

**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. \$65.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199688258); \$35.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780198776949).

In just 230 pages, *One* is a dense, remarkably clear, and unique treatment of a wide-range of topics in philosophy. What unifies the book is the topic of what unifies objects generally—what Priest calls ‘gluon theory’—and allied themes in Buddhist thought. Gluon theory answers the question, What makes something *one*? What is it that ‘glues’ an object together into a unity? The impressive number of topics brought together by Priest’s answer, which prominently services the fringe views for which he is well-known, speaks to its power and elegance. For this reason, *One* could also serve as a panoramic introduction to Priest’s work generally. But a review of this size can only highlight its peaks at the expense of details in the valleys.

Unities are more than just the sum of their parts. The parts must also be appropriately related. But merely *relating* is insufficient for *unifying*. There must be something else that makes them *one*, something akin to an Aristotelian form. This Priest calls an object’s ‘gluon’. But gluons are not nearly as domesticable entities as Aristotelian forms, not least because they both are and are not entities. A gluon can’t be an entity, lest it be just another entity among the entities whose unification needs explaining; for if to explain what unifies parts *a*, *b*, *c* into a unity, we appeal to another part, *g*, Bradley may now ask what unifies *a*, *b*, *c* ... and *g*—and it had better not be *g*’, or a vicious regress ensues. And yet, because there clearly are unities—to *be* is to be *one*, a unity—there must be a unifying entity. *That* is precisely what we are thinking about, quantifying over, and referring to as a gluon, and our doing so suffices for entityhood. So a gluon *is* an entity, albeit a contradictory one. With this intentional reference criterion of ontological commitment comes noneism (the view that some objects have non-being) and impossible worlds (to non-trivially characterize such objects).

Gluons are exotic not just because they both are and are not entities, but also because they glue objects together *with identity*; i.e., by being identical to each of an object’s parts. This is how gluons glue without generating a Bradleyean regress. The question of what unifies *a*, *b*, *c* and *g* is moot if each of *a*, *b*, and *c* is identical to *g*. It does not follow, however, that *a*, *b*, and *c* thereby become identical to each other, because on the paraconsistent account of identity Priest defends, transitivity and substitutivity fail. Although Priest doesn’t consider how gluon theory might be workable in other non-standard accounts of identity (e.g., contingent, relative), the question may be worth exploring for those who like gluons but are unwilling to go down the paraconsistent road. Priest does consider how gluons compare to other entities competing for the same ‘unifying’ job, such as forms variously conceived, universals, tropes, etc., and finds gluons better qualified.

Gluon theory is put to work in other ways, too. For example, Priest uses it to illuminate Heideggerian concepts of being and nothingness. To Heidegger’s question ‘what is the nature of being?’ Priest answers ‘the being of something is its gluon’. Heidegger’s own answer seems contradictory, as he says being itself cannot be spoken of, yet speaks of it as though it’s a being. But this is exactly what we should expect given the contradictory nature of gluons. Furthermore, the *Being* of being, thought of by Heidegger as a kind of universal, is itself a gluon. In Priest’s terms, all objects each have a gluon, but there is also an object consisting of the totality of all objects—**everything**—that itself has its own special gluon, a *prime gluon*: a gluon that has all the properties

of its parts. Because the gluon of **everything** is identical to each of its parts, it can truly be said that ‘all things are one’ (55). Included in ‘all things’, paradoxically, is **everything**’s complementary object, **nothing**, which has no parts (other than itself), for ‘if it did, it would not be the absence of every thing’ (56). **Nothing** turns out to be the fusion of the empty set, and is its own gluon.

Gluon theory also finds fruitful employment in interpreting Plato’s dialogues, where Priest presents a novel, jaw-droppingly brilliant dialetheist interpretation of the *Parmenides*. Priest takes the contradictory conclusion of the *Parmenides* at face value, suggesting that Plato rejects the Principle of Non-Contradiction and accepts the contradictory nature of the Parmenidean One. Although prevailing interpretations get short shift, Priest’s own is admirably defended with care and subtlety. It is bold, at the very least, to put such a view on the lips of the father of Western philosophy!

But there’s no doubting gluon theory’s precedents in Eastern philosophy, and in the final third of *One* Priest explores neighboring themes in Buddhist thought. In particular, Priest explicates and defends the Buddhist doctrine that everything is ‘empty’: nothing has ‘self-nature’—i.e., an individual essence or quiddity. Rather, all things have a merely relational quiddity; objects are what they are only in virtue of their relation to others. What makes an object one, then—namely, its gluon—is also what makes it empty: ‘For something to be one thing is for it to have its being by relating to other things: something could not be a one thing unless it was located in a field of relations’ (202). In a slogan: to be is to be one, and to be one is to be empty.

Nothing, therefore, is ontologically independent. Accordingly, Priest rejects a hierarchically structured picture of reality with a fundamental ‘ground of being’ at its foundation, blasting cosmological arguments to the contrary as ‘fairly bald and dogmatic’, ‘question-begging’, and ‘fallacious’. Unfortunately, these arguments clearly do not receive the same amount of expository care Priest gives to Plato and Buddhist philosophers. Leibniz’s argument, for instance, is *not* that ‘if there were no ground to a reality-dependence regress, there would be no reality’, as Priest says (184), but that then reality would be *inexplicable*. Nonetheless, Priest embraces the ‘ontological groundlessness’ of all things, and thinks reality, so understood, could be structurally isomorphic to non-well-founded set theories. But a more illustrative picture of reality is provided by the Buddhist metaphor ‘The Net of Indra’, where we are to imagine a net stretching out infinitely in all directions, with a monadic-like jewel at each node that reflects every other, including itself. All objects, like these jewels, are caught in a net of ontological interdependence, one in all and all in one, including **everything** and **nothing**.

This metaphor nicely illustrates Priest’s Buddhist-inspired ethics and politics as well, which read like a philosophical exposition of the banal lyrics of John Lennon’s ‘Imagine’. Persons, like jewels in the Net of Indra, are what they are in virtue of their relations to others, and have no self-nature, and, indeed, no *self* of their own at all. Introspection produces only the illusion of a self (the question of *whose* illusion this is is not discussed), though in reality we are, like everything else, empty. From our metaphysical emptiness we learn the ethical lesson that we are to be empty of desire and attachment (*trsnā*)—the cause of suffering and disquietude (*duhkha*)—to make room for the Buddhist *summum bonum*: inner peace (*upeksa*). But our inner peace ‘cannot be divorced from that of others’ (226), as we are all connected in a web of interdependence. This inter-personal connection can be thought of as being more like resonance than reflection: people give off good and bad vibes, thereby causing similar vibes in others. Because there can ‘be no radical disjuncture of

being between myself and others', Priest says, 'my relation to your interests is the same as my relation to my own—or better: we both have an interest in our common interest' (223). Chief among our common interest is inner peace, a commitment to which entails compassionate living and the elimination of suffering. The best way to achieve this on a global scale, besides singing Lennon songs, is to promote Lenin politics: dismantle capitalist systems and redistribute the tremendous amount of wealth and resources they created.

Gluon theory, and the broader philosophical vision within which it comfortably fits, is indeed powerful. Whether such power speaks in its favor, as Priest thinks (28), or is corruptive, is another question. For gluons and their wicked ways can be purchased only by selling one's philosophical soul to the devil of metaphysics—who alone grants fellowship with such demons as dialetheism, paraconsistent logic, non-transitivity of identity, noneism, impossible worlds, illusory selves, etc.—tempting as that may be, if only for a moment. In that moment, you are seduced by the anti-parochial spirit spanning East and West, ancient and contemporary, continental and analytic, that is embodied so well in *One* (whose cover, it must be now be pointed out, looks suspiciously like the Eye of Sauron). But the power of *horror contradictionis* may be stronger still, and will, I conjecture, compel the best of us to cast the *One* Ring into the fires of Mordor where it belongs, in the hope that the Beatles and socialist politics will follow.

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