

# A Précis of *One*

Graham Priest

Philosophy Departments, CUNY Graduate Center, and the University of Melbourne

*One*—as may be surmised from its title—is about what it is to be one. This might mean many things, but the oneness in question is metaphysical (rather than, say, political). The topic might sound like a rather arcane metaphysical issue, but it is not. The notion of being one thing is, perhaps, our most fundamental notion. One cannot say anything, think anything, cognise anything, without presupposing it. Unsurprisingly, then, its behaviour infuses the things that presuppose it. The ramifications of the matter spread out in many directions in philosophy, and affect other questions in metaphysics, questions in the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, and even ethics. They are also to be found lurking under many questions in the history of philosophy. This is what *One* is about.

However, what it means to be one, metaphysically, can itself be many things; and to each sense of *one*, there is a corresponding sense of *many*. Each pair gives rise to a problem often referred to as a *problem of the one and the many*. Thus, we may be talking about numerical unity, and the problem is how, if an object has parts (the many), these cooperate to form a unity. Alternatively, we might be concerned with the problem of universals: how can one property be located in many things? A special, but very important, case concerns the universal *oneness* (*unity*) itself. What exactly is this, and how does it behave? Third, it is not uncommon to hear philosophers claim that all things (the many) are one. Thus, Heraclitus says (Fragment B50), ‘Having hearkened, not to me, but to the Word (*Logos*), it is wise to agree that all things are one’.<sup>1</sup> The copula here can hardly be the *is* of identity.

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<sup>1</sup>D. W. Graham, D. W., ‘Heraclitus’, in E. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>, 2011.

My right foot is not numerically identical with my left. Sometimes, the claim is cashed out as the thought that each thing (the many) is all things (the one). What on earth is going on here?

*One* has three parts, each dealing with one of these matters. In more detail, the three parts are as follows.

Every object—or at least, every object with parts—is both a one and a many. But being one and being many are contradictories, so how is this possible? This is not a serious puzzle: it is the thing that is one, and its parts that are many. But other problems are harder—much harder. How do the parts conspire to form a whole? What is the difference between a unity and a mere congeries? Something must, as it were, glue the parts together. But when one starts to examine this matter, that thing appears to have contradictory properties. This might be thought of as a problem. But Part 1 of the book simply accepts this conclusion: these things—gluons, as the book calls them in Chapter 1—do have contradictory properties.

Indeed, it not only accepts this fact, but puts it to constructive use. How do gluons glue a unity together? When facing this question, one confronts the “Bradley regress”. The regress is solved by taking the gluon of an object to be identical with each part. This requires a theory of identity according to which it is not transitive. The possibility of contradictory objects is integral to this. Chapter 2 elucidates, spelling out the required theory of identity, and how gluons fit into the picture. This is done informally; the formal details are spelled out in a technical appendix to the chapter.

The formal construction demonstrates that the notions employed are, at least technically, coherent. Philosophical coherence is, of course, another matter. And one may well suppose that any account of identity according to which the substitutivity of identicals is not valid is not philosophically coherent. (The transitivity of identity is a special case of substitutivity.) That matter is taken up in Chapter 5.

The rest of Part 1 explores some of the immediate ramifications of the behaviour of gluons, such as their connection with universals and instantiation. Another connection is with Heidegger’s notorious *Seinsfrage*—the question of *being*. Gluon theory provides an answer to this.

The problem of the one and the many around which Part 1 turns has often been overlooked as a serious problem. Where it has been taken very seriously is in Ancient Greek philosophy. Aristotle and Plato, in particular, were much concerned with it. Aristotle’s solution is discussed in Part 1. There is much more to be said about Plato’s. This is the focus of Part 2.

The behaviour of parts is intimately connected both with Parmenides' partless One, and with Plato's form of Oneness. Both come in for scrutiny in this part. In particular, both of these are involved in Plato's *Parmenides*. This dialogue is one of his most important and influential. It is also one of the most tantalising and obscure. Many commentators have despaired of finding a coherent interpretation. The centre-piece of Part 2 is an interpretation based on gluon theory. This, it seems to me, provides just such an interpretation.

These are not the only issues traversed in Part 2, however. This part concerns itself with the application of gluon theory to questions of meaning, truth, intentionality, and mereology. These topics are, of course, central ones in contemporary philosophy. However, the book approaches them through the lens of Plato; this gives the material a unity it might otherwise lack. More importantly, it reminds readers that contemporary problems sink deep into the history of the subject.

Turning to Part 3, the key to understanding what it means for all things to be one—or at least one way of doing so—is to understand the notion of identity in question. Chapter 11 shows how this may be done in terms of the notion of interpenetration to be found in the Buddhist Hanyan tradition. This, in turn, depends on an analysis and endorsement of the Buddhist—and specifically Madhyamaka— notion of emptiness. The chapter is no mere historical exegesis, however. In particular, it deploys modern techniques of graph-theory to make sense of matters.

The doctrine of emptiness has always been controversial—even within Buddhism. Many have felt that it gives rise to a vicious regress. In Chapter 12, we see that it does not. In particular, we see why the regress in question, unlike the Bradley regress, is not vicious. Again, modern mathematical techniques are brought in at this point. This time, non-well-founded sets.

Ideas from Buddhist philosophy are also to be found in the other chapters in this part. Chapter 13 deals with the relationship between language (or our concepts) and the world. It shows how the notion of emptiness drives between the horns of idealism and realism. Buddhist philosophy often deals with the ineffable—and indeed, runs into paradox, since it talks about the ineffable. The chapter also shows how gluon theory makes sense of this. The final two Chapters of this part concern ethics. Central to these is the view that persons, like all things, are empty, and the consequent ramifications of this concerning the virtue of compassion.

So much for the three parts of the book. In one sense, it is clearly a strange

and eclectic book. It draws on ideas from Ancient Greek philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, contemporary metaphysical debates (“analytic” and “continental”), and deploys techniques of contemporary formal logic. It might well be thought of, then, as an example of “*philosophie sans frontières*”.

As may also be clear, there is a certain danger with a book like this—a somewhat ironic one, given the book’s title. This is that the book itself is fragmented, and so lacks unity. This, however, is not the case. The book certainly has three distinct parts, each dealing with a separate question, but the answers to those questions interact in important ways, knitting the material together.

In particular, there are a number of themes that link the parts of the book together. The most obvious of these is gluon theory; but perhaps the most important is the notion of nothingness. Nothingness is a strange non-existent object with fascinating properties. It is so important to the book that I included reference to it in the full title of the book, which is: *One: Being an Investigation into the Unity of Reality and of its Parts, Including the Singular Object which is Nothingness*. The notion of nothingness first appears in Part 1 of the book, in connection with a discussion of Heidegger. The topic is then taken up again in Part 2, in connection with the subject of mereology. There, a formal account of nothingness is given. Nothingness appears again in Part 3, in connection with the notion of emptiness, and as the hinge around which the interpenetration of all things turns.

A final word: the book draws on two views that are contemporary heresies: dialetheism (that some contradictions are true) and noneism (that some objects do not exist). Indeed, it adds a third to the picture, in the form of the non-transitivity of identity. Some may think that only ill can come from compounding heresy upon heresy. Personally, I do not see it that way. The orthodoxies on these matters were never as rationally grounded as their adherents like to pretend. Moreover, in the present context, the three heresies, far from adding to each others’ woes, interlock and support each other in fundamental ways. And in doing so, they open up a perspective of the world, which is forever closed to those with the blinkers of orthodoxy.