IS THERE A MEDIEVAL MEREOLGY?

Andrew Arlig

Medieval philosophers have a lot to say about parts and wholes, and their reflections on parts and wholes are often quite sophisticated. But do their treatments of parts and wholes amount to a theory of parts and wholes, or mereology? In a recent survey of medieval treatments of parts and wholes (2006), I assumed that the answer is yes. Here I want to step back and to consider whether there really is such a thing as a medieval mereology.¹

If we follow the etymology of the term ‘mereology’ (the Greek word meros means ‘part’), any sufficiently systematic account of parts and wholes would be a mereology. In the first section of this paper, I will defend the thesis that medieval philosophers have a sufficiently systematic account of parts and wholes. Medieval reflection on parts and wholes is an extension and refinement of a tradition that begins with the Greeks, and which continues to this day. Nonetheless, medieval philosophers put their distinctive imprint on the strands of mereology that emanate from Plato and, especially, Aristotle. I think that there is a class of medieval theories that we may call medieval mereology.

Yet, one might wonder whether medieval mereologies and contemporary mereologies share the same underlying understanding of what it is to be a part. When contemporary logicians and metaphysicians refer to ‘mereology’, they usually have in mind the class of formal systems that fall under the rubric of Classical Extensional Mereology (or Mereology for short), namely, to the formal systems developed by Leśniewski (1916), Leonard and Goodman (1940), and others. In contemporary discussions of parts and wholes the word ‘mereology’ often signifies some version of Mereology. It is often claimed that Mereology is ontologically neutral. Some are not so sure that this is right. Indeed, in the final section of this paper, I will argue that in so far as Mereology can be applied to ontology, Mereology cannot remain neutral with

¹ This is a distant descendant of a paper that I presented in Cambridge, February 2007. I thank the participants of the Conference for illuminating comments and discussion. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
respect to what there is. Nevertheless, many critics of Mereology seem to show a curious deference to these logical systems. For example, these critics talk about ‘non-mereological’ modes of composition.² Do they mean to say that if \( x \) stands in a ‘non-mereological’ relation of composition to \( y \), then \( x \) is not a part of \( y \)? Classical Extensional Mereology has one type of part-to-whole relation. Are contemporary critics of Mereology conceding that there is only one part-to-whole relation, but many relations of composers to composites?

In marked contrast to contemporary discussions, medieval mereologists are unapologetically metaphysical. As we will see very shortly, this makes medieval mereology much more complicated. In particular, medieval mereologists find that they must resort to a theory with distinct, irreducible modes of composition and division.

If contemporary discussions of mereology by and large assume a singular notion of part whereas medieval discussions assume a plurality of notions of part, does this mean that medieval mereologists are not talking about the same subject matter as contemporary mereologists? I think that this is not the case. In the middle sections, I will explain why I am convinced that medieval philosophers and contemporary philosophers are not talking past one another. I will present a skeletal notion of parthood, and I will present reasons to believe that many medieval notions of part conform to this skeletal notion of being a part of something. This common ground should enable us to evaluate medieval theories on their philosophical merits. I will suggest in the final section that contemporary metaphysicians might want to view medieval mereology as a model for how one can develop a comprehensive account of parts and wholes.

**There is a Medieval Mereology**

There is good reason to think that medieval philosophers had a theory of parts and wholes. To show that there is a medieval mereology, I first need to establish a criterion for what would count as a theory of parts and wholes. I think that there are at least these four desiderata that an adequate logical and metaphysical theory of parts and wholes needs to satisfy. As far as the logic of part and whole is concerned:

---