The unity of things

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Corpus Christi College, Oxford

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Abstract
Only some things have Aristotelian substantial forms, we may suppose – perhaps only organisms. What underwrites the (lesser-degree) unity of other things such as bundles and perhaps artefacts? I suggest such things may be viewed as the acting together of parts, where this acting together survives through time in the prevailing context. For example, a hydrogen atom as a proton and an electron acting together; an iron bar as many iron atoms acting together; and a pendulum as a bob, a string and a fixed pivot acting together. Acting may be understood as the manifesting of a power such as attracting, repelling, pushing, heating, etc, which manifests through time and survives through this period of manifesting (like Aristotle's agent-patient powers). I explore the nature of the unity underwritten by such acting together, contrasting it with substantial unity, and considering the sense in which it does (and does not) provide an answer to van Inwagen's Special Composition Question. If simpler things are acting-together unities, where is the cut-off with substances? I note the possibility that all things are acting-together unities (i.e. that there are no substances) and the parsimonious ontology which results.