
In *Mind* 110 (2000): 967-69

Lowe understands metaphysics in the old-fashioned sense, as an autonomous inquiry into the most basic nature of reality. It not a description of our thought about reality, or mere conceptual analysis, or a branch of the philosophy of language, or a regimentation of the deliverances of science. Despite the book's title, only the first of twelve chapters argues directly that metaphysics in this sense is possible. The rest is metaphysics in action.

Lowe has an extremely fertile and original mind, and the book is packed full of fascinating claims and arguments of the sort that his readers will instantly recognize. It covers a broader range of topics than his previous books, and anyone with a taste for heavy-duty metaphysics--and a solid background in the subject--will find something of interest. At the same time, this breadth is perhaps the book's main weakness. Though some parts are devoted to related themes and fit naturally together, the whole is rather disunified. (Most of the chapters are versions of previously published papers, and can be read in isolation. This is probably a better approach than trying to read the book through from start to finish.) Although the writing is clear, the arguments are sometimes condensed to the point that I could not fully understand them. Were this not so, the book would be considerably longer than it is already. All of this makes the book rather demanding.

Here are a few of the book’s main claims: The subject matter of metaphysics is a species of possibility not discoverable by logic or conceptual analysis. There are things without determinate identity conditions (e.g. electrons), things without determinate countability (e.g. portions of matter), and things without either (particular property instances or tropes). We cannot account for a thing's persistence in terms of causal or spatiotemporal relations among non-persisting things, or in terms of temporal parts. So there must be things whose persistence is brute: things that have determinate identity through time, but no informative criterion of identity. Tense is an irreducible feature of time, even though being temporally present is not a property of events. Numbers are not sets, but kinds of sets--universals of which sets are instances. A set with two members is literally a two, an instance of the kind two. Facts exist and make statements true, but have no determinate identity. It is necessary that there exist concrete objects, even though no concrete object exists necessarily. There are many more.

I won't try to discuss all of these themes here. I will remain silent about the many parts of the book that I found plausible and cogent, and focus instead on aspects I had more difficulty with.

Lowe's ontology is extremely generous. He accepts substances, tropes, two sorts of universals (‘properties' and 'kinds'), sets, facts, events, masses of matter, arbitrary mereological sums, two different kinds of arbitrary undetached parts of
substances ('component' and 'spatial' parts), and more, all as separate ontological
categories. There is almost nothing in the books of the philosophers that Lowe
doesn't believe in (temporal parts being a notable exception). He sometimes offers
arguments for the existence of these things, but more often he simply takes them for
granted, a tendency that I found exasperating (though this is perhaps a matter of
temperament). This generosity causes some tensions. The existence of events, for
instance, sits uneasily with the claim in chapter 4 that nothing is extended in time or
has temporal parts. And while Lowe happily accepts the possibility of
homeomerous stuffs, he says elsewhere that the existence of portions of stuff
depends on the existence of their parts, and that there could not be an endless
chain of such dependence.

The part of the book I found the most interesting, and at the same time most
puzzling, is chapter 3, 'Identity and Unity'. Here we find the claim that there are
exactly two electrons in a helium atom, yet 'there is no determinate fact of the matter
as to the identity of those electrons' (62). One can understand the motivation for
saying this: physics tells us that there are two electrons there, but we can't identify
them individually or tell them apart. Still, I have a hard time understanding how you
can have countability without identity. Lowe's position is apparently that 'there are
exactly two electrons' is not equivalent to 'there is an electron \( x \) and an electron \( y \)
such that \( x \neq y \), and for any electron \( z \), either \( z = x \) or \( z = y \).' If it were, then counting
would always involve identity. But if that is not what it means to say that there are
exactly two of something, what does it mean?

I have a similar difficulty with Lowe's claim that portions of matter (whose
existence he asserts without a word of argument) have determinate identity but not
determinate countability. We can say, apparently, that \( x \) is a portion of gold and \( y \) is
a portion of gold and \( x \) is not identical with \( y \); but we are forbidden to conclude from
this that there are at least two portions of gold--an inference that I should have
thought was obviously valid. Lowe does not propose a revision of logic to account
for this.

I may have misunderstood. It is not always clear what Lowe means by
'indeterminate'. Sometimes he seems to mean 'vague': 'it is indeterminate whether
\( x = y \) means that it is neither definitely the case that \( x = y \) nor definitely the case that
\( x \neq y \). This is what he appears to have in mind when he defends the vagueness of
identity against Evans's famous argument. This suggests that there is simply no
definite number of portions of gold. There might be definitely more than ten
thousand, and definitely fewer than a million, but no more definite answer to the
question, How many? But Lowe insists that 'it makes no sense even to inquire how
many there are' (74). There is no fact at all, not even a vague one. And a question
that cannot be asked cannot be answered: if we could meaningfully say that there
are at least two portions of gold, surely it must make sense to ask how many
portions of gold there are.

A related worry is this: If we cannot say, even roughly, how many portions of
matter there are--if we cannot give any answer to this question--then we cannot say
that the number of them is greater than zero. How, then, can we say that there are portions of matter--or for that matter that there aren't? I should have thought that anyone who insisted that there are Fs, but rejected all claims, even vague ones, about how many Fs there are, had simply not made up his mind what he meant by 'F'. Lowe later proposes that we interpret the existential quantifier as meaning simply 'there is something x such that' (229), thus severing the connection between quantifiers (or at least ordinary, non-numerical quantifiers) and counting. But then it becomes mysterious why there being exactly two giraffes should entail that there are giraffes.

Nor was I able to follow Lowe's argument for the claim that portions of matter (for instance) cannot be counted, even vaguely. Lowe says it is because each portion of matter is infinitely divisible into smaller portions. (Lowe is speaking of completely homogeneous stuffs; but he seems to think that his argument applies to real-world stuffs as well.) This suggests that there are as many portions of matter as there are matter-filled regions of space: 2 to the c, I should have thought. But for reasons not entirely clear, Lowe thinks that we cannot ask how many regions of space there are either--a principle he appeals to in several places throughout the book.

I am sure that Lowe has illuminating answers to my questions. I only wish he had included them in the book.

In any case, Lowe's book offers a rich philosophical vision, and no one interested in these topics can neglect it.

Eric Olson
Churchill College, Cambridge