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Do Ontological Categories Exist?

Abstract: This paper concerns the ontological status of ontological categories (e.g., universal, particular, substance, property, relation, kind, object, etc.). I consider E. J. Lowe's argument for the view that ontological categories do *not* exist and point out that it has some undesirable consequences for his realist ontology. I go on to argue that the main premise in Lowe's argument – that ontological categories cannot be categorized – is false and then develop a conception of ontological categories as *formal ontological kinds*.

Keywords: Ontological Categories, Kinds, Realism, Nominalism

Introduction

Metaphysicians use ontological categories as classificatory devices. Unlike the systems of classification we find in biology or chemistry that are restricted to certain domains of entities, a system of ontological categories aims to provide a comprehensive classification of existing entities. Much of the discussion about ontological categories concerns which categories we should posit, the organization of those categories, and whether any of those categories are actually filled by entities. However, questions about the ontological status of categories themselves are more rarely addressed. Are ontological categories themselves entities? If they exist, to what ontological category do they belong? In this paper, E. J. Lowe's argument against the existence of ontological categories is critically considered. First, it is argued that Lowe's conclusion poses a threat to his realist, anti-nominalistic ontology insofar as it appears to entail a thoroughgoing nominalism. Second, I argue that Lowe's reasons for thinking that ontological categories cannot be categorized are unconvincing. Finally, I propose that we think of ontological categories as universals, in particular as formal ontological kinds.[1]

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1 This essay is primarily aimed at understanding the status of ontological categories within Lowe's ontology, which recognize four fundamental categories of entities: kinds, properties/

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Lowe's argument

In his book *The Four-Category Ontology* (2006), Lowe presents a realist ontology according to which the differences and similarities between entities belonging to different ontological categories are not dependent upon our ways of thinking, classifying, or describing those entities. Although one might expect an ontology of this sort to acknowledge the existence of ontological categories, intriguingly, Lowe holds that "There are, quite literally, no such things as ontological categories" (2006: 43). Let us call Lowe's thesis NO:

> (NO): There are no ontological categories.

Equivalent ways of expressing NO, let us assume, are 'ontological categories are not entities,' 'ontological categories are not elements of being,' and 'ontological categories do not exist.' Lowe appears to offer the following argument for NO (2006: section 3.3):

(1) All entities can be categorized.
(2) Ontological categories cannot be categorized.
(3) Ontological categories are not entities.

The conclusion (3) is equivalent to NO; (2) is certainly the most contentious premise of the argument and Lowe defends (2) by arguing that ontological categories cannot be universals or particulars, a distinction among entities he takes to be exhaustive and exclusive. Why are they not universals? According to Lowe, universals are either kinds or properties/relations and universals can only have *particulars* as instances (2006: 41). If ontological categories are universals, then the category of kinds would have the kinds *dog*, *gold*, *water*, etc. as its instances, none of which are particulars. Hence, the category of kinds cannot be a universal, according to Lowe. Assuming, as he seems to, that all ontological categories belong to the same category if any do, it follows that no category is a universal.

Lowe also entertains the possibility that categories are higher order universals (i.e., universals whose instances are other universals). He rejects this possibility because different categories would be universals of different orders.

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relations, objects, and modes (or tropes). I'll go along with Lowe in assuming that there are entities that fill each of these categories, but the thesis does not hinge upon acknowledging entities of all four categories, with the exception of universals and kinds. Hence, my thesis may be read conditionally: *if* there are universals/kinds, then ontological categories should be thought of as formal ontological kinds.

The category of kinds would be a second-order universal whose instances are other kinds, while the category of objects would be a first-order universal whose instances are particular objects. On Lowe's view, universals of different orders belong to different ontological categories (2006: 42). Assuming, again, that all ontological categories belong to the same category if any do, he concludes that categories are not higher order universals. Lowe also argues that the category of universals poses a problem for thinking of categories as higher order universals. If the category of universals were a universal, it would have to be of some particular order. However, it seems that it cannot be of any order since, given that the category belongs to itself, it would have to be of a higher than itself, which is impossible (2006: 42).

Lowe then argues that categories cannot be particulars (2006: 41). Particulars, on his view, cannot have instances. This poses a problem for thinking of categories as particulars, for it is plausible to think of the relation between categories and the entities that belong to them as one of instantiation. But if categories are particulars, then nothing instantiates them, e.g., the kind *dog* cannot be an instance of the category of kinds. Lowe then considers the possibility that the relation between the categories and the entities that belong to them is one of set-membership. Sets are particulars. If categories are sets, then it appears that we must take the highest category – the category of entities – to be a set. As a set, the category of entities would have to be a member of itself. But it is widely recognized that no set can be its own member on pain of paradox.

In light of these arguments, Lowe concludes that ontological categories are not entities; they are "not to be included in a exhaustive inventory of what exists" (2006: 43). Before turning to the question of whether Lowe is right to think that ontological categories cannot be categorized, I want to consider some consequences of NO.

The consequences of NO

NO says that there are no ontological categories. Lowe's endorsement of NO is curious given his interest in category theory, which, according to him, is aimed at determining what ontological categories are, what categories we should acknowledge, how categories are organized, and how categories are to be identified and distinguished (2006: 6). It is prima facie hard to see how Lowe could provide these questions with substantive answers while maintaining NO. If ontological categories can be individuated, organized, and entities can be

correctly or incorrectly categorized according to them, then ontological categories would seem to qualify as exiting entities. Perhaps there is no outright contradiction between affirming answers to these questions and NO, but there does seem to be a tension that Lowe does not adequately address. Nevertheless, I will not pursue this issue any further because I think NO poses another, more serious problem for Lowe. NO entails that 'ontological category,' 'the category of kinds,' 'the category of objects,' etc. do not refer to anything (Lowe 2006: 46). But if 'the category of kinds' does not refer, then it may not be meaningful to say, for example, 'the kind *dog* belongs to the category of kinds,' something which does seem to be meaningful. Lowe is aware of this consequence of NO and says,

> As a first defensive move, we can, of course, point out that not every meaningful predicate, whether monadic or relational, need or indeed can be supposed to denote an existing property or relation – so that it is not obligatory to suppose that predicates such as 'is a universal' or 'instantiates' denote, respectively a monadic and a relational universal. (2006: 46)

He does not offer any other defensive moves, so presumably this is his reason for holding that we can meaningfully speak of ontological categories and entities belonging to ontological categories with impunity despite the failure of 'ontological category,' and related terms, to refer.[2] But this move is cause for concern, especially for Lowe's brand of realism. The problem is that this opens the door for nominalism at the level of predicates such as 'is spherical' and 'is red' that many, including Lowe, take to denote genuine universals. If we are permitted to use 'is a universal' meaningfully and in the construction of true statements without commitment to a universal *being a universal*, there would seem to be no principled reason for saying the same thing about the predicates 'is spherical' and 'is red.'

Let me explain the problem from a different angle. Lowe denies that there are ontological categories, which entails that no entity bears a relation of 'belonging to' any entity that is an ontological category. Moreover, he is skeptical that there are higher order universals, e.g., *being a kind*, *being a property*, *being an object*, etc. (2006: 42; 71–2). Thus, he appears to deny that all the entities belonging to an ontological category have something in common in virtue of which they are correctly categorized as belonging to that category. If

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2 The only condition under which a predicate does not denote a property that Lowe explicitly discusses is that in which a paradox would result if the predicate did denote a property, e.g., 'is non-self-exemplifying.' See Lowe (2006: 87; 1999: 197). Obviously, predicates such as 'is a universal' are not problematic like this.

there is literally no category to which such entities belong and they do not instantiate the same higher order universal, then it seems that we are left with something like the nominalist view that such entities merely form resemblance classes.[3] If Lowe endorses nominalism about predicates concerning ontological categories then he is immediately faced with the question about why we should not also be nominalists about predicates such as 'is spherical' and 'is red.' So far the reasons Lowe has given us to exclude 'is a universal' from expressing a universal apply equally to 'is spherical' and 'is red.' The challenge is to supply some reason for thinking that nominalism about ontological categorical predicates does not lead to nominalism about other predicates. Obviously, this does not entail that NO is false, but it does indicate that NO presents a threat to any realist, non-nominalistic ontology.

Categorizing the categories

In the previous section I attempted to draw out some problematic implications of NO for Lowe's realist ontology. In this section I turn to the evaluation of Lowe's argument for NO. The argument, I'll contend, is unsound because premise (2) is false: ontological categories *can* be categorized, even in Lowe's four-category ontology. The focus of the section will be on Lowe's reasons for thinking that categories cannot be universals. After addressing those reasons, I will suggest that ontological categories should be categorized as universals, in particular, as formal ontological kinds.

    Premise (2) of Lowe's argument for NO states that ontological categories cannot be categorized. The argument for this premise is that the categories can neither be universals nor particulars, which is an exclusive and exhaustive division between entities. I agree with Lowe that ontological categories cannot be particulars, largely for the reasons he gives that were detailed above (Lowe 2006: 41). However, his arguments for thinking that categories are not universals are not convincing. The first reason he gives for why categories cannot be universals is

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3 Perhaps this is too quick, for Lowe says that the difference between properties and objects, for example, is a matter of the objectively different intrinsic natures of properties and objects (2006: 43). But this merely raises the question being considered anew: do all the entities belonging to an ontological category share a nature in the sense of instantiating the very same nature (or kind of nature) or do their natures merely resemble each other in some respect? If it is the former, then Lowe must recognize entities (viz., natures) that would seem to be good candidates for being ontological categories or higher order universals. If it is the latter, then Lowe really does embrace the nominalism about ontological categories I'm suggesting he must.

that universals only have (or can only have) particulars as instances. But there is no compelling reason to think that a defining feature of universals is that they *exclusively* have (or can have) *particulars* as instances. We may hold instead that the defining feature of universals is simply that they have (or can have) instances, whether particular or universal; this suffices to distinguish universals from particulars. Indeed, this seems to be the essence of the distinction between universals and particulars on Lowe's considered view (2006: 89).[4]

As we saw above, Lowe is aware of this response and turns his attention to rejecting the view that categories are higher order universals (i.e., universals whose instances are other universals). His first objection is that even if, for example, the category of kinds and the category of objects were both universals, they would still belong to different categories, in a certain sense. The category of kinds would be a *second*-order universal whose instances are other kinds. By contrast, the category of objects would be a *first*-order universal whose instances are particular objects. But even if these categories belong to different categories in this sense, they are still both universals. I see no reason for thinking that universals of different orders do not belong to the same ontological category. In the present context, we are interested in categorizing the categories in order to determine whether they exist. So long as we can identify any ontological category to which the categories belong, this would suffice to establish their existence. Now Lowe assumes, rightly, that if the ontological categories belong to a category, they would all belong to the same category. It is reasonable to deny that some categories would, for instance, belong to the category of universals, while others belong to the category of objects, for that would make it difficult to maintain that all the categories are really entities of the same kind in any plausible sense. But Lowe provides no reason for thinking that they would all belong to the same 'category,' i.e., order, within a single category. The distinction between universals of different orders is importantly different from the distinction between universals and particulars. Only the latter distinction is relevant to the intuition that categories would all belong to the same category.

Lowe's second objection concerns the categorization of a particular category: the category of universals. He writes,

> But what now about the category of universals itself? If that is a universal, of what order is it? It is hard to see how it could be of any order, because a universal of any order

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4 Similarly, nothing in David Armstrong's definition of universals as entities that are strictly identical in different instantiations (1997: 21) suggests that what is distinctive of universals is that they have particulars as instances.

> whatever must belong to the category of universals – and so if the category of universals is a universal of some order, it seems that it must, absurdly, be of a higher order than itself. (2006: 42)

This argument assumes that every universal must be of one particular order (first, second, third, and so on). I agree that if the category of universals is a universal of just one order, then the absurdity that Lowe identifies follows. But there is no reason to make the initial assumption, for there are universals that are of no particular order. For example, the property *being a higher order property* may have as an instance any property that is second order or higher; the property *being a property* has any property of any order as an instance.[5] The assumption that each universal is of just one particular order also entails that no universal is self-instantiating. But this is false. The property of *being a property* is itself a property and I can see no incoherence in thinking this independently of Lowe's assumption.

The last challenge to categorizing the categories as universals from Lowe is his contention that the category of objects cannot be a universal because it can be neither a property nor a kind (which he regards as the only universals there are). His reason why the category of objects cannot be a property is that on the four-category ontology, properties have modes, not objects, as instances. The problem is supposed to be that the property of *being an object* would have objects rather than modes as instances. A simple response to this would be to reject Lowe's particular way of organizing the four categories, i.e., to deny that properties have (or exclusively have) modes as instances. One could do this while still recognizing the four categories. But we could also meet Lowe on his own terms and still reject his claim. If the category of objects is a property and properties have modes as instances, then let the property *being an object* be

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5 Lowe is skeptical of such properties (cf. Lowe 2006: 42; 71–2). However, he never gives a reason to deny the existence of higher order properties; he only attempts to undercut reasons for believing in them. One such attempt concerns whether there is a truthmaker for the statement 'the property of being red is a color property.' Lowe thinks there is no reason to posit the higher order property of *being a color property* as a constituent of the statement's truthmaker. He writes, "one possibility is that what makes it the case that a certain property is a *colour*-property is the fact that objects bearing the property are, in virtue of bearing it, coloured in one way or another" (2006: 71). Unfortunately, this fact does not explain (something a truthmaker is supposed to do) why the property is a color property. If object O is colored because O bears F, it is presumably because of the nature of F *as a color property* that O is colored. But if O is colored because F is a color property, then F is not a color property because O is colored (in virtue of having F), given the asymmetry of explanation. On the other hand, if F instantiated the property of *being a color property* that would explain the truth of 'F is a color property.'

instantiated by a 'being an object' mode that characterizes particular objects. This may be extravagant but I cannot see that it is incompatible with the four-category ontology.

According to Lowe, the category of objects cannot be a kind either. His reason is that kinds bestow a single set of identity conditions[6] on the objects that belong to them. But a highest kind 'object' could not bestow identity conditions for all of its instances, e.g., animals, artifacts, and atoms, given that such entities have very different identity conditions (2006: 43). However, the claim that objects receive a single set of identity conditions from the kinds they fall under raises a problem for Lowe. A particular dog belongs to the kind *dog*, but also to the kinds *canine*, *mammal*, *vertebrate*, *animal*, *organism*, and *substance* (Lowe 2001: 181; 184). Plausibly, the dog gets its identity conditions from the kind *dog*, but what about the other kinds to which it belongs? The higher we move up the taxonomic scheme, the more objects – *with increasingly different identity conditions* – belong to each kind. If Lowe disqualifies 'object' from expressing a kind on the grounds it would fail to supply a single set of identity conditions for its instances, the same argument would seem to apply to *substance*, *organism*, *animal*, and so on, all the way down to the object's genus. But Lowe believes many of these classificatory terms express sortal or kind terms (2006: 43), so it is not obvious why he draws the line at 'object.' If *object* is not a kind because entities with very different identity conditions such as organisms (e.g., tigers) and artifacts (e.g., books) would be classified as objects, then *substance* is not a kind either. Presumably, asparagus and anteaters have quite different identity conditions, yet both are organisms. By Lowe's lights, 'organism' would not express a kind either. So it seems that if Lowe is to maintain that there are any kinds beyond those that are directly instantiated by objects (i.e., kinds instantiated by objects that are not instantiated by the object in virtue of the object's belonging to any other kinds), he must give up the position that 'K' expresses a kind only if K supplies *one* set of identity conditions for the objects to which it applies (cf. Lowe 2001: 60).[7]

Perhaps all Lowe means to say is that a term 'K_n' expresses a kind when there is associated with K_n an identity condition of the form 'If x and y are K_n's, then x is the same K_n as y iff....' This would allow, for example, 'substance' to express a kind since it is plausible that we could fill in the right-hand side of the

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6 Identity conditions are conditions under which x and y of kind K are identical, i.e., truth-conditions for identity claims of the form 'x is the same K as y.' See Lowe (2001: 59).

7 In his (2007), Lowe suggests that there is a distinction between 'kind' in the sense of an ontological category and 'kind' in the sense of a natural kind. He merely mentions the distinction but does not define it.

biconditional of the identity condition 'If x and y are substances, then x is the same substance as y iff....' But now there is nothing stopping us from taking 'object' to express a kind as well. Of course, the identity conditions for *object* will be highly general and abstract, but that is to be expected for a highly general and abstract kind like *object*. If we follow Lowe in thinking that to be an object is to be an entity of some kind K that supplies a specific and determinate identity conditions for x's being the same K as y (cf. Lowe 2001), then the following identity condition seems appropriate for the kind *object*:

Object: If x and y are objects, then x is the same object as y iff there is some kind K such that x is the same K as y.

To this point, I've tried to show that none of Lowe's arguments against taking ontological categories as universals are convincing. In light of this, I propose that we categorize the ontological categories – the category of objects, the category of modes, the category of properties/relations, and the category of kinds, among others – as universals. If ontological categories can be categorized as universals, then ontological categories exist, Lowe's premise (2) is false, and the argument for NO is unsound.

   If ontological categories are universals, are they kinds or properties/relations?[8] Ontological categories are best thought of as kinds rather than properties/relations because they help characterize *what* their bearers are (as kinds do) rather than simply a *way* their bearers are (as properties/relations do). For example, by categorizing the property *being red* as a property, we are correctly saying what that entity is. (Though, to be sure, we would need to appeal to more than just the property's ontological category in order to distinguish it from other properties.) If ontological categories are kinds, what kind of kinds are they? They are obviously not *natural* kinds since they are not subject to empirical investigation, nor do they figure in natural laws.[9] They are, instead, *formal ontological kinds*. By saying that categories are *formal ontological* kinds, I mean to say that they are the highest, most general, and abstract kinds to which entities can belong. They help determine what it is for those entities that belong to them *to be* the entities they are in the most general and abstract sense. For instance, what it is to be a particular rock is,

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8 I'll follow Lowe (2006: 8, 39; 1998: 181) in thinking that universals are exclusively either kinds or properties/relations.

9 *Natural* kinds figure in natural laws, cf. Lowe (2006: 131, 144). However, if we acknowledge formal ontological kinds, as I suggest we do immediately below, we could say that such kinds figure in *metaphysical* or *ontological* laws, i.e., laws governing how entities from different ontological categories may be (re)combined and related (viz., by instantiation, dependence, constitution, etc.).

in part, to be an object; what it is to be the apple's particular redness is, in part, to be a mode/trope. The ontological category to which an entity belongs will be a constituent of a real definition of that entity.[10] In this way, ontological categories help constitute the *natures* of the entities belonging to them. We can think of the ontological categories (very roughly) as follows. The category of objects is the kind whose entities are concrete particulars that have determinate identity conditions, that instantiate kinds, exemplify properties/relations, but cannot themselves be instantiated or exemplified by anything. The category of modes is the kind whose entities are concrete particular ways for their bearers to be and that are dependent for their existence and identity on the objects that bear them. The category of properties/relations is the kind whose entities have or could have instances and that characterize a way for an entity to be. The category of kinds is the kind whose entities have or could have instances, that characterize what their bearers are, and that are constituents in laws.

I think Lowe should embrace this account of the ontological categories given that he says,

> An object is different from a property or a mode in virtue of the *intrinsic natures* of these entities, quite independently of us and our ways of describing or thinking of things ... we categorize correctly when we categorize by correctly apprehending the *existence and identity conditions* of the things considered. (First emphasis added, 2006: 43–4)

Suppose Lowe is right in thinking that entities belonging to different ontological categories have distinct intrinsic natures that are differentiated by their unique existence and/or[11] identity conditions. Then we can think of the ontological categories as formal ontological kinds that characterize entities with different (formal) natures. If we grasp these natures by apprehending their associated existence and/or identity conditions, then we can individuate each ontological category by identifying these conditions for kinds, properties/relations, objects, modes, etc.[12]

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10 A real definition of an entity says what it is to be that (kind of) entity; it has the form 'To be Φ is to be ψ,' e.g., 'To be a human being is to be a rational animal.' See Koslicki (2012: 197ff.) on real definitions.

11 I say "and/or" because Lowe thinks that every kind of entity has associated with it unique existence conditions, but not necessarily identity conditions. See Lowe (2001: 37, 180–1). See Lowe (2010: sections 1–3) on existential and identity dependence.

12 See Lowe (1999) on the existence conditions of properties, i.e., on the conditions under which a property being F exists. His preferred account is (PE**): "The property being F exists iff there is something which is predicable of all and only those things which are F and there is something which is F" (1999: 204). Note that PE** does not offer existence conditions for properties in general, only for particular properties.

In summary, none of the objections to categorizing the ontological categories as universals considered here are compelling. If we acknowledge universals and kinds at all, then we may affirm the existence of ontological categories, which, I have suggested, are formal ontological kinds.

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