

## Parmenides and Nāgārjuna: A Buddhist Interpretation of Ancient Greek Philosophy\*

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This article compares some principal components of the philosophical thought of the fifth century B.C.E. Greek philosopher Parmenides and the second century C.E. Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna. It argues that there are strong parallels between these two philosophers and the schools associated with them. It suggests a European line of philosophy which independently supports some of the principal insights of Buddhist thought, and which was developed contemporaneously with Buddhism.

Parmenides lived in the Greek city of Elea in southern Italy around the fifth century B.C.E. He is often viewed as pivotal in Ancient Greek philosophy: for some, he was the first person to write about metaphysics, or the first person to use deductive arguments. But despite a broad consensus that he was important, debate continues as to what Parmenides actually had to say. What I propose is a reading of Parmenides which draws out strong parallels between him and the Madhyamaka (middle way) school of Buddhism propounded by its founder Nāgārjuna, who lived in India around the second century C.E. I hope to show that such a reading is plausible and interesting, and the latter for three reasons. First, it renders intelligible and coherent what in Parmenides is often obscure. Second, it holds out the possibility that Parmenides might even have contemporary relevance to the modern reader. Third, and perhaps most interesting of all, it suggests that two important figures from distinct philosophical traditions (as far

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as we know) have arrived at a similar analysis. More specifically, it suggests that what is usually considered as characteristically Buddhist or Indian thought was also being developed independently and contemporaneously in Ancient Greece.

In this article, we shall also take contributions from Heraclitus, who lived in Ephesus in Turkey again around the fifth century B.C.E., and who provides further examples which help elucidate the themes discussed by Parmenides. And we shall start with Zeno, by way of an introduction.

### Introduction: Zeno, Nāgārjuna, and paradox

Zeno also lived in Elea around the fifth century B.C.E., and was a follower of Parmenides. In this section, we shall consider a particular paradox which Zeno offers up in defence of Parmenides. The argument underlying that paradox is readily susceptible to a Mādhyamika (of the middle way) reading. This is a promising place to start, for three reasons. First, it provides a suitable context in which to introduce Nāgārjuna's thought.<sup>1</sup> Second, it provides a convenient opportunity to discuss paradox as a philosophical method, a theme which recurs throughout this article. Third, it reinforces the argument, detailed in the sections which follow, that there are parallels between Nāgārjuna and Parmenides, by showing that there are further parallels between Nāgārjuna and Parmenides' follower and defender Zeno.<sup>2</sup>

Plato's *Parmenides* records a meeting in Athens between Socrates and Zeno and Parmenides. Socrates asks about Zeno's claim that "if the things that are are many, they must be both like and unlike, which is impossible." Zeno confirms that he intends this as a defence of Parmenides' claim that what-is is one, by showing that the plurality advocated by his opponents has "still more ridiculous consequences" (DK 29 A 11, 12).<sup>3</sup>

Modern authors have attempted to re-create the arguments behind Zeno's claim, but admittedly without success in producing anything worth further thought; the re-created arguments are simply dismissed as bad arguments (e.g., McKira-

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<sup>1</sup>To keep this manageable, I restrict myself primarily to Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* ("MK") (verses on the middle way).

<sup>2</sup>Indeed, parallels have already been drawn between Zeno and Nāgārjuna in their discussions on the topic of motion: Siderits and O'Brien 1976; Galloway 1987. For a dissenting view, see: Mabbett 1984.

<sup>3</sup>The Greek fragments in this article are identified by the standard references in H Diels and W Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*.

han 2010: 177-178; Barnes 1982: 237-238). However, the argument does look interesting when given a Mādhyamika reading: if there are many things, i.e., if there are things that are independent of and different from one another, then all those things would indeed be unlike, because this is what makes them independent and different. And yet they would also be alike in being unlike, and this in two ways. First, one thing on its own cannot be different. It can only be different when compared to a second thing. Two things are thus dependent on each other to show their unalikehood. They are alike in their dependency on each other to show their differing characteristics, indeed to define themselves at all. As Nāgārjuna says, “difference does not exist without the one from which it differs” (MK XIV 6). Second, the way in which they differ from each other is alike: as the one differs from the other, so the other differs from the one in the same way.

For Nāgārjuna, nothing has an independent or inherent nature or value (*svabhāva*). Rather, all things are inter-dependent and indeterminate or empty of inherent nature (*śūnyatā*). Furthermore, “the instruction of the teachings of the buddhas are based on two truths: the truth of common sense conventions about the world, and truth in the higher sense of the word” (MK XXIV 8). So first, there is the conventional truth that we do indeed see a world of different things: a tree, a house, a person. We conceptualize these things as independent. There is nothing wrong with this. To a certain extent, conceptualizing is just what we do, it is a natural function of our brains and an inevitable part of who we are. No doubt it also makes the world easier to navigate. But second, there is the higher truth that these conceptions are just conceptions and have no independent or inherent nature or value. A tree has no essential tree-ness, a house has no essential house-ness, and a person has no essential core or self.<sup>4</sup> We might have conceptualized a world of independent things, but we must not be deluded by our own creation.

In Buddhism more generally, delusion or ignorance causes suffering. So according to Nāgārjuna more particularly, we must not grasp after illusory inherent nature, vainly seeking from it permanence or satisfaction. We must not think, if only we could obtain that house or car or person, there is something in it, some inherent nature which we could lay hold of, to make us happy. We would be destined for perpetual disappointment. But the good news is that disappointment and suffering are similarly devoid of inherent nature, and so they can lay no per-

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<sup>4</sup>Our self is, in Mādhyamika terms, only a conceptualization for a collection of physical parts and mental states which have no enduring or unchanging permanence.

manent claim to us; “neither does desire, hatred or delusion have any inherent nature” (MK XXIII 1, 2).

It is not enough to understand Nāgārjuna’s position intellectually, though that is certainly a valuable preliminary. To be free of existential suffering, it is necessary for the higher truth to be perceived directly and realized as a living truth, what has been called a “cognitive shift” in how we view the world (Westerhoff 2009: 49, 157; Burton 1999: 73-74). How to bring about this cognitive shift? One tool is paradox, probably most associated today with Zen Buddhism, although it does feature in Nāgārjuna’s arguments, as we shall see. By showing the impossible is at the same time possible, the falsity of our conceptions is brought clearly to our minds through their perversity, and in the mental short-circuiting that happens as we accept both sides of the paradox as true simultaneously, it is hoped we might transcend our conceptualizing, and perceive the higher truth directly, without intellectualizing filter.

As for Zeno, in the argument set out at the beginning of this section, he too is using paradox as a tool to reveal the absurdity of what otherwise appears at first sight to be a common sense everyday assumption. Specifically, if the world were to consist of a plurality of independent things, as common sense suggests, then according to Zeno this leads to the paradox that such things would be both like and unlike at the same time and in the same way, thus revealing the absurdity of the original hypothesis. Zeno says this supports Parmenides’ rejection of plurality.<sup>5</sup> And it also supports Nāgārjuna’s claim that, despite conventional appearances, the world does not consist of a plurality of things with independent and differing natures.

With these introductions complete, we shall now turn to consider in detail the parallels between Parmenides and Nāgārjuna.

### **Parmenides and Nāgārjuna on false opinion**

A goddess teaches Parmenides, and he tells us, about “the unshaken heart of truth,” and also “the opinion of mortals, in which there is no true reliance” (DK 28 B 1). The truth comes first in his account. This is not objectionable. However, the way we get to the truth is often by identifying what is false in the views we currently hold. In this way, analyzing false opinion can be helpful. And indeed,

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<sup>5</sup> Does the rejection of plurality make Parmenides a monist? Some modern authors deny that Parmenides is a monist, e.g., Barnes 1982: 207, while others say that his theory is compatible with plurality after all, e.g., McKirahan 2010: 165, Curd 1998: 4-5, ch. 2. My views are set out below.

the goddess tells Parmenides that it is proper for him to learn both things (DK 28 B 1), so that no mortal judgment may ever overtake him (DK 28 B 8). We shall start with the false opinions, and the instruction which Parmenides receives is strikingly similar to Nāgārjuna's position.

Parmenides is warned to “not let habit, rich in experience” compel him to any false conclusions (DK 28 B 7). In Mādhyamika terms, the conventional truth, however familiar it may seem to us, is merely illusory. The goddess says that people only view the world as a plurality of independent things because they have been “persuaded that they are real,” whereas things are really only “posited” (DK 28 B 8). In Mādhyamika terms, the conventional truth, however convenient or persuasive, is only a conceptual construct. Parmenides is told to “gaze upon things which, although absent, are securely present to the mind” (DK 28 B 4). In Mādhyamika terms, people hold securely to the conventional truth of a world of things with inherent natures, whereas the higher truth is that inherent nature is absent from all things.

Parmenides is warned about following “mortals knowing nothing” who are “borne along deaf and blind,” who are “two-headed” for thinking what-is “both to be and not to be the same and not the same” (DK 28 B 6). McKirahan interprets this latter statement in the following way: a fig that is green in May ripens and turns black in August, so that it is the same (fig) and not the same (black not green) (McKirahan 2010: 157). Heraclitus makes a similar point. Famously, he says that no person can step into the same river twice (DK 22 B 91).<sup>6</sup> So if I step into the Ganges today and again tomorrow, what I step in is the same (the Ganges) and not the same (a new flow of water). In Mādhyamika terms, that something can be the same and not the same (as itself) simultaneously should signal to us the falsity of conventional truth; the Ganges is only a name, a river is only a concept – neither have an inherent nature.

The goddess tells Parmenides that ignorant people distinguish things one from another as opposites, the prime example being light and dark (DK 28 B 8). This is another case of people being “two-headed”: people have a dualistic vision that sees the world through pairs of opposites. Certainly the conventional truth is that light and dark are opposites. But they are not independent: light is defined and given meaning by dark. In similar vein, Nāgārjuna says that purity depends on the absence of impurity, while impurity depends on the absence of purity, creating a

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<sup>6</sup>There is controversy and considerable debate about whether Heraclitus himself put the point in quite these words. For a sensible overview of the controversy, see Guthrie 1962: 488-492.

cycle of dependence such that neither can exist independently (MK XXIII 10, 11). Hence, according to Parmenides' goddess, while people "established two forms to name in their judgments," such as light and dark, the higher truth is that "it is not right to name one" (DK 28 B 8), because we should appreciate that both are inter-dependent, and neither has an inherent nature. To echo Zeno, opposites are both unlike and like, a paradox signalling their indeterminate and inter-dependent status. And so Parmenides' goddess can declare "it is indifferent where I am to begin from, for that is where I will arrive back again" (DK 28 B 5). In Mādhyamika terms, two conventional opposites are in truth inter-dependent, so that investigating one only leads to the other, and back again. There is nothing to break that cycle because each is empty of any inherent or differing nature.

In addition to the river fragment, and in what McEvelley calls a "striking foreshadowing" of Nāgārjuna (McEvelley 2002: 430-431), Heraclitus is full of statements supportive of the idea that all things are inter-dependent or relative, and that each is both itself and its opposite simultaneously, for example: "the road up and the road down are one and the same" (DK 22 B 60), "day and night are one" (DK 22 B 57). Now Heraclitus has been variously interpreted, for example: the road is about the view-point of an observer (Osborne 2004: 86); day and night are indeed opposites but which combine together to create one stably recurring cycle of measured change (Robinson 1987: 183-184; Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983: 189); the river is about seeming stability masking constant change (Barnes 1982: 66; Guthrie 1962: 450, 466-467), or stability being dependent upon regular change (McKirahan 2010: 134; Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983: 197). But as Nāgārjuna says, the claim that "there is permanence in impermanence" has the effect of asserting both the one and its negating opposite, a paradox which indicates that neither has an independent nature (MK XXIII 13, 14). Hölscher says that Heraclitus' "unity of opposites," so presented as a paradox, is not something to be proved, but grasped through intuition (Hölscher 1974: 233), the suggestion again being, like Zeno, that paradox is not just style, but also method. And so, given a Mādhyamika reading, many of Heraclitus' statements show a deep consistency, in themselves and with Parmenides, their goal being to reveal to the reader, through paradox, the inter-dependence of things such that, although conventionally viewed as opposites, when properly considered each leads from one to the other and back again, neither having any independent or inherent value.

## Parmenides and Nāgārjuna on causation

In both Parmenides and Nāgārjuna, there is another way of attacking the conventional truth. This other attack does not depend upon the revelatory power of paradox, but upon logical arguments which seek to show that a plurality of independent and differing things could never arise or perish. Again there are strong parallels in how both Parmenides and Nāgārjuna approach this subject.

We start with a summary of Nāgārjuna's views on causation. For Nāgārjuna, having inherent nature (*svabhāva*) means being independent, i.e., not dependent on anything else for its existence (MK I 3, XV 1, 2, XX 21, XXIV 16). But after analysis he rejects the idea that independent things ever come to be. He says they never arise, whether: (i) from themselves, (ii) from others, (iii) from both, or (iv) from no cause (MK I 1; see too MK XXI 13). Rather, all things are caused and inter-dependent, such that nothing has an inherent nature (MK IV 2, XXIV 19, 26).

As for Parmenides, he says that what-is does not arise from what-is-not (DK 28 B 8). This covers origination from something other than itself, and origination from nothing, (ii) and (iv) in Nāgārjuna's scheme, albeit in a more condensed form. Parmenides also says that "it is right either fully to be or not" (DK 28 B 8), which Sedley reads as Parmenides further dismissing the possibility that what-is arose piecemeal, from a combination of both what-is and what-is-not (Sedley 1999: 118), and so covers scenario (iii). So the only question which is not posed in common is (i), omitted by Parmenides. That omission aside, both this structured approach to causation, and the supporting arguments advanced, are similar.

Nāgārjuna says that something cannot arise from nothing. So too, Parmenides says that what-is cannot come from what-is-not (DK 28 B 8). This is reinforced by the following Mādhyamika argument: how could one thing (e.g., what-is-not) produce another thing (e.g., what-is) such that the other has an independently differing inherent nature, even an opposite nature, not found in the one? Furthermore, if something were to come from nothing, continuing the Mādhyamika argument, either it would need a cause, or generation would be spontaneous (MK XXVII 12). But if there is a cause, then what arises is not independent. And if generation is spontaneous, "it would be arisen by being found anywhere" (MK VII 17), which is to say that generation would be continuous and infinite. Parmenides makes the same point when he asks "what need would have roused it to grow later or earlier?" (DK 28 B 8): either there must have been a need (a cause), or again generation would be continuous. As Zeno might say, however implausible we

might find the claim that things are empty of inherent nature, the opposite claim, if it means continuous and infinite generation, is more ridiculous still.

Precisely these same arguments, common to Nāgārjuna and Parmenides when discussing how something cannot arise from nothing, equally dismiss the possibility of something arising from itself, or from something different, or from both, these being the remaining scenarios in Nāgārjuna's scheme. (Readers prepared to accept this point can skip the next paragraph.)

Something cannot arise from itself (MK VII 13). First, it would be no origination if it already existed.<sup>7</sup> And at any rate, what would cause itself to generate itself? Again, either there would be a cause, or generation would be spontaneous and hence continuous and infinite. Something cannot arise from something different. Again, how could one thing produce another such that the other has an independently differing inherent nature not found in the one, and in such a way without the two things being related (and hence dependent)? And again, what would cause the one to produce the other? Either there would be a cause, or generation would be spontaneous – and this time it is even worse, since it is not just generating itself, but generating something different. So why would it generate one different thing rather than any other different thing? If there is no cause to differentiate between what gets produced, then every thing would produce every other different thing, again continuously and to infinity. And note that self-arising, and arising from another, both assume the existence of the originating thing in the first place. But what produced the originating thing in the first place? And so we get an infinite regress backwards too (MK VII 19). Finally, something cannot arise from a combination of both itself and something else, because the same problems would continue to present.

Having shown that nothing can arise, both Parmenides and Nāgārjuna believe they have shown that neither can anything perish. Parmenides says, “thus generation has been extinguished, and perishing cannot be investigated” (DK 28 B 8), a point similarly made by Nāgārjuna who says, “when events do not arise, cessation does not happen” (MK I 9; see too MK VII 29). As McKirahan says of Parmenides, mirror arguments hold against the possibility of going out of existence as coming into existence (McKirahan 2010: 159), a point also made by Nāgārjuna (MK VII 32). And presumably also because perishing would have to

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<sup>7</sup>Note that Nāgārjuna seems not to be saying that something cannot clone a second identical version, so that there are now two. Rather, he seems to be saying that something cannot produce itself, so that there is now still one.



be followed by generation (a possibility already dismissed) if there were anything to remain in the world.

For completeness, it should be noted that Nāgārjuna runs a further argument. Not only are things dependent on their causes, but causes themselves are indeterminate conceptual constructs. Thus all things are, in a sense, doubly dependent, first upon their causes, and second because causes are conceptually dependent (Westerhoff 2009: 124). This is because a cause is only a cause if it has an effect (MK IV 3, XX 22), just as an effect is only an effect if it has a cause (MK IV 2), creating a circularity of dependence. It is not possible to separate out cause and effect; they are inter-dependent (MK XX 19). For a start, an effect cannot be prior to a cause (MK XX 8); even conventionally, that would be illogical. But if a cause comes first, it cannot have stopped prior to the effect, because then it is spent before the effect arises; nor can there be an overlap, because after the effect arises the continuing cause is redundant (MK XX 10). Nor can they arise simultaneously, because that would result in identity of cause and effect (MK XX 7, 20).<sup>8</sup> Thus “cause and effect do not meaningfully exist” (MK XI 7).

### **Parmenides’ truth, and its consistency with Nāgārjuna**

False opinions have been identified and dismissed, whether through the revelatory power of paradox and “two-headed” thinking, or through the logical arguments relating to causation. So what is the truth left behind?

Parmenides says that what-is is “whole” and “complete” and not divisible but “full of what-is” and “inviolable” (DK 28 B 8). This corresponds with the broader Mādhyamika position that an independent thing cannot be a collection of parts, for then it would be dependent on those parts, and liable to be broken down into its constituent elements (Westerhoff 2009: 36). As Parmenides says, this “would keep it from holding together” (DK 28 B 8). Parmenides also says that what-is is “one,” “ungenerated and imperishable,” “unique” and “steadfast” (DK 28 B 8). Similarly, Heraclitus says that “listening not to me but to the *logos*, it is wise to agree that all things are one” (DK 22 B 50). But there are two ways of taking this.

The first way is not so charitable to Parmenides, but still instructive to the reader. We might say that Parmenides reasons as follows: impermanence (generation and perishing) has been rejected, so what-is must be permanent; plurality

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<sup>8</sup>Either that, or you get an effect arising without a prior cause, which is impossible, and the continuing overlap again makes the cause redundant once the effect has arisen.

has been rejected, so what-is must be singular. This might seem a forgivable conclusion were it not for the fact that it falls prey to the habit which Parmenides himself was warned against, of accepting the conventional view that the world consists of opposites. As Heraclitus says, “if a man who had stepped into mud were to wash it off with mud, he would be thought mad if anyone noticed him” (DK 22 B 5). And yet Parmenides, on this interpretation, has done just that, by rejecting as illusory a world of opposites, a world of pluralistic inherent natures, only to adopt its opposite, a monistic inherent nature.

According to Madhyamaka, as its name suggests, the proper conclusion is a middle way (MK V 8, XV 6, 10, XVIII 8, 11, XXI 10). Nothing has an independent or inherent nature; rather all things are inter-dependent and indeterminate. Similarly, Hussey suggests that Heraclitus’ “unity in opposites” might show that there are further solutions than just monism or plurality (Hussey 1999: 98). Nāgārjuna’s task is negative, to destroy ignorance, and not to advance some positive theory which merely replaces one conventional truth with another. Hence he says that “not any doctrine anywhere has been taught to anyone by the Buddha” (MK XXIV 24; see too MK XXIV 12). Thus it is not that all things have an inherent nature of emptiness; rather all things are empty of inherent nature. We should not hold onto or grasp after emptiness (MK IV 9, XIII 8, XXIV 11). Nāgārjuna only uses emptiness as a teaching aid (MK XXII 11). Emptiness is like an antidote (Williams 1989: 62), which uses itself up in overcoming the poison thought of inherent nature so that neither remain. Or, following McCagney, it is like air – there is simply nothing to grasp (McCagney 1997: xx, 25, 33). As Nāgārjuna says, “the one who clings is clinging to what is everywhere open” (MK XXII 10).

This first interpretation of Parmenides’ truth, not charitable to him because it fixes him with the very error he has exhorted others to avoid, is nevertheless instructive in being a final salutary warning, as Nāgārjuna himself makes, not to grasp after any conceptual determinacy (because all concepts are illusory and indeterminate).

There is a second, more charitable interpretation. If Parmenides is rightly a monist of sorts, what is that one thing? Perhaps it is Life (or Being) itself. This does not commit us to the view that Life only manifests itself in one thing, or that all instances of Life are permanent and independent. Rather, it is consistent with Life itself being persistent and ever-present, with manifestations which are inter-dependent and without differing inherent natures. This is not such a lowest common denominator as to be trivial: it has serious implications for cosmogeny

(how the universe came to be); and it has serious implications for ethics, e.g., should we behave virtuously if virtue is itself a mere concept devoid of inherent value?<sup>9</sup>

Adopting this second interpretation, are there still parallels here with Nāgārjuna? Support can be found in Conze. He agrees that for Parmenides the higher truth is a transcendent reality which, to circumvent the difficulties of adequate verbal expression, is hinted at through the use of paradoxes (Conze 1963: 20-21). This Conze compares to the “monistic ontology” of Mahāyāna Buddhism (the branch in which Madhyamaka is found), which he says developed the notion of emptiness as the prime avenue to nirvāṇa, itself the one and single, the ultimate and unconditioned reality (Conze 1963: 10-11). Thus we might say that the higher truth for Parmenides and Nāgārjuna is perhaps a cognitive state which transcends conventional and dualist conceptions (including any meaningful distinction between pluralist and monist), a state principally characterized as nothing more or less than a pure abiding in Life.

A final warning: whatever transcendent state we might hope to experience (e.g., MK XVIII 9), in the meantime nirvāṇa is still only a concept with no inherent difference from, indeed dependent upon, its opposite concept of saṃsāra (the realm of bondage) (MK XXV 19, XVI 10). We must not grasp after nirvāṇa, for it is yet another illusion (MK XXV, 10, 12). As Nāgārjuna says, “for those who say ‘nirvāṇa will be mine,’ their grasping of the non-grasping of freedom is a gigantic grasping” (MK XVI 29).

## Conclusion

The strong substantive parallels between Parmenides and Nāgārjuna begin with their rejection of illusory or false opinion. The conventional truth, that there is a plurality of independent things in the world, i.e., a plurality of things with independent and differing inherent natures, is familiar and convenient, but such things are only conceptual constructs which we create, and we should not be blinded or deluded by our creation.

For both Parmenides and Nāgārjuna, two methods in particular are used in support of their case. First, paradox helps signal the falsity of conventional truth.

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<sup>9</sup>We might note here that Nāgārjuna continues to put store by self-restraint, kindness, and friendliness (MK XVII 33), and affirms that Buddha himself taught from compassion (MK XXVII 30).

If we see something as being both the same and not the same as itself simultaneously, or as being itself while at the same time dependent upon its negating opposite in an unbroken cycle of mutual dependency, this should reveal the ignorance of our “two-headed” thinking. Second, they both use arguments designed to show the logical impossibility of a plurality of independent things ever arising. One thing (or nothing) cannot give rise to something of an independently differing nature not found in the one, let alone without a cause to govern or restrict what arises when, without which generation would be infinite and continuous, an absurd proposition.

Setting aside the conventional truth, what comes of the higher truth? If Parmenides is interpreted as a straightforward monist, then here he parts company with Nāgārjuna. For the latter, monism is as empty of inherent worth as pluralism. Instead, Parmenides would stand as a final warning against grasping after conceptual determinacy rather than accepting the middle way of indeterminacy or openness of all phenomena. But an alternative interpretation restores the parallels, whereby the higher truth for both Parmenides and Nāgārjuna is a unitary cognitive state which transcends conventional conceptions, which sees all things as empty of inherent nature, and which is perhaps characterized simply as a pure abiding in Life.

The consequence of all this is to recover the meaning and importance of Parmenides as a philosopher, and to reveal a European line of philosophy which independently supports some of the principal insights of Buddhist thought, and which was developed contemporaneously with Buddhism.

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