Unity, Wholeness, and Proportion

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Plato: Appropriately Constructed Wholes

Let us begin, as is natural, at the beginning – or as close to it as our evidence allows.

Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*, having listened to his companion reciting a speech composed (in the dialogue's fiction) by Lysias, and twice spoken in reply to it, launches a more general discussion of good and bad writing (259e). The many defects identified in Lysias' speech include random organization: it starts with what should have been said last, and the order in which points are made lacks any cogent compositional rationale (264a–b); the speech resembles an epigram whose lines could be shuffled into any order (264c–e). But "every text should be constructed like a living organism, having a kind of body of its own, so that it does not lack either head or feet, but has middle parts and extremities, composed so as to fit appropriately with each other and the whole" (264c). Socrates takes it for granted that Phaedrus would say the same; Phaedrus assents as if to a statement of the obvious, and later reproduces the formula: Sophocles and Euripides would think it ridiculous to suppose that tragedy is "anything other than the structure of those elements, appropriately constructed relative both to each other and to the whole" (268d). We cannot be certain, therefore, whether it is Plato himself or some unknown predecessor who deserves the credit for first explicitly formulating this principle. But we owe the first extant formulation to Plato.

Is this a principle of *unity*? Plato's discussion has features that will become standard components of talk of unity in the subsequent history of aesthetics: the analogy with the body of a living organism; the use of beginning, middle, and end to express the idea of parts placed in a determinate order; the effect of transposition as a test of that order. Yet Plato does not use the term "one." By contrast, the Neoplatonist commentator Hermias uses "one" and cognate words (such as "unified" and "unification') seven times in 116 words of exposition of this passage (231.2–12 Couvreur). Is its absence from Plato's text significant? He speaks instead of a whole: since a whole is one thing, this may be equally effective in conveying the point. It may, indeed, have a positive advantage: a whole has parts, as a unity need not. Elsewhere, in contexts far removed from aesthetics, Plato canvasses a variety of puzzles about the relationship of unity, wholeness, and parts (e.g. *Parm.* 137c–d, 144e–5e, 157c–8d, 159c–e; *Soph.* 244d–5b). By speaking of wholes rather than unities in *Phaedrus* he is able to

avoid these larger problems, and to focus our attention on issues relevant to the structure of texts, which are inevitably compounded out of parts.

Plato demands appropriate structure, but gives no concrete guidance on the criteria that texts must satisfy in order to conform to that principle. We are told that there should be some cogent compositional reason for the disposition of the parts; what would count as a cogent reason is not specified. Though Lysias' speech is faulted because it does not begin by defining its subject matter and organize everything that follows in relation to that starting-point (263d–e), that cannot be a sufficient condition of good writing: Socrates' first response to Lysias, which does begin with a definition (237b–8c), is subsequently repudiated (242d). Nor can it be a necessary condition of good writing applicable to every kind of discourse: *Phaedrus* itself does not begin with a definition, and Plato – author of aporetic Socratic dialogues – knew the difficulty of achieving a definition even at a discourse's conclusion. Socrates' real answer operates at a more abstract level: instead of specifying what counts as a cogent reason, he specifies what kind of expertise one would need to be able to judge what is cogent in any particular case. The structural advice given in rhetorical textbooks (266d–7d) are dismissed as merely preliminaries to the art of rhetoric (268e–9c): the art itself consists in knowing how to deploy those elements to achieve the desired effect. Invoking an analogy with medicine and bodily health, and taking the goal of discourse to be imparting virtue to the addressee's soul (270b), Socrates argues that, to be capable of judging whether any given text is appropriately composed, one must have an understanding of the nature of soul, its varieties, and how they are affected by different kinds of discourse (270c–2b). It is not surprising that Plato does not work this program out in concrete terms.

Two points are worth noting. First, the medical analogy shows that the application of Plato's principle is determined by functional considerations. Despite the long and important role that the principle has played in the history of aesthetics, therefore, it was not specifically aesthetic in its original conception. If being an appropriately constructed whole is defined in terms of functionally appropriate composition, then Plato's principle is applicable to texts of every kind. Second, the abstract and programmatic nature of Plato's formulation of his principle demands caution on the part of interpreters. Modern readers of ancient aesthetics (and of ancient literature and other arts) bring with them, as tacit assumptions if not as explicitly formulated theories, their own conceptions of what constitutes an appropriately structured or unified text or artwork. The more abstractly the principle is formulated in an ancient source, the more readily it is assimilated to our preconceptions. When an ancient source formulates criteria for appropriateness of unity in concrete terms, divergences between those criteria and those that we take for granted may be evident. In other cases, it is dangerously easy for us to project our own conceptions back into antiquity. That is invalid, unless we suppose that compositional standards are historically and culturally invariant – which is manifestly false.

Criteria of appropriate structure were not invariant even in antiquity, as the history of interpretation of Plato's dialogues shows. The Neoplatonists developed a substantive conception of unity: a dialogue should have a single "target" (*skopos*). This means that there should be a single theme to which all of the seemingly disparate turns of the argument are ultimately subordinate. Hermias mentions a variety of opinions about the *skopos* of the *Phaedrus* (it is about love, rhetoric, the soul as motive principle, the soul as such, the good, or original beauty), but rejects them all on the grounds that they illegitimately generalize from part of the dialogue and fail to account for every element of the text (8.15–9.9, 10.26–11.19). He adopts Iamblichus' interpretation: the dialogue is about beauty in all its forms (9.9–10, 11.19–25). Were the Neoplatonists right to suppose that this was also Plato's conception? Not self-evidently: there are dialogues which apparently resist such integration, as the Neoplatonists' inability to agree on the single *skopos* of *Phaedrus* shows. Yet the single-*skopos* theory was motivated precisely by a sense that there should be more to say about the text's construction

than reporting a plurality of topics assembled without any rationale. In that respect, Neoplatonist hermeneutics was entirely faithful to the spirit of the *Phaedrus*. But this was not the only way of conceiving unity available in antiquity. In rhetorically oriented criticism, understanding a text as pursuing a plurality of goals that are not subordinated to one all-embracing *skopos* was unproblematic, since an orator's selection of targets is contextually motivated. The things that an orator needs to achieve are determined by the specific situation which evokes the speech. Unity is achieved by coordinating the pursuit of what may be a diverse set of context-determined goals at the textual level, rather than subordinating them to a single over-arching theme. An anonymous teacher of rhetoric, probably of the second century AD and certainly with Platonist sympathies, analyzes Plato's *Apology* as a weaving together or mixture of four subjects: the defense of Socrates, an attack on the Athenians who put him on trial, an encomium of Socrates, and instruction on the philosophical character ([D.H.] 305.5–306.10 Usener-Radermacher). Dio Chrysostom argues that "detours" are acceptable in philosophical writing if they are about philosophically serious matters (7.127–132); philosophers, who are not subject to the time limits and procedural rules of the law courts, have no reason to curtail a discourse that has something useful to say to its audience (12.38, alluding to *Theaetetus* 172d–e). This conception is arguably more faithful than the single-*skopos* theory to the implications of Plato's medical analogy. If a patient presents with a sprained ankle and a broken arm, the doctor should not insist on treating just one of these injuries. In philosophical as in medical therapy, imposing a principle of unity that is not determined by the patient's needs would be inappropriate, and would thus violate the principle formulated in the *Phaedrus*.

Aristotle: Bound and Bounded Unities

By contrast with Plato, Aristotle does speak of unity in connection with literary texts, and in the *Poetics* he proposes concrete criteria for assessing the unity of certain forms of poetry – tragedy, primarily, and epic. Here, then, we have an explicit concept of unity applied to what we would recognize as aesthetic issues (though Aristotle has no term that corresponds to this). But the application to aesthetics presupposes a more generally applicable analysis of the conceptual nexus linking unity, wholeness, and completeness. The main source for this analysis is *Metaphysics* 5, which aims to distinguish different ways of understanding key philosophical terms with multiple uses. The summary that follows is necessarily incomplete, since limitations of space demand a selective focus on the uses most relevant to the application in the *Poetics*.

Starting from Plato's preferred term, *whole* (*Met.* 5.26, 1023b26–4a10), we immediately encounter the connection with unity: in one of its uses, "whole" designates "what contains its contents in such a way that they are one thing" (1023b27–28). In the relevant kind of containment, wholeness makes one thing out of a plurality of constituents (1023b29–30). A whole of this kind is distinguished by continuity and boundedness (1023b32–33). However, a quantity that has a beginning, middle and end (i.e. one that is continuous and bounded) is only a whole if the parts have a determinate order, so that their position makes a difference: if the parts can be transposed indifferently, we do not speak of the "the whole …" but of "all the …" (1024a1–8). A pond, in which the circulation of water from periphery to center makes no difference to the pond as a continuous and bounded quantity of water, fails the transposition test.

Wholeness, therefore, is a kind of unity (5.26, 1023b35–36). The most relevant application of *one* (5.6, 1015b16–7a6; cf. 10.1, 1052a15–2b1) is again distinguished by continuity, but Aristotle here additionally specifies that the continuity in question requires a bond

(*sundesmos*), not mere adjacency (1015b36–6a2). A bundle of planks roped together is one, but would cease to be one if the rope is cut (1016a7–9). So long as the bond that secures continuity is intact, the whole bundle moves or changes as one (1016a5–6). That is true of, for example, a leg, though its flexibility means that its parts are also capable of independent movement; the inflexible parts, such as thigh or shin, have greater unity (1016a9–12). According to another and more demanding criterion, continuity is insufficient for unity unless it binds things into a whole, with a single form (*eidos*). The components of a shoe do not constitute a unity in this strong sense if they are bound together haphazardly, but only if they have been assembled to make a shoe (1016b11–16). An artifact is used to illustrate this point because it would not, in Aristotle's eyes, makes any sense to think of an organism's parts being assembled haphazardly: no body part retains its identity when it ceases to be a functional part of a living body (*Mete.* 4.12, 389b30–31, 390a10–13; *PA* 1.1, 640b35–1a5; *GA* 734b24–28). Such parts exist, in Aristotle's terminology, potentially (*Met.* 7.16, 1040b5–16); their unity is greater than that of parts which (like planks in a bundle) retain their identity when separated from the whole (5.26, 1023b33–4). Hence natural continuities are more continuous than artificial continuities (5.6, 1016a4), and natural wholes are more whole than artificial wholes (5.26, 1023b33–34). That explains the attraction of the living organism as an image of literary unity. Yet the image is imperfect: the wholeness of natural wholes, since it arises from an internal cause of continuity, is greater than the explicitly imposed wholeness of artificial entities (10.1, 1052a22–25).

Wholeness is also conceptually related to *completeness* (*Met.* 5.16, 1021b12–2a3; cf. *Phys.* 3.6, 207a7–15; 5.3, 227a10–17). This rests in part on a structural criterion: a thing is complete when no part of it is left out. For example, a period of time is incomplete when any part of it has not yet elapsed (1021b12–14). Wholeness, too, requires that no parts are missing (5.26, 1023b26–27). But completeness goes further, since it combines the structural criterion with one of two qualitative criteria: either it cannot be improved upon in excellence relative to the kind of thing it is, as (for example) a consummate doctor (1021b14–17); or it has reached some goal (*telos*), provided that the goal is good (1021b23–25).

A convenient transition to the specific case of poetic unity is provided by a passage which briefly recapitulates some relevant features of the general analysis (*Met.* 8.6, 1045a7–14). If something has parts, in the sense that there is a whole besides the parts (it is something of which we would say "the whole. …" rather than "all the …"), then there is some cause of its unity. A definition is not unified in the way that the *Iliad* is, because of a bond (*sundesmos*, 1045a13), but because it is a definition of one thing. Though Aristotle's concern here is with the unity of a definition, for us the contrast poses a different question: What is the bond that binds the *Iliad* into a unity?

Aristotle provides the answer in chapter 8 of *Poetics*. It is a basic premise, introduced in chapter 1, that an epic poem is an imitation (1447a13–16). The object of imitation was said to be agents in chapter 2 (1448a1–2), but chapter 6 argues that in tragedy the agents are functionally subordinate to plot (1450a15–23), and therefore to the imitation of action (6, 1450a3–4; 7, 1450b21–3). Applying this to epic, and assuming that an imitation is one if it is an imitation of one thing (8, 1451a30–31), it follows that an epic is unified if it is an imitation of one action. The bond which unifies the *Iliad* is therefore the unity of its plot. That is too familiar an idea to seem surprising: but perhaps we should be surprised. Though Aristotle has contrasted the unity of a definition with the kind of unity possessed by the *Iliad*, there seems to be a parallel between the unity of a definition, as definition of one thing, and the unity of an imitation, as imitation of one thing. However, the parallel is not exact. The object of definition, Aristotle argues, is a unity of matter and form, which are not separable parts: they are the same thing, in potentiality and actuality respectively (*Met.* 8.6, 1045a23–33). A unitary action, by contrast, is made out of a plurality of acts (*Poet.* 8, 1451a18–19).

The unity of the *Iliad* must therefore be sought one step further on: what binds many acts into a single action?

Many poets compose epics about the adventures of a hero, like Heracles or Theseus, as if performance by one person were sufficient to bind many acts into a single action (1451a16–22). Aristotle objects that there need be no necessary or probable relation between two events in a single person's life (1451a25–28). The lack of necessary or probable connection means that transposing or even eliminating any one of the component actions makes no difference to the whole (1451a32–34); but nothing is part of the whole if its presence or absence has no observable effect (1451a34–35). Such plots therefore fail the transposition test. Another possibility is rejected in chapter 23: a plot that narrates events occurring in a single period of time. Though we have seen that a period of time may be described as complete, there again need not be any necessary or probable relation between two events that occur within a complete single period (23, 1459a21–29). Epic plots should be "about a single action, whole and complete, having a beginning, middle parts, and an end" (1459a19–20). Why? "So that, like a living organism, as one whole it may effect its characteristic pleasure" (1459a20–21). It is not, of course, the function of a living organism to give pleasure, but to live its species-typical life (though someone who understands why the organism's structure in relation to that function will get pleasure from it: *PA* 1.5, 645a7–10). But giving a certain kind of pleasure is part of an epic's function, and appropriate structure is as important to fulfilling that function as it is to a living organism's capacity to feed or reproduce.

Aristotle holds that the same basic criterion of unity applies to both epic and tragedy (23, 1459a17–19). So his treatment of epic plots in chapters 8 and 23 rests on the groundwork done in chapter 7, where Aristotle unpacks a phrase from the definition of tragedy: "imitation of a complete action having magnitude" (6, 1449b24–25). "Complete" is expanded to "complete and whole" (7, 1450b23–25); "whole," in turn, is used to gloss "one" (1451a1–2; 8, 1451a32). "Whole" is specified as having beginning, middle, and end (7, 1450b26–27), and these are defined in terms that entail continuity and closure: there is a necessary or probable connection between beginning and middle, and between middle and end; but there is nothing that necessarily or probably follows the end, nor anything that necessarily precedes the beginning (1450b27–31). The question of how this kind of causal closure is possible would take us too far from our present topic. Here we need merely observe that necessary or probable connection provides the bonded continuity (not mere adjacency) demanded of wholes in *Met.* 5.26 (1023b32–33), and closure the boundedness.

What of the action's magnitude? An organism or anything else that is composed of parts must have those parts in a certain order if it is to be beautiful (*kalon*), but it must also be the right size (*Poet.* 7, 1450b34–37). It is not immediately obvious that this recommendation has any specific bearing on unity: *kalon* is the most general term to commend aesthetic excellence (as well as excellence in ethics and other spheres). But unity is a precondition of excellence, and human perceptual capacities set limits to the magnitude of what can be *perceived* as a unity. If something exceeds the upper limit, so that observers cannot take it in, "the one and the whole" eludes them; beneath the lower limit, the time taken for observation is below the threshold of perceptibility (1450b37–1a3). A physical object or organism, therefore, must afford easy synoptic viewing (*eusunopton*) if it is to be aesthetically excellent; something that unfolds over time, like the plot of a narrative, must be easily held in memory (1451a3–6).

It is important to recognize that Aristotle is, at this point, concerned with the structure of the plot, as distinct from the structure of the text. That is not say that Aristotle has no interest in text structure: he applies the transposition test to parts of a text when he deprecates choral songs in tragedy that are interludes with no more connection to one play than to any other (18, 1456a27–32). But plot and text are not identical: for example, parts of a tragedy's plot may fall outside the boundaries of the play, occurring chronologically prior to the play's first

scene, or later than the final scene (18, 1455b24–32; cf. 15, 1454b2–8). Since epics and tragedies are unified by virtue of their unity of action, Aristotle's primary concern in the *Poetics* is with plot structure. His focus of interest is therefore not the same as Plato's, whose comments in the *Phaedrus* are concerned with the organization of texts. We must therefore be cautious in drawing inferences about Aristotle's criteria at the textual level; they cannot be extrapolated from plot-level criteria.

In this respect, Aristotle's approach to epic and tragic unity resembles that of the Neoplatonist approach to the unity of Platonic dialogues. Each theory situates unity in something that must be abstracted from the text: an abstracted structure of events and an abstracted theme respectively. Should we conclude that Aristotle's theory is driven by philo-sophically motivated preconceptions to an extent that makes it unrepresentative of the expec-tations which his contemporaries would have brought to tragedies or epics? We know that epics and plays that did not meet Aristotle's criteria found an audience (he provides some of the evidence for that himself). Perhaps, then, contemporary literary taste was more aligned to the rhetorical approach described earlier: it was willing to recognize unity in coordination at the level of text, and did not demand subordination to a single abstract source of unity. But Aristotle's theory is faithful to contemporary taste in one respect, at least: it is able to explain the universally acknowledged superiority of Homer's epics. Second, he does not impose his conceptual analyses arbitrarily: he has a respect for generic diversity, and he applies his con-cepts in a correspondingly flexible way. Third, although plot is "as it were the soul of tragedy" (6, 1450a38), the Aristotelian soul is not separable from a body (e.g. *DA* 2.1, 413a3–4): we shall see in due course that the abstraction of plot is qualified when account is taken of the interactions between the plot and the text which embodies the plot for the audience.

Aristotle takes it for granted that tragedies and epics are designed to affect audiences in certain ways, and therefore recognizes that the application of criteria for poetic structure must take account of the receptive capacities of an audience. This audience relativity has already been observed in the limits to the magnitude of plot imposed by the upper and lower boundaries of unitary human perception. But this is not an isolated case. Aristotle is willing to endorse a variety of techniques by which poets manipulate audience perceptions by controlling the salience of elements in the plot (9, 1452a3–11; 15, 1454b6–8; 16, 1455a12–16; 24, 1460a11–b5; 25, 1460b35–61a1, 1461b11–12). The transposition test, too, is sub-ject to a qualification that reflects Aristotle's sensitivity to what will or will not be salient to an audience: something is not part of the whole if its presence or absence has no *observable* (*epidēlon*) effect (8, 1451a34–35).

But the limits of perceptible magnitude have so far been stated only in the broadest terms: more precise guidance is needed if we are to have any realistic conception of the scale appro-priate to a tragedy. Aristotle suggests a criterion determined by the nature of a complete tragic action: "the magnitude in which a series of events occurring sequentially in accordance with probability or necessity gives rise to a change from good fortune to bad fortune, or from bad fortune to good fortune" (7, 1451a12–14). This, though not particularly precise, makes obvious sense. But the more general principle that precedes it is problematic: "always, the greater (up to the limits of synoptic viewing), the more beautiful [*kalon*] it is with respect to magnitude" (1451a10–11). It seems to follow that a person of large stature will be more beautiful than someone smaller – which Aristotle does, in fact, maintain (*NE* 4.3, 1123b6–8). But for each species, there is a certain range within which size varies (*GA* 4.4, 771b33–2a2): so a human as large as an elephant would not be beautiful. The general principle must simi-larly be relativized to different genres; if it were not, it would entail that tragedians should expand their plots to epic scale – which Aristotle denies. The relativity of norms to genre is consistent with the conceptual analyses discussed earlier. Of the two qualitative criteria of completeness, one relates to achieving some good goal; the other relates to excellence within

a certain kind (*Met.* 5.16, 1021b14–17, 23–25). Epic and tragedy have, in key respects, the same goal (*Poet.* 6, 1449b16–20; 26, 1462b12–15); but Aristotle has acknowledged a difference in length between epic and tragedy (5, 1449b11–16; cf. 24, 1459b17–18), and in chapter 26 he will argue that tragic brevity is superior to epic expansiveness. There must, then, be considerations which block the inference from "the greater … the more beautiful" to the superiority of the more expansive genre. The key to tragedy's superiority is that, even within the limits of synoptic viewing which preserve perceptible unity, differences in magnitude relate to different degrees of unity.

This point is made most explicitly when Aristotle takes up the challenge of those who claim that epic is intrinsically superior to tragedy. One of his arguments against this view rests on unity: "the epic poets' imitation is less unified" (26, 1462b3–4). Evidence for this claim is parenthetically inserted: many tragedies could be made from one epic; if epic poets use a single *muthos* (i.e. the material for a single tragedy) the result gives an appearance of being either truncated, if the epic is not developed to the length appropriate to it, or else diluted, if it stretches its material out to epic length (1462b4–7). Returning from this parenthesis Aristotle explains his claim that imitation is less unified in epic: an epic comprises a plurality of actions, in the way that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* contain many parts, each of which have magnitude in their own right. Yet the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are, to the highest degree, an imitation of a single action (1462b7–11). So even the most excellent epics are less unified than a comparably excellent tragedy.

We should not be puzzled that Homer's poems comprise a plurality of actions, and yet are imitations of a single action: we have already seen that the unity of an epic depends on binding multiple acts into a single action. It would be a merely terminological variation to speak of the binding of multiple plots into a single plot: so we should also not be puzzled when Aristotle mentions "the whole plot [*muthos*] of the *Iliad*" to illustrate an "epic-making structure," by which he means a structure "with many plots" (*polumuthos*) (18, 1456a11–13). His point is that it is wrong to make a tragedy out of an "epic-making structure" (1456a10–11). An epic poem has sufficient length to give appropriate magnitude to each of its parts; by implication, tragedies that try to deal with all the material of an epic are forced to compress each part into too small a compass to have any effect, and consequently fail (1456a13–17).

The *Iliad*, then, has an "epic-making structure" from which one should not try to make a tragedy. Yet Aristotle also says that, unlike other epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have the material for only one or two tragedies (23, 1459b2–5). The distinction between plot and text may help to resolve the apparent contradiction: the *text* of a narrative might provide material for many tragedies, though its *plot* provides material for just one. The importance of that distinction is illustrated by Homer's unique approach to epic structure. Epic poets who have avoided the mistake of composing plots based on a single person or a single period of time, which as we have seen are flawed in principle, have for the most part based their epics on "a single action of many parts" (23, 1459a37–b2). That description would apply to the story of the Trojan War as a whole, which Aristotle recognizes as satisfying his criteria for a bounded whole (1459a31–32). But if Homer had followed that model in the *Iliad* he would have faced a dilemma: either the plot would be too large, and could not be viewed synoptically; or, if it was moderate in magnitude, it would have been "over-complicated in its variety" (1459a31–35). Though Aristotle speaks here (as in chapter 7) of the magnitude of the *plot*, his thought-experiment assumes the same plot (the whole Trojan War) narrated more or less expansively. The variable is therefore the length of the *text* in which the plot is narrated. It may therefore seem that he is getting the level of text and plot confused. But the relativity of appropriate magnitude to the receptive capacities of the audience points to an explanation; it is psychologically plausible that the possibility of grasping a plot and retaining it in memory is dependent not only on the magnitude of the plot taken abstractly, but also on the length of the text which delivers it to the audience.

Homer's solution was to select a single part from the story of the whole war. We could say that a single action of many parts is like a bundle of planks: the planks have actual existence both within the bundle and when separated from it. By selecting just one part from such a story, Homer achieved a single action of which the parts have only potential existence, which (as we saw earlier) is more of a whole. But there is a paradox. The length which Aristotle recommends for synoptic boundedness is equivalent to three tragedies – approximately 4000 lines (24, 1459b17–22). The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are much longer than this. Such expansiveness at the level of text is consistent with plot-level concentration if the expansions, though related to the core plot, are not parts of it. Think, for example, of the many minor combats in Homer's battle narratives. Though these actions contribute to the richness of the narrative text, their absence would not make a difference to the plot in the way that (for example) the absence of the Quarrel would; for this reason, their presence places no additional demand on the audience's ability to keep the plot in memory. Aristotle speaks (with characteristic compression) of Homer taking one part of the Trojan War story and using "many of them" (i.e. many other parts of that larger story) as "episodes" to interrupt the narrative (23, 1459a35–37). His example is the Catalogue of Ships, a passage transported from its natural place at the start of the war and adapted to accompany the first deployment of the army in the *Iliad*: its removal would impoverish the poem as text, but not damage the causal integrity of the plot. The *Odyssey*, too, has a core plot that can be stated very briefly, but has been expanded at the textual level by means of episodes (17, 1455b15–23).

Epic is able to use contrasting episodes to provide variety for the audience: this gives it an advantage over tragedy, which can fail because "similarity soon satiates" (24, 1459b28–31). Here, too, Aristotle is sensitive to what is appropriate in relation to an audience's receptive capacities. The need for variety and change is a deficiency, but it is a deficiency that is part of human nature, and must be taken into account (*NE* 7.14, 1154b20–31). Yet Aristotle, always alert to the interaction of multiple factors, also sees it as an advantage of tragedy over epic that it achieves its goal at less length: "what is more concentrated is more pleasant than what is watered down by being extended in time" (*Poet.* 26, 1462a18–b3). How might the respective advantages of expansion and concentration be weighed against each other? Compare an epic of the length that Aristotle recommends with a standard set of three tragedies. The tragedies have the potential to give us three instances of a more concentrated, and therefore more intensely pleasing, experience, but with the risk that the audience will be dissatisfied by the repetition; the epic has more resources to avoid tedium by diversification, but cannot achieve such an intense effect. Tragedy has greater potential than epic, therefore, but also a greater risk of failure.

One final point: there are limits to the superiority of greater unity. It is possible for something to be *too* unified. A degree of unity that prevents something achieving its proper goal is a defect. This is a criticism that Aristotle makes of the hypothetical city of Plato's *Republic* (*Pol.* 2.2, 1261a13–22, 6–15; 2.5, 1263b5–14). Being more unified is part of the superiority of tragedy over epic; but an epic which achieved tragic unity would be as defective as a tragedy which achieved epic diversity.

"Everyone, so to speak": Proportion

Aristotle's requirement that a plot should have continuity, closure, and right magnitude depends on a general principle that excellence (or beauty: *to kalon*) consists in magnitude and order (*Poet.* 7, 1450b36–37). Elsewhere, in a mathematical context, he separates the two aspects of structure, and varies the terminology for magnitude: the basic elements of excellence are order, proportion (*summetria*), and boundedness (*Met.* 13.3, 1078a31–b6). The

fact that mathematical entities do not have physical bulk may be part of the reason for replacing substituting *summetria* for magnitude, but it is also important that *summetria* expresses a relationship between two or more things. *Summetria* is not primarily "symmetry" in the modern English sense. It can designate commensurability, but also proportionality, balance, or "fit" across a very wide range of applications. Giving way to fear in the face of terrors beyond human endurance is not cowardice: the virtue of courage is limited to dangers that are proportionate (*summetra*) to the human capacity to withstand them (*EE* 3.1, 1229b13–21). Physical health is, or depends on, *summetria* of physiological qualities (*APo.* 1.13, 78b19–20; *Top.* 6.2, 139b20–21; 6.6, 145b7–11), internally or in relation to the external environment (*Phys.* 7.3, 246b3–6). Poor physique can be expressed as a lack of *summetria* (*Poet.* 25, 1461a12–13). Here, obviously, the proportionality is of the individual's parts to each other: so physical beauty is, or depends on, *summetria* of the limbs (*Top.* 3.1, 116b21–22; *Phys.* 7.3, 246b7–8). But *summetria* is not sufficient for beauty: small people can be *summetroi*, but not beautiful (*NE* 4.3, 1123b6–8). Magnitude is still important.

In the collection of *Problems* transmitted among Aristotle's works, an unknown Aristotelian raises the question why someone who lacks physical *summetria* seems bigger when seen in company than when he is on his own, and suggests that this is a perceptual illusion explained by the fact that *summetria* is a source of unity (*Prob.* 17.1, 915b38–6a11). If someone is *summetros*, "the observation is one": we might say, recalling *Poetics* 7, that he is easy to view synoptically. The opposite is true of the person who lacks *summetria*. Seen in company, then, the person who lacks *summetria*, and so takes more time to grasp perceptually, appears larger.

These were not new ideas. In the *Timaeus* (87c–e) Plato argues that everything good is beautiful (*kalon*), and beauty does not lack measure (is not *ametron*). Taking it as an acknowledged fact that *summetria* in a body gives it health, beauty, and ease of movement, and that the same applies to the soul, he insists that there must also be a *summetria* between body and soul. In the *Philebus*, having established that a good human life requires a mixture of factors (61a–b), Socrates argues (64c–5a) that the integrity of any compound depends on measure (*metron*) and proportion (*summetria*); since these are the nature of beauty, it follows that the good has "taken refuge" in beauty: so the good must be "hunted out" in beauty, proportion, and truth (truth having already been added to the "mixture" at 61e–2a). This triad constitutes the unitary source of goodness in any compound. In the *Sophist* (235c–6d), *summetria* is used to distinguish different kinds of imitation: one preserves the true *summetria* of a beautiful object, while the other produces *summetria* that is not genuinely but only apparently beautiful. Plato here alludes to statues in which the proportions of have been manipulated to ensure that they appear correctly from an observer's point of view. His disparagement of this illusionistic technique highlights the significance of Aristotle's relativization of his criteria to the capacities of human observers.

The idea that health and beauty, both of body and of soul, involve *summetria* was taken up by Stoics (e.g. *SVF* III 278 = Stobaeus II 62.15–63.5 Wachsmuth; 279 = Cic. *Tusc.* 4.32). Chrysippus assented to this doctrine, as we know from Galen's critique (*De placitis* 5.2.32–3 = *SVF* III 471). But the doctrine was by no means distinctively Stoic: Galen accepts it, cites Plato in its support, and attacks Chrysippus only for his confused and inconsistent application of it (5.2.34, 48; 5.3.12–23; cf. e.g. *Thrasybulus* 5.822.6–9 Kühn). Platonists were, not surprisingly, enthusiasts for *summetria*. Plutarch, giving advice on correct deportment when listening to lectures, appeals to the principle that "in everything, beauty is realised through multiple factors, so to speak, being brought together at a single point by a kind of proportion and harmony" (*Mor.* 45c–d). The *Philebus* triad was influential. A second-century handbook of Platonism includes truth, *summetria*, and beauty among the attributes of God (Alcinous *Did.* 10.3). In the fifth century, Proclus' *Platonic Theology* identifies unity as the distinctive contribution of *summetria* to any compound or mixture (3.11; cf. 3.13, 48.11–25; 3.18,

62.11–63.21 Saffrey-Westerink). According to Plotinus, "everyone, so to speak" says that "proportion of the parts to each other and the whole, with the addition of good colouring, produces visible beauty, and for them [i.e. visible objects] and in general for everything else being beautiful is their being proportioned and measured" (1.6.1.20–25). Plotinus himself, however, is a dissenting voice.

Plotinus: Form

In view of the precedent set by Plato, one might be surprised to find Plotinus launching an attack on the theory of beauty as *summetria* (1.6). It is not that he repudiates the Phileban triad: it is explicitly cited and endorsed elsewhere in his works (6.7.30.32–39). The critique has been interpreted as opportunistic anti-Stoic polemic: but, as we have seen, this conception of beauty was far more widely disseminated. His critique of the theory would, in any case, be defective as an attempt to refute a rival philosophical theory. It is better understood as probing a widely accepted commonplace in order to prime our sense of the range of problems that an adequate theory of beauty needs to address. The constructive sequel is designed to persuade us that these problems can only be addressed adequately in the context of a Platonist metaphysics; that metaphysics also explains the element of truth in the *summetria* theory.

The questions which Plotinus poses to the theory (1.6.1.25–54) start from its making explicit reference only to composite entities. But, first, if parts are not beautiful except in relation to a whole, beautiful wholes will consist of parts that are not beautiful. Second, nothing that is not composite can be beautiful: it will make no sense to talk of a color, or sunlight, or lightning, or a single tone as beautiful. Third, a face may appear beautiful at one time, and not another, though its proportions have not changed. If, fourth, the theory is extended beyond the realm of perception, it is unclear how we are to measure proportionality in such things as lifestyles, laws, learning, or bodies of knowledge. Consistency is not enough: the conjunction of two morally repellent falsehoods is not beautiful, though its elements are consonant with each other. By what other kind of ratio would we determine proportionality between the parts of a soul, or its thoughts? What would become of the beauty of intellect, itself alone?

From the outset, Plotinus makes no secret of his Platonist perspective. He opens his discussion by reminding us of the diversity of things to which the word *kalos* is applied: there is visible beauty, beauty in sound, beauty in lifestyles, actions, characters, bodies of knowledge, and in virtue (1.6.1.1–6). The agenda he sets is characteristically Platonist: is there some *one thing* by which all beautiful things are beautiful? Some things, such as the nature of virtue, are beautiful in themselves, but physical objects are not, and must be beautiful by "participation" in something other than themselves (1.6.1.7–16). Clearly, Plotinus is directing our thoughts toward Platonic Forms: and after the preliminary survey of the issues it is to Form that Plotinus turns – not, of course, form in the sense of outward shape or structure, but Form in the sense of the fundamental reality that is the cause of a thing's being what it is.

The constructive phase begins from the experience of encountering beauty. Our response is explained as an instance of Platonic recollection: the encounter with beauty in the world of experience triggers a recollection of the soul's acquaintance with intelligible reality (1.6.2.2–11). Things in the world of experience are related to intelligible reality through participation in Form: "how are those [intelligible] and these [experienced] things both beautiful? We say: it is by participation in Form that these are" (1.6.2.11–13; cf. 5.8.1–2). In the case of composite entities, it is Form that brings one thing to be out of many parts, bringing them into a unified completion (*sunteleia*), and making them one thing by agreement (*homologia*);

since Form is itself unitary, that which it forms must also be unified, so far as that is possible for what comes to be out of many (1.6.2.13–22; cf. 2.9.17.15–21; 5.8.1.26–27). When something has been unified in this way, beauty resides in it and gives itself to the parts as well as the whole (1.6.2.22–24). Beauty is thus a top-down, not a bottom-up, phenomenon: so the problem of a beautiful whole composed from parts that are not beautiful dissolves (cf. 6.7.22.26–36). Equally, since this theory does not explain beauty exclusively in terms of a relationship between parts, the beauty of non-composites causes it no embarrassment (1.6.2.24–28). Where there are parts to relate, as in a body, it is their unification that is the source of health and beauty (cf. 6.9.1.14–16); but unity, and therefore beauty, also belong to non-composites.

Plotinus refrains from speaking of *summetria* in the case of composites, but he could have done so: he does speak of "agreement" (*homologia*, 1.6.2.20), which is used elsewhere in free variation with *summetria* (1.2.1.43–48). If virtue can be spoken of as "unification into one thing and one *homologia*" (6.9.1.16–17), then why should one not also speak of it as *summetria*? Whichever word one uses, it is the unity that is decisive: and the unity derives from Form. Perhaps, then, Plotinus' thought is not that speaking of *summetria* would be wrong, but that the word is too limited (if it is taken to specify a relation between parts), or at best misleading (since its use in the commonplace formula has laden it with the implication of a relation between parts). This makes it preferable to use terms, like consonance (*sumphōnia*) or harmonization (*sunharmonia*) (1.6.2.4–6; 1.6.3.3–16), which apply more comfortably to the fundamental relationship between the beautiful thing and Form, or between the soul and the Form which it recognizes in the beautiful thing. What is decisive is not the consonance of parts, but the Form-dependent consonance and harmonization of a beautiful object with soul, which makes the object dear to the soul, "just as a good man finds congenial [*prosēnes*] an apparent trace of virtue in a young person, consonant with his own inner truth" (1.6.3.15–16). Hence the problem of consonant falsehoods is solved, too. Things are not vicious, ugly, or false by participation in Form, but to the extent that they fail to participate in Form. So the conjunction of two morally repellent falsehoods cannot be beautiful if beauty derives from Form.

We do not have space to pursue Plotinus' discussion further and consider beauty in the soul (1.6.4–6; cf. 5.8.2–3), beyond mentioning briefly another reason for his preference not to speak of beauty as *summetria*. Making our inner self beautiful involves a purification that detaches us from the body. In turning away from the body, the soul "becomes Form" (1.6.6.13–14). To the extent that the soul achieves this purification, therefore, it has transcended measure (*metron*) (1.6.9.15–22; cf. 1.2.1.42–50; 6.7.32.34–39). Where lack of due measure (*ametria*: cf. Pl. *Tim*. 87c) is impossible, *summetria* too ceases to be relevant.

But our concern here is with beauty in the perceptible world: let us return finally to that. Basil of Caesarea, commenting on "God saw the light, that it was beautiful [*kalon*]" in his sermons on the six days of creation (2.7), alludes to the conception of physical beauty as *summetria* of the parts to each other with good coloring, and asks how this can apply to light. Mention of gold as a parallel case reinforces suspicion of an allusion to Plotinus. Basil suggests that the *summetria* is not between the parts, but in the congenial (*prosēnes*: cf. Plotinus 1.6.3.15) relationship to vision. Plato explains *color* as an outflow from objects with particles proportionate to sight (*Tim*. 67c); Basil's relativization of the beauty of *light* to species-typical perceptual capacities is a move reminiscent of Aristotle. Plotinus would surely ask what explains the congenial relationship, and would lead us back from perception to intelligible Form. Form is not itself composite, but can manifest itself in plurality: its binding force is what makes it possible for perception to gather together what is dispersed and take it in as something without parts (1.6.3.9–15). Those sympathetic to Aristotle's claim that Plato's Forms are "empty verbiage and poetic metaphors" (*Met*. 1.9, 991a20–22) might retort that

this explains nothing. Aristotle's approach, by contrast, shows how criteria for assessing the unity of particular kinds of text can be defended by arguments grounded in experience, and thereby opens up the possibility of a reciprocal process in which texts are evaluated against criteria which can in turn be assessed against the evidence of the texts. If the criteria seem to work, explanations can be sought in empirically determinable human capacities and motivations, in the spirit of Aristotle's account of the reasons why producing and consuming poetry is a natural human behavior (*Poet.* 4, 1448b4–24). This approach might provoke worries in turn. Is it possible to disentangle human universals from cultural and individual variables? Why should universals be privileged? Can norms be validly derived from empirical observation? Aristotle would not be lost for answers: the answers would lead into further debate.

After a beginning and a middle, it may seem disappointing to be left only with loose ends. But unanswered questions are good starting points for philosophical reflection.

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FURTHER READING

Heath (1989) contains a wide-ranging survey of conceptions of literary unity in ancient philosophy, rhetoric, and literary scholarship: I have since modified my views on many details (as here, especially, on Aristotle), and do not find the way the book frames its question entirely helpful. Aspects of Aristotle's theory are discussed in Belfiore (2001), Frede (2009), and Roberts (1992). Tracy (1969) is useful on the origins of the concept *summetria*; Horn (1989) examines its Stoic and subsequent history. O'Meara (1993), an unusually accessible introduction to Plotinus, includes a short but valuable discussion of his theory of beauty (88–99); Anton (1964) shows why Plotinus' critique of *summetria* theory is defective as a refutation. Later Neoplatonist views on the unity of Plato's dialogues are discussed in Coulter (1976).