

LOWE ON SUBSTANCE

In reading or rereading some of Jonathan Lowe's remarkably prolific, wide-ranging, and fascinating writings on metaphysics, I have found much with which to agree. I begin by listing just some of these agreements.

First, as I understand him, Lowe argues that metaphysical commitments are as inevitable as death and taxes (though, I think he would say, a lot less fearsome).

Second, he holds that both a priori and a posteriori truths are indispensable to an adequate metaphysical system.

Third, he says that at the core of metaphysics is ontology and at the core of ontology the theory of categories.

Fourth, Lowe believes that a theory of categories should, ultimately, tell us both what basic kinds of entities are possible and which of those kinds are actual. [As Gary Rosenkrantz has pointed out in his paper on categories, there are at least two senses in which an ontological category is possibly instantiated: a metaphysical sense and an epistemic sense. I think that Lowe would agree with this point.] A theory of categories should also tell us about the important relations between and among ontological categories. Lowe also seems to grant that there are equally plausible alternative ways of constructing a table of categories, depending in part upon which pair of contradictories one inserts into the table at the first divide, whether, that is, one inserts "abstract and concrete", or "necessary and contingent", or "universal and particular", or some other such pair.

Fifth, Lowe believes that philosophical analysis is an important tool in metaphysics and elsewhere in philosophy, and he believes that at least some ontological

categories are subject to philosophical analysis. By a philosophical analysis, he means, I think, a set of metaphysically necessary and sufficient conditions that help to explain or understand the analysandum. As far as I can tell, Lowe accepts the possibility that there is more than one analysis of a given ontological concept.

Sixth, Lowe embraces a neo-Aristotelian theory of individual substance, according to which the category of individual substance is neither eliminable altogether nor reducible to another category. He also adopts the Aristotelian distinction between the *de re* necessary and contingent properties of substances, or, in other words, the distinction between the essential and accidental properties of substances.

Seventh, Lowe strongly prefers the endurance theory of the persistence of substances, as opposed to the perdurance view. Connected to this preference is the way in which Lowe solves the so-called problem of intrinsic change.

Eighth, Lowe believes that we can analyze the concept of an individual substance, and that this analysis is in terms of some sort of metaphysical independence, a view that has a long and respectable history in metaphysics, including such adherents as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Spinoza.

Ninth, and finally, Lowe believes that there are different principles of unity for different kinds of substances, such as atomic substances, artefacts, and living organisms, and that there are also different criteria of identity over time, or none at all, for different kinds of substances.

As I have said, I agree with all of these and many other views of Jonathan Lowe. I hope that this helps to put into context some of the disagreements or worries I have about some of the views of Lowe that I shall discuss in what follows. To put it into

parliamentary language, what further I shall have to say about Lowe on substance is put forward in the spirit of friendly amendment and debate on the part of an ally rather than in the partisan spirit of the opposition.

Before taking a look at the analysis of substance that Lowe defends, most prominently and definitively in his *The Possibility of Metaphysics*, I want to discuss an issue concerning **philosophical analysis**, that, as far as I know, Lowe does not discuss. This is the issue of the degree of ontological neutrality of philosophical analyses, and, in particular, analyses of ontological categories. Such philosophical analyses are, I think, more or less **ontologically neutral**. I offer the following Principle of Ontological Neutrality (PON) to clarify my thesis:

(PON) Ontological analysis A is ontologically neutral with respect to ontological kind K (or to entity E) =df. the adequacy of A does not entail either that Ks exist or that Ks do not exist (or that E exists or that E does not exist).

By the **adequacy** of an ontological analysis, I mean that the analysis does not conflict with the **data** for that analysis. For example, if one were trying to analyze what a **concrete entity** is, then one's analysis should imply that what intuitively are concrete entities are concrete, and that what intuitively are not concrete entities are not concrete. (I shall ignore here the more complicated situation that arises when **no** analysis can be formulated that is in this sense adequate to the data, so that we have to choose among proposed analyses none of which is entirely adequate.)

It follows from (PON) that if in order to be adequate, a given analysis entails, for example, that universals do not exist, or that Cartesian souls do exist, or that God does not exist, then it is not ontologically neutral with respect to universals or to Cartesian

souls, or to the existence of God. If an alternative analysis does not have these entailments, and so is ontologically neutral with respect to universals, souls, and God, then, to that extent, the second analysis is more ontologically neutral than is the first analysis. Of course, it may not be the case that comparisons between competing analyses are completely straightforward. It may happen, for example, that analysis A1 is ontologically neutral with respect to Fs and Gs, and not with respect to Ms and Ns, while analysis A2 is ontologically neutral with respect to Ms and Ns, but not with respect to Fs and Gs. Many other permutations are possible. But at least sometimes, we will be able to say that one analysis is more ontologically neutral than another. In any case, we should be aware of the sorts of ontological commitments assumed by any analysis.

It is plausible to say, I believe, that the more ontologically neutral an analysis is, the better. Why should this be so? Because which kinds of entities, and which entities, actually or possibly exist, is often a matter of philosophical controversy. Witness the eternal debate over universals between realists and nominalists. Hence, if one can analyze, say, substance, without thereby being committed either to the existence or non-existence of universals, then that is preferable, other things being equal, to analyzing substance in such a way as to be committed to the existence or non-existence of universals. This principle about ontological neutrality seems to me just to be a special case of Ockham's Razor. It also seems to me likely that there are further principles for evaluating the ontological neutrality of philosophical analyses, but I shall not attempt to state them here.

Lowe's analysis of individual substance is to be understood in terms of a series of theorems and definitions he puts forward in Chapter 6 of *The Possibility of Metaphysics*.

These are as follows (see the handout provided):

(D1**) x depends for its existence upon y =df. Necessarily, the identity of

x depends on the identity of y .

(D3) The identity of x depends on the identity of y =df. Necessarily, there is a

function F such that it is part of the essence of x that x is the F of y .

(T5) If the identity of x depends upon the identity of y , then, necessarily,

x exists only if y exists.

(T6) If x is not identical with y and the identity of x depends on the identity

of y , then the identity of y does *not* depend upon the identity of x .

(D2*) x is a substance =df. x is a particular and there is no particular y such

that y is not identical with x and x depends for its existence upon y .

I do not have the time here to recapitulate the lengthy explanatory build-up through which Lowe goes to arrive at these theorems and definitions. The main idea is that substances possess some sort of metaphysical independence, but that it does not work to attribute individually to substances a straightforward metaphysical independence from all other entities. For example, if there are necessarily existing entities such as Platonic properties, then the existence of any substance will metaphysically entail the existence of such Platonic properties. What is needed, Lowe concludes, is a type of metaphysical independence that is both asymmetric and stronger than merely the relation of metaphysically entailing the existence of. (D1*), (D3), (T5), and (T6) serve to explain what that relation is, while the ingenious (D2*) incorporates it in a definition of substance.

(D2*) employs the notion of a *particular*, by which Lowe means

(correctly, I think) an entity that is not multiply exemplifiable or instantiable. Thus, (D2*) states that something is an individual substance just when it does not depend upon another particular for its existence. A particular x depends upon another particular y for its existence only if: (1) the existence of x entails the existence of y , and (2) the identity of x depends on the identity of y . This latter notion, that of the identity of x depending on the identity of y , is defined by (D3) as occurring just when “necessarily, there is a function F such that it is part of the essence of x that x is the F of y .” If it is part of the essence of x that x is the F of y , then being the F of y is an individual essence of x .

An example or two may help to clarify what Lowe has in mind with (D2*). First, Lowe argues (p. 148) that the unit set, x , that contains the substance y as its only member fails to satisfy the definiens of (D2*), as it should, because there is a particular, namely y , whose existence is entailed by that unit set, and because it is part of the essence of that set that it is identical with the function, F of y , where F is the *being something that has as its only element* function. Second, Lowe argues (p. 148) that the marriage of y and z , presumably an event, fails to satisfy the definiens of (D2*), again as it should. Let x be the marriage of y and z . Then, he says, there is a particular, y , and x , the marriage of y and z , such that the existence of y is entailed by that marriage, x . Moreover, there is a function, F , such that it is part of x ’s essence that x is identical with that function of y , namely, *being something married to z* (or as Lowe puts it, *marriage to z*).

The notion expressed by (D3), of *being part of the essence of* something, is, I think, not made **entirely** clear by these examples. It may seem clear enough in cases like the two just cited, in which the A is part of the essence of B in the sense that A is an *essential constituent* of B . In the first case, x is an essential constituent of the unit set

whose only element is x , and in the second example, y is an essential constituent of the marriage of y and z . As I shall try to show with further examples, however, I do not think that the *being an essential part of the essence* relation plausibly can be said **just** to amount to the *being an essential constituent of* relation. There is some unclarity, I think, in the requirement that if it is part of the essence of x that x is the F of y , then being the F of y partly *explains* or *helps one to understand* what x is. It is not altogether clear what sort of explanation or understanding this must be.

I come now to some of my more specific reservations about (D2*). My first reservation concerns what Gary Rosenkrantz and I, inspired by Roderick Chisholm, have called “mereological compounds”. These are compound material objects all of whose parts are essential to them. In other words, they are pieces of matter, such as a particular piece of gold, or a particular piece of plastic. Such objects are, basically, solids. In our book, *Substance: Its Nature and Existence*, we defended the idea that there are such bodies, by explaining the sort of natural unity of parts that they possess. This explanation was partly an empirical one, in terms of the forces believed by current science to hold together the parts of a solid compound material object. In an important footnote in *The Possibility of Metaphysics* (pp. 151-2), Lowe considers such entities (at least I think he does—footnote 12 is not entirely unambiguous on this point), and argues that (D2*) “is perfectly consistent with the possibility...that some composite substances possess *essential* proper parts...” (p. 151) To be fair, he also says that “I myself am not convinced that any do” exist. I must say that I **am** so convinced, but we can at least say that if (D2*) is not, in fact, compatible with the existence or the possible existence of

mereological compounds, then (D2*) is not ontologically neutral with respect to such entities.

Here is Lowe's argument, as I understand it, that (D2*) *is* compatible with the existence of mereological compounds:

- (1) If y is an essential proper part of a composite substance x , it is still possible for y to become an essential proper part of another composite substance z .
- (2) The only function of y that we need to consider in evaluating whether or not (D2*) is compatible with the existence of x is the function, is the (one and only) whole of which y is a proper part.
- (3) The function of y , is the (one and only) whole of which y is a proper part, is not part of the essence of x .

Therefore,

- (4) The existence of composite substance x (whose proper parts it has essentially), is compatible with the truth of (D2*).

I accept premises (1) and (3) of this argument, but reject premise (2). Suppose that we have a mereological compound, x , consisting of two proper parts, y and z . (Call this *counterexample #1*.) Now, instead of the function Lowe cites in (2), let us consider the function of y , being the (one and only) whole which consists of y joined together in way w with z . It seems to me that x is identical with **this** function of y , and that it is indeed part of the essence of x . x *is* essentially the conjoining of proper parts y and z in way w . In every possible world in which x exists, it consists of y and z conjoined in way w , and vice-versa. That y and z can be essential parts of *other* mereological compounds is not relevant to this fact about x . Thus, it seems to me that although mereological compound x

is a substance, (D2*) implies that it is not. Since I believe that mereological compounds exist, I take this to be a refutation of (D2*). For those who are not sure about mereological compounds, it is at least true, I think, that (D2*) is incompatible with their existence (or even their possibility), and so is not ontologically neutral with respect to them.

My second reservation pertaining to (D2*) centers around the notion of an individual thisness or haecceity. Lowe seems to be not unsympathetic to the existence of such entities, and a haecceity is, of course, a particular. It is a particular because by definition, a haecceity can at most be exemplified by or had by one and only one entity. Suppose, then, that a substance, x , has a haecceity, h . (Call this *counterexample #2*.) Haecceity h is a particular such that it is part of the essence of x that x is identical with the thing that has the individual essence, h . Hence, if a substance has a haecceity, then that substance fails to satisfy the definiens of (D2*). It seems plausible that if some substance has a haecceity, then every substance has one, and (D2*) in that case implies that none of the things we think of as substances are in fact substances. Hence, (D2*) is incompatible with the existence of haecceities belonging to substances, and so is false if they exist. In any case, (D2*) is not ontologically neutral with respect to such haecceities.

It might be noted at this point that according to Lowe's (T6), if x is not identical with y , and the identity of x depends on the identity of y , then the identity of y does not depend on the identity of x . It might be argued that since the identity of x 's haecceity h depends on the identity of x , then it cannot also be the case that the identity of x depends on the identity of h , as I have maintained. To this I would reply as follows. First, one could take the position that if the identities of both x and h depend on each other's

identity, then this shows that (T6) is false. It might be true that it is not possible for x to explain y and for y to explain x *in the same way*. But it is not so obvious that x cannot explain y in one way and y explain x in another way. Second, one can deny the assertion that the identity of the haecceity of a substance depends on the identity of that substance. Since a haecceity is a property, one could hold that it lacks identity conditions, unlike many substances, which require them just because they can persist through qualitative change. I am not sure which of these responses is best—perhaps both of them are equally good (or bad!). It does seem very plausible, however, that if a substance has a haecceity, then the identity of that substance depends on the identity of that haecceity—after all, haecceities were postulated in the first place to provide identity criteria, typically for substances.

A third problem I see for (D2*) is from an example of the following sort. (Call this *counterexample #3*.) Let x be the null set. Then x is a particular. As far as I can tell, there is no other particular y such that x depends for its existence upon y . I can see that x exists *only if* many other particulars exist (other sets, for example), but I cannot see how x depends for its existence, in Lowe's sense, on any of those other particulars. If this is correct, then (D2*) implies that the null set, x , is a substance, and (D2*) does not provide a sufficient condition for something to be a substance. At the very least, (D2*) is not ontologically neutral with respect to the existence of certain sets. (Another such set would be the unit set whose only element is the universal, roundness—there will, of course, be indefinitely many such problematic sets.)

Fourth, let x be the proposition, *that red is a color*. (Call this *counterexample #4*.) Then, again, x is a particular. Once more, it seems to me that x does not depend for

its existence upon any particular other than x . As in the previous case, x exists *only if* many other particulars exist (other propositions, for example), but I cannot see how x depends for its existence on any of those other particulars, in which case (D2*) implies that x , a proposition, is a substance. (x *does* seem to depend for its existence upon *redness* and *being colored*, but these are universals, not particulars.) So we seem to have another reason for thinking that (D2*) does not provide a sufficient condition for something to be a substance. At the very least, (D2*) is not ontologically neutral with respect to the existence of certain propositions.

It might be thought that Lowe can avoid the threat posed to the adequacy of (D2*) posed by **counterexample #3** by arguing as follows: there *is* a particular other than the null set which the null set depends for its existence upon, namely, the proposition, *that the null set exists*. Let this proposition be y . Perhaps it is true (though I am not sure what Lowe would say) that there is a function F of y to which x is identical, namely, *being the truthmaker for y* . So far so good. But is it plausible that x 's being the truthmaker for y helps us to understand what x is? Given my understanding of what Lowe means by (D2*), I think not. I would say the same thing about any similar attempt to avoid the threat posed to the adequacy of (D2*) posed by **counterexample #4**, that is by claiming that the proposition, *that red is a color*, depends for its existence upon the proposition, *that the proposition that red is a color exists*.

Moreover, there is a dilemma that arises for Lowe should he embrace the, I think, implausible strategy I have just rejected (call it **Strategy S**) for avoiding the threats posed by **counterexamples #3 and #4**. Suppose he does embrace **Strategy S**. Now suppose that we have a substance, x . (Call this **counterexample #5**.) Next, consider the proposition,

that x exists. Call this proposition y . Now propositions are particulars, so y is a particular. Let the function f of y in this example be the by now familiar one of ***being the truthmaker for*** y . Were he to adopt ***Strategy S***, Lowe would seem to be committed to the implication that substance x depends for its existence on particular y , and then x fails to satisfy (D2*). Thus, for any substance, x , x would fail to satisfy (D2*), and (D2*) would not provide a necessary condition for something's being a substance.

A final issue is this: can one formulate an analysis of substance, whether in terms of ontological independence or in some other terms, that is ***ontologically neutral*** with respect to the ontological categories cited and perhaps with respect to more? I believe that one can, but that is another topic for another time.