

“The Being of Groups”

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Aristotle famously observed that “being is said in many ways.” Since every being – insofar as it is a being – is also a unity or a whole or a one, it also seems to be the case that “unity” or “wholeness” or “oneness” is said in many ways. It therefore seems possible for things to constitute a plurality of separate, unified wholes in one respect, while being parts of another unified whole in some other respect. Individual human beings, for example, are separate, unified wholes insofar as they are individuated living things capable of performing their own biological and psychological functions and undertaking action on their own behalf; but they may also be parts of some other unified whole insofar as they belong to a group such as a family, or a team, or political order. The purpose of this paper is to examine the being of groups such as families, teams, and nation-states. When we refer to such groups as “beings,” are we speaking only metaphorically (or even confusedly); or on the contrary, is there a sense in which groups such as families, teams, and nation-states really do have a being of their own (a being that is not reducible to the being of their parts)?

In analyzing what is meant by the being of groups, this paper will – as a first step – consider arguments to the effect that the being of a whole is not reducible to the being of its parts. It is undoubtedly true that the being of a whole is dependent on the being of the parts of that whole (thus a family does not exist if there are no family-members, and a nation-state does not exist if there are no citizens); but – so the argument goes – it does not follow from this that the being of the whole can be explained entirely in terms of the being of the parts. But what is it precisely about the whole that resists explanation in terms of the actions of the parts? An adequate answer to this question, I shall argue, will depend on an adequate understanding of how it is that the *relations* among parts of the whole contribute to *the end or the common good* of that whole. In order to make this argument, I shall rely primarily on what Aristotle says (using the analogy of an army) in Book XII of the *Metaphysics*.

With his army-analogy, Aristotle suggests that there are two ways in which we can talk about the ordering of parts within a whole: first, insofar as the parts are ordered with respect to one another; and secondly, insofar as the parts are ordered towards an end. Corresponding to this two-fold ordering of parts within a whole, we can also talk about a twofold good of any whole. First, there is the intrinsic good; this is the form of the whole, which arises through the ordering of the parts within the whole. Secondly, there is the extrinsic good; this is an end which is external to the whole as such and for the sake of which the whole as a whole exists. Aristotle illustrates this two-fold good by talking about the form of an army (its intrinsic good) which is the ordering of its parts to one another, and that for the sake of which the army and its internal ordering exists (its extrinsic good), which is military victory.

Aristotle notes that one cannot understand the ordering of parts to one another (the formal cause), if one does not understand the aim or end of the whole within which those parts are ordered (the final cause). Thus the relatedness or ordering of a whole’s parts to one another (the whole’s formal cause or intrinsic good) is for the sake of the ordering of the whole to its extrinsic

end (its final cause). It is for this reason that the final cause is often said to be “the cause of causes.” But this implies, in turn, that an understanding of the non-reducibility of whole to parts will depend on an understanding of the final cause at work in the whole (a final causality that accounts for why the whole is the whole that it is in the first place). The upshot of this is that – if Aristotle is right – a defensible account of the being of groups (and thus their non-reducibility to the members of those groups) will depend on an adequate account of the final causality of groups (and thus an adequate account of final causality in general). It is the final causality of groups which explains their formal causality (the ordering and relations among their parts), and not *vice versa*.