

## THE BEARER OF ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

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The ancient claim that our language commits us directly to ontological doctrines, e.g., 'Abstract entities exist', undergoes a series of modifications in the essays of Professor W. V. Quine. At its most unvarnished the claim appears in these words, *circa* 1947: "Ontological statements follow immediately from all manner of casual statements of commonplace facts".<sup>1</sup> In *Word and Object* (1960) we find this remark: "We cannot paraphrase our (philosopher) opponent's sentences into canonical (quantificational) notation for him and convict him of the consequences, for there is no synonymy. . ."<sup>2</sup> In this paper I would like to notice and comment on some transitional stages between Quine's earlier and later views, keeping two questions in mind: (1) How does the idea of ontological commitment, as it develops in Quine's thought, implicate the user of discourse? (2) In what sense can discourse be said to carry ontological commitment?

### I

At one point Quine writes, ". . . when we say that some zoological species are cross-fertile we are committing ourselves to recognizing as entities the several species themselves, abstract though they are".<sup>3</sup> This sentence advances a strong version of the claim. Before noticing how Quine qualifies it, let us imagine a neighbor, Smith, remarking, "I've managed to grow three species of rose in this thin soil". Now whether Smith happens to care or not, his casual statement of fact is burdened, apparently and on the surface at any rate, with at least one problematical consequence. It implies "Species exist". This, I think, is the least that Quine could have meant in his earlier discussions of ontological commitment. Even this strong view, however, gives us no good reason to subpoena Smith himself for overpopulating the universe. As Quine puts it, the criterion of ontological commitment "applies in the first instance to discourse and not to men".<sup>4</sup>

In the same context Quine describes two ways in which "a man may fail to share the ontological commitments of his discourse".<sup>5</sup> To get at the way in which Quine's earlier view implicates the user of discourse, it will help