



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

ANALYSIS

Reply to Lowe on Ships and Structures

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Source: *Analysis*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Oct., 1988), pp. 221-223

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of [The Analysis Committee](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3328504>

Accessed: 15-03-2016 17:19 UTC

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REPLY TO LOWE ON SHIPS AND STRUCTURES

By HAROLD W. NOONAN

IN a previous reply to E. J. Lowe (ANALYSIS 46.4, October 1986, pp. 218–21) I maintained that the collection of planks constituting a ship at a certain time would itself then qualify as (predicatively) a ship, notwithstanding its non-identity with the ship it constituted, and in support of this contention I cited (following R. M. Chisholm) Webster's definition of a ship as 'a structure used for transportation in water'.

In his 'Reply to Noonan' (ANALYSIS 47.4, October 1987, pp. 201–3) Lowe does not dispute the correctness of this definition, but he denies, appealing to Webster's own definition of 'structure', that it supports my claim. He goes on to say, however, that *whatever* the dictionary said he would dispute my claim, for 'is it or is it not the case that for something to qualify as a ship it should be capable of surviving at least some change in its component parts — such as its planks — through renovation or repair? Clearly the answer must be that it is. *Of course*, a ship may lose or gain a plank without thereby ceasing to be. By contrast, the very identity of a collection of planks is determined by the identity of the planks that are its members . . . and consequently it does not make sense to speak of such a collection surviving the loss or gain of a plank. Hence no such collection will ever qualify as a ship.'

This argument suggests that in order to qualify as a ship at a time (or generally, to satisfy a sortal predicate at a time), an entity must satisfy certain *modal* constraints, i.e. certain modal predicates must be true of it, for example, 'is capable of surviving some change in its component parts'. And doubtless Lowe would also be willing to add that it is equally a necessary condition of an entity's qualifying as a ship at a time that it also satisfy certain historical constraints, i.e. that certain past- or future-reflecting predicates (to use Chisholm's terminology) be true of it. Now if so my claim is easy to resist: for certainly the collection of planks constituting a ship at a time is bound to differ from the ship it constitutes at that time *either* in respect of the modal predicates true of it *or* in respect of the historical predicates true of it (otherwise there would be no reason to deny its identity with the ship),

so all that an opponent need do is to point to some predicate (e.g. 'is capable of undergoing change of parts' or 'is *always* a ship'), satisfied by the ship but not by the plank-collection, and claim that its satisfaction is a necessary condition of qualifying as a ship.

But in fact I wish to deny that satisfaction of any such constraint is a necessary condition of being a ship at a time.

Let us look first at modal and then at historical constraints.

Lowe says that it is a necessary condition of an entity's qualifying as a ship that it be capable of undergoing a change of parts. But consider this familiar type of example (taken with irrelevant changes from David Lewis *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 252–3). A piece of plastic constitutes a toy ship (or boat, for those who care about the difference) throughout its existence, for it is synthesized in the mould in which the boat is formed, and it is destroyed when the boat is destroyed. But there are modal predicates true of the boat, but not true of the piece of plastic and vice-versa. For example, the piece of plastic could have been squeezed into a ball and not destroyed, but this is not true of the boat, and the boat could have undergone repair and replacement of parts, but this is not true of the piece of plastic.

However, if we regard these modal differences as providing us with a reason to deny that the piece of plastic is predicatively a boat we must say that there are *two* entities where the boat is — one a boat-shaped piece of plastic and the other a boat. But to say this would manifest a bad case of double vision — there is manifestly just *one* entity there, which we can refer to indifferently *either* as 'a piece of plastic' or as 'a boat'.

It might be replied that given the difference in modal predications true of them we *must* distinguish the piece of plastic and the boat. But this is not so. Instead we can deny that the reference of a modal predicate is independent of the linguistic context in which it occurs, and in particular is independent of the singular term to which it is attached — and then the argument is blocked (for details see Lewis *The Plurality of Worlds*, last chapter, or my 'The Closest Continuer Theory of Identity', *Inquiry* 28 (1985)). However, given that we *can* block the argument in this way, and given the absurdity of denying the identity of the piece of plastic and the toy boat, I submit that we *have* to do it. It cannot then be argued, as Lowe maintains, that an entity cannot qualify as a ship (or boat) unless it is capable of a change of parts. For to argue in this way commits one to an absurd view of the number of entities present in situations of the type Lewis describes.

I have no similar argument to bring against the contention that it is a necessary condition of an entity's being a ship at a time that it have a certain type of history. Of course, many predicates do apply to an entity at a time only if certain things have been or will be true of that entity at other times, for example, 'is a widow' or 'is a future President'. I do not, however, believe that this is true of

sortal predicates, or, in particular, true of the predicate 'is a ship', and I think that Webster's definition supports me in this.

Lowe denies that this is so since he takes Webster's definition of a 'structure' to imply that for an entity to be a structure at a time it must not only be structured *at that time*, but must be a structure *at all times* and indeed must be *essentially* a structure. But I do not read the definition as having this implication (it is certainly not, as Lowe suggests, what 'one might expect of a definition' — how then could the dictionary define 'bachelor'?). Anyway I have already argued that it is incorrect to suppose that an entity can satisfy a sortal predicate only if it satisfies such a modal constraint.

But suppose that I am right and a collection of planks constituting a ship at a time may itself then qualify as predicatively a ship in virtue of the non-modal, non-historical properties it then possesses. What unwelcome consequences follow? None, I think. We must then, I have argued, distinguish between restricted and unrestricted quantification over things which are predicatively a ship, and hence we must distinguish between two senses of the predicate 'is a ship', i.e. 'is predicatively a ship' and 'is identical with some ship', only one of which (the former) applies to collections of planks constituting ships. But these distinctions can be made without falling into inconsistency. Nor is someone adopting Lowe's position able to claim that his account is more economical, for he too must distinguish between two senses of the predicate 'is a ship', namely 'is predicatively a ship' and 'is constitutively a ship', only one of which (the latter) applies to collections of planks constituting ships.

The difference between Lowe and myself is simply that he takes the predicate which is true both of ships and plank-collections to be the semantically complex 'is constitutively a ship', whilst I take it to be the semantically simple 'is predicatively a ship', this difference in turn deriving from the fact that I accept, while Lowe denies, that the non-modal, non-historical properties possessed by an entity at a time may warrant the application to it, at that time, of the simple predicate.

I hope that this note has clarified what is at issue between us.

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