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# The *Five*–Category Ontology?

## E.J. Lowe and the Ontology of the Divine

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**Abstract:** E.J. Lowe was a prominent and theistically–inclined philosopher who developed and defended a four–category ontology with roots in Aristotle’s *Categories*. But Lowe engaged in little philosophical theology and said even less about how a divine being might fit into his considered ontology. This paper explores ways in which the reality of a divine being might be squared with Lowe’s ontology. I motivate the exploration with a puzzle that suggests Lowe must reject either divine aseity or the traditional view that God is a substance. After showing that the puzzle cannot be overcome by rejecting one of its premises, I consider ways in which Lowe might try to reject the puzzle wholesale. I argue that the best way to reject the puzzle is to countenance a fifth fundamental category, the category of supernatural substance.

**Keywords:** E. J. Lowe, Ontology, God, Substance, Aseity

*“However, I can proceed no further at present in these  
theologically deep waters...”*

E.J. Lowe (2006, 204)

### 1. Introduction

E.J. Lowe was a prominent, inspiring, and theistically–inclined philosopher who developed and defended a four–category ontology with roots in Aristotle’s *Categories* (2006). But Lowe did not engage in much philosophical theology. Indeed, it seems the only positive, substantive theological claim he made in print was that God should be conceived as the necessarily–existent foundation of reality (2007, 2012a).

So two questions naturally arise: (1) what is Lowe’s God like? and (2) how does Lowe’s God fit into his considered ontology? My aim here is to begin to explore

answers to the latter question. I do not think it is possible to piece together in a responsible fashion Lowe's conception of the divine from his limited works on theological topics. But I think we can make progress on answering the latter question, and in doing so, begin to shed some light on what his God could or could not have looked like.

While the second question is unexplored and interesting in its own right, it is partially motivated by the following puzzle. God is traditionally thought to be a substance, and a wholly ontologically independent substance at that. If God is the ultimate ontological ground of all of reality, then, the classical thought goes, God must exist *a se*. But, while substances are ontologically independent *in a sense*—in that they serve as the subjects for ontological predication (Lowe 2006, 27–28)—Lowe's conception of substance, as it is developed and defended in the *Four-Category Ontology* and elsewhere, is, in a way made clear below, a dependent category of being. Indeed, for Lowe, all fundamental categories of being are dependent, in some sense, on other fundamental categories of being.<sup>1</sup> So how can God be a substance if, for Lowe, to be a substance is to be a dependent being? And, if God neither is nor can be a substance on Lowe's view, then *what is* God for Lowe?

After a brief presentation of Lowe's ontology in the next section, I begin to bring the above puzzle to bear. I first consider ways in which Lowe might deal with the puzzle by rejecting one of its premises, and find all such maneuvers wanting. I then consider ways in which Lowe might avoid the puzzle by placing God beyond the four-categories or by expanding his ontology. I conclude that the best approach to the puzzle is to expand the four-category ontology to a five-category ontology. The upshot is that for Lowe to maintain a minimally-classical or neo-classical conception of the divine, he must alter his considered ontology in a significant way.

## 2. The Four-Category Ontology

Lowe's fundamental ontology was comprised of the categories of substance, kind, mode, and attribute. These categories result from two distinctions cutting across one another: the substantial—non-substantial distinction and the universal—particular distinction. Substances are substantial particulars, like Socrates and Fido, and kinds are the substantial universals, like 'human being' and 'dog,' that substances fall under or belong to. For Lowe, like for Aristotle, for a being to be substantial is for it to be, among other things, the subject of ontological predication (see Perin 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> John Heil helped me to see this.

Modes are non-substantial particulars, and are the ways that substances are, for instance, Socrates's paleness and the brownness of Fido's fur. Attributes are the non-substantial universals under which modes fall, like 'paleness' and 'brownness.' These beings are non-substantial inasmuch as they are predicated of other beings, namely, substantial beings, but are not themselves subjects of predication.

Much of the novelty of Lowe's view comes from the various relations he thinks hold between these four categories. For Lowe (2006, 15–19), modes and attributes characterize or inhere in substances and kinds, respectively. These non-substantial beings are ways that substantial beings are; in more familiar terms, modes and attributes are properties of substantial beings (cf. Heil 2012, ch. 2; Martin 1980). Socrates's paleness is a particular way that Socrates is, and this particular brownness is a way that Fido is. Somewhat more abstractly, 'risible' is a way that 'human being' is. That is, the attribute 'risible' characterizes the kind 'human being.' The basic idea here is that attributes make up part of what it is to be a substance of some kind. Part of what it is to belong to the kind 'human being' is to be such that one is capable of laughter.

Along with the characterization relation, Lowe takes there to be a primitive instantiation relation. Particulars, whether substances or modes, instantiate universals. Substances are instances of kinds and modes are instances of attributes. For Lowe (2006, 76–78), the particular—universal distinction is analyzed in terms of instantiation: universals are not multiply-located entities, but rather are such that they may be multiply instantiated. Particulars, like Socrates and his paleness, are not such that they have instances.

Beyond these relatively familiar relations, Lowe posits an array of dependence relations between the four categories. There are *generic ontological dependence relations*, *rigid ontological dependence relations*, and *identity dependence relations*. In the first case, Lowe (2006, 60–62, 96–100) rejects an *ante rem* or Platonic view of universals, and so claims universals exist if and only if they have instances. So for a universal to exist is for it to have one or more instances. But since the kind 'human being' and the attribute 'paleness' would exist whether it was Socrates or Plato (or both) that existed, or Socrates's paleness or Plato's paleness (or both) that existed, the ontological dependence involved is generic. A universal exists no matter what, or who, its instances are. So kinds and attributes generically ontologically depend on substances and modes, respectively.

But, interestingly, substances and modes likewise depend on kinds and attributes, respectively.<sup>2</sup> For Socrates is a human being and has many of the properties associated with being a human being, because he is an instance of the kind ‘human being.’ If Socrates is to exist—if there is to be a substance with his various properties—then there must be some kind, ‘human being,’ which, in a sense, is the ontological recipe for Socrates. Just think: could there be a substance belonging to no kind *or other*? Of course not: to be a substance is to be a substance of some kind, and so, to be a human being is to depend, in some sense, on the kind ‘human being.’ For Lowe (2006, 34–37, 116–117), this sort of dependence is rigid ontological dependence. Socrates does not depend on any old kind; he depends on the kind ‘human being.’ So, unlike universals depending on any of their instances (generic ontological dependence), substances depend on precisely those kinds to which they belong (cf. Lowe 2015). The same goes for modes and attributes: *this* particular paleness exists as the very mode it exists as because it is an instance of *this* very attribute universal.

Things get more complex still. Entities from certain categories not only could fail to exist, or exist as they do, should entities in other categories fail to exist, but entities from certain categories could not be *what they are* should entities in other categories fail to exist. For instance, a mode is rigidly ontologically dependent on the substance it characterizes, but it is also identity dependent on that substance (2006, 61). What it is to be Socrates’s paleness is to be the particular paleness that characterizes Socrates; should there be no Socrates, while the attribute of paleness might still exist if, say, Plato is pale, there would be no paleness *of Socrates*, *this* very mode. And similar to modes, part of what it is to be a certain kind is to be characterized by certain attributes. For example, part of what it is to belong to the kind ‘human being’ is to be mammalian and omnivorous. The kind ‘human being’ is the very thing it is because the attributes ‘mammalian’ and ‘omnivorous’ characterize it. So, the kind ‘human being’ depends for its identity on certain attributes (2006, 62).<sup>3</sup>

We can very crudely summarize these various relations thusly (where solid arrows indicate instantiation and rigid ontological dependence, dashed arrows

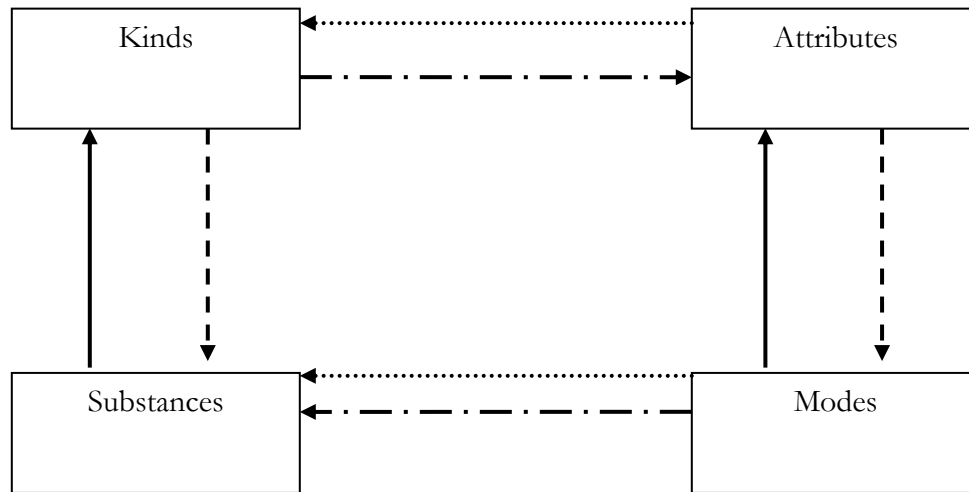
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<sup>2</sup> For discussion of implications of the symmetrical dependence between universals and their instances, see Keinänen (2018).

<sup>3</sup> Somewhat confusingly, Lowe claims also that certain attributes rigidly ontologically depend on kinds. He writes (Lowe 2006, 62): “For instance, whiteness the property–universal plausibly would not exist if no *kind* of thing had the characteristic of being white, but whiteness is not the very property that it is in virtue of the kinds of things that it characterizes—for it could have characterized quite other kinds of things.” But for our purposes, I leave out this additional dependence relation. I also omit the exemplification relation, which Lowe (2006, 22) claims holds between substances and attributes.

indicate generic ontological dependence, dotted arrows indicate characterization, and dotted/dashed arrows indicate identity dependence):

**Figure 1.** *The Four-Category Ontology*



### 3. The Puzzle Revisited

With a grip on the basics of Lowe's ontology, we can revisit the puzzle I introduced above. The puzzle arises when we consider the following claims together.

- a. God is a substance.
- b. God is wholly independent, that is, God exists *a se*.
- c. Substances are ontologically dependent entities, that is, substances do not exist *a se*.

Since Lowe (2006, 116) claims that substances "depend rigidly for their existence upon the highest kinds that they instantiate," he must either reject the view that God is a substance or reject the view that God is wholly independent, that God exists *a se*. To bite either bullet would be to reject a central tenet of classical theism and many versions of neo-classical theism. The only other way out is to reject c, and this amounts to a significant departure from Lowe's ontology.

But you might not think that there is much of a puzzle here or at least not a puzzle for Lowe in particular. For, in almost any theistic metaphysical system, God is taken to be the exception to the rule. Hylomorphists take substances to be composites of form and matter, but deny that this is the case with God; they generally conceive of God as pure form. But, you might think, that there could be a substance lacking a

material principle is no objection to Aristotelian hylomorphism! So, you might think that there just is no problem with God not fitting neatly within Lowe's ontology; to think God and creatures must fit within a single category, *by the same criteria*, is to flout the classical idea that God and creatures are radically different metaphysically.<sup>4</sup>

Suppose then, that God is a substance, but say, the only substance that does not rigidly ontologically depend on a kind. In what sense then, we might ask, is God a substance?<sup>5</sup> A sensible answer is that God is a substance inasmuch as God is a substantial being, a subject of ontological predication; God is characterized by modes, such as omniscience, omnipotence, *et cetera* (and suppose that these divine modes do not ontologically depend on attributes). At first glance, this suggestion seems to violate divine simplicity, something that, while controversial, we shouldn't so quickly toss aside. So perhaps God is a substantial being that we truly predicate modes of, but in reality lacks any metaphysical composition. But now our picture of God is one in which God is a substance for, well, no reason in particular. At this point, we could claim that God is a substance inasmuch as God is subsistent, inasmuch as God exists 'through himself' and not through or in another. But this conception of substance now shares little in common with Lowe's conception of creaturely substance, and so, by my lights, points towards a distinct category of substantial being. For if *subsistence* were the main criterion of substancehood, why go through the rigmarole of specifying all those dependence relations? As I will try to show, Lowe ought to follow this suggestion, but I think it commits him to a *five*-category ontology. The hylomorphist can claim that God as pure form is a substance, but they must take God to be a very special—and by Lowe's own criterion, a *fundamentally distinct*—kind of substance.

In the remainder of this section I show the cost of rejecting either claim a or claim b is too high to bear. While this suggests the only move for Lowe is to abandon his conception of substance, I think there are less revisionary ways for him to avoid the puzzle. So, in the next section, I develop what I take to be the most promising moves for Lowe.

### 3.1. God is not a Substance

One might think that if we reject the view that God is a substance, we can construct some reasonable conception of the divine that holds onto aseity. The problem with

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Billy Dunaway for bringing this objection to my attention.

<sup>5</sup> We might also ask why God is the *only* substance that does not rigidly ontologically depend on a kind. It seems the only reason is to salvage aseity, but this makes the considered objection seem ad hoc.

this maneuver is that it leads to patently unacceptable conceptions of the divine (and *doesn't* hold onto aseity).

If God is not a substance, then God must be a mode, a kind, or an attribute. If God were a mode, God would be some particular way a substance is. But God plainly is not ontologically akin to Socrates's paleness. Recall that modes are identity dependent, and so, rigidly ontologically dependent, on substances. Given this, the current proposal would imply that should the substance that God—a mode—characterizes cease to exist, so too would God cease to exist. (It might also imply that God *came into* existence with that substance, or at some point in the substance's history!) But God's existence (and identity) could not be so ephemeral.<sup>6</sup>

If God were a kind, God would be a universal, and beyond being strange in itself, this implies that God would lack causal power. Also troubling is that if God were a kind, 'God' would have one or more instances. (Recall that if 'God' had no instances, that it would not exist.) Suppose that the kind 'God' has one instance. If so, why would we suppose that the kind under which such a being fell, instead of the being, the substance, was God? If we suppose that the kind 'God' had more than one instance, not only would we run into the oddity just mentioned, but we could introduce the threat of polytheism.

If neither mode nor kind, perhaps God is an attribute? For reasons that should be clear by now, I think the obvious answer is 'no.' First, again, 'God' would have one or more instances, and second, that or those instances would be a way some substance or substances is/are. So we run into the very same problems as we did above when conceiving of God as either a mode or a kind. An attribute just is not up to playing the role of the divine.

So it seems the categories besides substance are not up to the task of housing God. But perhaps God could be a substance without, strictly speaking, *being* a substance? von Wachter (2007) has defended the view that a being could have many of the characteristics of a substance without belonging, strictly speaking, to the category of substance. He suggests that theism is compatible with a stuff ontology, an ontology devoid of *things* (or substances), and so, the theist has no need for recognizing the category of substance.

While von Wachter's proposal is interesting, it seems incomplete. He never argues that we should conceive *of God* as a portion or stuff, rather than a thing or substance, but only that theism is compatible with a stuff ontology. (He does suggest that various attributes theists traditionally ascribe to God, like being concrete and

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<sup>6</sup> You might suggest that the substance God the mode characterizes could be eternal, but this is an additional commitment, and one I can see little motivation for.

being a causal agent, may be true in a stuff ontology, but he doesn't claim that God *is* a portion of stuff.) But, even so, what would it mean to say that God is a portion of stuff? To me, on any conceivable conception of stuff, it would mean that God is material. But it is obvious that a portion of material stuff—or all the stuff comprising the universe—cannot be what Lowe, or any classical or neo-classical theist, has in mind when thinking about God. No portion of stuff could be the necessarily-existent foundation of reality.

Besides all this, since each fundamental category in Lowe's ontology is dependent, in some way or another, on members of other categories, even rejecting the claim that God is a substance fails to hold onto aseity. Recall that substances depend on kinds, kinds on attributes and substances, modes on substances and attributes, and attributes on kinds and modes. So not only do the above maneuvers reject the classical idea of God being a substance, but they do so without salvaging God's aseity.<sup>7</sup>

### 3.2. God is not Wholly Independent

Rather than attempt to hold onto aseity by rejecting the view that God is a substance, one might find it promising to reject aseity so as to maintain God's substancehood instead. On this view, God would be a substance just like the rest of us. God would rigidly ontologically depend on a kind, be characterized by modes, and so on. But it just so happens that God is a very special substance; God is the substance that explains, grounds, and perhaps causes all the other substances. And one might ask: what is so wrong with this picture? God might depend on some kind, and that kind on some attributes, but God doesn't depend for his *existence* on any other substance. God might be an ontologically but *not existentially* dependent substance. Isn't this just what aseity is trying to capture?

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<sup>7</sup> Nic Koziol brought to my attention the interesting suggestion that should Lowe adopt the doctrine of divine simplicity and deny that God is characterized by any modes, then there would be no attributes corresponding to those modes, and so, no kind under which God the substance fell. For, kinds are identity dependent on (at least some) attributes. If this is right, then God the substance would not rigidly ontologically depend on a kind, and so, aseity is maintained. But, as pointed out by Heil (ms), should you admit of an entity in one category, it seems you get entities in the other three categories for free and automatically. For, the moment you admit of a substance (God), you get a kind under which that substance falls—for the substance must be some kind or other—and the moment you get a kind, you get attributes—for the kind must be variously propertied—and the moment you get attributes, you must have some modes—for the attributes couldn't exist should some modes not fall under them. So, while fascinating, this suggestion won't help Lowe to maintain aseity.



I am inclined to think that the necessarily-existent foundation of reality cannot ontologically depend, in any sense, on anything. And indeed Lowe and Tahko (2015) suggest God as *the* case of a *wholly independent* being. So at first glance, I suspect a number of theists, including classical theists and some neo-classical theists, will find this maneuver unacceptable. Moreover, belonging to a kind brings with it, besides rigid ontological dependence, limitations many theists will be uncomfortable with. For instance, if, per Aristotle, kinds are composites of genus and difference, then God's belonging to a kind will violate divine simplicity immediately. Second, belonging to a kind places limitations on God's being, making God *a this but not a that*; but God is traditionally thought to be infinite, not limited or bound to any way or mode of existence.<sup>8</sup>

However, besides all this, we can show that this move has problems of its own apart from its rejection of a strong sense of aseity. In his later work, Lowe develops a three-pronged justification for countenancing kinds (2015; cf. 2018, 17–20). He thinks we need kinds to give adequate accounts of individuation, instantiation, and natural law. Now, for Lowe, an entity belongs to the category it does in part because of the relations it stands in with other entities (2006, 43–44). For instance, if some *x* is instantiated by a mode, then *x* is an attribute, and if some *y* is characterized by a mode, then *y* is a substance. So figuring out what category an entity belongs to is a matter of showing that it is related thus-and-so to entities in other categories. But the justifications Lowe gives for countenancing kinds don't seem to apply in the case of God; that is, there doesn't seem to be a need to posit a divine kind. And if there is no kind, 'God,' that a divine substance could instantiate, then there is little reason to think that there is a divine *substance*, God. If this is right, then the move to reject claim *b* seems to lack precedent.

Let's lay out Lowe's three justifications of kinds and address them individually. (i) The first justification is that we need kinds to provide an adequate account of individuation (2015, 72–76). The basic idea is that we need a category of kind distinct from the category of attribute if we are going to be able to tell whether some *x* is identical with some *y*. Suppose substances *x* and *y* have the same attributes, for example, they are mammalian, 10 kilograms, and have four limbs. Even with this knowledge, we cannot tell if *x* and *y* are numerically identical or not. To know that, we need to know what *kinds* of substances we're dealing with. Knowing that *x* and *y* are both mammalian, 10 kilograms, and have four limbs doesn't tell us whether, for example, *x* is a dog and *y* a human child and so that *x* is not identical to *y*, or whether *x* is a dog and *y* is a dog and that *x* is identical to *y*.

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<sup>8</sup> Thanks to Eleonore Stump for pointing these worries out to me.

This argument doesn't apply to God however. The attributes that God is generally thought to possess, such as omniscience, omnipotence, and the like, are thought to be possessed only by God. If some *x* is omniscient, omnipotent, and the like, *x* is God; and if there is some *y* with exactly similar properties, then we know a priori that *x* is identical with *y*. So, there is no worry of individuating God, and so, no need to posit a divine kind, and so, no reason to think God is a substance that instantiates a kind. Of course, one could object that Lowe must be open to polytheism, but I think this is simply too high of a cost to bear, and, moreover, Lowe himself seems not to have been a polytheist.<sup>9</sup>

(ii) The second justification comes from instantiation (2015, 76–79). Without kinds, Lowe thinks we must say that substances instantiate attributes. (Recall that a mode, the only other category available to us currently, is not the sort of entity that can be instantiated.) For, if Socrates does not instantiate the kind 'human being,' the only other entities he can instantiate are his various attributes. This means that Socrates would be, say, an instance of paleness and an instance of risible. But this is odd in itself, and moreover, it commits us to claiming that paleness *is* risibility. For, if Socrates just is an instance of paleness and an instance of risibility, then paleness and risibility are one and the same thing. But this is absurd. So, we need to posit a kind of which Socrates is an instance, and then suppose that this kind, 'human being,' is characterized by various attributes.

I think that this is the most successful of Lowe's attempts to justify kinds, and so of concern to us here, the best attempt to support the idea that God could be a substance in Lowe's sense. However, this success depends on our commitment to the doctrine of divine simplicity. For, if God is entirely simple, then there is no distinction between God's various attributes: God's will is God's power and is God's knowledge, *et cetera*. If there is truly no metaphysical distinction between God's attributes, then there is no issue with God's various, seemingly distinct attributes being identical to one another. Now, again, the doctrine of divine simplicity is controversial, and so, taking recourse in it is dialectically suspect (and Lowe himself intimates he might do without it (2006, 203–204)). But it is important to note that recent opposition to the doctrine is rooted in the worry that it turns *God into a property*, not that it identifies each of God's attributes with one another (Brower 2008, Leftow 1990).

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<sup>9</sup> Certain Christians could object that the three persons of the Trinity instantiate the same properties, but nevertheless need to be individuated, and so, that there could be a justification for divine kinds. However, it is unclear whether kinds are needed for this, or whether relations or some other category of being could help individuate the three divine persons. At present however, I leave religious particularities aside.

So, I submit that, depending on one's inclination (and Lowe's) to accept or reject divine simplicity, there *may* be a way to justify a divine kind, and so, a divine substance in Lowe's sense. But doing so requires that we reject the doctrine of divine simplicity. Moreover, note that even if one can justify a divine kind, and so, substance, in this way, we still must reject aseity, and this is just to fail to avoid the puzzle.

(iii) The third justification is that we need kinds to provide a parsimonious account of natural law and to answer the problem of complex essences (2015, 79–84; cf. 2006, 28–30). The problem of complex essences is a challenge to explain why certain attributes so universally co-instantiate (see Dumsday 2010). For Lowe, we can only answer these challenges by countenancing kinds. Regarding laws, Lowe argues that the law that Ks are F and G is best captured by countenancing K ontologically as a kind, and not some attribute or cluster of attributes. And regarding the problem of complex essences, kinds reified explain why some substances are so reliably F and G: K is the essence of said substances, and it metaphysically determines that its instances are F and G.

This justification fails in the case of the divine for two reasons. First, God is not obviously subject to natural laws, and so, there is no obvious need to account for laws into which God factors. It is plausible that God is subject to logical constraints, such as that God cannot make  $2+2=5$ , but it is not plausible that God is subject to natural constraints, such as that God cannot make water flammable (cf. Lowe 1987). Second, in regards to the problem of complex essences, since it is plausible that there is only one God, there is only one case of divine attributes co-instantiating. So there is no need to explain why divine attributes 'so reliably' cluster; *there is only one instance of such clustering*.

At this point, might we claim that God is a substance, not because God falls under some kind, but because God is characterized by modes? I don't think so, at least not without discarding much of Lowe's ontology. For, a substance isn't just whatever instantiates a kind or is characterized by modes, but what instantiates a kind *and* is characterized by modes. If we wanted to do without kinds, we would simply chop off the top-half of Lowe's ontology (Heil 2011), and this is clearly not a way in which Lowe would hope to 'accommodate' God in his ontology.

#### 4. Another Way?

So far I've argued that Lowe must reject either the view that God is a substance or the view that God is wholly independent, that God exists *a se*, and that both moves have a high cost. This suggests that the only way for Lowe to deal with the puzzle

is to amend or reject his conception of the category of substance. In other words, the argument so far suggests that God simply doesn't fit within Lowe's considered ontological scheme.

But you might think that this is too quick. Lowe's four-category ontology is an ontological scheme for the natural sciences, a metaphysical account of *natural beings*. So there is no reason to think that God or some other supernatural being could or should have to fit within that scheme. If this is right, then the puzzle is puzzling only because it artificially restricts the categories open to us; perhaps Lowe's ontology of being in the broadest sense, or an ontology very much in line with Lowe's four-category ontology, has room for God. But now the question becomes: given the four-category ontology is Lowe's considered ontology, just where exactly are we to go from here?

By my lights, there are three (relatively) plausible options. We might claim (i) that God is an abstract object, (ii) that God somehow transcends the four-category ontology, or (iii) that God belongs to a category of divine, supernatural, or immaterial substance. While Lowe wrote about *abstracta*, and so gives (i) some precedent, he doesn't appear to have considered anything in line with (ii–iii). So I must admit that, in discussing these latter two options, I make no claim to know that these are ways in which Lowe thought about, or would be inclined to think about, God; (ii–iii) are entirely exploratory in nature. My hope is only to illuminate the ways in which Lowe's ontological horizons might be expanded so as to make room for God.

#### 4.1. God as Abstract Object

Lowe believed in the existence of abstract objects, and you might think that they do not fit straightforwardly within the four-category ontology (cf. Lowe 2006, 8). Perhaps this opens a way for God to fit within Lowe's broader ontology, and allows for God to be both a substance (or a substantial being) and to exist *a se*.

At first glance, the suggestion that God is an abstract object seems promising. For Lowe (1995, 2012; cf. Markosian 2000),  $x$  is abstract just in case  $x$  exists outside space and time, and it is generally agreed that God does not exist in space and that God is at least not 'bound by' time.<sup>10</sup> So far so good.

However, things begin to break down when we inspect closer Lowe's notion of abstractness. For Lowe, abstract objects are those objects that exist outside space and

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<sup>10</sup> That is, God exists either outside time—is atemporally eternal—or exists in time, but infinitely into the past and future—is sempiternal (see the contributions in Ganssle 2001 for further discussion).

time, but they are also objects that call out for explanation. That is, for Lowe, no abstract object exists *a se*; *abstracta* are dependent beings, not independent beings, and, moreover, they ontologically depend on concrete beings (2006, 81–83, 2012, 182ff; cf. van Inwagen 2018, 139–144). So, for Lowe there is no *x* such that *x* is both abstract and exists *a se*. But this means the current proposal is no better off than those we considered above.

Besides all this, Lowe himself is clear that God cannot be an abstract object (2012a, 181). For, he thinks, God must be concrete if God is to have any causal power, such as, for example, the power to create and sustain contingent beings. While this doesn't preclude someone propounding an ontology much like Lowe's from claiming that God is abstract, it certainly throws water on the proposal that Lowe might think God is abstract.

#### 4.2. God Beyond the Categories

A more promising approach, by my lights, might place God somehow beyond the categories. Rather than think of God as a being alongside other beings, we might instead think of God as a transcendent source or ground of being. God might be thought of as *the ground of* the categories, and so, not a being subject to, or falling under, the categories (for how could God both ground the categories *and* fall under them?). So understood, there is no puzzle: there are natural beings that fall under the four categories, and there is God, who is somehow beyond them.

While there's something very natural about this suggestion, it suffers three problems. The first is that it just seems paradoxical. God is traditionally thought to be that being that most of all *is*; God is being or a being in the fullest sense. But if God were a something—God cannot be a nothing—but not a being, this traditional thought goes out the window. For how can God *be* if not by being, well, *a being*?<sup>11</sup> Moreover, how might God be the ground or cause of the being of creatures if God doesn't, properly speaking, have being to give?

The second issue, which follows upon the first, is that the current proposal makes God ineffable. Should God be beyond the notion and categories of being, it is unclear we can meaningfully, let alone truthfully, say or think anything about God. Our entire conceptual machinery is grounded in the basic notion of being, the very intelligibility of existence (see Clarke 2001, 29). But if God is beyond being, in what sense may we intelligibly think, let alone predicate, anything of God? How can God

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<sup>11</sup> Clearly, I don't find a Plotinian conception of the ultimate first principle satisfactory. See Cohoe (2017, 761–764) for discussion.

be concrete or necessarily existent if God is (?!), but is not a something, not a being? While I do not doubt that the tradition of the *via negativa* may shed some light here, I cannot help but find these consequences troubling.

The third problem is the least consequential, but may be acute depending on one's religious tradition. Suppose that God is somehow beyond the categories. Suppose also that there are angels, or immaterial or purely intellectual beings of a sort. The motivation to place God beyond the categories was so that we didn't place God among natural beings. But angels and the like clearly are not natural beings. So perhaps they exist beyond the categories in some sense too. But what then separates God from the angels? It cannot be that God is necessarily existent or omnipotent or what have you, for these are attributes—beings—and God is beyond being. As soon as we predicate anything of God or angels to differentiate them, we abandon the original proposal to place God beyond being. And should we deny that angels or the like are beyond being, supposing, say, that they fall under the category of substance alongside material creatures, we must develop yet another story about what differentiates purely intellectual and material substances, and this introduces yet another layer in Lowe's ontology. While this move is open to us, it seems to abandon the very motivation that got the current proposal off the ground in the first place.

### 4.3. God as a New Species of Substance

Perhaps what is appealing initially about the previous proposal is that it attempts to make room or find space for God. What is problematic with the proposal is just that, in the particular way it makes room, it *removes* God from the realm of being *tout court*. A more promising approach might be to make room for God *within* Lowe's ontology by *expanding* it.

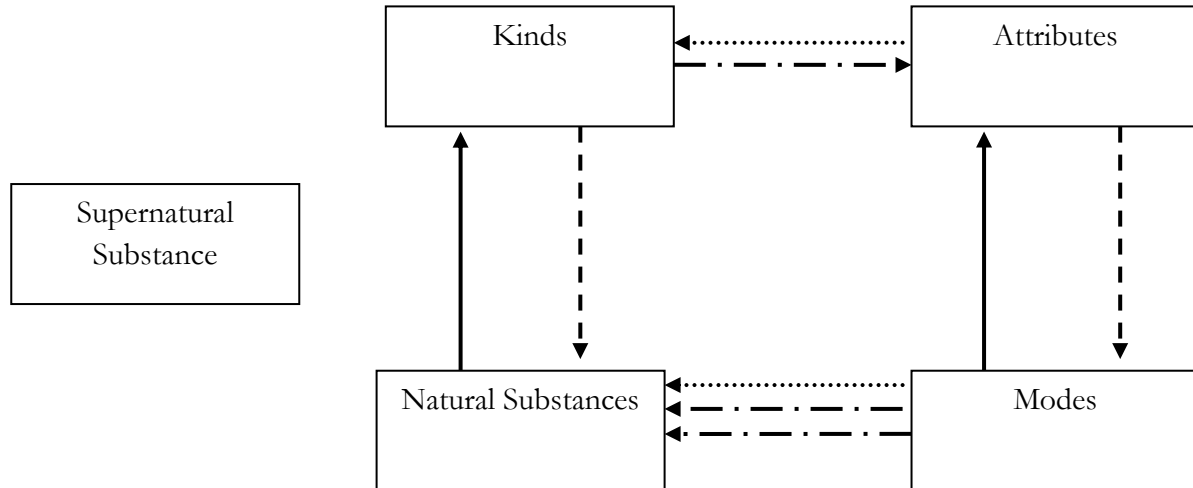
On such a proposal, we might submit that Lowe's conception of substance is too coarse-grained. When push comes to shove we must recognize that the category of substance is immediately differentiated into 'natural substance' and 'supernatural substance' and that these species of substance are both fundamental.

According to Lowe (2006, 8), a category is fundamental if and only if "the existence and identity conditions of entities belonging to that category cannot be exhaustively specified in terms of ontological dependency relations between those entities and entities belonging to other categories." Given that Lowe believes God is *necessarily* existent, and given some uncontroversial theological assumptions, I think it is clear that the identity and existence conditions of God are very different from natural substances. And they certainly cannot be exhaustively specified in terms of

dependence relations to entities in other categories; God exists no matter if anything else exists, so the dependence relations amongst the four categories have no bearing on whether God exists, or what God is. Indeed, the category of supernatural substance would not bear any relation to any other categories, unless and until God decided to create. If this is right, ‘supernatural substance’ would be a fundamental category alongside the other categories, and not a non-fundamental species of the fundamental category of substance.

God, of course, would be housed under the category of ‘supernatural substance’ and under the category of ‘natural substance’ would fall the various substances Lowe customarily speaks of, for example, Socrates, Fido, *et cetera*. What differentiates supernatural substances from natural substances, besides their identity and existence conditions, is that the former do not rigidly ontological depend on kinds and are not characterized by modes, while the latter do and are.<sup>12</sup> Both *are substances* inasmuch as they are subsistent beings, beings that exist ‘through themselves’ and not through or in another. If this proposal is coherent, then Lowe can maintain both that God is a substance (of a sort) and that God exists *a se*.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 2. *The Five-Category Ontology***



<sup>12</sup> Should we want to locate angels or other supernatural but not divine substances in this category, we might divide it further between infinite and finite supernatural substances. While this complicates our story a bit, the desire to accommodate finite supernatural beings doesn’t obviously introduce any serious difficulties, and it doesn’t add an additional fundamental category.

<sup>13</sup> Should you be on board with me so far, but desire divine modes, I see no trouble in claiming such things exist, apart from my particular reasons for thinking God must be simple.

I think this is exactly the move Lowe must make if he is to avoid the puzzle. It is well-motivated and avoids the problems besetting the proposals previously considered.

But, for this, you might think that for Lowe it is too easy, too low-cost. However, this is simply false. The proposal under consideration adds an entirely new fundamental category to Lowe's ontology, and this is neither low-cost (from a standpoint of parsimony) nor conservative (from a standpoint of preserving Lowe's ontology). While a theistically-inclined proponent of Lowe's ontology may have no qualms with simply tacking on a much-needed fifth category, this move represents a serious shift from Lowe's considered ontology: Lowe's fundamental categorization of being is incomplete, leaves out a *very important* category. Should we begin speaking of Lowe's 'five-category ontology,' we would be dismissed as ignorant of Lowe's work or questioned into submission. The addition of the category of 'supernatural substance' may be *straightforward*, but the five-category ontology it results in is certainly not present or hinted at in any of Lowe's work. Indeed, Lowe seems to not have been aware of the puzzle we're dealing with at all. So for Lowe to solve the puzzle, he must amend his ontology in a significant way.

But you might not think we need to make this move. In his later work, Lowe's focus seems to have shifted from the four-categories to the notions of essence and existence (see his 2012b, 2018). Existence is the very being or reality of an entity and essence is *the what it is to be* that entity. Existence is not to be thought of as a property mingled with an essence such that it results in a being, and essence is not to be thought of as an entity at all. Lowe's focus seems not to have been to elucidate these notions (for, he seems to adopt a fairly Aristotelian conception of essence; cf. Clarke 2001, ch. 5), but rather to emphasize their centrality in metaphysics. Either way, for Lowe, all entities have an essence, some unified criterion for being the very things they are. Whether or not all essences are 'paired' with existence is another story though: unicorns have an essence even though they lack existence. And this is just the core of his latter work: metaphysics is the *science of essence*.

But there is a traditional line of thought which takes God to be that being whose essence is existence. So understood, God is the being whose very identity is to be. So, in God, the thought goes, there is no distinction between existence and essence. If this is the case—and Lowe intimates this much at one point (2018, 22)—do we even need to add the fifth fundamental category of supernatural substance? Might we just say that God is the being whose essence is existence, whose very nature is to be, and leave it at that?

While I think Lowe *ought* to say that God is that being whose essence is existence, saying this much does not obviate the puzzle. Essences do not undermine or replace



the categories; they are, in a sense, superimposed on members of the categories. While Lowe is clear that the categories are not themselves beings (2006, 40–47; cf. Miller 2016), members or instances of the categories—Socrates, ‘human being,’ Socrates’s paleness, and ‘paleness’—most certainly are beings, and beings ‘composed’ of essence and existence. There is the very reality or existence that is Socrates, and then there is *the what it is to be* Socrates, or *the what it is to be* human, or both (Lowe 2018, 15–17). Part of what it is to be Socrates is to be a substance, the sort of entity that instantiates a kind and is characterized by modes, *et cetera*. And so on for members of the other categories. In short, essences contain categorical information, and so, are not completely independent of the four–category ontology.

If this is right, then even claiming that God is that being whose essence is existence doesn’t tell us to which category God belongs. Is God a kind whose essence is existence, or a mode for which to be it is to exist? None of these questions are settled by the identity of God’s essence with existence. To know that what it is to be God is to exist is not to know what sort of entity God is.

## 5. Conclusion

I’ve argued that Lowe can preserve a fairly classical or neo–classical conception of God should he amend his fundamental ontology in a significant way. Should Lowe countenance the fifth fundamental category of supernatural substance, he can maintain both that God exists *a se* and that God is a substance. Again, while this move is straightforward, I don’t think it is a simple tweaking of Lowe’s system: Lowe failed to accommodate a *very* important being in his ontology! Nonetheless, even if I am right, I do not think that Lowe’s categorical scheme is to be viewed as deficient or defective; it was simply left incomplete. All I hope to have shown here is that, whether a suitable metaphysical foundation for the natural sciences or not, Lowe’s *five–category* ontology is up to the task of securing a traditional conception of the divine.<sup>14</sup>

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way he felt he had to. In few thinkers do I find such intellectual grit, and in fewer still do I find such a source of philosophical motivation.

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