Many commentators think that 'empty' terms constitute a problem for Aristotle's logic. In this paper I argue that Aristotle's logic can accommodate 'empty' terms: although the subject as well as the predicate of every genuine affirmation and of every genuine denial must be 'non-empty,' those utterances which have the outward appearance of an affirmation or a denial with an 'empty' subject or predicate are really neither affirmations nor denials, but collections of affirmations or denials. Since a collection of affirmations or denials is a collection of sentences, and since it is sentences, not collections of sentences, that are true or false, it follows that those utterances which have the outward appearance of an affirmation or a denial with an 'empty' subject or predicate are neither true nor false.

I. Arguments for attributing to Aristotle the view that affirmations and denials have existential import

Subjects and predicates cannot be 'empty': (i) affirmations, denials, joining, and separating. Aristotle's remarks on affirmations, denials, joining, and separating strongly suggest that in his view both the subject and the predicate of any affirmation or denial signify items of the appropriate kinds. For:

(i.i) Aristotle insists that in every affirmative (negative) sentence something is said about (away from) something. In his formulation of this claim Aristotle places the indefinite pronoun 'something' in an emphatic position: 'Something is said about something;' 'Something is said away from something.' Such a formulation strongly suggests that for Aristotle in every affirmative or negative sentence both the subject and the predicate are 'non-vacuous' in that there are items of the appropriate kinds which they signify.

(i.ii) A basic tenet of Aristotle's account of the truth and falsehood of thoughts is that in a mental affirmation (denial) one item is joined with (separated from) one item. When Aristotle says that in every affirmative (negative) sentence something is said about (away from) something, what he has in mind is probably that in the mental affirmation (denial) that corresponds to an

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1 I apply '(non-)empty' to any expression that fails to signify (signifies) an existent item of the appropriate kind.
2 I often use 'sentence(s)' for 'declarative sentence(s)' or 'declaration(s).'
3 See Int. 5. 17a20–1 (< T 4); 6. 17a25–6 (< T 4); APo. I 2. 72a13–4.
5 See Int. 1. 16a9–18; Metaph. E 4. 1027b19; b29–30; b31–3.
affirmative (negative) sentence one item is joined with (separated from) one item. More precisely, the view Aristotle is only partially formulating is probably that in an affirmative (negative) sentence the item signified by the predicate is joined with (separated from) the item signified by the subject. But now, how could something which is not there be joined with, or separated from, something which is not there?\(^6\)

On the other hand, there are reasons for thinking that according to Aristotle all items are existent items. For:

(i.iii) The following passage from Topics IV 6 can be plausibly understood as a formulation of such a view:

T 1 Being and one are predicated of absolutely\(^7\) everything. (127a33–4)\(^8\)

(i.iv) Aristotle does not explicitly endorse the view that some items are non-existent. Since this is a somewhat unusual and out-of-the-way view, if a philosopher with a well worked-out ontology does not explicitly endorse it then it is plausible to assume that he endorses its contradictory, i.e., that all items are existent items.

Now, if Aristotle thinks that for every affirmative or negative sentence there are items of the appropriate kinds which are signified by its subject and its predicate, and if he also thinks that all items are existent items, then he is committed to the view that for every affirmative or negative sentence there are existent items of the appropriate kinds which are signified by its subject and its predicate, i.e., to the view that the subject and the predicate of every affirmative or negative sentence are 'non-empty.'

Subjects and predicates cannot be 'empty': (ii) the evidence from Categories 4. Another important piece of evidence comes from Categories 4:

T 2 Each of the things said with no interconnection signifies either a substance or a quantity or a qualified item or a relative or where or when or being-in-a-posture or having or doing or being affected. (1b25–7)

In T 2, and in general in the Categories, the phrase 'thing said with no interconnection'\(^9\) probably denotes non-composite linguistic expressions.\(^10\) For:

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\(^7\) The context of T 1 makes it plausible to assume that 'absolutely' (\(\alpha\pi\lambda\omega\varsigma\)) should modify 'everything' (\(\pi\alpha\nu\tau\omega\nu\)) rather than 'are predicated' (\(\kappa\alpha\tau\eta\gamma\omicron\sigma\rho\omicron\epsilon\iota\tau\alpha\iota\)). Aristotle is not contrasting 'absolute predication' with other types of predication: he is merely emphasizing that it is with no exception that being and one are predicated of everything.

\(^8\) Cf. 127a27–8; Metaph. B 3. 998b20–1; 4. 1001a19–22; Z 4. 1030a21; I 2. 1053b20–1; K 1. 1059b28–9; 2. 1060b4–5; \(\Lambda\) 4. 1070b7–8.

\(^9\) See Cat. 4. 1b25 (< T 2); 2a8–9; 10. 13b10 (cf. 2. 1a16–9; de An. III 8. 432a11).

\(^10\) Cf. Ammon. in Int. 18, 2–5; Simp. in Cat. 42, 2–3; 60, 13–6; Maier (1896/1936: II.II 292–3); Lewinsohn (1911: 203); Ackrill (1963: 73); Brandt