

THE POSSIBILITY OF UNITY

By H.W. Noonan

In *One* Priest argues for the contradictoriness of Unity. The argument is that the unity of complex things is contradictory. It is contradictory that there are complex wholes composed of many parts. But there are. Thus, the explanation of unity has to be a contradictory entity, a gluon, which both is and is not an object. The book then develops and utilises a theory of gluons. The argument for the contradictoriness of Unity is crucial; without it there is no motivation for the theory of gluons. It fails. It does so because 'because' is a sentential connective. So what follows it must be a sentence, not a list. So Priest is wrong to say that in a complex whole there must be something, an entity, which binds the parts together

Keywords: Priest, unity, complexity, Bradley's regress, gluon, explanation.

At the beginning of his important book *One* Graham Priest argues for the contradictoriness of Unity. He sees his argument as a generalization of Bradley's Regress (which, of course, has itself antecedents). The argument is that the unity of complex things is contradictory. It is contradictory that there are complex wholes composed of many parts, such as aardvarks and ambulances, zoologists and zebras. But there are such complex wholes. Thus, the explanation of unity has to be a contradictory entity, a gluon (as Priest jokingly calls it, with a nod to the physicists), which both is and is not an object. This causes Priest, as a dialetheist, no qualms, of course. The book then develops and utilises a theory of gluons. The argument at the beginning of *One* for the contradictoriness of Unity is therefore crucial; without it there is no motivation for the theory of gluons.

I think that the argument fails. It goes as follows (paraphrasing and abbreviating Priest's presentation):

Suppose we have a zebra composed of the parts a, b, c and d. There must be something which, metaphysically speaking, binds them together, ... the gluon g. But then there must be something which binds them and g together, a hyper-gluon g'. Obviously we are off on an infinite regress. Moreover, it is a vicious one. It is not merely that there is just a whole lot 'a gluon goin' on, goin' on.

Our original problem was how a unity of parts is possible. We need an explanation. Given a bunch of parts simply invoking another object does not do this. We still have the original problem of how a unity of parts is possible. Something has already gone wrong at the first step: a failure of explanation. (11)

But can we not get the explanation by invoking not an object, but a relation? No, because:

One simply adds an extra element to the melange. We have the parts plus the relationship between them. How is this any better? (12-13)

I think this argument goes wrong at its second sentence: 'there must be something which binds them together', i.e., there must be some thing which binds them together. We can just reject this.¹

¹ Priest assumes that if a, b, c and d form a complex whole bound together by the gluon g, then a, b, c, d and g form a complex whole – hence a regress ensues. This is unwarranted. But my criticism does not depend on this point.

As Priest emphasizes, what is at issue is the possibility of an explanation. Now suppose I want to explain why a, b, c and d compose a zebra. Then I must say something of the form: a, b, c and d compose a zebra because P. ‘Because’ is a sentential connective. So what follows it must be a sentence, not a list. The sentence must contain names of a, b, c and d. One possibility then is that what is said by some such sentence containing no names of things other than these provides the needed explanation.² In which case it is not true that there must be something other than a, b, c and d, that is, the gluon g, which binds them together. Suppose, however, that no such explanation is possible. I need to mention some other object to explain how they can compose a zebra. So I need a sentence containing not only names of a, b, c and d but also a name of another object g.

But can this help? Priest says no, since ‘simply invoking another object’ does not provide an explanation.

But we are not simply invoking another object. Our original inadequate explanation was not a list, it was a sentence. So we are not just adding a name of another object to a list. What we have now in place of P is a new sentence P*. P stated that a, b, c and d are arranged *thus and so*. P* states that a, b, c, d and g are arranged *so and so*. The difference is not just that one name is added to a list. (Unlike lists, which, if they contain names of the same things, can

² A concrete example, the three legs and seat compose a stool because the legs are attached vertically to the base of the seat, are equidistant from one another, and at its perimeter. Or as a referee suggested: Line segments A, B, C and D compose a square because they are of equal length, an endpoint of A is an endpoint of B, an endpoint of B is an endpoint of C and so on, A is parallel to C and B to D, A meets B at a right angle and B meets C at a right angle.

only differ by addition of new names – ‘a, b, c and d’ and ‘a, b, c, d and g’ – sentences which name the same things can differ in other ways). So it may be that the new explanation is adequate even if the old one was not. That Tom loves Mary may not explain why Tom and Mary are a married couple, but it does not follow that this cannot be explained sufficiently by using a further sentence in which one other individual is named just because that individual is ‘just another object’. An explanation may perhaps be given by the sentence ‘the Reverend Green pronounced Tom and Mary man and wife’. We have, however, not replaced an inadequate explanation by an adequate one simply by mentioning another object, and the Reverend Green is not a gluon.

Priest says that invoking a *relation* cannot help to provide an explanation since again, to repeat, thereby ‘one simply adds an extra element to the melange’. But the point is that there was not merely a melange. What identifies a melange is a list. What follows ‘because’ cannot be a list so the initial, supposedly inadequate, explanans did not merely identify a melange.

So either one can explain why a, b, c and d compose a zebra by saying something of the form ‘a, b, c and d compose a zebra because P’ in which no items other than these are named in ‘P’ or one cannot. If we can, well and good. If not this does not preclude the possibility of another explanation ‘because P*’ in which some other item in addition to a, b, c and d is named. This is because P and P* are sentences not lists, so can differ *not merely* by the latter containing a name of an extra item (object, relation or whatever).

Hence, for all Priest has said, unity is not contradictory, and gluons are not needed to explain it.

REFERENCES

Priest, G. (2014) *One: Being an Investigation into the Unity of Reality of its Parts, Including the Singular Object which is Nothingness*. Oxford: University Press.

University of Nottingham, UK