



## Book Reviews

GRAHAM PRIEST, **One: Being an Investigation into the Unity of Reality and of its Parts, including the Singular Object which is Nothingness**, Oxford University Press, 2014, 272 pp., ISBN 9780199688258

### An overview

Since the beginning of Western thought, philosophers have been interested in problems of the *one* and the *many*. For example, how can two or more parts be unified together to constitute one object? Considering this question, Parmenides and Plato cast doubt on the notion of parthood. Indeed, they offer some arguments according to which the notion of parthood leads to contradiction. How should we evaluate such arguments? If we turn our eyes to the Eastern tradition, we find that Buddhists have considered the one and the many from a different perspective. According to them, the one is the many and the many is the one. How does this claim make sense? *One* is the ambitious attempt to answer these and other questions concerning the metaphysics of the one and the many, using formal materials like paraconsistent logic, world semantics, mereology, non-well-founded set theory and so on.

This book consists of three parts. Part I (“Unity”) examines the problem of unity — how are two or more objects unified into one object? — and develops a theory of unity on the basis of what he calls *gluons*. According to Priest, a gluon for an object is one of its parts and, as its name suggests, glues all parts of it together. Discussing Frege’s account of the proposition unity and his puzzle about the concept *horse*, Chapter 1 explicates the paradoxical nature of gluons: a gluon is an object but not an object. Arguing that gluons are essentially contradictory, Priest’s

gluon theory is a clear instance of dialetheism, which he has developed and argued for over the years ([5, 6]). After establishing the foundation of gluon theory in Chapter 2 (discussed in some details later), Priest presents some applications of it. In Chapter 3, the author develops a novel theory of universals and their instances on the basis of his gluon theory. Chapter 4 is about two extreme entities, that is, everything (the totality of all objects) and nothing (the absence of all objects). Finally, Chapter 5 examines cases of the non-transitivity of identity, more generally, cases of the failure of substitutivity of identicals, which are essential in gluon theory.

In Part II (“Plato’s Trajectory”), Priest untangles some riddles which have kept philosophers busy since Plato such as mereological wholes (Chapter 6), falsity (Chapter 9), perception (Chapter 10.1) and intentionality (Chapter 10.5). He also gives an original interpretation of the Parmenides of Plato. First of all, Priest summarizes, discusses and criticizes the position of Parmenides presented in *On Nature*. Secondly, he examines the Plato’s *Sophist* specifying the meaning of ‘being one’ into two different meanings (‘being one’ or ‘being the sum of parts’ and ‘being a true unity’ or ‘the unity itself’). Finally, Priest provides a dialetheistic interpretation of Plato’s Parmenides suggesting that “by the end of the dialogue, the contradictory nature of the One is defended, and the dialogue ends” (p. 138).

In Part III (“Buddhist Themes”), Priest links his metaphysics to the well-known Buddhist claim that all is one, through a clear-cut interpretation (including exposition on the basis of formal theories like graph-theory and non-well-founded set theory) of the Buddhist notion of interpenetration and emptiness. The view in the Huayan tradition that all things interpenetrate with — ontologically depends on — all things is defended, in particular, by showing that such a holistic interdependence relation does not lead to any vicious regress (Chapters 11 and 12). The paradox of ineffability (the effability of the ineffables) and some ethical consequences of the theory are also discussed from the view point of Buddhist philosophy (Chapters 13, 14 and 15).

From this first overview, it is easy to see that the number of topics covered in the book is surely impressive. The generality of the theory is, too. Ambitiously enough, Priest is presenting his gluon theory as a general theory of unity: it is not intended to apply only to the unity of some particular kinds of objects (for example, propositions or complex physical objects), but to the unity of objects in general. In this sense,

this book is about *what it is to be an object*. That's why gluong theory perfectly fits the definition of metaphysics given by A.W. Moore, according to whom "metaphysics is the most general attempt of making sense of things" ([2, p. 2]). Gluong theory then is exactly that general attempt to make sense of things.

Most of the concepts are expressed with remarkable clarity. The arguments are always well-structured and the overall reading of the book is enjoyable. For example, we expect that most readers of this review are not familiar with Buddhist philosophy. Don't worry. Readers will find very clear exposition of Buddhist concepts in this book and thus understand how Buddhist ideas make sense. Readers will be also happy to find Priest strengthening his metaphysical claims by exploiting some formal tools which we have previously mentioned. There are specific paragraphs and appendixes to clarify the formal apparatus used. In this way, the readers who are not familiar with formal approaches can enjoy the metaphysical arguments without being overwhelmed by any formalism. In this book Priest develops his theory on the basis of what he has already defended in his previous works, like paraconsistency, dialetheism ([5, 6]) and noneism (a version of Meinongianism, [4]). Relying on these works, *One* doesn't give detailed defense of these theories. But it is a laudable feature of this book that it presents an accessible introduction to both the formal and metaphysical aspects of them and thus it does not require any strong background in them. In this sense, the the book is self-contained.

In what follows, we will give a closer look at the core ideas of the three parts.

### **Gluong Theory and non-transitive identity**

According to Priest, the unity of an object is explained by gluons. His gluong theory is designed to answer the following two important questions.

The first questions is: how does the gluong of an object unify all its parts? Without an adequate answer to this question, the notion of gluong doesn't have any explanatory power.

The second question concerns the problem of infinite regress. Suppose that  $a$  and  $b$  are two different parts of an object  $c$ . Then the gluong of  $c$ ,  $g$ , glues  $c$ 's parts,  $a$  and  $b$ . However, since  $g$  is a part of  $c$  too,  $g$  and  $a$  (and of course  $b$ ) must be glued as well. Thus, there must be something which glues  $a$  and  $g$  together. Let us call this  $g'$ . By a similar reason,  $g'$  and  $g$  must be glued. We need a third gluong  $g''$  for  $g$  and  $g'$ .

In this way, the notion of gluon seems to lead to an infinite regress of unification by gluons. So, the second question is: how does the notion of gluon avoid this apparently vicious regress?

Priest answers these questions by defining the gluon for an object  $o$  as “an object which *is identical to all and only the parts of*”  $o$ . (p. 20, our emphasis). According to this gluon theory, a gluon unifies two or more things into one *by being identical to each of them*. Moreover, if the gluon for an object and its parts are identical, there needs to be no further gluon which is supposed to unify the gluon and these parts. A gluon is something which binds two or more different objects together, but the gluon for an object and its parts are identical at all — there is no gap which should be filled up. As a consequence the *regressum ad infinitum* is broken.

At this point, careful readers would argue against this definition of gluons as follows: suppose that  $a$  and  $b$  are different parts of  $c$ . According to gluon theory, the gluon  $g$  of  $c$  is identical to both  $a$  and  $b$ . Then, from the transitivity of identity, it follows that  $a$  is identical  $b$ . This contradicts the supposition that  $a$  and  $b$  are two different objects. Surprisingly enough, Priest prevents this inference *by denying the transitivity of identity*. In particular, from  $g = a$  and  $g = b$ , it does not follow that  $a = b$ .

In this way, gluon theory crucially depends on the notion of non-transitive identity. Some may think that this makes gluon theory highly implausible since transitivity is one of the most basic properties of identity. If a relation is not transitive, it is not identity in the first place. How can one make sense of non-transitive identity? Since non-transitive identity is the grounding idea of gluon theory, answering this question is crucial.

Here is Priest’s answer. Non-transitive identity is obtained by a *standard definition of identity* and a *paraconsistent interpretation of the material biconditional*. According to him, the identity of objects is defined by the Leibnizian law, which says,

$$x = y \text{ if and only if for every property } P, Px \equiv Py \quad (*)$$

where  $A \equiv B$  is the material biconditional, i.e.,  $(\neg A \vee B) \wedge (\neg B \vee A)$ . The crucial step is to interpret the material biconditional by the paraconsistent logic  $LP$  (cf. [3]). On  $LP$ , the inference from  $A \equiv B$ ,  $B \equiv C$  to  $A \equiv C$  is invalid, and the non-transitivity of identity is followed from this property of the material biconditional on  $LP$  and  $(*)$ .

The non-transitivity of identity should be one of the most controversial claims of this book. Priest offers several arguments for non-transitive identity, which include giving counterexamples of the transitivity of identity, that is, fission of an ameba and vagueness (see Sections 5.7 and 5.8). We leave evaluation of his arguments for the non-transitivity of identity to readers. Here we would like to point out a surprising consequence of gluon theory. According to gluon theory and the unrestricted mereological sum operation, almost every object is contradictory. First, it follows from gluon theory that if an object  $o$  is a proper part of another object  $o'$  which has two or more proper parts, the gluon of  $o'$  is identical to  $o$  and *not* identical to  $o$ . Second, Priest argues for the unrestricted mereological sum operation on the basis of his version of Meinongianism (see [4]). According to him, for any set of objects, some (existent or *nonexistent*) object is the mereological sum of them (see Sections 6.8 and 6.9). Note that, for Priest, the mereological sum of objects is an object which has its own unity. Since the mereological sum of  $a$  and  $b$  has its own unity that the parts  $a$  and  $b$  don't have, for Priest, the mereological sum is not identical to  $a$  and  $b$ .<sup>1</sup> Now suppose that 1 is the mereological sum of all objects. Then every proper part of 1 is not identical to the gluon of 1. But, of course, every proper part of 1 is identical to the gluon of 1 by the definition of gluons.

Of course, dialetheism is the metaphysical position which claims that at least one contradiction is true (and paraconsistency is crucial for dialetheists to prevent triviality from following from contradictions, even though endorsing paraconsistency doesn't require any commitment to dialetheism). For dialetheists, contradictions should not be rejected only by reason that they are contradictory. However, dialetheism does not need to be a view which admits *every* contradiction. Indeed, it is reasonable even for dialetheists to admit only contradictions which have enough reason to do so. These contradictions invoked by gluons may seem to be a cost we should not pay for getting a theory of unity. If so, these contradictions give us a reason to reject either gluon theory or his conception of mereological sums. This worry immediately connects Part I to Part II.

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<sup>1</sup> It is fair to underline that this position is contentious. According to an influential view in the current debate, mereology is ontologically neutral which means that it does not multiply entities as, for example, set theory does. Traditionally, fusing three objects together does not give any fourth object while, in Priest's case, the unified object is something else (or something more) than the parts that are unified together.

### Parmenides as a dialetheist

While the first part of *One* lays the foundation of gluon theory, the second part presents several of its applications. We will focus on the interpretation of the Platonic dialogue entitled *Parmenides*.

The problem of unity has its origin in Parmenides and Plato. In Chapter 6, the Parmenidean solution to the problem of unity is explored. His solution to the problem of unity is the rejection of the problem itself. According to him, since the relation between one object and its parts seems to lead to a contradiction, there is only one thing, namely *Being* or *what is*, and that this thing is partless. Furthermore, everything which has parts is not real—it is not. As Priest correctly points out, the Parmenidean *Being* has two features. First of all, *what is* is not *what exists* but *what is thought or talked about*, endorsing a sort of Meinongian definition of intentional object *ante litteram*. Secondly, *what is* respects the law of non-contradiction (LNC) since *what is* cannot *not be* at all. *What is* always is. On the basis of these two features of *what is*, Parmenides argued that *what is* has to be partless. His argument goes as follows. If it is assumed that *what is* has two parts (let us say  $p_1$  and  $p_2$ ), then those parts are not the same; they are different because  $p_1$  is something that  $p_2$  is not. However, even though  $p_2$  is not something (for instance,  $p_2$  is not  $p_1$ ),  $p_2$  is still something. This seems to violate the law of non-contradiction. Thus, *Being* has to be partless. Priest does not believe in the validity of this argument, while he believe, as most scholars of Parmenides do, that this exegesis constitutes a solid interpretation of what Parmenides thought to be a sound argument. But, more importantly, Priest rejects the conclusion of Parmenides' argument not only for the invalidity of the argument itself, but also in virtue of one of the assumptions on which the argument is based, the law of non-contradiction. Priest thinks that Parmenides does not have any good reason to assume the LNC nor to defend it. But, if this is the case, then what's about the problem of unity?

Another solution to the problem of unity is provided by the interpretation of Plato's *Parmenides*. It is easy to understand that this is a crucial point of the book because the topic is extensively treated: there is one chapter (Chapter 7) devoted to the first part of the dialogue and another chapter (Chapter 8) for the second part. Priest, after an examination of *Parmenides* (which is impossible to summarize here), reaches the following conclusion: all the strategies of defining the *One* (that is,

the unified object) in a consistent way seem to fail. Parmenides as a fictional character in Plato's dialogue, attacking Socrates, suggests the idea that the *One* is actually contradictory and that this truth has to be, finally, accepted. Priest's interpretation really calls attention to the irony in Plato since the fictional character Parmenides, endorsing this view, is actually supporting an idea which is the opposite of the one held by the real Parmenides; an idea grounded on the law of non-contradiction. Priest reads this dialogue as the Platonic attempt of overcoming an empty attachment to the Aristotelian law of non-contradiction, supporting a dialetheistic position. Gluon theory is exactly the formal framework which can be used to structure a possible dialetheistic approach to the problem of unity. Priest is helping Plato in his famous patricide against Parmenides. Contradictions can be more lethal than hemlock.

Although Priest's interpretation seems plausible, it should have been supported by more secondary literature. We believe that a close comparison with the traditional way of looking at this dialogue would have underlined better the differences between Priest's account and the classic one. However, this is still a minor remark since, not only does Priest's interpretation remains clear and understandable, but the missing comparison can be added in some future works.

### **Interpenetration and its ethical consequence**

Part III begins with examining the problem of *quiddity* — what does make an object the object it is? — and answering it with ideas drawn from Buddhist philosophy. Priest proposes that the quiddity of an object consists of all properties which it has and all relations in which it stands to some objects. He expresses this view as a view of quiddity *in general*. Every object has a relational quiddity of this kind. According to Priest, this view, unknown in Western thought, is instead a pivotal element of Buddhist philosophy. In particular, it is a main claim of the Madhyamaka school that there is no object which has a non-relational, self-standing quiddity — their own self-nature, or what is called *svabhāva* in Buddhism. The well-known Buddhist claim that everything is *empty* is a paraphrase of this view. Priest gives a graph-theoretic implementation to the notion of relational quiddity by *structural trees*. The structural tree of an object *o* is the tree which represents how objects are related to each other and

whose root represents the locus of *o* in such an interconnected network of objects. The locus of *o* is the relational quiddity of *o*.

The notion of *interpenetration* in the Huayan tradition is also explained within this framework. Two objects *interpenetrate* if “the structural tree for each is a subtree of the tree for the other” (p. 179). On the basis of this notion of interpenetration, Priest shows that all objects interpenetrate with all objects — this is the view which is associated to the Net of Indra in Huayan tradition. In this way, all objects ontologically depend on all objects.

From this metaphysical basis, Priest easily starts to develop an ethical theory grounded in Buddhism. Buddhism is presented as what Foucault calls a “*technology of self*” and, even though Priest uses the expression ‘*personal technology*’ because there is no ‘self’ in Buddhism, the meaning remains basically the same: they are both practices which bring about dispositional changes in a person. The aim of the Buddhist ‘*personal technology*’ is to obtain the inner peace (*upeksa*) and it is grounded on the so-called *Four Noble Truths*. According to them, since the cause of suffering (*dukkha*) is the attachment to our self, the way to get the inner peace is to be released from it by acquiring awareness of the emptiness of the self.

Of course, ethics is also concerned with the relation with others. Buddhism claims that we are all interconnected and interdependent. Since we don’t have a self and our nature is not self-standing, everything depends on everything else being connected in the Net of Indra. The happiness of each human being relies on the happiness of all the other human beings and, thus, everyone needs to think about the inner peace of others just as much as of oneself. The way of doing it is ‘compassion’. Finally, Priest ends by wishing for a world where people understand how they are all dependent on each other (how they are ‘*one*’) because, only in this way, it would be possible “to break down the barriers of nationality, of vested interests [...]. We need to understand the Net of Indra” (p. 235).

The Buddhist view of the holistic interdependence among all objects is clearly presented by Priest. He also shows how one can reply to potential objections against the holistic interdependency. This shows that the Buddhist view is a viable position. What is not clear is why we should accept the view. For example, Priest claims that the quiddity of an object consists of all of its properties and relations. However, it is possible to think that some of its properties and relations constitute its



quiddity but some do not, and that, as a result, it may turn out that not every object interpenetrates each other. This seems to be at least a viable option, too. Then, why is the holistic interdependence preferable than the local interdependence? Since the idea of the holistic interdependence and its ethical consequence are not matching our common intuitions — for example, it seems counterintuitive that hurting someone is actually hurting ourselves —, showing the viability of the view seems not enough to endorse it. Another problem could be observed in the bridge between metaphysics and ethics. Priest easily jumps from the metaphysical level to the ethical level grounding the latter on the former. This philosophical position is stated at beginning of Chapter 14 without any explicit discussion. The overall ideas about Buddhist philosophy and ethics would have been stronger if the link between metaphysics and ethics was made more explicit with an argument.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, *One* combines the tradition of analytic philosophy including formal materials like paraconsistent logic or mereology with continental or Buddhist philosophy. This combination might look odd. Indeed, the recent philosophical debate depicts the analytic and the continental traditions as two incompatible views (cf. [1]). This may partly explain why the combination of the two proposed by Priest can appear, at least *prima facie*, unnatural. However, it is also true that this approach of mixing different traditions is not new in Priest's works. In [5] the author openly defends this methodology. Priest does not care about the historical origin of the problems but he cares about the problems themselves. Reading *One*, it is not hard to believe that merging different methodologies enriches the philosophical debate triggering ideas. For all these reasons, *One* is not only relevant for readers exclusively interested in the metaphysics of unity but is also a very useful book for both philosophers interested in the continental tradition and in Buddhism. Priest shows how it is possible to connect some fundamental notions in different branches of philosophy with contemporary philosophical logic. And, of course, after reading *One*, gluing something with something else will never be the same.

### References

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