

# Mariusz Grygianiec

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## On E. J. Lowe's argument for "Brobdingnagian atomism"

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## On E.J. Lowe's Argument for *Brobdingnagian Atomism*\*

### 0. INTRODUCTION

In a number of his essays<sup>1</sup> E.J. Lowe presented an interesting argument for the ontological simplicity of the self. This argument had become the subject of Eric T. Olson's polemic reaction<sup>2</sup>, who was trying — unsuccessfully — to discover a formal mistake in the argument. Eventually, the modified and improved version of Lowe's reasoning came out in *Identity, Composition, and the Simplicity of the Self*.<sup>3</sup> It seemed that the argument for ontological simplicity of the self has resisted from criticism. Hereby, I am going to present a few manoeuvres which can be used by ad-

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\* This essay is one of the results of *The Ontology of Mental Causation* research project, realised by me during the academic year 2010/2011 at Durham University under Prof. E.J. Lowe's supervision. The project got support within *IEF Marie Curie Intra-European Fellowship for Career Development* (reference number: 250594) grant. The term 'Brobdingnagian Atomism' has been coined by E.T. Olson. A slightly modified version of the paper has been published in Lithuanian, under the title *Argumento už ontinį asmenų paprastumą kritinė analizė*, *Logos* 71(2012), pp. 43-50.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g.: E.J. Lowe, Substance and Selfhood, *Philosophy* 66(1991), pp. 88-89; his, *Subjects of Experience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 39-44; his, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 18-21; his, In Defence of the Simplicity Argument, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 78(2000), pp. 105-112.

<sup>2</sup> See E.T. Olson, Human Atoms, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 76(1998), p. 396-406. With reference to further Olson's criticism see also his, *What Are We? A Study in Personal Ontology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, pp. 177-179.

<sup>3</sup> See E.J. Lowe, Identity, Composition, and the Simplicity of the Self, [in:] *Soul, Body, and Survival: Essays on the Metaphysics of Human Persons*, (red.) K. Corcoran, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2001, p. 139-158. See also his, Substance Dualism: A Non-Cartesian Approach, [in:] *The Waning of Materialism*, (red.) R.C. Koons, G. Bealer, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, pp. 444-446.

vocates of animalism to dismiss conclusions from Lowe's argument. An animalist may want to do that because of a simple reason: basing on animalism it is difficult to argue for the *simplicity of the self* thesis, as persons are — according to animalism — human organisms, it means composite objects.

Before I start the analysis of Lowe's argument, I would like to submit some pre-assumptions. First of all I assume that both Lowe's metaphysical beliefs and basic theses of animalism are known. Secondly, in my research I omit critical threads raised by Olson and modifications made in the reasoning by the argument's author — for the sake of this analysis I will assume the final, mature version of the discussed argument. Thirdly, I omit — for clarity of the analysis — both complicated metaphysical issues concerning human being and wider philosophical context, which it appears in. Fourthly, I assume that the discussed version of the argument for the ontological simplicity of the self is formally valid, it means I assume that the conclusion logically follows from its premises. Therefore, I will not do any formal analysis of the argument, I will focus only on its material soundness.

## 1. THE SIMPLICITY ARGUMENT

Lowe's argument is based on nine premises, from which the first four ones are metaphysical theses obtained by intuition or on the basis of additional arguments:

- (1\*) I exist, as does my body.
- (2\*) I am not identical with my body [*ant-identism*].
- (3\*) I am not identical with any proper part of my body.
- (4\*) I do not have any proper part, which is not the proper part of my body.

Next four premises are the theses of classical mereology:

- (1\*) If an object has some proper parts, there exists the mereological sum of these parts and it is a proper or improper part of that object [*the fusion principle*].
- (2\*) If an object has a proper part, it has another proper part which is not a proper part of the first part [*the weak supplementation principle*].
- (3\*) No two objects having proper parts have exactly the same proper parts at the same time [*the weak extensionality principle*].<sup>4</sup>
- (4\*) The relation of *being a proper part* is transitive.

The simplicity of the self thesis derives from the expressed premises

- (1\*) I have no proper parts — I am a simple entity.

Formal proof runs as follows ('*a*' — 'me'; '*b*' — 'my body'; '*x*' — 'is a proper part of'):

- (1\*)  $\exists x x = a \wedge \exists x x = b.$

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<sup>4</sup> For interpretations of the used mereology theses see e.g. P. Simons, *Parts: A Study in Ontology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987, pp. 37-41.

- (2\*)  $\sim (a = b)$ .  
 (3\*)  $\forall x [x \ll b \rightarrow \sim (a = x)]$ .  
 (4\*)  $\forall x (x \ll a \rightarrow x \ll b)$ .  
 (5\*)  $\forall x \forall y_1 \forall y_2 \dots \forall y_n \{(y_1 \ll x \wedge y_2 \ll x \wedge \dots \wedge y_n \ll x) \rightarrow \exists z [z = \lceil y_1 + y_2 + \dots + y_n \rceil \wedge (z \ll x \vee z = x)]\}$ .<sup>5</sup>  
 (6\*)  $\forall x \forall y \{y \ll x \rightarrow \exists z [z \ll x \wedge \sim (z = y) \wedge \sim (z \ll y)]\}$ .  
 (7\*)  $\forall x \forall y \{(\exists z z \ll x \wedge \exists z z \ll y) \rightarrow [x = y \equiv \forall z (z \ll x \equiv z \ll y)]\}$ .  
 (8\*)  $\forall x \forall y \forall z [(x \ll y \wedge y \ll z) \rightarrow x \ll z]$ .  
 (9\*)  $\sim \exists x x \ll a$ .

Next Lowe proposes an argument *ad absurdum*, which purports to show that admitting the thesis that I am a composite object, so I have proper parts, leads — basing on adopted premises — to contradiction. For the sake of argument let us assume that:

- (10\*) I have some proper parts and each of these parts is a proper part of me.

The below reasoning shows how the premise (10\*) leads to contradiction:

- (11\*) I have some proper parts (10\*).  
 (12\*) My body has proper parts (4\*), (11\*).  
 (13\*) There exists such an  $x$  which is the sum of my proper parts and  $x$  is the proper part of my body or  $x$  is identical with my body (12\*), (5\*).  
 (14\*) There exists the sum  $r$  of my proper parts and this sum is the proper part of my body or it is identical with my body (13\*).  
 (15\*) There exists the sum  $r$  of my proper parts (14\*).  
 (16\*) The sum  $r$  of my proper parts is not identical with any of my proper parts (11\*), (6\*), (10\*), (15\*).  
 (17\*) Each of my proper parts is the proper part of the sum  $r$  of my proper parts (15\*), (16\*).  
 (18\*) For any  $x$ : if  $x$  is the proper part of me,  $x$  is identical with some of my proper parts (10\*).  
 (19\*) For any  $x$ : if  $x$  is the proper part of me,  $x$  is the proper part of the sum of my proper parts (17\*), (18\*).  
 (20\*) There exists such an  $x$  which is the sum of my proper parts and  $x$  is the proper part of me or  $x$  is identical with me (11\*), (5\*).  
 (21\*) There exists the sum  $w$  of my proper parts and the sum  $w$  is the proper part of me or it is identical with me (20\*).  
 (22\*) There exists the sum  $w$  of my proper parts (21\*).  
 (23\*)  $r = w$  (15\*), (22\*).  
 (24\*) The sum  $r$  of my proper parts is the proper part of me or it is identical with me (21\*), (23\*).  
 (25\*) For any  $x$ : if  $x$  is a proper part of the sum  $r$ ,  $x$  is the proper part of me (8\*), (24\*).  
 (26\*) For any  $x$ :  $x$  is a part of me always and only when  $x$  is the proper part of the sum  $r$  (19\*), (25\*).  
 (27\*) There exists such an  $x$  which is the proper part of me and there is such an  $x$  which is the proper part of the sum  $r$  (11\*), (17\*).  
 (28\*) I am identical with the sum  $r$  always and only when — for any  $x$ :  $x$  is the part of me always and only when  $x$  is the proper part of the sum  $r$  (27\*), (7\*).  
 (29\*) I am identical with the sum  $r$  (26\*), (28\*).

<sup>5</sup> The formula ' $z = \lceil y_1 + y_2 + \dots + y_n \rceil$ ' should be read as ' $z$  is the sum of objects  $y_1, y_2, \dots, y_n$ '.

- (30\*) The sum  $r$  is the proper part of my body or it is identical with it (14\*).
- (31\*) The sum  $r$  is the proper part of my body (assumption), (30\*).
- (32\*) If the sum  $r$  is the proper part of my body, it is false that I am identical with the sum  $r$  (3\*).
- (33\*) It is false that I am identical with the sum  $r$  (31\*), (32\*) *contradictio* (29\*).
- (34\*) The sum  $r$  is identical with my body (assumption), (30\*).
- (35\*) It is false that I am identical with the sum  $r$  (2\*), (34\*), *contradictio* (29\*); *qed*.

This argument clearly shows that the attempt of legitimating the thesis about compositeness of the self immediately leads to contradiction. If the thesis about compositeness followed from animalism, this would mean the falsity of animalism. This would be a highly unwelcome result. Because I assumed that this reasoning is formally valid, the only way to refute it is to question its material soundness. In order to obtain the desirable effect one should prove that at least one of premises of the above argument is simply false or — at least — insufficiently justified. The subsequent part of the text is this kind of attempt.

## 2. PREMISES OF THE ARGUMENT — AN ANALYSIS

Now I am going to examine the particular premises of the argument. With regard to the first premise, which conjunctionally states an existence of me and of my body, it would be difficult to determine any doubts — of course if realistic attitude is accepted. It seems that this premise is of common, intuitive character. Questioning it would be tantamount to either positing some version of eliminativism with reference to self or macroscopic objects (bodies) or accepting more or less exotic variants of reductionism (which, for example, comes down to recognize subjects as bundles of perceptions, whereas bodies — as constructions from impressions). However, because these options are false and extremely unreliable at the worst, and highly questionable and arguable at the best, it is reasonable just to accept the premise in question.

To accept the second premise of the argument is not so easy. Firstly, it is worth noticing that accepting this premise is equivalent to rebutting a specific form of materialism with regard to persons. This specific form identifies persons with physical bodies, wherein the exact meaning of this attitude depends on the meaning of the term “body”. Secondly, which is worth stressing, a possible consent for this premise still does not mean any form of dualism: a subject can — being not identical with the body — still remain something thoroughly physical. From an animalist point of view this premise can be accepted, but only on the condition that we understand a body as a physical object in respect to a collection or an aggregate of other physical objects. However, if we wanted to interpret the term “body” as “living human organism” we would not — as animalists — agree to this premise, because it would settle the status of animalism negatively. Because of the above reasons the second premise of the analysed argument seems to be ambiguous. But in order not to block subsequent analyses from the very beginning I shall assume the first possible interpretation. *Ipsa*

*facto* I accept its truth: a subject is not (cannot be) simply a collection or a physical aggregate of some parts of an organism. However, it should be said again that accepting the fact that an object is not a body does not mean that the subject is not a physical object of particular type (for example an organism).\*

I suggest treating the third premise in the similar way. Generally, I think it may not be accepted if one accepts an interpretation according to which the phrase "a proper part of my body" is understood as "a mereological part of collection of objects composing my body". But some reservations can arise with such an understanding, where "parts of a body" means "parts of a living organism", because in some cases that what initially has been a part of an organism, can exist as an individual organism then.

The fourth premise claiming that a subject does not have any proper part which is not a proper part of a body, causes much more controversy. The problem with this premise is not only that the interpretation of the term "body" seems to be disputable, but also that the notion of a *proper part* can be interpreted in a lot of ways. So we encounter here, first, some doubts whether we can assume, with no reservations, the synonymy of the terms "body" and "human organisms". Second, in the light of what the author of the argument claims in many points with regard to the notion of a *proper part* (*inter alia* telling apart proper parts, structural parts and functional parts of composite objects), there is a doubt arising, exactly what type of objects are included as values of variables quantified over in the relevant premise (can, for instance, an endocrine or immune system be qualified, with no reservations, as a component part of a body?).

In my opinion, questioning the truthfulness of the premise in question constitutes one of the most probable and promising strategies for a rejection of Lowe's argument.<sup>6</sup>

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\* An anonymous referee for this journal has pointed out that I am wrongly supposing that Lowe's denial of the identity thesis presupposes that the term "body" denotes here a mere aggregate, not an organism, whereas his rejection of the thesis in question is based on the fact that I and my body have different identity/persistence conditions. This is very important point. Nevertheless I would like to emphasize that I am happy to agree with Lowe on that issue as long as we will be likewise inclined to claim that a body and an organism also have different identity/persistence conditions (it seems to me that Lowe in fact distinguishes them precisely, but gives at times some suggestions for their identification). At this stage we can leave open the question of whether "I" and "organism" have the same or different identity/persistence conditions, though, of course, an animalist will be willing to identify them. This, I think, would be the main difference between Lowe and an animalist. I would like to thank the referee for her critical comments and remarks on this topic.

<sup>6</sup> For instance Lowe writes: „Consider, for example, an organic molecule and the various atomic and subatomic particles which compose it. There are parts of such a molecule, namely, the various valence bonds that give it its structure, which are not composed by any of the objects that compose the molecule. Those valence bonds are real parts of the molecule, which would have to be represented as such in any adequate model or diagram of the molecule. Two different kinds of molecule can have the same kinds of objects composing them, but differ in their structure as a consequence of having different kinds of valence bonds. A valence bond, I shall say, is a *structural* part of

Subsequent four premises are relevant theses and axioms of classical mereology. Hereby, I am not going to discuss the fifth premise (*the fusion principle*) and the eighth premise (the transitivity of the *proper part* relation). Although there are reasonable doubts regarding a usage of these theses within informal domains, these theses seem to be undisputable, at least with regard to some scope of the mentioned usage. Concerning the sixth and seventh premise matters look a little bit different. *The weak supplementation principle* (the sixth premise) says that if an object has any proper part, it has another proper part which is not a proper part of that first part. Although Lowe in the hereby analysed argument has no reservations for the considered thesis, in his latest paper, while discussing the so-called *Tibbles the cat* paradox, clearly calls it into question.<sup>7</sup> Without a doubt, the mentioned reaction of the author is a promising starting point in the strategy of challenging the discussed argument. In my opinion, Lowe is right in rejecting the weak supplementation principle while analysing the mentioned paradox. But in such a situation he should not make use of that principle within the argument for the simplicity of the self. A completely independent reason of doubt with respect to this premise could also be the above comments to the third premise.

A bit less hopes can be connected with a dismissal of *the weak extensionality principle* (the seventh premise), although also here, there is an interesting perspective. Its success depends on acceptance of a disputable metaphysical view, allowing an exact coincidence of objects. Since the weak extension principle excludes the case when two different objects are composed of exactly the same parts. Nevertheless, one can still imagine the situation when two different objects (here: the objects with different qualities) have exactly the same parts (for instance a physical lump making up a building and a house — the house can be cosy, the lump — rather not). But an approach of this sort has some costs which have to be accepted (for example a lack of convincing explanations where the difference in qualities with a simultaneous lack of differences in the structure comes from). Perhaps that is why there are not too many advocates of the stance in question.

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a molecule, whereas the various particles composing it are *component* parts of it. And my contention is that when one object composes another, they differ at least in their structural parts.” Compare his, *Identity, Composition...*, p. 149. Of course hereby there is a self-imposed question arising: if this kind of reasoning can be, with no collision, referred to a simple DNA molecule, why we could not do the same with reference to a complicated human organism?

<sup>7</sup> The author is writing: „But what then is *Tib*, subsequent to the annihilation of *Tail*, given that *Tib* is not then — much less previously — a *cat*? My answer is that *Tib* remains what it was before, namely, a part of the cat *Tibbles* — albeit a part which now *wholly composes Tibbles* (‘wholly composes’ *Tibbles* in the sense that *Tibbles* now has no other part that is not materially included in *Tib*). [...] This answer requires me to deny what is known, by mereologists, as the *weak supplementation principle*, according to which, if an object has a proper part, then it also has *another* proper part which is not a proper part of that first part.”. Compare his, *More Kinds of Being: A Further Study of Individuation, Identity, and the Logic of Sortal Terms*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2009, p. 95.

### 3. GENERAL CRITICAL REMARKS

The above analysis reveals the opportunity to dispute material soundness of the discussed argument by questioning at least one of the following theses:

- (a) I am not identical with my body (because by a body we can understand a living human organism).
- (b) I am not identical with any proper part of my body (because some parts of living organisms can themselves be such organisms in some circumstances).
- (c) I do not have any proper part, which is not a proper part of my body (because there are some parts of organisms which are not their constitutive parts).
- (d) If a given object has a proper part, there is another part of it which is not a proper part of the first part (because Lowe himself rejects this thesis in the other context).
- (e) No two objects having proper parts have precisely the same proper parts at the same time (because there can be two objects with the same mereological structure, but with different modal and historical properties as well as with different persistence conditions).

It is clear that if we want to admit the falsity of the conclusion of the analysed argument, we have to question the truthfulness (or: degree of justification) of one of the above mentioned theses. For this purpose it is enough, for example, to follow the author himself and to rebut the weak supplementation principle (d).

However, there are still another reasons of scepticism for Lowe's argument. These are more general reasons, of methodological character. Well, firstly, it is worth noticing, that an advocate of animalism can protest against the fact, that the above argument attributes some views to animalists, which do not have to be accepted by them. For example, when it comes to the second and third premise, there are some doubts whether they are negations of appropriate theses, conceded by animalists. I suspect that at least some adherents of animalism, including myself, will be ready to agree with the given premises, but only because they are negations of some different theses which — from an animalist point of view — are trivial falsehoods. Yet Lowe seems to suggest that these premises are allegedly negations of important theses of animalism. Secondly, there is a reasonable doubt, whether the notions of classical mereology — such as “being a part”, “being a proper part”, “being a sum of proper parts” — can be collision-free while used with reference either to the notion of *a subject (a person)*, which, *nota bene*, is characterized mainly in a psychological terminology or to the notion of *a body*, understood as a notion of a living human organism (since an organism has not only proper parts, but also structural and functional ones). It is worth mentioning that within the terminology proposed by Lowe, organisms are regarded as *integrates*, not ordinary *collections* or *aggregates* of objects. Yet Lowe is willing to ascribe to adherents of animalism an interpretation according to which organisms are ordinary aggregates. Thirdly, referring to the proposed argument, there is a caveat that its formal validity is beyond reproach as long as it is formulated out of the context of an argument for substantial dualism. Since it



is worth noticing that the second premise of the analysed argument constitutes the conclusion of the other Lowe's argument, namely the so-called *indivisibility argument*.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the conclusion of the simplicity argument is, in turn, the premise of the above mentioned indivisibility argument. When both arguments are put together, immediately a *circulus in demonstrando* fallacy arises. Fourthly — in connection with the first remark above — it is worth adding that premises (2\*)-(4\*) may seem to be attractive, because they are *de facto* negations of radically unconvincing views (assuming appropriate interpretations of neuralgic terms, suggested by Lowe). In the light of this circumstance the success of the analysed argument seems to be the result of too trite, simplified depiction of competitive approaches. If it were so, Lowe's argument would commit a *straw man* fallacy.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis we can draw the following conclusions. The argument for the simplicity of the self is formally valid provided that none of its premises does not appear in a conclusion of any other argument and that its conclusion cannot be found within the mentioned argument as a premise. The argument might also be treated as materially sound on the proviso that we are prepared to accept contentious interpretations of premises (2\*)-(4\*) and an indisputability of the involved principles of classical mereology. However, as one can come around, the mentioned interpretations are unacceptable from an animalist point of view. Moreover, a doubt arises whether the weak supplementation and weak extension principles can be used with no reservations beyond formal domains. In the light of drawn difficulties I am rather inclined to accept the verdict that the simplicity argument is not sound and to insist on an animalistic interpretation of the subject, according to which the self is a composite material object, identical with a living human organism.

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<sup>8</sup> See E.J. Lowe, *Substance Dualism...*, pp. 443-44.