FIRST-ORDER QUANTIFIERS, SECOND-ORDER DOMAINS, AND ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

G. ALDO ANTONELLI

In the wake of Quine's claim that to be is to be the value of a variable, philosophers have burdened the quantifiers "there is" and "for all" with the extraordinary task of carrying the ontological commitments of theories, resulting in much armchair philosophizing. But it is seldom, if ever, explained exactly how the quantifiers manage to convey ontological commitment, nor why it is that these two quantifiers, among the many possible choices, are singled out for task.

This talk attempts to shed light on these questions based on the proper understanding of first-order quantifiers as predicates of predicates. Once viewed in this way, it becomes clear that first-order quantifiers are just as dependent on the prior specification of a higher-order domain as the second-order quantifiers are thought to be.

It follows that "there is" and "for all" (just like their second-order counterparts) can be provided with a non-standard interpretation, a fact that reveals how Quine's criterion is neither necessary nor, in an importantly different sense, sufficient for ontological commitment.

Along the way, we will be able to tell a story as to why "there is" and "for all" (and not any one of numerous alternatives) play such a prominent role in formal, philosophical, as well as everyday reasoning.