

Unity and Predication in Plato's *Parmenides* and Nāgārjuna's *Root Verses*

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Abstract: I consider in parallel some main argumentative strategies of Nāgārjuna's *Root Verses* and the "dialectical exercise" of Plato's *Parmenides*. I argue that both can be seen as critically targeting the unity that is attributed to entities as coherent and individual subjects of predication. In particular, both show that it is incoherent to suppose any such subject either *has* the relevant kind of unity *or* (lacking such a unity) does not exist at all. This suggests that we may reject familiar analyses of the contradictory or paradoxical conclusions of both arguments as pointing either toward a superior and consistent structure of logical categories or toward a transcendent insight into the ineffable. Instead, we may see both as pointing rather to a possible overcoming of the "habit" of reifying conceptualization that is deep-seated in ordinary language and practice, and thereby to the potential soteriological benefits of such an overcoming.

Key words: Plato; Nāgārjuna; *Root Verses on the Middle Way*; *Parmenides*; unity; predication; contradiction; *svabhāva*, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, the One

Conceptually speaking, this paper is about *oneness* or *unity* in the sense in which it is reasonably said, or thought, to characterize any *one* thing or item, just insofar as and in the ways that it is said to be *one* at all.¹ With respect to any one thing, its unity – in the sense in which I will consider it here – can be understood as implying: i) that it is one "individual" thing rather than another, or rather than *all* the others that it is not; ii) that it is some (one) way among others; and iii) that it is *one* instance of a more general type, set or class.² All of these can, I suggest, be brought together by considering the unity required of something in order that it can serve as an individual subject, or object, of *predication*.³ Historically speaking, I will argue that central strands of the critical argumentation of both Plato's *Parmenides* (especially its second part, the so-called "dialectical" exercise) and Nāgārjuna's *Root Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*)

¹ This paper is a dramatically shortened and partially modified version of a longer paper written during the first months of the pandemic in 2020 and workshopped by a Buddhist-Platonist research group in September, 2020 and August, 2021. I would like to thank all of the participants in those discussions and especially Amber Carpenter, Christian Coseru, Pierre-Julien Harter, Alexis Pinchard, Graham Priest, and Chiara Robbiano for providing detailed feedback and questions.

² What I call "unity" here is perhaps more often in recent literature called "individuation." Despite this, I prefer here to speak of "unities" or "ones" rather than "individuals" for essentially two reasons: first, to preserve a closer terminological link to Plato's talk of *to hen* or "unity"; and second, because "individual" seems to me to invite what are here essentially irrelevant implications about inseparability, indivisibility, or compositional simplicity. Compare the similar list of definitive features of "individuals," in a sense in which Plato is centrally concerned with them, at McCabe 1994: 3.

³ This formulation is neutral between the older (Aristotelian) sense of "predicate," according to which it is opposed to the "subject" of a sentence, and the newer (Fregean) sense, whereon predicates can be one- or many-place and surface sentential structure is subordinated to logical multiplicity. It is also meant to be neutral with respect to whether unitary subjects or objects, in this sense, are treated as the bearers of proper names or rather as falling within the ranges of quantified variables. Unity or individuation in this sense, in addition to its qualitative aspects, is also relevant to an entity's being able to be *counted* as one of a type. Further, I do not wish to privilege a "linguistic" over a "conceptual" or "cognitive" sense of "predication" here: what is important is just the kind of unity that qualifies something to be the subject (object) of a predicatively structured entity, whether this be a sentence, proposition, judgment, belief, or whatever.

can be seen as concerned with predicative unity in this sense. Reading them together in this way, I argue, further suggests that both texts can be understood as applying logical-linguistic reflection on the forms and categories of ordinary language and thought to significant soteriological benefit. In particular, both can be read as pointing toward a possible overcoming of the deeply-seated everyday habit of reifying conceptualization that the everyday practice of ordinary language both produces and involves.

1. Whether one is or is not...: unity and contradiction

Familiarly, the conclusion of the “dialectical exercise” of the second part of the *Parmenides* (135d-166c) concerning the one (*to hen*) – and hence, of the dialogue as a whole – is (at least apparently) multiply contradictory. Virtually all existing interpretations argue or presuppose that, as a matter of logical reasoning, the seeming contradictions of this conclusion must be able to be overcome.⁴ Thus, for example, in her review of existing interpretations, Meinwald distinguishes (among those which take the arguments of the dialectical exercise as seriously intended) two main types (Meinwald 1991: 20-26). What Meinwald calls “rejectionist” approaches take the contradictions as real, and thus attempt to find some assumption or set of assumptions that Plato is making in the arguments that can reasonably be rejected. Interpretations of the second main type (of which Meinwald’s own is an example), by contrast, view the contradictions as merely apparent and thus try to show how the arguments of the dialogue as a whole can be read as actually consistent despite this appearance. Either way, contradiction is to be avoided, and the success of an interpretation or response is measured, in large part, according to its ability to restore consistency to the overall account of unity itself. The commentarial tendency this exhibits is, furthermore, representative of a recognizably broader tendency in philosophical argumentation about unity and multiplicity in general. This is the tendency, in the face of an overall account of unity that appears to generate contradictions, to hold that the primary philosophical task is to overcome these contradictions, or the appearance thereof, by providing an improved and demonstrably *non-contradictory* theory of the unity of individual things, or of things overall.

By contrast with this, though, Nāgārjuna does not, in discussing dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), intend to produce an explanatory theory of it that vindicates the substantial unity or overall consistency of dependently arisen phenomena in general. Thus (for example) if he gives a series of arguments meant to show that the assumption that things have substantial existence leads to contradictions or absurdities, it is clear that he does not thereby mean to gesture toward (for example) a better and overall *consistent* account of substantial existence that would avoid the contradictions or absurdities here invoked. Rather, the point is to get us to see past the “conventional” truth or reality (*saṃvṛtisatya*) of our ordinary language and concepts, and thereby to attain the level of the ultimate. In this movement, we simultaneously come to understand the reality of dependent origination in a clarified way, coming to see past the ordinary assumption of distinct unities and identities, as well as all the dualistic and reifying oppositions and habits this assumption brings with it. In service to this goal of soteriologically relevant demonstration,

⁴ The sole contemporary interpretation I know of that does not fit this pattern is Priest’s in Priest 2014 (Priest also mentions Hegel and Proclus as predecessors in not taking the dialectical exercise as a whole to demand a non-contradictory interpretation).

Nāgārjuna often, especially in the first chapters of the *Root Verses*, employs *reductio* arguments. Often – though not invariably – the target of the *reductio* is the claim, with respect to a specific kind of phenomenon or entity thought by philosophers to be basic or ultimate, that that phenomenon bears *svabhāva*, which we may translate alternatively as “substance,” “essence,” “intrinsic nature,” or “own-being.” In each of these cases, one point of the argumentation is to show that, since this assumption of *svabhāva* cannot be sustained without contradiction, the assumption is to be rejected and the relevant phenomena are to be seen as, rather, “empty.” They are empty, that is, of *svabhāva*, or of the kind of unity that would suffice to endow them with individuation, independence, and identity of their own.

Now, noting this difference between the usual ways of interpreting the *Parmenides* and Nāgārjuna’s own apparent intentions raises an interesting question with respect to Plato’s own text. In view of what seem to be important parallels of structure and strategy between the arguments of the two, might the “dialectical exercise,” – against the usual commentarial tradition which attempts to restore consistency with respect to the relevant idea of unity – be seen as actually having at least somewhat similar implications? I shall begin to consider this suggestion by juxtaposing the final substantive sentence of the *Parmenides* with the first verse (after the dedicatory one) of the *Root Verses*:

Let us say then say...that, as it seems, whether one is or is not, it and the others both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other.⁵

Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause:
Never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen.⁶

The first thing a reader may notice from the juxtaposition of these passages – aside from the fact that both appear to adduce contradictory or paradoxical conclusions about their main topics – is the organizing “self/others” structure that they share. Both passages appear to consider the possible relationships of their main theme (“one” [*hen*] or any “existing thing” [*bhāvāḥ*]), both to itself and to any possible other. In both cases the relevant opposition appears to be absolutely *exhaustive*: if we have considered all of the relevant relations of the subject matter to itself and to (all) others, we are entitled to draw a conclusion that holds with full generality for *all* of the distinct items or matters that can be considered in this way. These conclusions are, respectively, either that all of these both have and appear to have and do not have and do not appear to have all qualities, including being itself; or that nothing in any way or at any time has ever arisen or come to be.

Beyond just this apparent similarity in (maximally general) scope, the arguments that both passages summarize also exhibit significant parallels of strategy and result. The *Parmenides* conclusion summarizes the arguments of the “dialectical exercise” as a whole, which consists in the successive and maximally comprehensive consideration of the series of hypotheses about the one, whether it is taken to exist or not, in relation to itself and to the others. The argument that

⁵ *Parmenides* 166c. Quotations from the *Parmenides* are by Gill and Ryan, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ *MMK* I.1. Quotations from the *Root Verses* are by Siderits and Katsura, unless otherwise noted.

Nāgārjuna summarizes in I.1 functions by considering and rejecting, with respect to any (putatively arisen) thing, four alternatives that are evidently completely exhaustive of the possibilities for its arising, given that we *can* distinguish between any such thing and others at all. The conclusion of Plato's argument is that we may not suppose without contradiction either that the one exists or that it does not; the conclusion of Nāgārjuna's argument is that it is untenable to suppose anything to be arisen in any of these mutually exclusive and exhaustive ways.

In Nāgārjuna's text, further arguments in Chapter I extend these negative results to the consideration of other pairs of oppositional concepts that might be thought to characterize the conditions of arising, for example the pairs: conditions of production/thing produced (I.4-6) and operative cause/operation (I.7). And beyond chapter I, similarly structured arguments bear against the thought that a thing or entity could come to bear specific properties or qualities, whether those are conceived as either *different from* or *the same as* itself.⁷ Thus, for example, it is argued (II.18-21) that a mover is neither identical to nor distinct from its act of moving; that (VI.1-3) an episode of desire can be neither identical to nor different from its agent; that (VIII.7-11), more generally, a produced object can be neither identical nor different from its producer, that (X.1-5) fire can be neither identical to nor different from its fuel; that (XVIII.1) the self can be neither identical to, nor distinct from the aggregates thought to make it up, and so on. In each of these cases, consideration of the logic of the application of a pair of oppositional or relational concepts that are evidently mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive with respect to the constitution, causation, or characterization of a kind of phenomenon suffices to show that the relevant phenomena cannot uniquely be identified with either of the pair. The reason for this, in general, is that a purported distinguishing of the object by appeal to its possession of one member of the oppositional pair immediately invokes, simultaneously, also its dependence upon, and hence its being conditioned by, the opposite member. In this way, the central problem in each case is the problem of distinguishing any thing as a distinct one, especially as distinct from that on which it is thought to depend.

As recent scholarship has recognized, it is historically likely that Nāgārjuna's attack on *svabhāva* responds to at least two somewhat distinct contemporaneous uses of the term, especially by his opponents in the Nyāya (non-Buddhist) and Abhidharma (Buddhist) schools.⁸ In the first of these uses, *svabhāva* has a primarily classificatory sense: the *svabhāva* of a distinct and particular entity is just its property or properties which qualify it for membership in a broader classifying type. In a second (perhaps more specialized) sense, an entity's possession of *svabhāva* marks it as ontologically *fundamental* in the sense that it is qualified to serve as an "ultimate" and independent constituent of other, dependent, entities, ones that are not characterized as having *svabhāva* in this sense. In either sense, however, what is thought to be the *svabhāva* of a particular entity is associated with its "own" or "intrinsic" nature or unity: what it has that qualifies it to be the definite *one* that it is and thereby to enter into regular and repeated relationships with others. Taking *svabhāva*, then, in either of these senses (or in both), it is clear that it is relevant to its critique to consider, as Nāgārjuna does, the relationship of this purported "intrinsic" nature of a thing to those of the "others," both individually and in general, and to these "others" in general,

⁷ This is essentially the argument that is known in the later interpretive tradition as the "diamond slivers" argument.

⁸ See, e.g., Guerrero 2019: 92-3 and Arnold 2005: 201-203. I would also like to thank Shalini Sinha and Stephen Harris for helpful comments, in discussion and email, on the topic. See also Cox 2004 for a broader investigation of the changing use of *dharma* and related terms in Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma that reaches largely parallel conclusions.

themselves.⁹ The critical argument using this general pattern will go through, as directed against an opponent (whether or not “philosophically sophisticated”) as long as that opponent supposes, with respect to a given entity or phenomenon, that there is indeed some individuating difference that makes this entity a distinct one: some individuating aspect which suffices to distinguish it from others of distinct types, or other “tokens” of the same type.¹⁰ And as later arguments in the *Root Verses* make clear (see section 2 below), Nāgārjuna is just as concerned, with respect to any such supposedly distinct phenomenon, to refute the claim that (lacking the unity which would be provided it by its having or being *svabhāva*) it does not exist at all.

In at least partially similar fashion, the arguments of the “dialectical exercise” of the *Parmenides* work, in each case, by running through, often in rough parallel, a number of potential characteristics or relations (such as identity and difference, parthood and being a whole, or being nameable or not) which the one, or any unity, might reasonably be thought to have, or lack. The eight hypotheses result from assuming the one (*to hen*) either to exist (1-4) or not (5-8); consider, given this, the consequences for the one itself (1-2 and 5-6) or for the others (3-4 and 7-8); and further consider the consequences for each (the one or the others) of the one’s existence or non-existence “with respect to” (*pros*) the subject matter (i.e., what the consequences are being drawn “for” in the particular deduction) itself (1, 4, 6, and 8) or “with respect to” the other subject (2, 3, 5, and 7). It is somewhat obscure what the “with respect to” qualifications are supposed to mean, but it is, notably, just in those cases where the subject matter is considered “with respect to itself” (i.e., 1, 4, 6 and 8) that the subject is asserted to have *no* characteristics of the relevant kind; and just where it is considered with respect to the other (i.e., 2, 3, 5, and 7) where it is asserted to have *all* of them (including the contradictory ones).¹¹ Thus, for example, while the deduction from the first hypothesis (137c-d) shows that the one can neither be a whole nor have parts, the second deduction (142c-d) shows that it must both be whole and have parts; while the first deduction shows (138a-b) that the one cannot be inside itself or another, the second deduction shows (145b-e) that it must be both inside itself and inside another; while the first deduction

⁹ Hayes 1994 accuses Nāgārjuna of equivocating (fatally, Hayes thinks) between what are essentially these two senses (what Hayes calls the sense of “identity” or identifying criterion and the sense of (causal) “independence”) of *svabhāva* in the first chapter of the *Root Verses*. But as Siderits 1997 (quoted in Arnold 2005: 202) recognizes, one can see the two senses as continuous with each other by reflecting that the philosophically special sense (of causal independence) “represents a reasonable articulation of [the] common sense realism” involved in the first sense. At any rate, “individuation” or “unity” in the sense I have introduced it above (with features i)-iii) of the first paragraph) is neutral between the two conceptions and sufficient (I believe) to render valid Nāgārjuna’s arguments in chapter I.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that, as thus construed, the argument has force against the assumptions of Abhidharma and other nominalist philosophers who suppose that the ontologically basic entities are (what are today called) “tropes” or irreducible “property-instances” (whether or not these are considered only momentarily existent). For tropes, there is plausibly no distinction between “property” and “property-bearer”: the entity just is the (instance of) the property. But the distinction of unique individuals – and hence unity in the senses i)-iii) above – will still be requisite for their discussion and classification in general (e.g., for the purposes of an overall classificatory project of the type pursued in Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*). I am indebted to Amber Carpenter for discussion of this point.

¹¹ For this point in its general form, see Sayre 1978. The point about “all characteristics/no characteristics” is also suggested by Priest 2014 (chapter 8), especially with respect to the relationship of the first two hypotheses. Following Sayre in taking the *pros* qualifications to play a central role in organizing the overall conclusions of the text (but with a slightly different sense of how they apply in some of the cases), Meinwald 1991 develops this into a systematic interpretation of (what she takes to be) different senses of predication operative in the various deductions.

shows (138b-139b) that it cannot move or be at rest, the second deduction shows (145e-146a) that it must always be both moving and at rest; and so on.¹² As with Nāgārjuna, therefore, the multiply contradictory implications of supposing any such subject or object to have the kind of unity seemingly demanded by its characterization require this supposition to be rejected.

Drawing this out, therefore, I suggest that “the one” or *svabhāva* – in the sense in which these are each targeted by Plato and Nāgārjuna – can be understood, in each case, as that which is imagined to account for the unity of any thing which is thought to be a one: that is, whatever is a single thing that *can* be characterized as some *one* thing, rather than another. An item that can be so characterized will be one that has at least one “characterization of its own” in the general sense that Nāgārjuna’s arguments associate with its having (or being) a *svabhāva*. More specifically, I shall take it that, for an item, A, to have a characterization “of its own” is simply for there to be true characterizing statements *about what it is*: that is, statements of the form “A is ...” or “That is...” – where the “is” may be either the “is” of predication or the “is” of identity, and where what fills the ellipsis may be a definite or indefinite description, a name, or a (monadic or relational) predicate. This formulation relates both philosophers’ arguments about their respective topics centrally to one aspect of what has been called the “problem of predication,” which is, in part, the problem of the unity invoked or presupposed when we characterize (truly or falsely) any one thing *as being* a one at all.¹³ In these terms, it is clear, any entity, phenomenon, or process that has a characterization in this sense will, as a consequence of what appears to be the basic structure of predication, be required or assumed to exhibit the kind of unity that is the critical target of both philosophers’ arguments.¹⁴ And if these arguments are successful, they will show that no such entity, phenomenon, or process can in fact coherently bear the kind of unity that is thus required.

This kind of interpretation of the *Parmenides* “dialectical exercise” – on which it is most centrally concerned with the unity characteristic of *any* one whatsoever – is perhaps somewhat unusual, since it is more common to take the central topic to be the idea or form of unity or of the one.¹⁵ However, I do not think the present interpretation is actually in *competition* with interpretations on which the exercises are mainly about the idea or form (or concept) of unity rather than the unified individuals themselves. For on any account, the point of appealing to this form or idea or concept is, after all, just to *explain* the unity that any such individual – anything that is “one” in the relevant sense – enjoys and exhibits. And the very generality with which the method of the dialectical exercise is announced at 136b – according to which the point is to consider with respect to “any subject whatsoever” the consequences of the assumption that it is or is not, and that it undergoes any affection or bears any characteristic – itself suggests such a maximally general and universal bearing of both method and result.

¹² Cf. Priest 2014: 122.

¹³ See, e.g., Davidson 2005, especially chapters 4 and 6, and Geach 1962.

¹⁴ This formulation is meant to be neutral, as well, with respect to whether the relevant “characterization” of a one is taken to be primarily descriptive or (rather) accomplished by means of “singular thought” or a device of “direct reference” (as, e.g., by means of a demonstrative, or a non-descriptive name).

¹⁵ But see McCabe 1994: 111-14 for a precedent for the view that Plato is centrally concerned with unity or individuation in the *Parmenides*’ dialectical exercise itself. Other texts wherein Plato is visibly concerned with the unity of anything possessing characteristics or properties in such a way as to make judgment (including false judgment) possible include *Theaetetus* (188d-189c) and *Sophist* (243d-244e).

In the context of the Ābhidharmika positions against which (among others) Nāgārjuna is probably critically reacting, the unity of that which has or is *svabhāva* is often understood as the identifiable unity of that which is regularly caused or conditioned by *another* such item. This is not, in the Ābhidharmika perspective (or perspectives) necessarily or typically understood as a matter simply of the possibility of linguistic description. But it is nevertheless essential to positions of this kind that they be *able* to identify and distinguish (for example) a cause from its regular effect, or a condition from what it regularly conditions. And if the kind of unity that is invoked in predicative description is already implicitly presupposed or required for the unity that is involved in this kind of identifying and distinction, then Nāgārjuna's arguments against the former will at the same time show the untenability of the Ābhidharmika picture (or pictures) of causation or conditioning as well. In particular, in several of the arguments we have considered so far, reflection on the relationship of a thing with its putative "conditions" turns on the consideration of how those conditions, if they *were* really active in conditioning the thing, would allow it to be positively and accurately identified, described or characterized. Sometimes – as for instance at *Root Verses* V.3-5 – Nāgārjuna makes this relationship between conditions and characteristics explicit by referring to a thing's "defining characteristics" (*lakṣaṇas*) and considering how, for a given thing, its having such a characteristic may be thought to condition its being what it is. A thing *without* a particular defining characteristic may not reasonably be thought to be conditioned by its having that characteristic (since it does not have it at all). But at the same time, something *with* a defining characteristic must already have that characteristic in order to be what it is at all: that is just what it means for such a characteristic to be a *defining* one. So there can be in this case no "functioning" (*pravṛtti*) of the characteristic to condition a thing that is what it is independently of having that characteristic: that is, no coherent sense in which a defining characteristic conditions or modifies a thing that is. It follows that there can be no way in which the (one or several) defining characteristics attributed to a thing determine it as *the* unique one that it is.

In the first deduction of the *Parmenides*, at 139e-140b, Plato puts a parallel consideration in a general form which (as Priest notices) formulates an underlying reason why the one, or unity, cannot have any property or characteristic, and which thus plausibly underlies many of the separate individual conclusions of that deduction (Priest 2014: 122). The consideration is that if the one were to suffer or be affected (*paschein*) in such a way as to be characterized in one way rather than another, then it could not be characterized as like or unlike anything (including itself). For, taking the similarity or difference of things as depending on the similarity or difference of the ways that they are "affected," those that are affected in a like way, will thereby become alike; those which bear similar characteristics are similar.¹⁶ But if the one is affected (that is, characterized) in a way similar to something else, it will not be unique, since both it and the relevant other will share the same characterization. And if it is affected (characterized) in a way similar to itself, it will again be characterized as similar to something else, and so again not as simply unitary. As in the *Root Verses*, the conclusion is that a unitary or identifying characteristic *cannot* be

¹⁶ That this consideration does not only affect the idea or reality of an absolutely simple "one" without any possible further determination (what has appeared to some to be the topic of the first deduction by contrast with the second) is shown by its substantial repetition in the second deduction, at 148a-c.

borne, since there is no possibility either that the imagined characteristic is either the same as, or different from, the thing that it (putatively) characterizes.¹⁷

In this way, both texts centrally address the question of the kind of unity which is involved or presupposed in the identifying characterization of any one whatsoever; and they both show, by broadly parallel arguments, this assumption of this unity to be incoherent.

2. Analyzing predication and overcoming unity

If the central arguments of the two texts are indeed parallel in the way I have suggested, they appear to suggest that there is no *consistent* way for philosophical theory to portray the predicative or relational structure of purportedly identifiable entities overall and in general. There is no way, that is, for a logico-philosophical theory *consistently* to characterize the natures of entities in general by means of a definition or clarification of the predicates and relations they can bear and their specific ways of bearing them. But this does not mean that, in view of the *aporias* about the one and its properties or characteristics that emerge from the attempt logically to articulate the structure of predication, we ought to (or even reasonably can) just abandon that structure. The identification of unities suitable to serve as the subjects of predicative sentences is evidently a “deep” and pervasive feature of our ordinary conceptual apparatus, one which we can hardly avoid as long as we think or talk at all.¹⁸ And the point of the *Parmenides*’ dialectical exercise as a whole, as announced right at its outset (135c) is – after all – not to destroy this possibility of the articulate *logos* capable of yielding the truth and reality of things, but rather to save it. This is the sense of the way in which the exercise is to serve as the “training” in dialectic that it exemplifies, for the purpose of illuminating how philosophy is itself possible and productive of real insight. In setting up the exercise, moreover, the learner is specifically instructed in advance (at 135d) to attend to, rather than abandon, the structure of ordinary usage.

This suggests that it may be precisely the point of the dialectical exercise – including (even essentially) its aporetic result – to work through the structure of ordinary language and thought systematically in order to give the learner an understanding of the deeper, or further, truth that the analysis indicates. Even if we are not given by the exercise itself any clear sense of its positive theoretical yield, we may thus nevertheless appreciate that its point may be to facilitate our understanding of what is implied in our ordinary use of predication rather than vitiate that use. In this way, the analysis would in a significant way vindicate – even (or exactly) through its aporetic character – the potential of philosophical reflection to illuminate the reality of what we thereby talk about in general, even if it does not do so in the way that standard interpretations tend to assume it must (i.e., by “saving” consistent unity itself or the possibility of a global explanation in terms of it). And if read in this way, one aspect of the outcome of the *Parmenides* dialectical exercise would in fact parallel a central (perhaps *the* central) aim of Nāgārjuna’s own

¹⁷ In reconstructing these arguments, I do not make any use of the Aristotelian apparatus of “essential” vs. “accidental” predication, for two reasons: first, because to do so would seem to beg questions (especially about identity and “substance”) that are still open for both Nāgārjuna and Plato, but second (more importantly) because that apparatus does not solve the underlying problem, which applies as much to “essential” characterizing predication as to any other kind.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Strawson 1959, especially chapters 1, 5, and 6; and Evans 1982, especially chapter 4.

analysis: that of illuminating the *conventional* or *ordinary* (*saṃvṛti*) in order to elicit insight into the *ultimate* (*paramārtha*) truth.

While the *Root Verses* itself is somewhat terse on the subject of the two truths (it is discussed explicitly only in three verses) it is clear that Nāgārjuna does hold that there can be no insight into the ultimate without considering first the structure of the conventional. Further, as verse XXIV.10 attests, the conventional in the sense in which Nāgārjuna uses it is associated with “customary ways of talking and thinking”: with, that is, the structure of ordinary language and the conceptualization it permits. Here, Nāgārjuna’s aim of analyzing the conventional is recognizably of a piece with the *Root Verses*’ claim overall (as signaled in the dedicatory verse) to present a teaching of dependent origination (rather than a refutation or denial of it), and with the culminating and summative teachings of the non-differentiation of dependent arising from emptiness (XXIV.18) and of *nirvāṇa* from *saṃsāra* (XXV.19-20). And at several points in the argument (e.g., XV.9-11; XVII.22; XXIV.21-37), the possibility of appealing to the reality of dependent origination and realizing the emptiness of every dependently originated thing is essential to vindicating, against objector’s arguments, the possibility of key components of the Buddhist soteriological framework, such as path, *karma*, and awakening. The central idea is that if these components were not dependently arisen they would be eternal and unchanging, and so none of these dynamic realities of attainment would be possible. If, then, we can read the *Root Verses*’ analysis of the ordinary language and reality of predication, as we apparently should, as illuminating dependent arising rather than eliminating it, we may apparently *also* see the significant insight thereby produced as pointing toward just that insight of its non-differentiation from emptiness that the *Root Verses* presents (XXIV.18) as the very meaning of the Middle Way itself.

Indeed, seeing things this way, we might read *both* texts as in fact suggesting that a structural analysis of ordinary language (and, I would suggest, specifically of its predicative structure), even if inconsistent overall, has the potential to illuminate truth at (what Nāgārjuna calls) the “conventional” level of ordinary language and predication, and *hence* to point the way toward the ultimate. This would be so in two related ways, relevant to the specific conclusions about predicative unity we have considered. First, the logico-linguistic analysis would operate as a *global* analysis of the unity that appears to characterize the familiar objects and entities of ordinary life and discourse, what Nāgārjuna understood as the domain of dependent arising as a whole.¹⁹ Second, it would work, specifically, by illuminating the underlying structure of predicative language or thought that makes these entities available to our ordinary discourse and conceptualization, and thus as a critical reflection on the role of language and concepts in structuring our lives. Here, the important point that brings the respective considerations about unity together is just that the kind of unity that is systematically involved or presumed in predication is just that which is plausibly thought to be imposed by language or conceptualization as such: that is, by the ordinary logico-linguistic structure that routinely enables our linguistic reference to the world and thought about it. As such, an analysis of it – such as I am suggesting Nāgārjuna explicitly conducts, and we may see Plato as at least implicitly engaging in – can operate as a critical reflection on this imposition, or on the mechanism of linguistic “conceptualization” as such. But then, to read both texts this way is to present the potential soteriological benefit of the logico-

¹⁹ Suggestively, it would then be an analysis of dependent arising *in general* that would not countenance the claim that any existent thing *is* dependently arisen: cf. the title and thesis of Carpenter 2023, to which I am indebted here.

linguistic analysis as that of beginning to elicit a radical and potentially transformative truth that is not yet grasped if we remain wholly on the “ordinary” level of unreflective everyday language and practice, but is nevertheless directly facilitated by its analysis.

In reading both texts as capable of producing this kind of deeper insight into the structure of entities and phenomena, even despite (or rather through) their aporetic conclusions about unity, it is important to realize that neither of the texts draw the *nihilistic* conclusion that nothing exists at all.²⁰ In fact, both the *Root Verses* and the *Parmenides* pervasively indicate (albeit in slightly different ways) compelling reasons, each stemming from their own internal problematics, why such a nihilistic alternative must be rejected. For Nāgārjuna, one of the major determinants of the “middle way” itself, after all, is that it is a path “between” the extremes of eternalism and nihilism or annihilationism, and he thus gives reasons as compelling to reject the latter as the former. This is centrally of a piece with his goal of presenting a teaching of dependent arising as a whole rather than eliminating it, and is again essential to the specific kind of understanding of the structure of ordinary language and predication that it is trying to facilitate. With relevance to the specific arguments and issues surrounding characterization that we have discussed above, Nāgārjuna affirms both that there are no existents (*bhāvaḥ*) *without* defining characteristics (V.2) and that there is no existent that *is* a bearer of such a characteristic (V.5).²¹ There is, similarly, the more general consideration that (e.g., XXI.17, XXV.7-8, XXV.15) where it is not meaningful to hold that something is existent, it is not meaningful to hold that it is nonexistent either. For (as we may put the issue) both the predication of “existence” and the predication of “nonexistence” of a supposed unitary thing require the structure of unitary predication that we have seen to be incoherent.

In the *Parmenides*, the demonstration that it is not tenable – even given the contradictory results of the investigation into the structure of predication and unity of the first part – to draw the nihilistic conclusion comes rather by way of the aporetic results of the *later* deductions (5-8), those that develop the consequences of the claim that “the one is not.” In the examination of these deductions, the implication of the one’s nonexistence is first shown (mirroring the aporetic consequences of the first two hypotheses on which the one exists) to either lead to its having no properties (deduction 6) or having all properties (deduction 5). In this way, it is shown that the hypothesis of the nonexistence of entities fares no better than the assumption of existent unity itself. And then, in the last two deductions, the consequence of the non-existence of the one for the others is such as to destroy any possibility for the others (as there is now nothing to articulate them *as* distinct others) to be articulated at all. This makes them appear, in dreamlike fashion, as the unlimited or completely indeterminate (deduction 7), or dissolve into complete nothingness (deduction 8). In each of these ways, whether with respect to itself or to the others, the assertion of the non-being of the one turns out to be just as aporetic, and in symmetrically parallel fashion, as that of its being.

²⁰ And much the same (as we shall see) for the conclusion that (although they do exist) we cannot in any way talk or think about them.

²¹ It should be noted that this combination leads to the conclusion that there are no existents at all *only* on the assumption that if there are existents, they must be unities consistently describable in terms of their characteristics (which is, as I am reading it, just the premise to be rejected by the *reductio* arguments themselves).

In each of these cases, the arguments that witness the incoherence of the assumption of substantial and distinct unities underlying what exists do not, then, lead to the conclusion that, given this incoherence, nothing exists. Rather, what the (similarly structured) negative arguments show is that the adoption of this nihilistic view would be just as problematic as the positive, substantialist one, and for similar reasons grounded in the structure of ordinary predication and truth itself. Thus, if both texts provide reasons for rejecting “metaphysical” views, or “views” of being and non-being in general – at least on the assumption that such a view, in order to be one, is required to be consistent – this is not because Nāgārjuna is a “quietist” or because Plato, in the dialectical exercise, is indulging a mere penchant for producing absurdities. Instead, the structure of both arguments seems to suggest that while an analysis of the unity of things required by predication may indeed be incurably aporetic, the same logico-linguistic analysis *may yet* nevertheless bear the potential to point toward a different and “deeper” kind of understanding of their truth.

3. Critical consequences: against hierarchy

Under the constraint of the assumption that an analysis of predication must be, overall, consistent, it can seem almost self-evident that the danger of contradiction must be avoided, within the scope of its project, by introducing a *superior* structure of logico-grammatical or ultimately structurally determining types. In the *Sophist*, for example, visibly responding, in part, to the problems about the one and predication canvassed in the *Parmenides*’ dialectical exercise (see especially *Sophist* 243c-245d), the Eleatic Visitor introduces the overarching structure of the so-called “greatest types” (*megista genē*), suggesting also that these are the most general and broad determinants of any stable discourse whatsoever. These are (at least) the five types: *being*, *rest*, *change*, *sameness*, and *difference* (or “otherness”; 254d-255e). Their overall structure is explicitly connected to the unity of the structure exhibited (minimally in the combination of a subject term and a verb or predicate term) by predicative sentences in general (261d-262e). In each case, it must be possible for these great types to enjoy at least limited relations of possible mixing with at least some of the others in order (the Visitor argues) to explain the possibility of the meaningfulness of these ordinary sentences. The apparatus is then brought to bear directly on the problems of the coherence of non-being and falsity that were forcefully urged by the historical Parmenides in his poem. The great type “difference” or “otherness” plays, in particular, the logically decisive role: whereas (the Visitor agrees with Parmenides) it is incoherent to say of anything that it simply *is not*, to say of a thing that it is *not some way* is just to say that it is *different* from everything that is that way (257b-c).²²

The *Sophist*’s five great types are explicitly interdependent and (at least in the case of being, sameness, and difference) *pervasive*: this marks the elevation of their status and their qualification to organize the regulative grammar of possible predication as a whole. At the same time, they are in an important sense themselves *exempted* from the scope of ordinary predicative determination itself. On pain of reintroducing the contradictions of the *Parmenides* dialectic, they cannot apparently serve as straightforward subjects of predication in their own right. They are, in the terms of Ryle’s classic analysis of the *Parmenides*, “formal” or “syncategorematic” terms,

²² Or perhaps that all of its properties are different from the property that it would have if it were; the two readings correspond to different current interpretations of the argument (see Crivelli 2012, chapter 5).

qualified not to serve as subject matters of categorizing judgments but rather only (in some sense) to regulate their significant possibilities (Ryle 1939a, 1939b). The *Sophist* itself, no doubt deliberately, makes no mention of the five themselves being, subsequently or additionally, unified into some *higher* or still more pervasive overarching unity (although the Visitor does emphasize that “being” cannot be considered identical to the one). But even if they are not seen as (in any sense) further unified, the five (or more) great types or any structure like them will nevertheless have the formally “exempt” status that Ryle accords to them as “syncategorematic” (on pain of reintroducing contradiction into the underlying structure of predication itself). And we can nevertheless envision the probable form that thinking about any such superior structure of the possibility of predication must take within the ambit of a further development of the standardly “Platonist” strategy that seeks, in connection with any variety of explananda, their higher explanatory unity.

In the *Enneads*, Plotinus introduces ‘the one’ as an overarching and maximally simple first principle by means of a recurrent style of “transcendental” argumentation.²³ We may see this argumentation as seeking, in general, to guarantee the coherence of thinkable being by reference to the ultimately unitary character of its universal cause, unity or oneness itself. This cause is, for Plotinus, following Socrates’ suggestion about the good in Book VI of the *Republic*, situated “beyond” being (in the sense of *ousia*).²⁴ Its ultimate simplicity and its superiority to the realm of differentiated being result in its *exemption* from any possible differentiation or distinction. This is what leads Plotinus to hold the ultimate unity to be *strictly* ineffable or incapable of positive description, although he still maintains that negative characterizations (though also not strictly correct) may serve some purpose in directing us toward it. From this perspective, it is only at the immediately subordinate level of the Intellect that one can invoke a minimally differentiated but still regulative domain of logical types and categories. It is at this level that, explicitly, Plotinus indeed locates the “great types” of the *Sophist* along with their capability of structuring the intelligible characteristics and determinations of sensible objects in general and as a whole.²⁵

Plotinus’s explication of the classificatory strategy of Plato’s argument in the *Sophist* (and the *Statesman*) thus exemplifies a strategy that comes to be characteristic of much Platonism and, beyond this, a recurrent tendency of much philosophical argumentation and explanation in response to problems about the contradictory structure of predication as a whole. We may term this strategy that of *exemption and hierarchy*. On it, some privileged item, entity, or realm of entities are, first, *exempted* from the normal run of predicative determination, and second, *elevated* to a position from which they can themselves effectively structure and regulate consistent predication as it operates everywhere else. In this way the possibility and above all the consistency of predicative discourse is said to be guaranteed by the existence and regulatory force of this superior item or realm. But in order to maintain this overall consistency, it is at the same time necessary that the superior item itself be exempted from predication, or from any possible positive description at all.

²³ For this argumentation, see, e.g., *Enneads* V.3, chapters 12-17, and VI.9.

²⁴ *Republic* 509c; for this identification in Plotinus, see *Enneads* VI.9.

²⁵ *Enneads* VI.2, chapter 8; compare Emilsson 2007:105-107.

Something like this strategy is evident almost whenever philosophers have considered the generality of the basis of discursive predication from a position committed to avoiding the possible arising of contradiction. Something similar, for example, characterizes – though in the inverse direction – *atomistic* positions which describe discursively predicable entities as logically or structurally composed from ultimately *simple* ones. One such position, for example, is the one that Socrates stages, and then rejects, in the “dream” argument of the *Theaetetus* (201d-202c); another is Wittgenstein’s logical atomism in the *Tractatus*, according to which logically simple objects cannot be described. In the Indian context, much the same tendency may be reasonably thought to be exhibited by Dharmakīrti’s invocation of ontologically basic and ultimately “ineffable” particulars, whether these are thought to be ultimately individuated by reference to their causal powers, or by means of (non-conceptual) operations of perception.

In each of these cases, concerns about the coherence of predication can be seen to lead to the introduction of privileged unities which – whether “from above” or “from below” -- are intended to serve as its ultimate basis or grounding. As long as this basis is itself exempt from ordinary predication, consistency overall can be guaranteed, because (what is seen as) the unifying structure that determines all meaningful predication is not subject to predicative determination itself. Whether the appeal is to a strongly unique and singular One (as in Plotinus) or is many individual and yet logically simple ones (as for the atomist), the posited unity or unities thus serve to anchor the non-contradictory possibility of coherent predication and predicative judgment in general, and at the same time are themselves exempted from coherent predication at all.

Plato’s arguments in the *Sophist* and the other arguments in the same style function by adducing the necessity for such a superior structure to exist, if these ordinary phenomena of predication – and hence, as we may say in Nāgārjuna’s idiom, if dependently arisen entities and phenomena in general – are to be possible at all. But whatever the extent of the clarification this provides, it is clear that strategies of this type cannot suffice to yield a *complete* account of predication as such. For in introducing while simultaneously exempting, in each case, the superior and regulative structure for which they argue, they require that *certain* judgments or claims not be subject to the very terms of analysis that they, themselves, propose as (otherwise) general. In particular, the terms and structures introduced by (what are supposed to be) the necessary demands of the philosophical analysis of the predicative conditioning of things are themselves seen as beyond such conditioning. In the terms of Nāgārjuna’s analysis, this is to introduce a structure, purportedly determinative of the whole of dependent arising, that is not itself dependently arisen: as we may put it, an *unconditioned* structural condition for all that exists within this domain.

As we have seen, the tendency to introduce a superior and ontologically governing structure – one that must then be represented as *unconditioned* by the range of phenomena it is rather said to govern – is often palpably motivated by the felt need to preserve the possibility of unitary and overall consistent explanation, most directly in the face of aporetic conclusions like the ones drawn by Plato in the *Parmenides* and Nāgārjuna in the *Root Verses*. But what if this requirement is dropped, and one pursues, rather, a global analysis of predicative structure – or, in these terms, of dependent arising -- that is *not* committed to saving a unitary and consistent overarching structure in this sense? Then it appears at least conceptually possible to *uphold* in full the critical arguments of both the *Parmenides* dialectical exercise and the *Root Verses* about unity,

and indeed see both as contributing to, rather than vitiating, our understanding of the phenomena they treat.

This alternative strategy does not appear to be seriously considered anywhere by Plato or within the subsequent “Platonist” tradition after the *Parmenides* itself. But in fact it accords well with the generality of scope that is attested by Nāgārjuna at XXIV.19 in making the claim (one centrally important to his project) that there is *nothing* that is not dependently originated:

There being no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated,
It follows that there is also no dharma whatsoever that is non-empty.

If this claim of universal dependence has the generality it appears to, then it also applies to language itself and the categories and distinctions it permits: *these, too*, are dependently arisen phenomena and are to be treated by means of an analysis of their conditions. Reading the passage this way, it suggests that seeing this – that is, seeing the dependent and conditioned character of *all* entities and phenomena, including those which we are tempted to adduce as privileged in the course of philosophical or logical-syntactic analysis – we are at the same time enabled to see (“it follows”) that *all* of them are empty. This suggests that – for Nāgārjuna at least – the global analysis of the overall structure of predication that characterizes all that which *can* be characterized – all that is thought to be a *one* – is at the same time and by its very global insight capable of delivering the *universal* truth about *all* such entities and phenomena in this sense. This truth is that all of them are empty: empty of *svabhāva* or intrinsic being, as the preceding considerations about dependent arising have generally tended to show.²⁶

One consequence of seeing language and linguistic phenomena uniformly as dependently arisen in this way, and hence resolutely refusing the “exemption and hierarchy” strategy with respect to predication itself, is that it becomes clearer that attempts to resolve or avoid the paradoxes of unity by distinguishing between *types* of predicative conditioning cannot ultimately succeed. One such attempt, marked elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues and in the subsequent Platonic tradition, is the attempt to distinguish “logical” or “conceptual” conditions for the definition or categorization of an entity from the “causal” or “compositional” conditions for its arising. This distinction might, in particular, be thought to align with and explicate the classic Platonic distinction between temporal and sensible particulars, which are seen as primarily conditioned in the latter way, and atemporal forms, which are not. But as we can now see, whatever its benefits for the classical Platonist metaphysical project itself, it does not provide any help in resolving the underlying contradictions involved in the assumption of unity itself that we have considered.

Familiarly, Nāgārjuna’s analyses are often criticized for appearing to blur or ignore the distinction between these two kinds of conditions of (what are thereby supposed to be) unitary entities.²⁷ And similarly, it might be suggested that the aporetic conclusions of the *Parmenides*

²⁶ For a somewhat similar line of argument (drawing on Candrakīrti) with bearing against Dinnāga’s use of *svabhāva*, see Arnold 2005: 158-74.

²⁷ Thus, for example, Taber 1998 understands Nāgārjuna’s reasoning about conditions and the conditioned as exemplifying a “principle of coexisting counterparts” according to which a thing cannot be (or be of a certain type) unless its opposite or differential counterpart exists in (temporal) simultaneity with it. Taber takes this reasoning to be general in Nāgārjuna and also incorrect as it stands, since (he says) it ignores the evident fact “that a thing in the first

dialectical exercise result only from a (perhaps deliberate and intentionally demonstrative) failure to observe such a distinction, perhaps (in particular) what is supposed to be the distinction between the “temporal” predication of relationships between particulars, and the “atemporal” predication of definitional relations among forms. But if the paradoxes of unity are grounded in the general structure of predication in the way I have suggested here, then the bearing of these paradoxes is similarly general, and indeed affects *any* characterization whatsoever (whether “conceptual” or not) of the unity and identity of anything thus characterized. It follows from this generality that there is no hope to save the overall unity and identity, even of purportedly atemporal objects such as the forms, by appealing to their exemption from the range of ordinary predication itself and their articulation wholly in terms of (as it is supposed) “definitional” rather than causal or compositional conditions. For even given this appeal, the relations of mutual conditioning which are supposed to exist between the forms (assuming they are interdefinable at all) will suffice to defeat the assumption of their own individually consistent unity. And for the same reasons, the invocation of a *superior* principle of (what is supposed to be their even greater) conditioning unity beyond the forms themselves will not provide any help, either.²⁸

Conclusion: rejecting unity and finding peace

If the analysis of the overall structure of characterizing predication indeed goes even partly by way of the considerations discussed above, it will operate, at least in part, by demonstrating the real and irreducible *inconsistency* that is involved in the deep and deeply “ordinary” assumption that there *are* such characterizable unities. It will show, in other words, the deep and irreducible inconsistency of supposing that ordinary objects of discourse and predication are indeed unities in the way our everyday language and practices of predication, identification, differentiation and categorization generally and ubiquitously present them as being. In this way, the demonstration of the inconsistency at the heart of these ordinary practices *itself* functions as a relevant demonstration, with respect to any such entity, of the ultimate untenability of supposing it to *be* a unity in this sense.²⁹ If we are willing to credit this conclusion in general, and do not seek to restore

instance is what it is by virtue of its inherent properties and is only secondarily related to its counterparts, whatever those may be” (Taber 1998:217). On the position argued for here, however, it is exactly not to the point here to appeal to the thought that a thing is what it is in virtue of its “inherent” and non-relational properties, since this is exactly the thought that is being challenged by Nāgārjuna’s analysis. See also Westerhoff 2009: 28-29 for a partially similar suggestion in response to the (putative) dilemma of “existential” vs. “notional” dependence, and Priest 2018: 44 for some related considerations about how the “causal” and “conceptual” determinations of entities are plausibly interrelated for Nāgārjuna.

²⁸ These considerations thus bear, as well, on both the motivations for Plato’s discussion of the good beyond being in *Republic* VI, and the reasons for thinking it must fail as an account of the ultimately unifying causal principle of the forms.

²⁹ The relevant contradiction is both interestingly similar to, and also importantly different from, the two “inclosure” paradoxes that Priest and Garfield 2002 find in the *Root Verses*. For like them (especially the second), it adduces a general “ontological” paradox at the heart of any kind of thinking of the “essences” or “natures” of things. But unlike what Priest and Garfield call “Nāgārjuna’s paradox” – namely that “all things have one nature, that is, no nature,” the present argument does not *presuppose* the possibility of describing all things in a unitary way, even as universally empty (and in this sense it is not really a “limit paradox” in Priest’s sense). Instead, by means of the exhaustiveness of the “one/others” distinction and its connection to individuating predication, it shows how predication as such both presupposes and ultimately renders contradictory the unity it demands, thus tending (as I have argued) rather to *demonstrate* this universal emptiness.

consistency by limiting its scope, we are left with the only evident alternative: to drop this assumption, and thus to abandon, with respect to the relevant entity or entities in general, the “habit” of reification, hypostatization or unitary conceptualization that ordinary language and practice recurrently involve and invoke.

I have thus suggested that if the conclusions of Nāgārjuna’s and Plato’s arguments about unity are upheld, even in their contradictoriness, they may be seen as indicating the possibility of a radical type of logical/linguistic reflective analysis of the language and concepts of ordinary life. If this is correct, it appears to have important implications, on the level of concrete practice, for how we might pursue a philosophically informed reflection on the maximally general determinants of this life, and what might be the actual benefits of doing so. In particular, reading Nāgārjuna and Plato as I have suggested, we may come to see our ordinary language and conceptualization as presupposing as a kind of “transcendental” condition of predication that there be unitary things *there* to predicate of. That this condition turns out to be incoherent, and thus unrealizable, effectively defines the spontaneous position of ordinary language and conceptualization as, in this sense, a kind of “transcendental illusion,” one we might recognize, along with the Buddhist tradition, as significantly and regularly implicated in the root causes of suffering through its tendency to produce reification, grasping, and attachment. With this recognition, analysis of the structure of linguistic conceptualization thus converges with the critique of the illusion it induces. At the same time, the critique itself defines a practice: a practice of reflecting on the commitment to unity that is pervasively imposed by the structure of our ordinary language, seeing its actual incoherence, and then returning to conditioned things with a transformed appreciation of their conditioning and interdependence.

Despite the suggestion, which, as I have argued, is in fact motivated in common by the arguments of Nāgārjuna and Plato we have considered here, the possibility of this kind of generalization and practical development as critique is subsequently blocked within the Platonist tradition, as well as much of the history of subsequent European philosophy itself. We have seen here some of the means by which it is blocked: by the positing of a superior or foundational ineffable, by the claim of an irreducibly non-discursive “intellectual” intuition at the end of the dialectic, or by the assumption that a comprehensive analysis of being and becoming, dedicated to restoring consistency overall, must posit this consistency as having a source outside the realm of dependent origination itself. With the programmatic or presumptive development of this assumption, the generality of dependent phenomena is seen to be, as a whole, conditioned by what then can only appear as a *higher* truth, one capable of fixing the terms and relations by means of which the intelligibility of all (other) things are said to be intelligible, without itself being constrained by them. By marked and decisive contrast with this, though, Nāgārjuna does not seek to *exempt* the level of ultimate truth from the logical/ontological conditions that appear necessarily to characterize all discourse in general. For the same reason, there is no ontological *hierarchy* for Nāgārjuna; the ultimate, whatever it is, is on exactly the same level as the “conventional” level of dependent arising, and indeed we are to come to recognize that there is, finally, no distinction to be drawn between them.³⁰ This may seem to suggest, by contrast with the recurrent philosophical

³⁰ As suggested at XXV.19: “There is no distinction whatsoever between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. There is no distinction whatsoever between nirvāṇa and saṃsāra.” The only verse in the *Root Verses* that appears to me at all suggestive of a hierarchy is XVIII.8, which asserts a “graded teaching” of the Buddha passing through the “stages” of

effort (in historical allegiance with “metaphysics” and theology) to save unity and unification as the superior explanatory cause of things, rather the different kind of insight that offers ultimately to bring them, in their diversity and contingency, to peace.

realizing the reality of all things, their unreality, the conjunction of both, and then the joint denial of both. But the hierarchy asserted here appears to be soteriological or practical, rather than ontological; and even if the remark is read as affirming a real ladder-like hierarchy to be ascended, this does not establish that there is some ontologically substantial being at the top (compare Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* 6.54:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.)

But I do not wish to dispute the possibility and potential usefulness of a reading such as Alexis Pinchard’s contribution to this volume, which sees the various hypotheses of the *Parmenides* as gesturing toward an insight into the form of the good or of value in itself, as long as this insight is not seen as an insight *into* the character or nature of any putatively unifying being, item, or principle; or indeed into what is seen as the “character” or “nature” of the “totality” of beings itself.

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