

THE ONE-MANY PROBLEM -  
ONE PROBLEM OR MANY?  
SOME INSIGHTS FROM  
PLATO'S PHILEBUS

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The usual understanding of the one-many problem today: The Dispersal Problem

- When we use a term such as 'ox', are we referring to some *one* thing ('oxhood') which has a strange 'spread-out' character across all individual oxen?
- Is oxhood **one or many**?
- Or even (medievals) 'some quantity in between' (??)



# The Dispersal Problem

- ◎ Dilemma (Parmenides). If a Form is:
  - **many**, why is it that if an ox is destroyed, oxhood itself is not diminished?
  - **one**, how is it that “one and the same thing exists as a whole at the same time in many separate individuals, and will therefore be in a state of separation from itself” ?
- ◎ This dilemma has seemed to many philosophers to render the whole idea of universals or Forms incoherent.

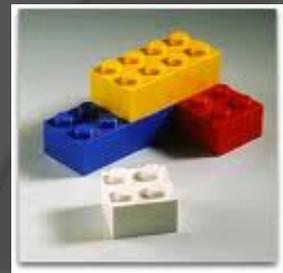
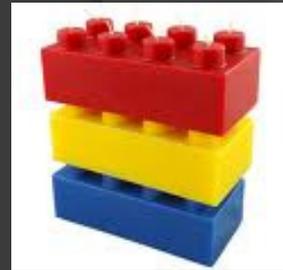
# Contemporary (Reified Hylomorphic) Responses to the Dispersal Problem:

- ◎ Realism (Armstrong): particulars and universals exist: Oxhood is **one over many**.
- ◎ Nominalism (everyone else): only particulars exist. Oxhood is a **many**.
- ◎ What both views share:
  - Reification of particularity and generality into particulars and universals.
  - The role of metaphysics is merely to state 'what there is' (list of ontological ingredients)



# “Ontological Compositionality”

- The most fundamental ingredients of the Universe are always combined and recombined in world-making **without changing their natures.**
- 3 is always 3, a physical object is always a physical object, the property white is always the property white, no matter in what state of affairs they may be found.
- **David Lewis** assumes this without question in his **“Humean Supervenience”**



# The *Philebus*, Setting the Scene:

- ⦿ Often seen as a late dialogue. One of the most difficult and abstract (**Rosen**: “Technical eccentricity”)
- ⦿ 3 protagonists: **Socrates**, **Philebus** (‘love-boy’, ‘lover of youth’), **Protarchus** (‘first principle’)
- ⦿ Key Question: Which is superior in human life: Knowledge or Pleasure?
- ⦿ Answer: Superior to both is the correct balance or mixture between the two.
- ⦿ It therefore **raises the one-many problem entirely within the realm of Forms**. A possibility that the contemporary analytic (reified hylomorphic) approach cannot even see.

# The *Philebus*, Setting the Scene:

- ◎ Early in the dialogue **one-many** issues arise. For **Socrates** begins by noting that the heterogeneity of pleasures will complicate their rank-ordering task:  
*“...surely she [Aphrodite, pleasure’s goddess] takes the most varied and even unlike forms. For do we not say that the intemperate has pleasure, and that the temperate has pleasure in his very temperance...”*
- ◎ **Protarchus** is willing to accept this at face value. But **Socrates** draws his attention to its philosophical perplexity:  
*“For that the many are one and the one many are amazing statements, and can be easily disputed, whichever side of the two one may want to defend.” (14c8-10).*
- ◎ However Socrates immediately makes a distinction between more and less **serious** one-many problems....

## Non Serious One-Many Problems:

- ◎ **Protarchus:** how a single person has many opposite characteristics in different contexts, such as tall/short, heavy/light, and in this way is “*many ‘mes’*”. (Inconsistent Properties Problem)
- ◎ **Socrates:** “...when someone who first distinguishes a person’s limbs and parts asks your agreement that all these parts are identical with that unity, but then exposes you to ridicule because of the monstrosities you have to admit, that the one is many and indefinitely many, and again that the many are only one thing (15e1-5)” (Physical Combination Problem)

Socrates dismisses these as “childish and trivial but a serious impediment to argument if one takes them on” (14d7-e1)

## Serious One-Many Problems:

where “...the *one* is not taken from the things that come to be or perish...”

**Socrates:** “...when someone tries to posit man as one, or ox as one, or the beautiful as one, and the good as one, zealous concern with divisions of these unities and the like gives rise to controversy...Firstly whether one ought to suppose that there are any such unities truly in existence. Then again...whether each one of them is always one and the same, admitting neither of generation nor of destruction; and whether it remains most definitely one and the same, even though it is afterwards found again among the things that come to be and are unlimited, so that it finds itself as one and the same in one and many things at the same time. And must it be treated as dispersed and multiplied or as entirely separated from itself, which would seem most impossible of all?” (15a4-b9)

Sounds a lot like the **Dispersal Problem**. But is the instantiation relation the only relation invoked here? And is it restricted to Forms dispersing over particulars...?

# The Genus-Species Problem

- **Constance Meinwald** argues the passage also makes reference to the way a Form is one while being divisible into many species and sub-species. (Genus-Species Problem)

*We “see the problem as arising from both positing monads and dividing them while denying that they admit generation and destruction.”*

- How is ‘mammal’ one in ‘cat’, ‘dog’ and ‘fox’?
- Note **genus-species** relation is quite different from i) **instantiation** relation, ii) **part-whole** relation
- Meinwald’s hypothesis seems vindicated by what Socrates goes on to say next...

# The Promethean Method

- ◉ When **Protarchus** asks for an answer to the one-many problem, **Socrates** replies by describing a method of inquiry, as follows:

*“It is a gift from gods to men...hurled down from heaven by some Prometheus along with a most dazzling fire. And the people of old, superior to us and living in closer proximity to the gods, have bequeathed us this tale, that whatever is said to be consists of **one** and **many**, having **limit** and **unlimitedness** naturally together in them...” (16c5-9)*

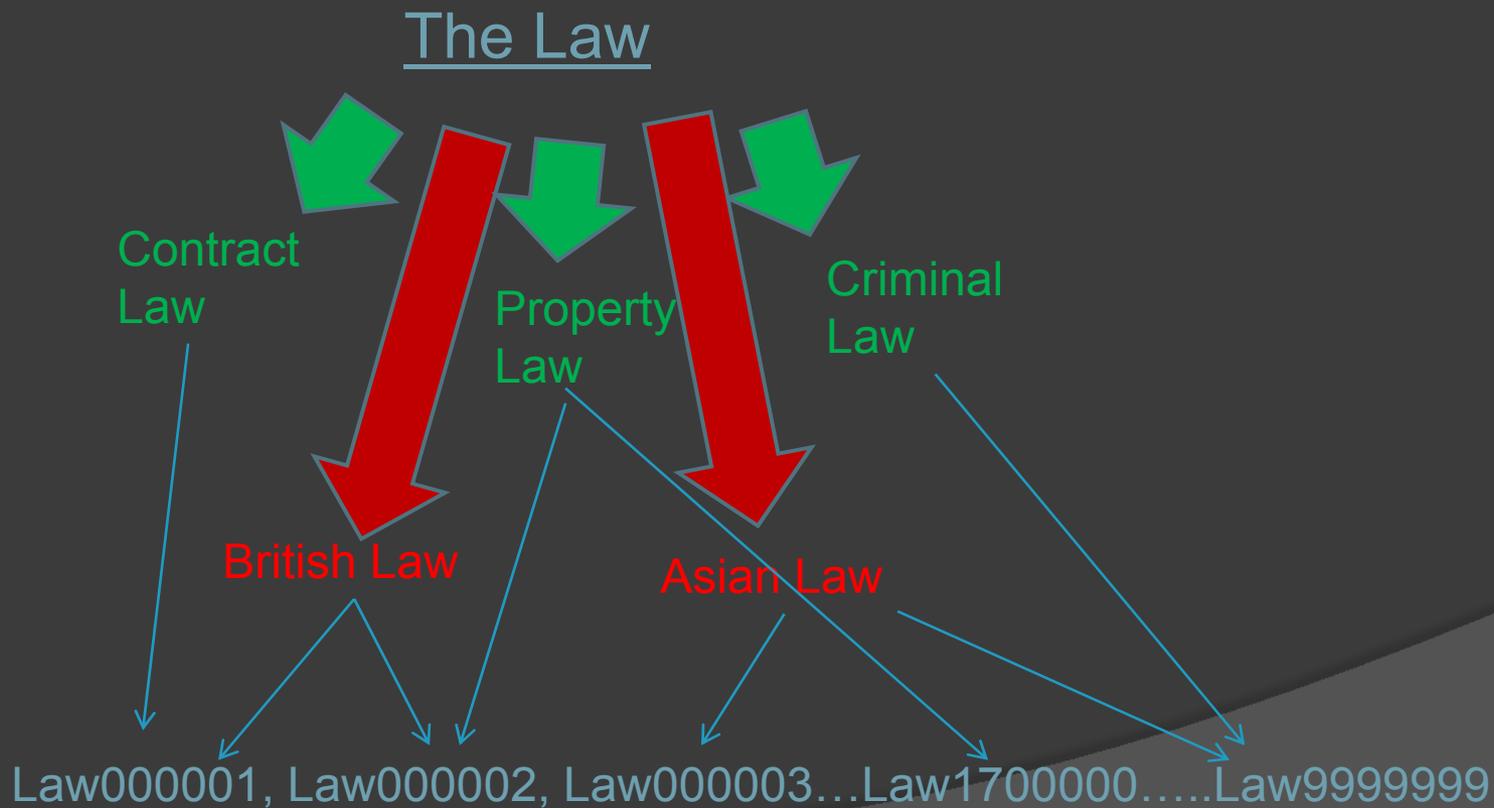


# The Promethean Method

- ⦿ We begin any inquiry by laying down “**one idea**”. After that:  
*“...we must look for two, as the case would have it, or if not, for three or some other number. And we must treat every one of those further unities in the same way, until it is not only established of the original unit that it is one, many and unlimited, but also how many kinds it is...Only then is it permitted to release each kind of unity into the unlimited and let it go (16d5-e3).*
- ❖ E.g.: I am interested in studying human laws. I begin by identifying The Law as my (**one**) object.
- ❖ I could then start collecting every law ever written, to study them. This would be proceeding straight to the **infinite**. But would be impossibly confusing and inefficient ....

# The Promethean Method

- ❖ More useful would be to make some intermediate (**plural**) divisions of my subject matter:



# The Combination Problem

- ⦿ However **yet another one-many problem**, arguably even more important, may be discerned in the text.
- ⦿ The dialogue's conclusion is that the **Good Life** is a mixed life which must contain both **Pleasure** and **Knowledge**, balanced correctly.
- ⦿ If 2 puddles are combined, the result is just one puddle. But in the Good Life Knowledge and Pleasure are both still present – the liver of such a life does not cease to know or to enjoy.
- ⦿ How can a Form contain 2 other Forms within it, and still be one thing?
- ⦿ We may call this an **Eidetic Combination Problem**.

# Why the Eidetic Combination Problem is 'serious', while the Physical Combination Problem is not

- ⦿ The human body is a combination of arms, legs, a head, and other parts... Why doesn't this diversity mean it is subject to the one-many problem?
- ⦿ The crucial difference is that the complexity of physical objects can be analysed by means of their **genesis**, and (thus) their **spatial arrangement**.
- ⦿ These allow **independent** means of individuating such entities. My head is my head and not a separate object because spatially integrated with my other body-parts.
- ⦿ Forms however were not generated and are not arranged in space. **The only individuation they have is eidetic**. This is why the one-many problem is harder for them.

## Summary: Three One-Many Problems, purely Eidetic (in the realm of Forms).

1. *The Dispersal Problem*: How can a Form be one while dispersed throughout its participants? (E.g. How is goodness one in military valour and compassionate charity work?)
2. *The Genus-Species Problem*: How can a Form be one when divisible into species? (E.g. How is mammalhood one in cats, dogs and foxes?)
3. *The Combination Problem*: How can a Form be one when a mixture of disparate and unrelated ingredients? (E.g. How is the Good Life one yet containing both Knowledge and Pleasure?)

These issues cannot be distinguished in frameworks such as D.M. Armstrong's

## Peras (finite, limited)

- ⦿ We will now look at solutions offered in the dialogue to the one-many problem
- ⦿ When **Protarchus** asks **Socrates** for his solution to the one-many problem, the latter answers (16d1-2) that everything that is is structured in terms of *peras* and *apeiron*.
- ⦿ Although *peras* is sometimes translated as “finite” (e.g. Jowett), it also means “limit” or “boundary”.
- ⦿ This provides the beginnings of a metaphysics of how something can be both one and many

# Peras (finite, bounded)

- ⦿ A boundary **demarcates** something: it creates an edge where one thing finishes and another begins.
- ⦿ A boundary **encloses** something, and what it encloses or contains is brought together, and distinguished from what is without, in virtue of being bound by the boundary.
- ⦿ Thus “limit” or “boundary” seems to give us **a principle of unity**.

But this is not the whole story.....

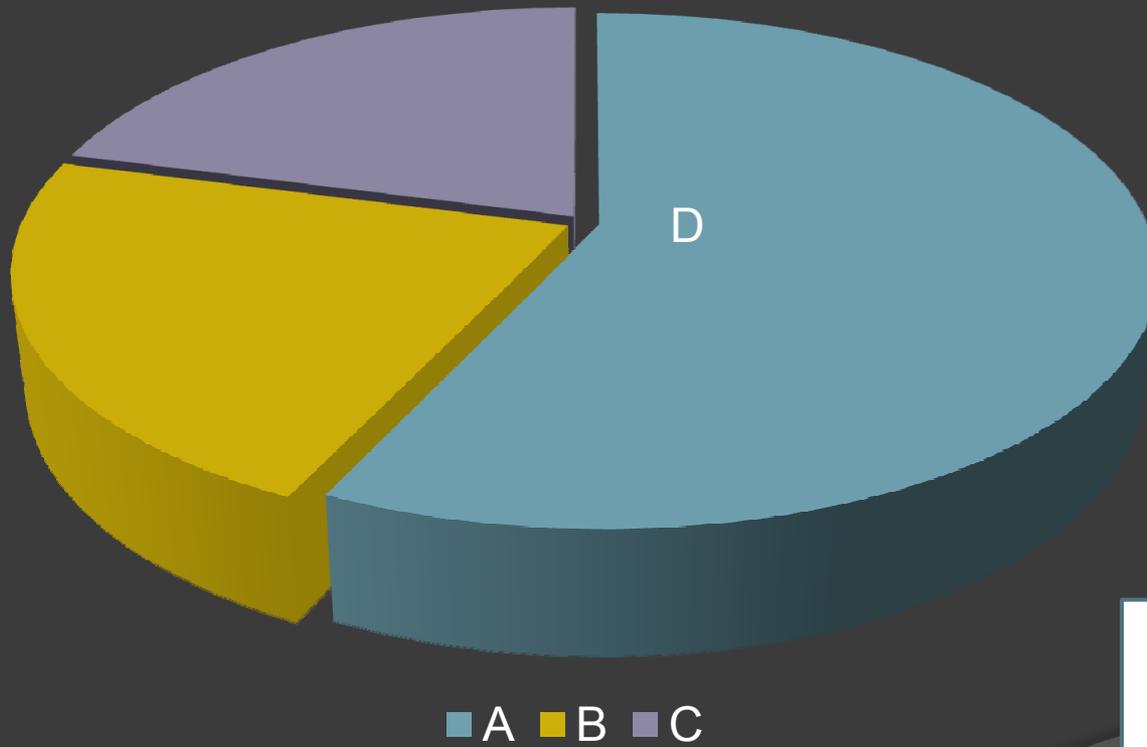
# Apeiron (infinite, unlimited)

- ⦿ Although *peras* acts to draw a boundary around an object, there is no guarantee that what is within the boundary is genuinely unified. (Consider a bundle of sticks tied together with twine. Remove it and they fall apart...)
- ⦿ We need not only to be able to bind things, but to do it in such a way that there are no gaps between them, *and* somehow still keep the things which are joined sufficiently distinct.
- ⦿ With only *peras* as our metaphysical principle, there would be no true 'one'. It is not possible to make real things purely out of boundaries.

# Apeiron (infinite, unlimited)

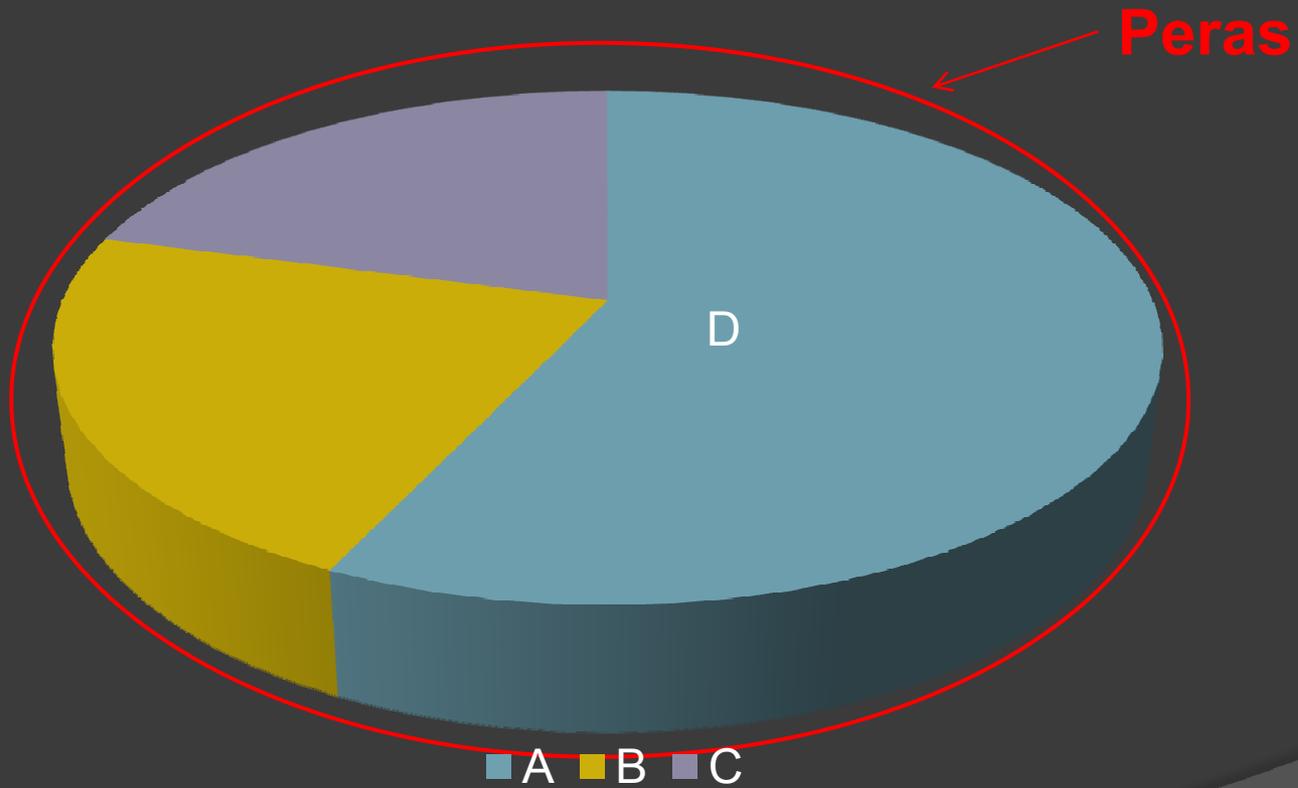
- ◎ *Apeiron* means “unlimited”, “indefinite”, “infinite” or “boundless”.
- ◎ It is thus a principle capable of explicating the lack of gap between things which are joined. It might be seen to perform a double role, ensuring:
  - ‘Intra-object unity’
  - ‘Trans-object unity’ as follows.....

# 'Intra-Object Unity'

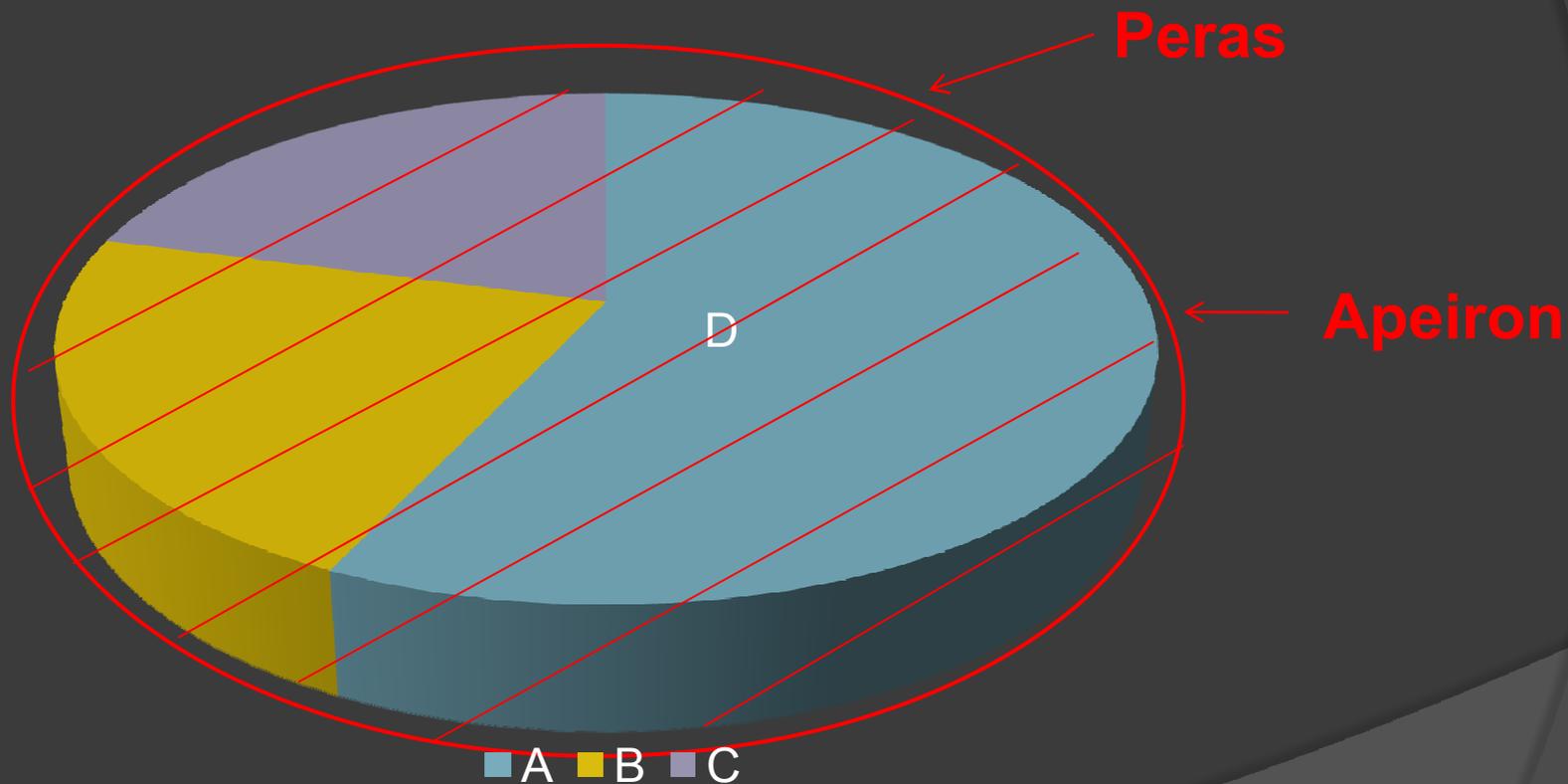


**D is composed of  
A, B and C**

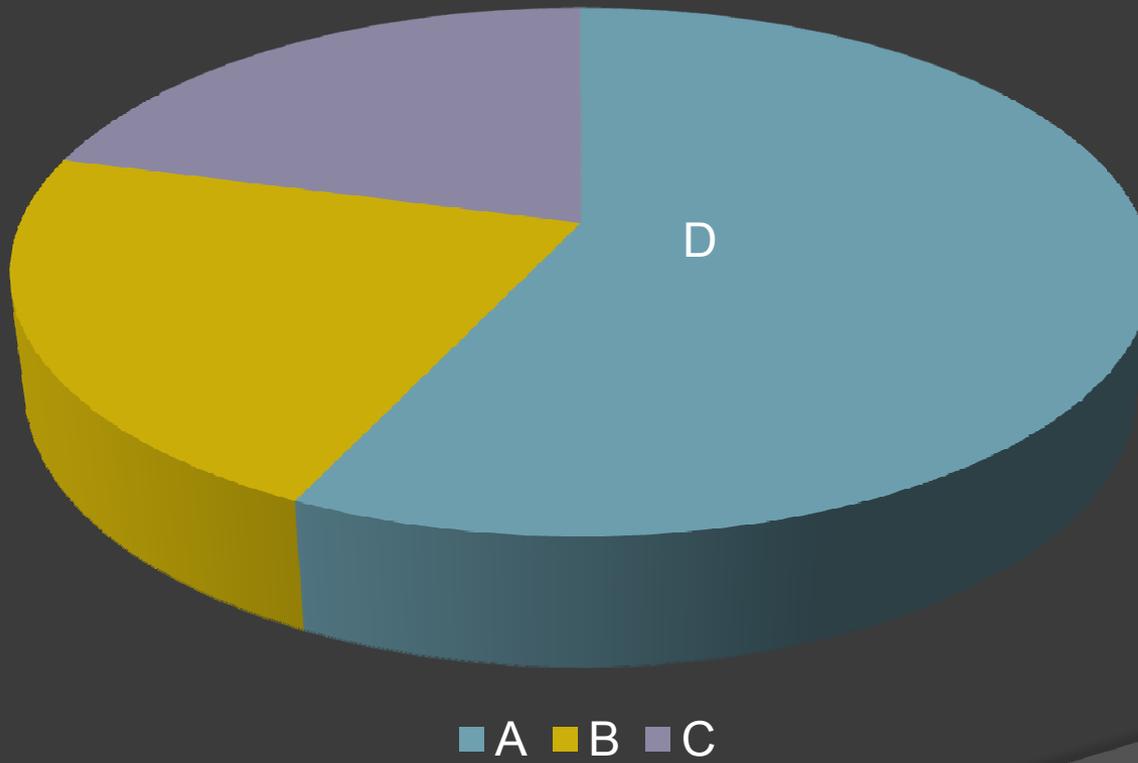
# 'Intra-Object Unity'



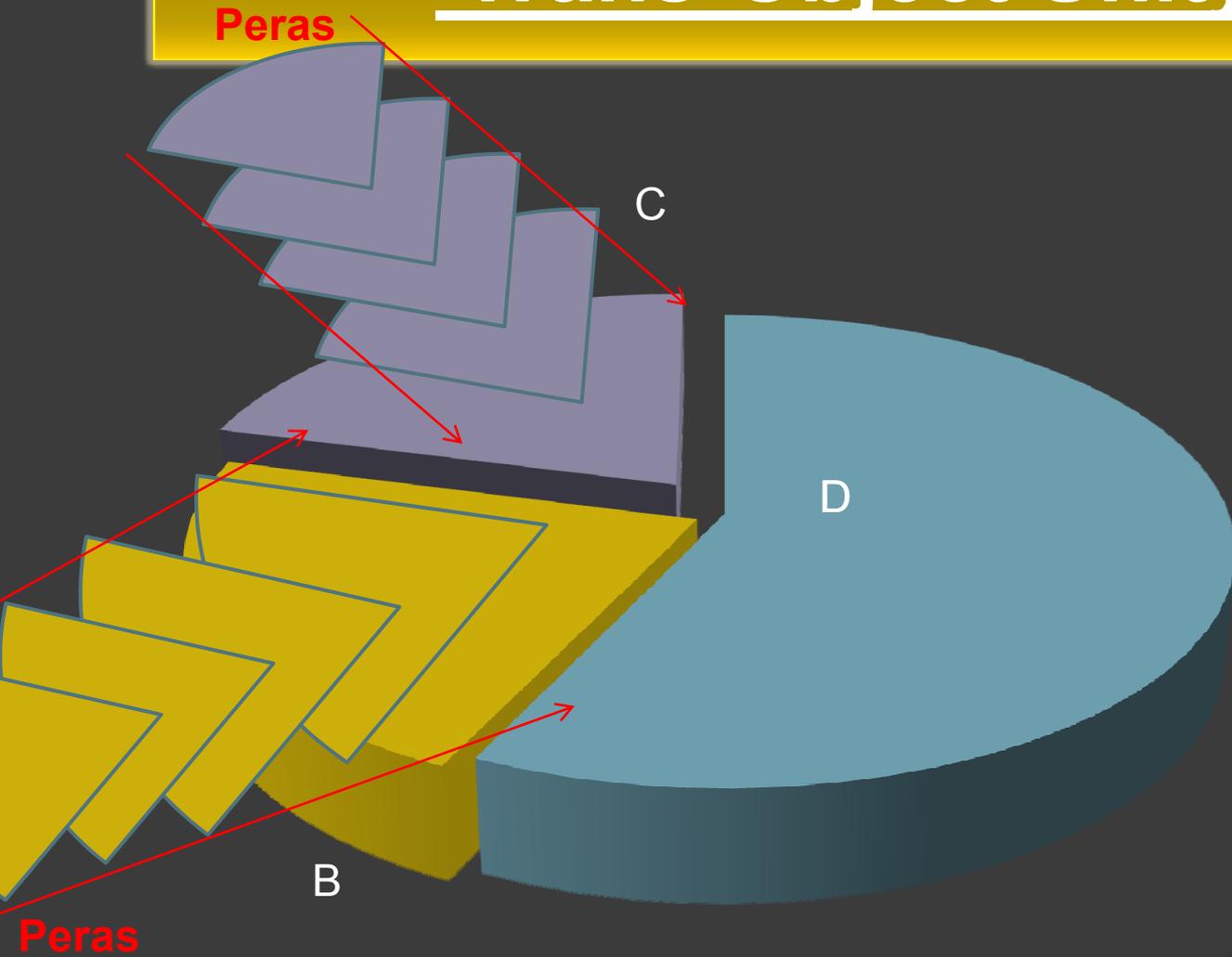
# 'Intra-Object Unity'



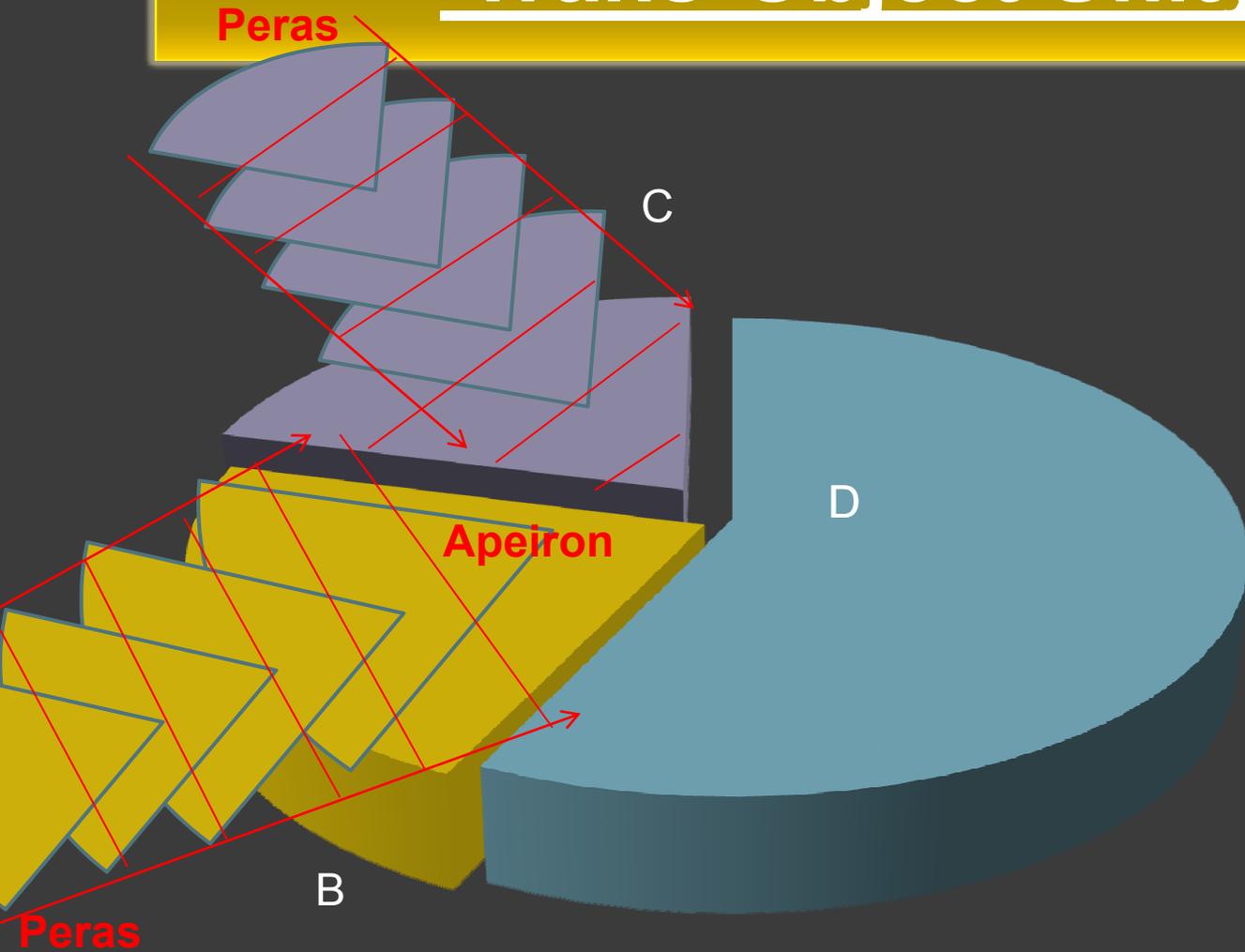
# 'Trans-Object Unity'



# 'Trans-Object Unity'



# 'Trans-Object Unity'



## The two uses of *apeiron* really one

- ⊙ We may understand this use of *apeiron* as providing ‘**trans-object unity**’ from the point of view of **D**.
- ⊙ However from the point of view of **A**, **B**, and **C**, the Forms which are thus stabilized are themselves further **ones**. So it provides an ‘**intra-object unity**’ for them.
- ⊙ From this convergence between the two uses of *apeiron* profound consequences follow...

# The two uses of *apeiron* really one

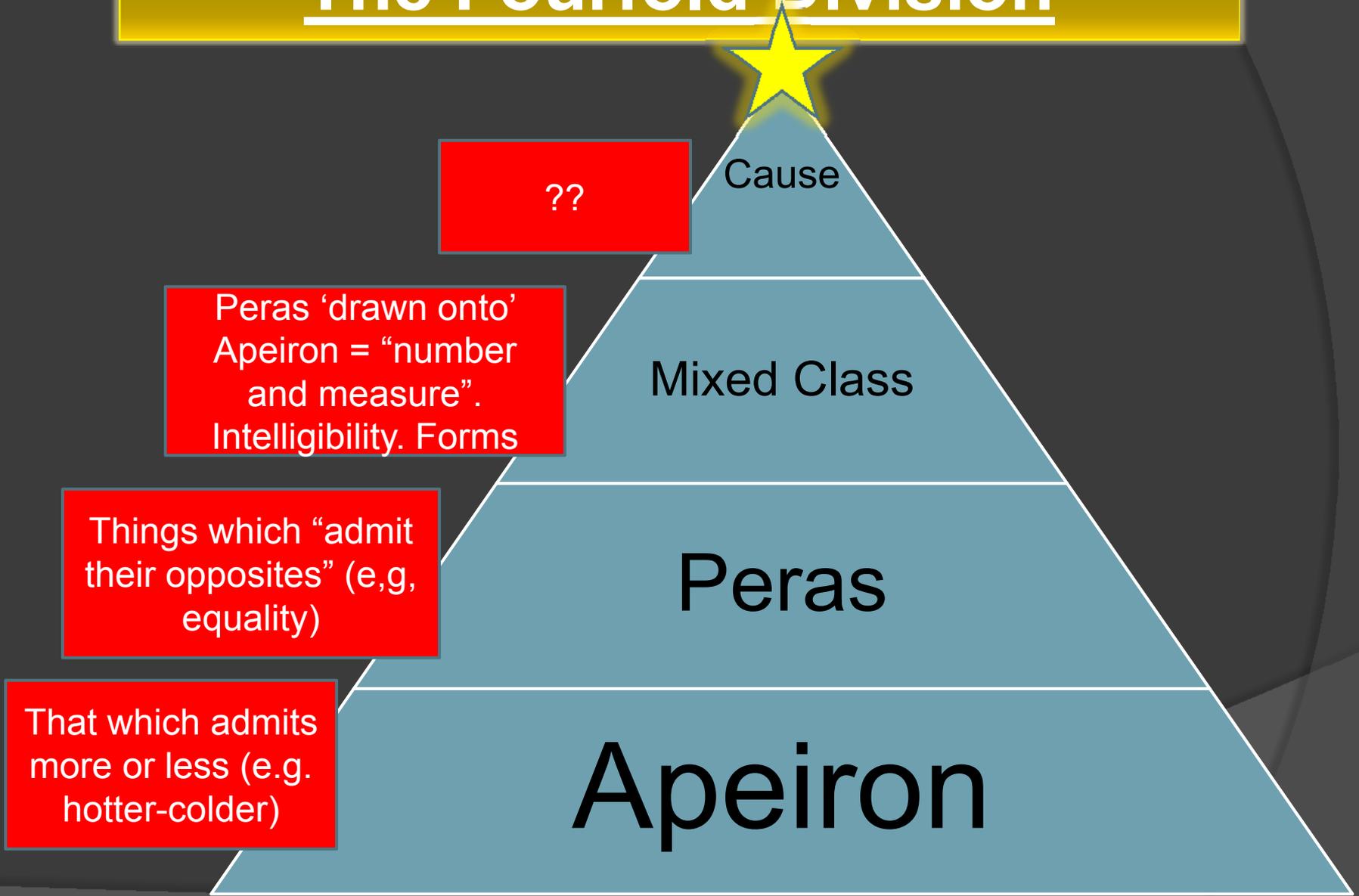
- ⊙ Arguably a key point of Plato's realism is that spatial individuation is relatively trivial – *it is eidetic individuation against a background continuum of Forms that gives us the more profound grasp on reality.*
- ⊙ In this sense, to return to the wording of the *Parmenides*, although its instances may seem scattered, when understood rightly a Form is *not* “in a state of separation from itself”.
- ⊙ It is unified eidetically, and that is the unification that matters.

The “Dispersal Problem” has now been (dis)solved via a change in perspective

# The Fourfold Division

- ◎ After outlining the Promethean Method Socrates elaborates *peras* and *apeiron* **still further** in a metaphysical discussion which has come to be known as the **4 fold division**.
- ◎ The levels are as follows...

# The Fourfold Division



??

Cause

Peras 'drawn onto'  
Apeiron = "number  
and measure".  
Intelligibility. Forms

Mixed Class

Things which "admit  
their opposites" (e.g,  
equality)

Peras

That which admits  
more or less (e.g.  
hotter-colder)

Apeiron

# The Fourfold Division

Translation by  
Bernadete here

- ◎ Why the Fourth level?

*“Every way of blending whatsoever and of whatever kind, if it does not get measure and the commensurate nature, destroys of necessity the things being blended and first itself, for anything of the kind is not even a blending but truly an unblended mishmash, and on each and every occasion proves to be really and truly for those in possession of it a smashup.” (64e2-4)*

- ◎ This is a direct challenge to **ontological compositionality**

# The Fourfold Division

- True mixture is much more than mere concatenation.
- The presence or absence of **harmony** (“health”) can *change everything* in a mixture, in a way which is not at all like Lego (where one can rearrange the parts in all kinds of ways but they remain the same).
- Consider for example a person's **character**. It is possible that just a touch more pride, turning the person to hubris, might spoil all their other good qualities.
- The role of the cause is to provide *a normative realism about combinations*.

# Systemic realism

- ◉ We are now working with an **irreducibly systemic perspective** on realism about Universals.
- ◉ In this light here are some interesting quotes from **Charles Peirce**:

*“...where ordinary logic considers only a single, special kind of relation, that of similarity – a relation too of a particular featureless and insignificant kind, the logic of relatives imagines a relation in general to be placed. Consequently, in place of the **class** which is composed of a number of individual object or facts brought together in ordinary logic by means of their relation of similarity, the logic of relatives considers the **system**, which is composed of objects brought together by any kind of relations whatsoever.” (p. 156-7, Reasoning and the Logic of Things (RLT)).*

# Systemic Realism

*“The dialogue of the Sophist... gives reasons for abandoning the Theory of Ideas which imply that Plato himself had come to see, if not that the Eternal Essences are continuous, at least, that there is an order of affinity among them, such as there is among Numbers. Thus, at last, the Platonic Ideas became Mathematical Essences, not possessed of Actual Existence but only of a Potential Being quite as Real...” (p. 115, RLT)*

*“The existing Universe...is an offshoot from, or an arbitrary determination of, a world of Ideas, a Platonic world....” (p. 258, RLT)*

# Systemic Realism

- ⦿ How is the potential being of Ideas realised?
- ⦿ Philosophical dialogue and inquiry.
- ⦿ Hence the intriguing final exchange of the dialogue:

***Socrates:** And will you let me go?*

***Protarchus:** There is a little which yet remains, and I will remind you of it, for I am sure you will not be the first to go away from an argument.*

- ⦿ **Rosen:** “Socrates was free to begin the investigation of the good life, but he is not free to terminate it” ...

# Conclusion

- We need a much deeper appreciation of Plato's realism.
- Ontological combinatorialism precisely begs the question against the reality of relations.
- We need a truer, more objective debate on this question.