**The Metaphysics of the Dream Argument (201c7*ff*)**

*§1. Introduction.*

Theaetetus recalls hearing a man claim that knowledge is true judgement with an account (*logos*) (201c7-202d1). Call this KTA.[[1]](#footnote-1) Theaetetus also recalls that the man claimed that there is an asymmetry between things that have accounts and things that do not have accounts:

A1: There is an x such that x has not account and is hence unknowable and there is y such that y has an account and is hence knowable.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Socrates first develops the metaphysical underpinnings of KTA before arguing that it is a wind-egg. The development come in the form of a dream, which has two parts:

M: Humans and everything else, i.e. complexes (*sullabai*)are composed[[3]](#footnote-3) of primary elements (*stoicheia*) (201e1-3)

Secondly, an asymmetry claim:

A2: (i) The primary elements have no account. (ii) The complexes that are composed of primary elements do have an account.

From KTA and A2, Socrates eventually draws the following inference:

A3: The elements are unknowable and the complexes knowable. (202d8-202e1).

A2 and A3 jointly entail the following:

A4: (i) The primary elements have no account *iff* the primary elements are unknowable and (ii) the complexes have an account *iff* they are knowable. [[4]](#footnote-4)

While there has been much discussion on A2, for my purposes, I can stipulate that ‘complex’ and ‘element’ are perfectly general terms applying to both semantic, physical, abstract, particular and universal entities, i.e. it applies to anything that can properly be called a complex and anything that can be properly called an element. Further, while I do not here discuss what sort of account complexes have and elements fail to have, I make the following observations. Firstly, Socrates claims that the elements only have names, and the account of a complex is woven together from the names of its elements. I stipulate that the reason that elements only have names is that the ‘other things’, other features/properties/parts, are applied to all things alike (202a5-6). His point, I take it, is that while elements can be referred to by proper names, they cannot be uniquely described as they have no peculiar intrinsic features, i.e. a feature or property or part that a single element possesses alone (itself by itself). Since accounts must contain or refer to peculiar intrinsic features/properties/parts, elements do not have accounts. What is important to what follows is to recognize how ‘naked’ the elements are.

*§2 The Dilemma*

Socrates presents a dilemma against A4 that turns on the relationship between a complex and its elements. He argues that either both complexes and their elements are equally knowable or complexes and their elements are equally unknowable.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Socrates’ strategy is to take paradigms or ‘models’ of elements and complexes, letters and syllables. The account of the syllable ‘SO’ is ‘S’ and ‘O’. Hence, ‘SO’ is knowable. There is no account of S and there is no account of O. Hence, the individual letters are unknowable. What justifies using letters and syllables as models? The Greek for elements/letters and complexes/syllables is the same. It is only context that allows us determine whether Socrates is referring to the linguistic items or something more general. Hence, inferring how complexes and elements are related as such from how letters and syllables are related is reasonable to a Greek ear.[[6]](#footnote-6) The two horns of the dilemma are stated as follows:

What do we mean by ‘the syllable’? The two letters (or if there are more, all the letters)? Or do we mean some single form produced by their combination. (203c3-6)

This quote describes two possible relationships between a syllabus and its constituent letters. Either a syllable is numerically identical to all its letters, or a syllabus is produced by, and so numerically distinct from, its constituent letters. Since I take the discussion to be perfectly general, we have here an instance of the standard mereologists concern over the relationship between parts and wholes. Are wholes identical to their parts?

Socrates does not, however, defend any answer to this question. Instead, he argues that, however we answer this question, A4 is false. In particular, he intends to show that there can be asymmetry between the knowability of the complexes and elements; either they are both knowable or both unknowable.

*§3. Horn 1*

His strategy here is to show that if a syllable is numerically identical to all its letters then necessarily if a syllable is knowable then so are its letters.

P1: SO = ‘S and O’

P2: B knows SO

P3: From P1 and P2, B knows ‘S and O’

P4: B knows ‘S and O’ *iff*  B knows S and B knows O.

C1: From P3 and P4, B knows S and B knows O.

C2: Hence, if SO is knowable then S is knowable and B is knowable.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The argument is quick and commits two ‘apparent’ fallacies.[[8]](#footnote-8) The first relates to the substitutivity of co-extensional terms into opaque contexts. This is a fallacy:

1. Superman = Clark Kent
2. Louis knows Superman
3. Therefore, Louis knows Clark Kent.

C is an invalid inference from A and B. Likewise, one might charge Socrates with an invalid inference from P1 and P2 to P3. If B knows SO it should not immediately follow that B knows ‘S and O’.

I have one solution. The argument is concerned with whether certain entities have accounts and are knowable. There is an important subtlety with the concept of being ‘knowable’. On the one hand, to claim that ‘x is knowable’ might be a purely epistemological claim. In general, when we claim that ‘x is knowable’ we often are just making a claim about some possible knower, some possible knower could know x. However, there is a distinct more robustly metaphysical notion of ‘knowability’. For instance, to claim that God is unknowable or Godel sentences are unknowable (or unprovable in the case of Godel) is to ascribe some feature not just to a possible knower but to the object in question, i.e. there is something in the nature of God that makes her unknowable. If Socrates’ intends the metaphysical claim then the argument does not obviously fail to notice opacity, i.e.

1. S = S and O
2. S is knowable
3. It follows from D and E that ‘S and O’ is knowable.

For the inference to be valid only requires 1) that knowable be a real property and 2) the indiscernibility of identicals. To put it another way, if SO has some property P precisely in virtue of which it is knowable, then since SO is identical to ‘S and O’, ‘S and O’ must have P, and hence be knowable.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The second fallacy is committed in P4 is called the fallacy of division. This is a fallacy:

1. 7 = 3 and 4
2. 7 is odd
3. From A and B it follows that 3 is odd and 4 is odd.

Likewise, one might worry that Socrates argues invalidly from the claim that ‘S and O’ is knowable ‘together’ to the claim that S individually is knowable and O is individually knowable.

The charge is misplaced. According to H1: SO = S ‘and’ O. What sort of claim is this? Firstly, I have presented the claim using ‘and’. However, Socrates contrasts H2 with H1 by claiming that in H2 the elements are combined. In H1 the elements are not combined. We have no reason to think that the ‘and’ expresses any significant relationship that S and O stand in at all.[[10]](#footnote-10) This one thing SO is meant to be numerically identical to these two things S, O.[[11]](#footnote-11) Take the following argument:

1. SO = the set {S, O}
2. SO has a property P.
3. From 2, the set {S, O} has P.

We can ask what subject has P? Do S and O individually have P? Assume that it is not the case that S has P and O has P but the set of them does. It would follow that the set {S, O} is some distinct entity above and beyond its members. That is, if you count up the number of subjects you would count three, S, O and the set of both. However, on h1 there just is no single subject above and beyond S and O. On H1, if you count up the syllable SO and you count the letters S and O separately, you should only count two things, S, O.

One might still claim that there is no third subject that is P but resist accepting that P is predicated individually of S and of O. Perhaps one might claim that P is somehow a relation that S and O stand in but is not predicated of each, e.g. two straight lines are parallel but neither line ‘itself by itself’ is parallel. However, recall two things here. One, on H1 there is no mode of combination for the elements allowed, i.e. it is unclear whether elements can stand in relations. Secondly, and more importantly, recall how ‘naked’ the elements are. There are no intrinsic properties that the relations can supervene on. That is, two lines are parallel because they have the same length but elements however have nothing like length in virtue of which they could stand in a relation one to another.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Conclusions: On the assumption that a syllable is identical to all its letters and given how ‘naked’ the elements are, it is reasonable for Socrates to conclude that any property had of a syllable should be had by each of its letters. Since he takes knowability to be such a property, it is reasonable to conclude that if the syllables/complexes are knowable then so too are the letters/elements. Hence, on H1, A4 is false.

*§4. Horn 2[[13]](#footnote-13)*

Recall that on H2 a syllable is some single form produced by the combination of all its letters, i.e. a syllable/complex is numerically identical to a single from (*eidos*) and is not numerically identical to all its letters/elements. Its letters combine to produce the syllable. Socrates does not tell us what he means by ‘form’, ‘combine’ and ‘produce’. In fact, he speaks merely of the syllable coming to be from the letters. Socrates probably intends the argument to be sufficiently general so that it applies to different types of production and combination, e.g. the way letters combine vs. the way parts of the body combine. His strategy is to show that if the syllable is not identical to all its elements, then both the syllable and its letters are unknowable (contra A4). The argument has the following general structure (203e1-205d3):

P1: A syllable is a single form.

P2: If a syllable is a single form, then a syllable does not have parts.

P3: If a syllable does not have parts, then a syllable does not have elements (205b)

P4: If a syllable does not have elements, then a syllable does not have an account and is hence unknowable.

C1: It follows from P1-P4 that a syllable does not have an account and is hence unknowable.

C2: A complex does not have an account and is hence unknowable.

C3: If an element has no account and is unknowable then from C2 a complex does not have an account and is hence unknowable.

P1 is assumed on H1. Most of the discussion turns on arguing for P2. P3 is taken as obvious. If a syllable did not have letters as parts, then what else could its parts be? P4 follows from KTA and the claim that the account of a syllable/complex must be given in terms of letters/elements. C2 is a generalization of C1. C3 shows that it follows from C2 that A4 is false.

The argument for P2 requires us to distinguish between complexes and elements on the one hand, and parts and wholes on the other hand. Socrates strategy is to show first that wholes are numerically identical to their parts. Secondly, he intends to show that if a syllable is a single form and not numerically to its elements, it follows that a syllable is not a whole with parts. The argument that a whole must be identical to its parts takes the form of a familiar dilemma:

a) Either a whole is identical to all its parts or b) a whole is identical to some single form that has come into being from its parts and is distinct from all its parts. (204a6-9)

Socrates argues against b and hence for a. The heart of the argument rests on the distinction between ‘all of it’ and ‘all of them’, e.g. all of Socrates and all of Socrates’ parts.[[14]](#footnote-14) The argument has two significant steps:

Step1: All of Socrates is identical to all of Socrates’ parts.

Step2: Either (i) if all of Socrates is identical to the whole of Socrates, then the whole of Socrates is identical to all of Socrates’ parts, i.e.:

all the parts of Socrates = all of Socrates = the whole of Socrates

Or (ii) if all of Socrates is not identical to the whole of Socrates then Socrates does not have parts.

The argument for S1 is by example:

‘one, two, three, four, five, six’ (i) = six

‘twice three’ (ii) = six

‘three times two (iii) = six

‘four plus two’ (iv) = six

‘three plus two plus one’ (v) = six.

Each of (i) – (v) is identical to six. The argument is under-described. However, the point is that the parts of six are identical to all of six.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is important to realize here that Plato is employing a very specific concept of number (*arithmos*).[[16]](#footnote-16) That is, he is here thinking of numbers as enumerable collections or units. So ‘5’ is five units or a quintet. ‘6’ is six units or a sextet. The parts, then, of six are the six units that make it, a sextet, up. Further, a quintet is part of a sextet just in virtue of the fact that the five units that are the quintet are parts of the six units that are the sextet. So, on this view five really is part of six. Now Socrates is here arguing that no matter how you count the six units, all six units together are identical to six, i.e. no matter how you describe the parts of six, all the parts of six are identical to all of six. This we should note is obvious given that the definition of what it is for something to be six (i.e. a sextet) is to be six units. As an example:



Here, there is a sextet of lollipop men. There is also a doublet, a triplet, etc. The quintet is part of the sextet just in virtue of the fact that each unit that is part of the quintet is also part of the sextet. It should be clear that the doublet plus the quartet of lollipop men is identical to the sextet of lollipop men, i.e. there is a one-one equivalence relation between the members of the set of lollipop men formed by the addition of the doublet and quartet and the set that makes up the members of the sextet. Hence, all of these units/lollipop men together are identical to the sextet of lollipop men, e.g. to six lollipop men.

So Socrates takes himself to have shown that in the case of six, all of six is identical to all the parts of six together. He then generalizes from this conclusion to the claim that for all x, if x is made up of number then all of x is identical to all the parts of x.

What does Socrates mean by ‘being made up of number’? Socrates discusses three cases, an acre, a mile and an army. Now he certainly does not mean that the number 5 is part of an acre. Recall, he is thinking of numbers as enumerable collections of units. So to claim that x is made up of number is just to say that x is made up of a number of units. To go further here requires us to supply a claim not explicitly contained in the text. That is, what is a unit? I do not deny that Plato can allow himself a formal or abstract notion of unit. However, in this argument it is best to assume that a unit is always a unit relative to some measure or other. There are then in fact many different units depending on what we want to measure. For instance, to measure whether something is one foot long we need to ascertain whether it is, say, twelve inches. So, inch is here the appropriate unit. To ascertain whether a field is an acre we need to see whether it is 4,840 square yards. Square yards are here the units that we measure. Likewise, to ascertain whether something is an army we need to ascertain whether it has 4 corps.[[17]](#footnote-17) Corps is here the unit by which we measure. So, Socrates’ strategy here is to claim that there are certain things that are essentially *n*F (where F is some unit or other and *n* is the number of F that the thing must have). In these cases, he can infer that all of x is identical to all the parts of x. For example, an army is 4 corps. All of an army is identical to all the parts of army, i.e. all of an army is identical to its 4 corps.

Does this argument generalize? Socrates needs to show that all things are like armies and acres. That is, for any x that has parts, Socrates has to claim that x is made up of a number of parts, i.e. is *n*F. If Kate Moss, for instance, has parts but is not *n*F then Socrates is not entitled to infer that all of Kate Moss is identical to all the parts of Kate Moss. The argument is perspicuous in its omission. We might help Socrates by distinguishing between a specific number of parts and some number or other. The argument will go through on even this weaker reading. So while we might question whether everything has some specific number of parts, it seems reasonable to assume that everything that has parts has some number or other, i.e. Kate Moss has some number or other of parts. All that this requires is that for any entity that has parts, it must have more than one part.[[18]](#footnote-18) Besides, normally we express the relationship between a whole and parts as a one many relationship, i.e. Kate Moss has many parts. So, if Socrates assumes that anything that has parts has many parts, and since ‘many’ is concept of quantity, I take it that he is on safe grounds to say that things that have parts, have a number of them.

Socrates can then conclude that all of x = all the parts of x. The argument at this point seems to be as follows (I use ‘Socrates’ as my variable):

G1: Either the whole of Socrates = all of Socrates or ~the whole of Socrates = all of Socrates.

G2: All of Socrates = all the parts of Socrates.

G3: From G1 and G2 it follows that if the whole of Socrates = all of Socrates, then the whole of Socrates = all the parts of Socrates.

G4: From G1 and G2 it follows that if ~the whole of Socrates = all of Socrates, then ~the whole of Socrates = all the parts of Socrates.

G5: If ~the whole of Socrates = all the parts of Socrates, then Socrates does not consist of parts.

G6: The whole of Socrates must consist of parts.

G7: It follows from G6&G7, that the whole of Socrates = all the parts of Socrates.

The argument is valid but not obviously sound. The argument turns on the fact that Socrates is only allowing one possible relation between the whole of x and all the parts of x, i.e. identity. However, it is important to stress that the failure is not immediately to notice that there could be some other relation that a whole stands in to all its parts. Rather, it immediately turns on not allowing any other relation between the whole of x and all of x. That is, between a whole and a mere aggregate or sum. It is in this context that certain theories of forms or structures are articulated, i.e. to distinguish aggregates from wholes. That is, one would not introduce structure to distinguish say Socrates from all his parts. Rather, structure would be introduced to distinguish Socrates from the mere aggregate or sum of all his parts, i.e. he is not a mere aggregate of parts.

Irrespective of whether Plato would full heartedly sign up to G1-G7, we can wrap up the argument. We recall that on H2, a syllable is taken as numerically distinct from its letters. It is composed of them. Now if a complex has parts, then elements are its parts. However, if it has parts, then it is a whole. But if it is a whole with parts then it must be identical to those parts. Hence, we get impaled on H1. However, if a syllable is not identical to its parts, then it is not a whole. Hence, a syllable does not have parts. Hence, it does not have elements. Hence, it does not have an account. Hence, it is unknowable. Hence, A4 is false.

Conclusion: either a complex is identical to its elements or it is a single form that is distinct from its elements. On either horn, A4 is false.

1. I am not here going to discuss a) what sense of *logos* is being employed b) the relationship that a true judgment and a *logos* are meant to stand in. For epistemology of the argument see Gail Fine [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Distinguish A1 from A1`: for all x, if x does not have an account then x is not knowable & if x does have an account then x is knowable. KTA clearly implies the conditional claim A1`. However, KTA does not imply the existential claim A1 that there *are* both things without accounts and things with accounts. Hence, if you reject A1 you do not thereby reject KTA. For instance, it is possible that everything has accounts and is knowable. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Greek is *sugkeimai*. This can be translated ‘lie together’ or ‘compound’ ‘compose’ etc. The discussion that follows will be centered on the nature of this relation. It is hence best to suspend too specific a translation here. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note: A4 is an instance of A1. A1 only implies A4 on the assumption of M, i.e. that everything is either a complex or an element. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The falsity of A4 does not entail the falsity of KTA. Socrates does not explicitly state that KTA *entails* A4, and he is right to do so. I take Socrates to be donning his mid-wife hat in providing one promising way of developing KTA, Theaetetus’s suggestion. In a similar way, I agree with those who deny that Protagoras’s *measure doctrine* is entailed by the claim that knowledge is perception; it is rather one very promising way of developing and defending that suggesting. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It might also be reasonable to an English speakers’ ear. The point is that if a skeptic questioned what licensed the move from syllables/letters to say humans/elements, Socrates would likely reply that the complex/element relationship is a general one that applies equally to all things that can properly called complexes and elements. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is a presentation of the argument found in 203c-d. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. cf. Verity Harte [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For this non agent centered notion of ‘knowability’ or ‘being known’ see for instance David Armstrong’s Eleatic Principlein *Truth and Truthmakers* (2004), Sydney Shoemakers ‘Causality and Properties’ 1980, Plato’s *Sophist* (reference to argument that forms are changeable in respect of being known when known) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. cf. Harte. She claims on this horn of the dilemma composition is innocent. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. If you are having difficulty with H1 then you are not alone. In modern discussions, the thesis that we find under H1 usually comes under the title ‘composition is identity’, i.e. a whole is identical to its parts. There are some who argue explicitly against this thesis but there are others, famously Peter Van Inwagen, who complain further that they just cannot understand the claim (\*\*\*\*). His worry is that we are being asked to accept that one thing is numerically identical to many things, something beyond the realm of conceivability. Irrespective of whether Plato likewise accepts that the thesis is incomprehensible, it is important to see that the thesis that composition is identity is assumed in H1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Verity Harte is very keen to see Plato as arguing against defenders of the composition is identity thesis, most importantly David Lewis. But David Lewis’ ‘primary elements’ are not naked. Lewis’ primary elements have intrinsic properties and relations supervene upon these intrinsic properties. He further uses technical machinery and global supervenience to provide a subject for predicates that seem to apply to a whole but not its parts. So it is not clear that we can take Plato in dialogue with David Lewis in the way Harte would have us imagine. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. My re-construction of the argument does not map linearly on to the discussion. However, it is the best I can do in identifying the line of reasoning. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I follow Harte here in translating ‘*to pan*’ as ‘all of it’ rather than ‘sum’ and ‘*ta panta*’ as ‘all of them’, i.e. all the parts. The argument at this point is to establish that ‘*to pan*’ and ‘*ta panta*’ are the same ‘*tauton*’. I am here assuming that ‘all of them’ means the same as ‘all the parts’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Socrates enumerates the different ways of ‘getting’ six. He is perhaps arguing that, there are five possible ways of describing the parts of six and under each possible description all the parts of six are identical to all of six. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. We would define six as the integer that comes after five in the series of natural number. We would be unlikely to take five as part of six. The view of number being employed by Socrates comes under sustained attack by Frege (Foundations of Arithmetic \*\*\* ) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. An army is 2-4 corps depending on era and region of the world. Since, by definition, an army must have one and no more than one general, ‘general’ might be more appropriate to define a unit of measurement, i.e. ‘lead by one general’. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The discussion assumes that objects do not have themselves as parts, i.e. we are here speaking of proper parts. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)