

Kantian meta-ontology^{*}

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ABSTRACT: This paper develops a Kantian approach to meta-ontology. It contrasts first-level and second-level construals of existence with Kant's modal interpretation of existence and then identifies the problem of modal representation as the central issue of Kantian meta-ontology, showing how this problem can be overcome by means of non-conceptual resources.

I Meta-ontology

Ontology (as conceived of nowadays) is concerned with the question of what there is.¹ The task of ontology is to provide an inventory of the world. It is supposed to address first-order existence questions and identify what (kinds of) things exist. Meta-ontology, by contrast, is concerned with second-order questions regarding existence. On the one hand, it examines the nature of existence and attempts to explain what it is for something to exist. On the other, it examines the methodology and epistemology for addressing first-order existence questions. It attempts to explain how one can settle existence questions and adjudicate ontological disputes. These two projects are related, in that understanding what the nature of existence consists in is likely to help one get a better understanding as to how one can find out what (kinds of) things do in fact exist.

A prominent contemporary approach to existence proceeds via quantificational resources. Existence is understood in terms of the existential quantifier. What it is to exist is to fall within the range of an existential quantifier. Existence is understood in terms of either 1. being identical to, or 2. being instantiated by some member of the domain of quantification:²

^{*}This paper outlines the central commitments of a Kantian meta-ontology. For a systematic exegetical treatment of these issues cf. "Kant's theory of modality" (Bader: forthcoming).

¹Cf. Quine: 1948 for the classic statement of this view.

²An important problem for this approach is that it presupposes a domain of *existing* things. The domain of quantification needs to be interpreted as consisting of all and only those things that exist. This, however, presupposes a prior understanding of existence that cannot be spelled out by means of a quantificational account.

1. a exists iff $\exists x(x = a)$
2. F's exist iff $\exists x(Fx)$

When operating with an ontologically loaded existential quantifier, one can define both a first-level and a second-level existence property.

FIRST-LEVEL: existence is the property that some thing has iff it is such that there exists something that is identical to it, i.e. Ea iff $\lambda x[\exists y(y = x)]a$

SECOND-LEVEL: existence is the property that some concept or property has iff it is such that there exists something that instantiates it, i.e. EF iff $\lambda X[\exists x(Xx)]F$

When existence is understood in this way, it is natural to read off the ontological commitments of a theory by looking at what this theory quantifies over. To settle existence questions, one has to determine which theory is true and then identify the ontological commitments of that theory.

2 The nature of existence

The Kantian approach rejects this approach to meta-ontology. Most importantly, existence is neither to be understood in terms of the existential quantifier, nor in terms of a first-level or second-level property.

2.1 The particular quantifier

Kant does not countenance an existential quantifier. There are three quantifiers in the table of the logical functions of judgement, namely

1. universal: 'all'
2. particular: 'some'
3. singular: 'the'

None of these quantifiers involve existential commitments. Quantification is existentially non-committal. Instead of using an existential quantifier, Kant operates with the particular quantifier: 'some'. This quantifier is not ontologically loaded and does not have existential import.³

We can see this clearly when noting that, for Kant, universal quantification implies particular quantification, i.e. 'all' implies 'some'. One can infer 'some' from 'all', e.g. 'some unicorns have horns' follows from 'all unicorns having horns', without any commitment to the existence of unicorns. Neither of

³Cf. Priest: 2008 for some interesting historical observations about how the particular quantifier came to acquire existential import.

these judgements is existentially committing. Universal judgements can be non-vacuously true when they do not have any instances. Correspondingly, particular judgements can also be non-vacuously true when they do not have any instances. Such judgements are made true, not by their instances, but by the concepts involved in the judgement.

Analytic judgements, in particular, are non-vacuously true even when they do not have any instances. This is possible because there are two ways in which judgements can be true.⁴ On the one hand, logical truth is purely a conceptual matter. It is a question of concept containment. Analytic judgements are logically true, independently of whether they are universal or particular judgements. Material truth, on the other hand, is a matter of the world being the way that it is represented to be. The connection that is represented by the judgement has to obtain not (only) at the level of the concepts involved in the judgement, but (also) at the level of the things corresponding to the concepts. Material truth does require existence. For a judgement to be made true by its instances, it must have instances.⁵

2.2 Existence as a modality

Existence is not a matter of the quantity of a judgement. When making existence judgements, one does not achieve existential purport by means of the quantifier. Nor is existence a matter of the predicate that is employed in a judgement. This is because existence is not a property. It is neither a first-level nor a second-level property. As Kant notes in his critique of the ontological argument, 'existence' is not a real predicate. Instead, it is a merely logical predicate. It functions grammatically as a predicate. However, there is no property that corresponds to this predicate. As a result, it cannot be used in determining objects.

Rather than being part of the matter of what is being judged (which would be the case if existence were to be a real predicate) or being part of the form of the judgement (which would be the case if existence were a quantifier), existence is a modality.⁶ It is one of the three categories of modality: 1. possibility, 2. existence and 3. necessity (alongside their correlates: impossibility, non-existence and contingency). None of these modal categories are real predicates and none

⁴The contrast between logical and material truth corresponds to that between truth understood in terms of the logical extensions of concepts and truth understood in terms of the non-logical extensions of concepts. (For a helpful discussion of the role of logical and non-logical extensions in Kant's logic cf. Anderson: 2015, chapter 2.4.)

⁵The relevant distinction is thus not between analytic judgements and synthetic judgements, but between logical truth and material truth. Synthetic judgements are special because they cannot be true solely in virtue of facts about the concepts involved. Hence, for them to be true, they have to be materially true.

⁶Kant uses existence interchangeably with actuality. Since there is no distinction between existence and actuality, non-actual things cannot exist, i.e. there cannot be any mere possibilities.

of them contribute to the content of judgements.⁷

Whereas the subject and the predicate constitute the matter of a judgement, its quantity, quality and relation constitute its form. Together they constitute the content of the judgement. They determine what it is that is being judged. Modality, by contrast, concerns the manner in which it is judged. The different modalities constitute different modes in which one and the same content can be judged. Modality is not part of the content but applies to such a content. As such, it functions as an operator, i.e. existence can be construed as: EXISTS(Fa).

This operator applies to judgeable contents. It is predicational complexes, with both a subject- and a predicate-component, to which EXISTS applies. This is because it is property instantiations or facts that exist and that are represented by predicational complexes. This means that, on Kant's conception, it is strictly speaking a category mistake to apply existence to objects or to properties, as is done by the quantificational approach as well as by approaches that construe existence as a first-level or second-level property of objects and properties, respectively. More generally, it is a category mistake to speak of modal properties. A property is something that an object instantiates. Modality, however, does not apply to objects. Instead, it applies to the connection between the object and the property, namely to the property instantiation. In Kant's terms, modality concerns the "value of the copula" (A74/B100). Accordingly, one needs a copula, i.e. a predicational complex, in order for modality to apply.

The category mistake involved in ascribing existence to objects or properties is analogous to the category mistake that is involved in ascribing truth to concepts. Existence is the metaphysical analogue of truth, i.e. the logical modality corresponding to the category of existence is truth. In the same way that truth applies to judgements, so existence applies to property instantiations. It is not the subject that is true, nor the predicate, but instead the predication. Likewise, it is not the object that exists, nor the property, but instead the property instantiation.⁸

The modalities are thus to be understood in terms of operators that do not contribute to the content of judgements but apply to such contents. An important upshot of this is that there is no room for iterated modalities. Whilst much

⁷This holds not only for the real but also the logical modalities. The logical modalities also do not add to the content of judgements. For instance, existence in metaphysics is the analogue of truth in logic – in the same way that truth does not add anything to the content of what is thought, so existence does not add anything to the content of what is represented.

⁸Loosely speaking, one can say that objects or properties exist, on the basis that they feature as subjects or predicates in a suitable predicational complex. This is analogous to the way in which one can say that P is true of something or that something is true of S. Yet, S and P, strictly speaking, are not themselves true. Instead, it is the predicational complex 'S is P' that is true. Likewise, it is not F and a that exist or are actual but the property instantiation Fa that exists. This loose way of speaking leads to confusions since it suggests that there can be existence claims that do not involve any predicate components, such as 'something exists' or 'everything exists' (cf. McGinn: 2000, pp. 26-28). Such claims, however, are ill-formed and do not follow from ordinary existence judgements.

of contemporary modal logic is concerned with iterated modalities and the accessibility relations on the domain of possible worlds that give rise to them, these questions do not make any sense from a Kantian perspective. To get an iterated modality, one would have to make the modality part of the content, so that one could then apply a further modality to that content. The first/inner modality would have to be part of the content to which the second/outer modality could then be applied. This, however, is ruled out if modal predicates are not real predicates and cannot enter into the content of judgements.⁹

Modality is nowadays often construed as being primarily concerned with possibility and necessity (and their correlates impossibility and contingency). On the Kantian approach, by contrast, existence is as much a modality as are possibility and necessity. Once existence is recognised as a modality, one can conceive of ontology as not only the study of what there is, but more broadly as the science of being that encompasses all modes of being. It deals not just with what exists, but also with what is possible and what is necessary, i.e. what there can be, what there is and what there must be.

This approach also renders reductive theories of modality incoherent. One cannot reduce modal notions to non-modal notions by reducing modality to what exists, for instance to concrete possible worlds à la Lewis: 1986, given that existence itself is a modality. At most, one can reduce some modal notions to other modal notions, not however to non-modal notions. Similarly, theories that attempt to banish modality from the fundamental level of reality, as done by Sider: 2011, are a non-starter when operating with the Kantian construal of existence. Given that existence is a modality and given that the fundamental level of reality exists, the fundamental level cannot be non-modal. Likewise for fictionalist, conventionalist and eliminativist approaches to modality. One cannot adopt these approaches to modality, unless one is a fictionalist, conventionalist or an eliminativist about existence. There is, however, no such thing as a non-modal or pre-modal characterisation of the world, since characterising the world requires one, at least in part, to give an account of what exists. Nor can one reduce modality to essences. Though proposals to make sense of possibility and necessity in terms of essences have some plausibility, one cannot reduce or explain existence in terms of essences. After all, the upshot of Kant's critique of the ontological argument is that nothing is such that it exists by its very essence.¹⁰ Given that existence

⁹Importantly, the negative correlates of the modal categories are not to be understood in terms of applying a negation operator to their positive counterparts but instead in terms of the logical division of their higher genera, i.e. negation comes in, not at the level of the operator, but at the level of the differentiae, e.g. NON-EXISTS does not result from applying negation to EXISTS but from dividing POSSIBLY.

¹⁰Even if one rejects the Kantian critique and considers some things to be such that their existence can be explained in terms of their essence, it is implausible to hold that this applies to everything that exists, since it would imply a modal collapse whereby possibility, existence and necessity become co-extensive.

cannot be reduced, modality cannot be reduced.¹¹

3 The problem of modal representation

Kant advocates a distinctive conception of the nature of existence. Existence is to be understood neither as a real predicate (= property) nor in terms of quantificational resources. Instead, it is a real (= metaphysical) modality. This account of existence gives rise to a distinctive way of thinking about meta-ontology. The crucial issue for Kantian meta-ontology is to explain how we can represent existence (as well as the other modalities). How can we employ the modal categories to make possibility, existence and necessity judgments?

The problem of modal representation constitutes the core of Kantian meta-ontology. It arises because none of the modal predicates are real predicates. They do not contribute to the content of what is judged/represented. The content is determined by the component representations together with the way in which they are determined with respect to quantity, quality and relation. Modality, by contrast, is not part of the content. It applies to such a content but is not itself part of any content. As a result, one needs to explain how modality enters into representations and how it is that we can represent different modalities. In particular, one needs to explain how we can make existence, possibility and necessity judgements and how these various modal judgements differ from each other.

This focus on the question as to how existence (as well as the other modalities) can be represented forms part of Kant's representational turn and its associated faculty-based meta-ontology. This involves focusing on the ways in which one can represent the world and on the faculties that can be employed in generating judgements, distinguishing the various cognitive faculties and the different roles that they can play. This faculty-based approach makes use of two distinctions that are at the heart of Kant's theory of cognition. On the one hand, there is the distinction between the three cognitive faculties: understanding, judgement and reason, to which corresponds the contrast between possibility, existence and necessity judgments. On the other, there is the distinction between the two ways in which a given faculty can be employed, namely the contrast between the logical and real employment of our faculties, which gives rise to the corresponding contrast between the logical and the real modalities.

3.1 Relative positing

As long as we remain at the level of what Kant calls the logical employment of our faculties, we will not be able to give our judgements existential purport. The logical employment is existentially neutral. This is because it consists in putting

¹¹Whilst one might try to reduce actuality by adopting the indexical account proposed by Lewis, this option become unavailable once existence and actuality are identified.

together concepts to form simple judgements (= categorical judgements), as well as putting together simple judgements to form complex judgements (= hypothetical and disjunctive judgements). No matter how we put them together, we will be unable to achieve existential purport. It does not matter whether we are forming a universal, particular or singular judgement, an affirmative, negative or infinite judgement, a categorical, hypothetical or disjunctive judgement, or a problematic, assertoric or apodictic judgement.

Existence is not a function of the logical form of the judgement. How a given judgement is determined with regard to the logical functions of judgement has no bearing on its ontological commitments. Logic is free of existential commitments.¹² It has nothing to say about existence (or non-existence).¹³ It operates entirely at the level of concepts and judgements, not at the level of the world. Existence does not have a place in logic and is not to be found in the table of the logical functions of judgements. Instead, it belongs to metaphysics and, correspondingly, features in the table of categories.¹⁴

Nor does it matter what concepts we are combining in our judgements. Existential purport cannot be achieved by appealing to the concept <existence>. Given that existence is not a property and that 'existence' is not a real but a merely logical predicate, existence judgements do not involve an attribution of the property of existence. No such property exists. One is neither attributing a first-level property to objects, nor a second-level property to concepts. This means that the contribution that the category of existence makes to existence judgements is not at the level of the predicate.

More generally, the problem is that concepts are general representations that can be empty. Such general representations might not have any objects corresponding to them. There might be nothing in the world that falls under them. As long as one is working with concepts, one is representing things only mediately. The representation relation between concepts and objects is not immediate. Concepts (immediately) represent properties and thereby (mediately) represent those

¹²This applies not only to general logic but also to what Kant calls transcendental logic.

¹³Importantly, not even logical necessity implies existence. This implies that metaphysical modality is not a restriction of logical modality. One cannot represent these modalities in terms of possible worlds, whereby the set of metaphysically possible worlds forms a subset of the set of logically possible worlds, such that if something holds in all logically possible worlds it also holds in all metaphysically possible worlds. Logical necessity does not imply existence, yet metaphysical necessity does imply existence. This is because logical and metaphysical modalities have different domains and apply to different things.

¹⁴This means that the existential quantifier approach not only mistakenly attributes existential commitment to non-universal quantification but also confounds logic with metaphysics. Not only does it place existence under the wrong heading, given that existence belongs to modality rather than quantity, it also, more troublingly, places it in the wrong table. Whilst quantifiers belong to the table of the logical functions of judgement, existence belongs to the table of categories. Existence is a real modality, not a logical modality. Accordingly, it belongs in the table of categories, not the table of the logical functions of judgement.

objects that instantiate the properties in question. One is representing various features that objects may (or may not) have. One is not representing objects directly, but only representing the properties that they might instantiate. This means that existential purport cannot be achieved when merely employing concepts.

All that we are doing when combining concepts is to engage in relative positing. One concept is posited relative to another. Representing existence and giving our judgements existential purport, however, requires absolute positing. Doing so requires a switch from the merely logical employment to the real employment of our faculties.

3.2 Absolute positing

The key question is how we can move beyond the conceptual, how we can move from the level of thought to the level of the world, from logic to metaphysics. When concerned with what there is, we need to get outside the realm of the conceptual. We need to move from the logical to the real employment of our faculties and, correspondingly, from the logical functions of judgement to the categories.

We need to posit something, not in thought, but in the world. Rather than merely connecting concepts, we have to immediately represent the world as being a certain way. In order to do so, we need to immediately represent objects. This allows us to represent property instantiations in the world. Rather than representing the connection between the predicate concept and the subject concept, we are then representing the connection between a property and an object. This means that we need to make use of objectual representations. Only then can we achieve existential purport. Only then can we represent existence.

In the case of a logical judgement one combines a subject concept *S* and a predicate concept *P*. The former mediately represents those objects that fall under it. The latter represents a property that is predicated (or denied, depending on whether it is an affirmative or negative judgement) of these objects (either of all of them or only some of them, depending on whether it is a universal or particular judgement).

This model, however, does not apply when it comes to existence judgements, such as 'God exists' (or more clearly in subject-predicate form 'God is existent'). On the one hand, the predicate 'existent' does not represent a property that can be ascribed to the subject of the judgement. On the other, one would not be able to achieve existential purport but only make a claim to the effect that whatever falls under the concept <God> (if there should happen to be any such objects) also falls under the concept <existent>. That way one would merely be making a claim about the way in which the (possibly empty) extensions of these concepts relate to each other. An existence judgement, however, is meant to have existential purport. It is not meant to represent a relationship between possibly empty extensions, but instead represent the world as being such that the relevant

extensions are not empty.

The question then is: what is the correct logical form of existence judgements, if not in terms of a subject-predicate judgement whereby <existent> is predicated of the subject concept? The answer is that existence does not come in at the level of the predicate but instead at the level of the subject.

The concept <God> contains various predicates, namely the divine predicates. Something that has the properties corresponding to these predicates is something that falls under the concept <God>, i.e. what it is for something to be God is for it to instantiate the divine properties. This means that we can represent God as existing by representing an object as instantiating the properties corresponding to the divine predicates. Whereas <God> appeared to be the subject of the judgement, this concept in fact provides the predicates that are being predicated in the judgement. The existence judgment 'God exists' is then to be understood as predicating the divine predicates of something in the world.

The representation that functions as the subject of the judgement, accordingly, has to immediately represent an object in the world. This means that it has to be a non-conceptual/objectual representation by means of which we can immediately represent particulars. The existence judgement 'God exists' represents an object as instantiating the divine properties. It attributes these properties to a thing that is immediately represented by means of a non-conceptual representation, i.e. its correct logical form is EXISTS(Da), where D are the divine predicates and a is the object that is non-conceptually represented.

Accordingly, we are no longer dealing only with concepts but are also operating with non-conceptual representations that function as the subjects of existence judgements. This is precisely what the real employment of our faculties consists in, namely operating on non-conceptual representations (paradigmatically on intuitions). That way we are not merely combining concepts, namely general representations, but are synthesising non-conceptual representations that have existential purport by representing particulars. It is thus not by means of the predicate but instead by means of the subject that we represent existence. Existential purport is achieved, not by means of concepts, but by means of non-conceptual resources, most notably by means of intuitions which immediately represent particulars.¹⁵

4 Cognising the real modalities

Doing ontology requires one to move beyond the merely logical to the real employment of our faculties. One has to not only operate with concepts but bring in non-conceptual resources. By employing non-conceptual resources one can

¹⁵Intuitions are to be understood in a broad sense that does not imply object-dependence and allows for non-veridicality. For a helpful discussion of this notion cf. Stephenson: 2015.

solve the problem of modal representation. Understanding how the real modalities can be represented helps us to make progress with the epistemological and methodological part of meta-ontology, namely the question how we can cognise existence, as well as the real modalities more generally. It thereby allows us to get clearer on the methodology that is to be used in settling ontological questions.

When we are concerned with the real modalities rather than the logical modalities, we are dealing not only with analytic conditions that are based on logical principles but with synthetic conditions that are based on metaphysical principles. As a result, a crucial gap opens up between the logical and metaphysical modalities. Most notably, being non-contradictory is no longer enough for being possible. Whether something is logically possible can be determined by inspecting the concepts involved. Analysis of concepts suffices for the logical modalities. All that one has to do is to see whether they satisfy the relevant analytic conditions. However, one cannot do so when it comes to real possibility. Real possibility, existence and real necessity cannot be established on the basis of conceptual resources alone.

The key question then is how we can determine whether our concepts have objective reality, i.e. whether the objects that they represent are really possible. Unless objective reality can be established, it may turn out that our concepts are empty figments of our imagination that lack any basis in reality. This is precisely the issue that Kant raises when noting that “thoughts without content are empty” (A51/B75). Nothing is cognised by means of such thoughts. Even though one is thinking something, i.e. one is combining concepts in thought, one is not cognising anything. If the concepts that one is employing lack objectively real content, then the resulting judgements do not amount to genuine cognitions but are instead idle speculations that lack any basis.

This problem arises in particular when dealing with synthetic judgements. To ensure that such judgements have objectively real content, one needs to bring in non-conceptual resources. This is relatively straightforward when dealing with a posteriori judgements. In that case, experience can establish objective reality. One can cognise the real possibility as well as actuality of that which is encountered in experience. Experience involves the combination of intuitions and concepts and constitutes the paradigm example of the real employment of our faculties. One is moving beyond the purely conceptual level and is instead synthesising intuitive representations.

Difficulties arise, however, when dealing with synthetic a priori judgements. Such judgements are not established on the basis of conceptual connections alone, nor are they based on experience. This makes it difficult to understand how one can establish their objective reality. This concern is particularly pressing when it comes to metaphysical theorising. Such theorising is neither based on experience, nor on the concepts themselves. In short, the problem is that of making sense of synthetic a priori judgements. How can cognition be extended beyond

that which is given in experience?¹⁶ This is where Kant's transcendental account comes in. Cognition is not restricted to what is given in experience (= empirical cognition), but also includes what makes experience possible (= transcendental cognition). Even though synthetic a priori judgements are not based in experience, they are justified on the basis that they make experience possible. This means that we can cognise the objective reality of metaphysical concepts, such as substance and causation, on the basis that they are required for experience to be possible. Metaphysics thus acquires a transcendental justification.

5 Conclusion

The Kantian approach operates with a distinctive conception of the nature of existence. Existence is neither a first-level nor second-level property but is instead a modality that applies to predicational complexes, rather than to objects or properties. Ontology on this approach is not only concerned with what there is, but also with what there can be and what there must be. The central problem of Kantian meta-ontology is the problem of modal representation. This problem arises because none of the modal predicates are real predicates. They do not represent properties and do not contribute to the content of our judgements. This renders it difficult to explain how the real modalities can be represented. Doing so requires one to go beyond the conceptual. Real modality cannot be represented as long as one remains at the level of the logical employment of our faculties. One has to bring in non-conceptual resources, most notably intuitions. Intuition thus plays a central role in making modal representation possible. It enables us to immediately represent the world as being a certain way (= absolute positing), rather than merely representing various connections amongst concepts, i.e. combining them in thought (= relative positing). Once the real modalities are distinguished from the logical modalities, it becomes imperative to give an account as to how we can ensure that our representations are not empty, that they are not mere figments of the imagination but instead represent real constituents of the world. We can do so either empirically on the basis of what is given in experience, or transcendently in terms of what is required for experience to be possible.¹⁷

¹⁶This is not restricted to absolutely a priori judgements, such as those of metaphysics, which are entirely independent of experience, but also includes comparatively a priori judgements which proceed from something that is given in experience to something that is not given in this way, which raises the question how we can extend cognition beyond what is given in experience. This is what Kant addresses in the Postulates of Empirical Thought (A218-235/B265-287).

¹⁷Thanks to audiences at Oxford, Keele, and St Andrews. I am grateful to Mario Schärli, Erica Shumener and especially to Andrew Stephenson for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

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