

Commentary
Verity Harte
Plato on Parts and Wholes
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Verity Harte's book¹ proposes a reading of a series of interesting passages from Plato's Dialogues, where Plato sets forth different considerations about the way in which ontological unity and plurality can – or cannot – be conciliated in some form of unified ontological complexity. Harte reads the passages in a systematic way and this allows her to extrapolate the basic elements of a theory of parts and wholes, which she compares with two main contemporary positions (i.e. those of David Lewis and of Peter Van Inwagen²) on the problem of composition. Accordingly, the book can be read from two perspectives: as a reconstruction of an aspect of the philosophy of Plato and as a proposal of an alternative approach to the problem of composition and to the notions of part and whole. I shall first sum up what I take to be the main aspects of Harte's reconstruction of Plato's theory of parts and wholes and then comment on two main points, the first concerning the historical and interpretative contribution of the book and the second concerning the theoretical proposal there outlined.

The problem at issue can be formulated in the following way. There is something (say: Socrates), which we regard as *one* object. This object has parts (say: limbs), which are *many*. The one object is, in some sense, the same as its many parts; so, the same thing is one and many. But this is absurd because the same thing cannot be both one and many – at least not without qualification.

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¹ V. Harte, *Plato on Parts and Wholes. The Metaphysics of Structure*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2002 (repr. 2006).

² See, in particular, D. Lewis, *Parts of Classes*, Blackwell, Oxford 1991; P. Van Inwagen, *Material Beings*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York 1990; Id., "Composition as Identity", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 8 (Logic and Language), pp. 207–220.

The question is: Is any qualification available? It should be stressed here that the problem is not – or not merely – a problem of counting objects, but a matter of accounting for the ontology of non-atomic entities. If we indicate what we regard as one as “whole” and what we regard as many as “parts”, the general problem is to understand what ontological claims are at stake if we want to make sense of

$$(C) \text{ whole} = \text{parts}^3.$$

What is a whole? What are parts? And what relation does “=” indicate?

Harte explores Plato’s approach to this problem by individuating two complementary groups of texts. The first group (discussed in Ch. 2) consists in a series of texts where Plato discusses (without endorsing) the conception of composition as identity, i.e. a conception according to which = in (C) just establishes that what appears on the left hand side of = is *just the same* as what appears on the right hand side of it *in the sense that* it is not ontologically “richer” than parts. According to the account at issue, parts always pluralize. Plato presents a series of puzzles resting on this assumption. Accordingly, if we want to retain the idea that the whole, which appears on the left hand side, is something one and that parts are many, either we must say that the presence of parts makes the whole a plurality (i.e. many) or we must say that the whole, if it has to be one, has no parts at all. In order to provide a more satisfactory account of the fact that a whole can be regarded as one despite the plurality of its parts, in the second group of texts (Chs. 3–4) Plato would then suggest to identify the (one) whole not with its (many) parts, but with a contentful structure. In order to convey an identity, (C) should be replaced by (C*):

$$(C^*) \text{ whole} = \text{parts} + \text{structure.}$$

(C*) should not be interpreted in the sense that structure is an additional part of the whole of the same kind as its material parts⁴. Rather, the idea would be that parts (or contents) and structure are the result of ontological analysis by way of abstraction on the ontology of the whole. Structure is nothing that the whole or the parts of the whole have and might lack; the whole *is* the structure of its contents.

³ All formulations of (C) and the like are mine and are not present as such in the book.

⁴ Cf. Arist., Met. VII 17, 1041b11–33; cf. also Top. VI 13, 150a1 ff.

Contrary to Lewis and with Van Inwagen, structure is essential to a whole; contrary to Van Inwagen, the structure is not just essential to the whole, but is also essential to its parts, which do not exist as "things" independently from the whole.

Some features of this account of composition should be stressed before moving to a couple of particular points of Harte's reconstruction. (i) This theory of structure rests at least in part on the neat separation of the ontological relations involved in composition from identity and otherness. In particular, the kind of ontological relations that are involved in composition are peculiar to it and cannot be reduced to identity: The relations of part to whole and of whole to part are sharply distinguished from the relations of identity and otherness. (ii) In addition, composition is ontologically creative and not innocent. Although we can analyse the ontology of a whole in terms of two components (structure and contents), we should not think of structure and contents as two distinct parts of the whole. The imposition of structure on unstructured contents is an abstraction which should not induce us to think that contents are there as separate and independently identifiable things. (iii) In Plato's account structure has a normative character such that either a whole is the result of the imposition of a good structure on the appropriate contents or there is no whole at all. The main idea seems to be that if some items (which might resemble the parts of a whole) are put together in a disordered and unbalanced way, the result of their composition cannot be regarded as a unified whole. (iv) Given the interdependence of structure and contents, it should be clear that, according to Plato, composition is not unrestricted (not any plurality of disparate objects counts as a whole). (v) In addition, the interdependence of structure and contents leads to the negation of extensionalism: It is not the case that the same materials build the same whole if they are structured in a different way⁵.

Given this sketchy presentation of what I take to be the main points of Harte's reconstruction, I should like to say something on the proposed theory

⁵ If contents are structure-laden in such a way that they can only be structured in one way, the problem does not arise in the first place. But this does not seem to be the case for at least some of the examples that Harte considers. Harte underlines that the structure is often characterized in mathematical terms, as a numerical proportion. Clearly, such a structure can be applied to very different contents. In developing this theory of structure, one might wish to be more precise on the proper level of generality of the abstract description of the structure.

as an interpretation of an aspect of Plato's metaphysics and, more generally, as a theoretical proposal.

From the historical and interpretative point of view, Harte certainly selects an interesting set of texts and provides a careful analysis of what she takes to be their "underlying ontology". One can disagree with her on the interpretation of particular points⁶ as well as on her methodological assumptions on the connections between the texts⁷, but I shall not comment on this, both because I do not think that this would be the appropriate place for such a discussion and because I think that it is useful to take Harte's methodological assumptions for the sake of the argument. She is very clear on the fact that her goal is not to provide a general account of Plato's metaphysics but to focus on Plato's approach to structure and I shall confine to her account of this particular aspect.

Harte says repeatedly that it is not completely clear whether Plato intends to apply his account of wholes as contentful structures to types and/or tokens, although, with the exception of the *Timaeus*, which portrays the construction of a particular token (the visible world), the examples seem mainly to refer to types. It is not very clear to me whether Harte thinks that the distinction between types and tokens reflects any important ontological distinction in Plato's ontology or not. Harte says more than once that she is not concerned with "what happens to Forms" (p. 6) or that she does not know how her analysis might apply to the case of Forms (p. 270). This is, I think, problematic for her reconstruction – and not (or not just) for the general reason that one might wonder whether it is possible to give an account of fundamental pieces of Plato's metaphysics without taking Forms into account. Rather, I think that what happens to Forms is quite crucial for Harte's interpretation.

In the first place, Harte relies on some passages (p. 140 ff.) in which Plato talks about the large-scale structure of the domains of sciences. Even if we do not want to say that each particular science such as music or mathematics has Forms as its objects, one might wonder how the large-scale structure is instantiated by the domain of what Plato takes to be the eminent form of philosophical knowledge, namely dialectic – and I assume as a relatively

⁶ For example, Soph. 244b6–245e2, commented upon on p. 100 ff., is very difficult to understand and in some points it is possible that the Greek text is corrupted (e.g. at 244d11–12).

⁷ For example, one might want to reject the idea that there is a "mereological undercurrent" in the Parmenides.

uncontroversial fact that, even if dialectic can be exercised with reference to any object, the primary objects of dialectic are Forms.

In the second place, Harte comments very clearly (p. 50 ff.) on Socrates' claim in the *Parmenides* that the most problematic case of joint ascription to the same subject of unity and plurality would be the case of Forms. If Harte's reconstruction does not apply to Forms, it is not very clear in what sense the metaphysics of structure that she proposes could be regarded as a very basic aspect of Plato's metaphysics. In particular, it seems to me that, if Harte reconstruction did not apply to Forms⁸, there would be a problem to distinguish Plato's theory of structure with respect to Forms – which I take to be a basic part of his ontology – from Lewis' approach to composition as it is presented by Harte. Let me explain why. On p. 276 Harte presents Lewis' approach to parts in contrast with Plato's approach in the following terms: "Lewis has what one might call an 'atomistic' approach to composition. By this I do not mean that Lewis is committed to the existence of atoms. What I mean is that Lewis approaches composition from the bottom up. One starts with things, which are candidate parts, as the building blocks of composition. And one builds up to composites from these things by taking various sets of things, which are more or less related to each other in various ways. But the various ways in which the things in question are related (including their composing something) seem somehow secondary to the things themselves". Now, it seems to me that this kind of bottom-up approach to composition is discussed by Aristotle⁹, at least on some occasions, in the form of an objection to Plato or to Platonists, who claim that each Form is one and that we can define Forms through their genus and specific differences. For instance, say that we want to define (the Form of) Man. The Platonists at stake would say that Man is Rational Biped Animal. Each of Rational, Biped and Animal is a Form and, as such, it is one. Now, why should the formula "rational biped animal" pick up one unified Form (i.e. the Form of Man) and not three distinct things (i.e. Rational, Biped and Animal)? It would seem that Harte's proposed approach to

⁸ It should be clear that I am not saying that Harte's reconstruction does not apply to Forms; I am just saying that, despite the fact that she does not want to address the topic, assessing whether the reconstruction applies to Forms is quite important for her interpretation.

⁹ Cf. e.g. Arist., *Met.* VII 15, 1040a14–23; and the generalized form of the problem (i.e. without reference to the theory of Forms) in *Met.* VII 12, 1037b10–14. See also the argument used in *Met.* VII 13, 1039a3–14 to show that a substance cannot be made of actual substances, each of which is one in actuality.

composition might provide an answer to Aristotle's objection *if* it can be applied to Forms. But unless we explain whether and how this approach applies to the Forms, the basic problem of the beginning of the *Parmenides*, i.e. how we talk of Forms in terms of one and many, remains intact.

Let me now move to the theoretical proposal that emerges from Harte's enquiry. As Harte herself suggests, the normative character (iii above) of the structure of wholes is "a feature of the account that one might wish to detach" (p. 274). This might be the case not just for reasons of "ideology" of the theory, but, as Harte seems to imply, for reasons of generality. In fact, what is presented as Plato's theory of composition is far from being a theory of composition in general, if we want to say that there might be composite objects that do not comply with Plato's requirements for wholes. As Harte suggests, one might ask what a theory like this would do with heaps. Harte outlines three possible answers: 1) there might be different kinds of composition; 2) there might be different degrees of wholeness; 3) heaps are just not wholes and the theory does not apply to them and does not say anything about their nature and existence. Harte comments on 1) by saying that Plato does not say anything about other kinds of composition and this fact might induce us to think that this would not be his reply to the issue of heaps (or of "bad" composites). It seems to me that both in Plato and in Aristotle *holon* ("whole") is used to designate not a generic composite, but a very precise composite, with a precise structure and a precise organization of its parts. The paradigmatic example of a whole is that of the living being, whose parts are organically unified and serve the purpose of the whole. If this is correct, then Plato's account of the structure of wholes *cannot* be a general account of composition. If this is the case, then we should ask the further question whether composition is wholeness (in the sense of "whole" of Plato). If it is, then we have to do with a very restricted notion of composition. But I am not sure at all whether we have enough evidence to say that composition is actually regarded as the same as wholeness. I personally believe that all we can say is that Plato (as Aristotle) has a very precise and restricted notion of wholeness¹⁰ (not necessarily of composition). Clarity on this point might be relevant in order to better characterize the rejection of unrestricted composition ((iv) above).

¹⁰ Nonetheless, I believe that both Plato and Aristotle accept the possibility of degrees of unity.

To conclude I would like to go back to (C) and to the way in which Plato analyses the views of those who take (C) as an identity claim. Harte correctly stresses (p. 83 ff.) that one feature of Plato's analysis of this point is that the relation of parts and whole is regarded as similar in nature to the relation of quantitative entities such as numbers and measures. To give an idea of this, we should think of (C) as analogous in structure to:

$$(C') 6 = 4+2 = 3+3 = \dots = 1+1+1+1+1+1$$

$$(C'') 1\text{m} = 10\text{dm} = 100\text{cm} = 1000\text{mm}.$$

Even if Harte does not press this aspect too close, I think that this introduces an interesting element in the debate: = in (C) would indicate a sort of quantitative equivalence, saying that we have the same amount of stuff on both sides of the relation.

The problem with this, according to Plato, is precisely that the list of parts or "measures", which appears on the right hand side of =, simply states the presence of many items and does not say anything on how these should be arranged to make something one, just because arrangement is not relevant at all in this kind of equivalence. Other people, with different metaphysical intuitions, might be perfectly happy with the situation suggested by the association of (C) with (C') and (C''). It should be stressed that the supporter of (C*) can make sense of (C) in terms of quantitative equivalence or extensional coincidence (in the sense that the whole is exactly "where" its parts are and vice versa). One reason why Plato and, after Plato, Aristotle are not happy with (C) alone and require (C*) is that, although both claims state some relation of *sameness*¹¹ and, in this sense, express a *symmetrical* relation, the right hand side of (C*) has an explanatory power on the ontological structure of the left hand side that (C) lacks. In this sense, (C*) introduces a fundamental epistemological *asymmetry*. The right hand side provides an account of the ontological structure of what is on the left hand side and, in this sense, has explanatory priority. I am not sure what part explanatory tenets play in the contemporary debate on composition, but they certainly play an important role in Plato's and Aristotle's approach to the problem.

¹¹ I use "sameness" to indicate a looser relation than strict identity. This seems to be necessary in any case, given that there cannot be strict identity between one item and many items. Cf. Lewis on composition as "analogous" to identity.

