Why is this “whole mass of suffering” the way that it is? *P* is both the explanation and the solution, for “Who sees interdependent origination (*P*) sees The Dharma; who sees The Dharma sees interdependent origination.” Whatever “the Buddha” might have meant here, I suggest *we* understand it in all of its multivalent glory.

Let’s just note in passing that within the articulation of a unitary discourse like Buddhism, “the world” transmutes into “the World.” The world, immanent and material, empirically given, is, within the very articulation, transformed into the World, transcendent and ideal, buddhistically given. Since, however, a committed Western Buddhist would deny this distinction—for he or she has, by definition, made the decision that the World *is* precisely the world—we have to take a different tack. A more substantial critique requires that we identify the *internal* operation that renders this decision cause for conceptual hallucination rather than for a generically “liberating insight.” The *S-P* combination is, in Laruelle’s formulation, “a Dyad of contrasted terms and a divided Unity, immanent and transcendent to the Dyad.”⁶³ In our definition, this “immanent” state of affairs is represented as “a structure in 2/3 terms, as a Dyad+One.” The Dharma (*D*), as the lawful function that synthesizes the dyad of *S* and *P*, is the +one that, moreover, transforms the empirical 2 into a rational 3. In order to serve as the dyad’s synthesizing (and necessary) guarantor within the empirical world that the *S-P* dyad aims to lend liberating intelligibility, however, *D* must simultaneously be *extrinsic* to the world given as the dyad. Thus, the “matrix” may also be understood as a “3/2 identity.” The unity of the ostensibly empirical and thus phenomenologically verifiable 2 is divided and then subsumed within a transcendently grounded 3 (the 2 plus the 1). The base assumption here is so crucial that it bears repeating: the structure, the dyad+one, obtains nowhere, bears no sense, outside of this decisional act.

Again, the believer will object. And she must! The operation, however, constitutes an inescapable circularity, whereby the premise (*D*) is contained in the conclusion (*S-P*), and the conclusion, in the premise. In other words, the entire decisional structure of Buddhism amounts to an *explanans* (*D*: the teaching, cosmic structure), that is already present in every instance of the very *explanandum* (*S-P*: phenomenal manifestation), and an *explanandum*, every instance of which already attests to the truth of the *explanans*.⁶⁴ In x-buddhistic terms: The *saṃsāra-pratītyasamutpāda* nexus is visible through The Dharma, and The Dharma is visible in the contingent swirl of the world that it, The Dharma, minutely indexes. Indeed, it is true: whoever sees interdependent origination operating in the world sees The Dharma; and whoever sees The Dharma operating in the world sees interdependent origination. Decision constitutes the specifically x-buddhist vision of the world. It is in embodying this vision that the practitioner becomes “the shape of the World.”⁶⁵

It may help to clarify this somewhat technical explanation of decision by returning briefly to the “real world/true world” distinction discussed earlier. In synthesizing the two terms of the dyad, The Dharma ensures the dyad’s unity, verity, and sufficiency. However, being necessarily *external* to the dyad, The Dharma also creates the division between the “real world” of the (immanent) dyad and the “true world” of its (transcendental) grounding. “Real” has a valuable resonance for us since it is the term that lies at the heart of this critique. We will return to this point in the following chapter. Ultimately, however, “apparent world” is more salient than “real world.”⁶⁶ Nietzsche’s ultimate goal in introducing this distinction was, after all, to abolish “the greatest error that has ever been committed.” That error is generated in the metaphysical pretense that we possess “a criterion of reality in the forms of reason” on which we erect the “true world,” and, along with it, the very notion of the *mere* appearance of the “apparent” world. For the x-buddhist, The Dharma constitutes such a criterion. Nietzsche’s fuller statement is instructive for our purposes.

This is the greatest error that has ever been committed, the essential fatality of error on earth: one believed one possessed a criterion of reality in the forms of reason—while in fact one possessed them in order to become master of reality, in order to misunderstand reality in a shrewd manner—

And behold: now the world became false, and precisely on account of the properties that constitute its reality: change, becoming, multiplicity, opposition, contradiction, war.

Nietzsche, recall, wants us to see the reality-constituting terms that institute this error—change, becoming, ultimate truth, The Dharma, etc.—as fetishistic explanatory concepts plucked from the tree of reason rather than gathered along “the road to science.” We are involved here in a “fiction of a world that corresponds to our desires: [a] psychological trick,” he says.

The intention [is] to deceive oneself in a useful way; the means, the invention of formulas and signs by means of which one could reduce the confusing multiplicity to a purposive and manageable schema.⁶⁷

Again, as interesting as it would be to illuminate this affective, psychological, aspect of decision, it would not get us very far. If the Western Buddhist World is for the nonbeliever but a “psychological trick” it is for the believer, as Stephen Batchelor taught us above, a “universal set of values” impervious to the “right” and “wrong” of mere “truth-claims”; and the attempt to sort out the difference leads to nothing but fruitless bickering. Uncovering the cognitive aspect is another matter entirely. In delineating the internal grammar of decision, we have a truly powerful instrument of critique. It enables us, believer and nonbeliever alike, to identify the character of Western Buddhist discourse (speech, text, argumentation, rhetoric). Most importantly, perhaps, it allows us to consider the *human* consequences of the main features of this discourse: a form of life ensnared in circularity and specularity. “Specularity” refers to the reflexive tendency within Western Buddhism to gaze into the world and see reflected back its own theories, postulates, categories, etc. Specularity ensures that the world becomes, for the Western Buddhist, the mirror of Western Buddhism. Specularity thus offers a seductive means to, in Nietzsche’s words above, “reduce the confusing multiplicity” of possible ideologies “to a purposive and manageable schema.” It is the decision to accept this image in the mirror of the world that catalyzes a person’s interpellation into the Western Buddhist thought-world. Circularity ensures Western Buddhism’s infinite capacity to interpret the world. The practitioner can rest assured that she possesses the “criterion of reality” that renders all things buddhistizable.⁶⁸ Finally, in giving thought to the real life effects of decision on an actual living human being, some of my readers may find that Laruelle’s occasionally violent language is not only justified but imperative. Let’s imagine you conclude that there is at least some merit to the claim that decision usurps human interests in the name of a visionary form of knowledge that, crucially, presents itself as a science of the Real. If so, is not language, however figurative, that speaks of victimhood, insurrection, the x-buddhist arsenal, amputation, and even murder, suddenly pertinent? Perhaps the

decided Western Buddhist will still say *no*! Well, I suppose there will always be bickering among incommensurable communities of thought. To the *undecided* observer, one outcome, however, seems likely: Western Buddhist figures who ignore the consequences of the decisional matrix are trading their seats at the savory, if raucous, Great Feast of Knowledge for the arid desert of the New Age apocalypse.