

SOMMERS ON EMPTY DOMAINS AND EXISTENCE

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Many philosophers have held the question of what there is to be a logical question. They have argued that a logical examination of our language will reveal our existential commitment. A source of difficulty for such a view has been the empty domain.

1. Can there be an empty domain of discourse? Quine's well known answer was that such a domain, though logically possible, is best ignored.¹ Quine wanted to retain all normal quantified theorems, e.g.

$$(1) (\exists x) (Fx \vee \neg Fx)$$

$$(2) (x) (Fx) \supset (\exists x) (Fx)$$

as true in any domain. Thus he was forced to assume (so he thought) that there is always at least one object in any domain which could be the value of these bound variables; otherwise such theorems would be false. Quine simply would not allow an empty domain of discourse.

Karl Potter has charged that this position into which Quine has forced himself is the result of his failure to recognize the denial-negation distinction.² Negation (\neg) may be construed as a unary propositional connective which has the effect of reversing the truth value of any proposition upon which it operates. Denial (' or *non*) is an operation upon a predicate alone. It will be seen that denial has the effect of reversing the ontic commitment made by the proposition in which the denied predicate occurs. Keeping this distinction in mind Potter gives a restricted version of Quine's criterion for ontic commitment:

OC: Given an asserted formula S , to be is to be a value of a bound variable in S if either (1) S is categorical and tilde-free, or (2) S logically implies a formula which is categorical and tilde-free.

1. "Meaning and Existential Inference," *From a Logical Point of View*, New York (1953), p. 160.

2. "Negation, Names, and Nothing," *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 15 (1954).