

SOMMERS' PROOF THAT SOMETHING EXISTS

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In the concluding remarks of [4] I mentioned that in [8] Sommers had given a proof to the effect that necessarily something exists and that later in [5] this proof was shown to be wrong in principle. Sommers' proof went like this:

1. Something is possible.
2. Whatever is not a categorially possible thing is not a possible thing.
3. Suppose there were nothing (i.e., nothing exists).
4. By definition D -things are categorially impossible if and only if nothing is D and nothing is \bar{D} .
5. For any D , nothing is D and nothing is \bar{D} . (by 3)
6. For any D , D -things are categorially impossible. (by 4 and 5)
7. For any D , D -things are not possible things. (by 2 and 6)

Since 7 is inconsistent with 1, we must reject 1 or 2 or 3 or 4. 1, 2, and 4 seem certain. Thus we must reject 3. This gives us the negation of 3 (Something exists). Q.E.D.

Guerry attacked Sommers' proof by showing that 4 allows counter-examples and must be rejected rather than 3. What bothered Guerry about 4 was that it allowed Sommers to "derive a necessity (the impossibility of D -things) from a contingency (the nonexistence of D - and \bar{D} -things)." Nevertheless, a simple reformulation of this definition (4) can be used to render the proof immune to Guerry's attack. The reformulation is simply what I think Sommers had actually intended by 4. However, this reformulated argument can be shown to be simply invalid requiring Sommers to find a completely new argument for his purposes.

Definition 4 is unclear because the phrases "nothing is D " and "nothing is \bar{D} " are ambiguous. Sommers has failed to make a distinction explicit which he happens to hold (implicitly). The distinction to be made is that which holds between *spans* and *is predicable of*. This distinction has been reinforced in [1], [2], [3], and [6]. A term D spans a thing if and only if any sentence used to affirm D of that thing is category correct. Of course, D and \bar{D} will always span the same things. (See [7], pp. 329 and

351.) On the other hand, D is impredicable of a thing if and only if no sentence used to affirm D of it and no sentence used to affirm \bar{D} of it is true. Whatever is predicable of a thing must span it, but the converse need not hold. Now the phrase "nothing is D " can be read here in one of two ways: (i) " D spans nothing" or (ii) " D is predicable of nothing."

Counterexamples to 4 hold only when it is read in the sense of (ii). If this is the sense Sommers intended, then clearly Guerry's attack is correct. I propose, however, that Sommers has taken 4 in the sense of (i). We might best replace 4 by the clearer

4.1 By definition, D -things are categorially impossible if and only if D spans nothing.

The difference between the two interpretations of 4 is obvious when we consider one of Guerry's examples. Before there was like in the universe it was true that "fed" and "unfed" were predicable of nothing since neither could be truly affirmed of anything. On the other hand, it was not the case that "fed" and "unfed" spanned nothing. The existence or nonexistence of a thing has nothing to do with what terms span it, but it has everything to do with which terms are predicable of it. While "thinks often of Vienna" is not predicable of the present king of France, because neither it nor its logical contrary can be truly affirmed of him, it nonetheless spans him since neither the result of affirming it nor of affirming its logical contrary of him are category mistakes. Sommers' proof, when 4 is read as 4.1, is immune to Guerry's counterexamples and must therefore stand or fall for other reasons.

I think it is clear that Sommers' proof, as it appears, must fall; and on very simple grounds. It is formally invalid. When 4 is replaced by 4.1, line 6 is unjustified. It (6) does not follow from 4.1 and 5. Sommers' choice is to either read 4 in the sense of (ii) and accept the consequences of Guerry's counterexample, or read 4 as 4.1 and recognize the invalidity of the argument, or find some other argument. I offered just such a new argument in [4].

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