

Notes on Whether “Existence” is a Predicate

Kant’s claim that “existence” is not a predicate is based on his view about what a predicate is. We begin therefore with some background. The concept of a predicate comes from grammar or, more precisely, from as grammar as it was developed long ago as part of logic.

Background Notions in Logical Grammar

A predicate has both a grammatical and a semantic definition. Grammatically, a *simple sentence* – which is called a *proposition* in traditional logic – has the form NPVP, and consists of the “concatenation” of a *noun phrase* NP and a *verb phrase* VP. In modern European languages both the noun and verb phrase may be quite long and have a complex grammar.

Normally, the noun phrase either stands for a single thing, for example a *proper noun* or *pronoun*, or it stands for “many” and consists of a combination of a *common noun phrase* and a modifying *quantifier* expression. The quantifier determines how many objects from the class are being talking about. In traditional logic, the common noun phrase is usually a simple common noun, and if so, it is called the proposition’s *subject term*. If the noun phrase is a proper noun, then the proper noun is the proposition’s subject. In traditional logic quantifiers are restricted to just *every*, *no*, and *some*. Thus in traditional logic *Socrates*, *every man*, *no man*, and *some man* are all possible subject terms.

In traditional logic the proposition’s verb phrases is usually understood to be a combination of two parts: *is* (called *the copula*) and a common noun (called the *predicate term*) modified by the indefinite article. If the subject term is a proper noun or is modified by the quantifier *some*, traditional logic allows that the copula may be negated by the expression *not*. Thus in traditional logic possible verb phrases are *is an animal*, and *is not an animal*.

In traditional logic, then, there are four possible simple proposition forms in which the subject and predicate are common nouns. Let us use *S* for the subject and *P* for the predicate:

Every S is P *No S is P*
Some S is P and *Some S is not P*

If the subject term *S* is a proper name, there are two possible forms:

S is P *S is not P*

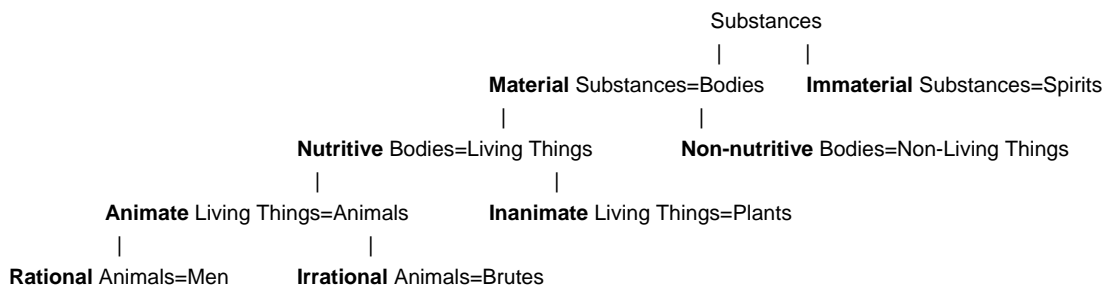
Semantically, a proposition is understood to assert that the property that the predicate stands for is in all of the members of the class named by the subject if the subject is modified by *every*, in none of them if it is modified by *no*, in some if it is modified by *some* and the copula is not negated, and is not in

some if the subject is modified by *some* and the copula is negated. If the subject term is a proper noun, then the proposition asserts that the property named by the predicate is in the individual named by the subject if the copula is not negated, and that it is not in it if it is negated.

Kant's Claim

Kant's claim is that a predicate can never stand for existence. Another way of putting the claim is that existence is not a property.¹

Before we discuss Kant's own argument for his claim, it is helpful to sketch how properties were understood in traditional Aristotelian logic. Aristotle believed that all substances could be classified into genera and species. They were classified into a genus or species according to whether they possess that genus' or species' characteristic property, which was called its *difference* (in Latin, *differentia*). Humans were traditionally classified according into what was called the Tree of Porphyry (due to Porphyry, 234 – c. 305).



Here the defining properties of the various genera and species are indicated in bold. The point to notice is that there is no defining property of substance, the highest genus (the *summum genus*). The genus substance simply consists of everything that exists. What constitute the various substances in existence are combinations of matter and form, and the form is constituted from the defining properties of the various genera and species to which a substance belongs. Socrates, for example, is a composite of his matter and form, and his form consists of the properties named by the adjectives: *material*, *nutritive*, *animate*, and *rational*. Properties are theoretical entities that occupy a special explanatory role in Aristotle's ontology. Their role is to explain what a substance is. A substance is a combination of matter and form, i.e. of matter and the defining properties of genera and species. But existence plays no such role. As the Tree of Porphyry shows, there is no property called "existence" that goes into the form of any substance. If existence is not a property, then no predicate can stand for it. In this sense existence is not a predicate.

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Transcendental Dialectic, Book II, Chapter III, Section 4.

Kant makes a similar point. He considers the terms of a proposition to be concepts and believes that every concept has a definition. The properties that are part of a concept's definition are true of that concept "analytically." Another way of saying this is that the proposition *every S is P* is *analytically true* or a *tautology* if *P* is a property that is included in the concept (i.e. is true by definition) of *S*. Propositions that are true but not analytic are said to be *synthetically true*.

Kant argues that if true, the proposition *S exists* is either analytic or synthetic. If it is analytic, then existence would have to be part of the concept of *S*, and the proposition *S exists* would be a mere tautology, repeating in the predicate position something already contained in the subject term. It would convey no information. The proposition *god exists* would be true but would beg the question of whether God exists by building into the concept of God the property at issue. Normally, however, a true assertion of existence is synthetic because existence is not part of the concept. In Kant's words, "...the assertion of the existence of the thing adds nothing to the thought of the thing." Normally, the object in question has a concept that allows that it is possible but does not build into its definition that it exists. It follows that the assertion *god exists* needs evidence for its truth beyond the content of the concept of god. That is, the ontological argument fails.

Kant summarizes the issue by characterizing a predicate in a true synthetic proposition. A proposition is synthetically true if it is true but the predicate is not part of the concept's definition. Such a proposition is interesting; it is not trivially true. It has what Kant calls a *determining predicate*. In his words, "a *determining predicate* is a predicate which is added to the concept of the subject and enlarges it. Consequently, it must not be already contained in the concept." He goes on to claim that "being" or, in other words, existence, is not such a determining predicate because it does not "enlarge it." In Aristotelian terms, it does not classify the subject.

Modern Logic

Today one commonly hears from people who have learned some modern logic that the notation of modern logic supports Kant's view that existence is not a predicate. It is true that modern logical notation assumes that a sentence is talking about existing things. If a simple sentence contains proper nouns, the notation assumes that the name refer to an actually existing thing. The notation does not allow for names like *Santa Claus* that "fail of reference." If the sentence talks about *sets* of things, the notation begins by "quantifying." It declares whether it will be talking about everything that exists or just some things that exist. It then goes on to assert or deny predicates of these existing things. The notation supports Kant, it is said, because it separates out the two functions: quantification and predication, using different symbols for each. For example,

$$\exists x(Fx \& Gx)$$

is notation for:

We are talking about at least one actually existing thing, the predicate F is true of it, and the predicate G is true of it.

The notation

$\forall x(Fx \rightarrow Gx)$
means

We are talking about every existing thing, and for any such thing if the predicate F is true of it, then the predicate G is true of it.

Since modern logic is right, it is argued, and since it separates out issues of predication by indicating existence assumptions by quantifiers rather than predicates, it follows that existence cannot be a predicate. But there are objections to this view.

Critique of Kant's Argument

There is something deeply wrong with the claim that when we learn that something exists, we are not learning anything about it. Whether Homer, the Loch Ness monster, or god exists are very serious questions. An affirmative answer packs lots of information. We need not put any serious weight on Aristotle's understanding of fixed genera and species with necessary defining properties nor the claim that substances are composed of matter and form. Both views have long since been superseded by modern science.

Nor should we be misled by the notation of modern logic. In modern logic there are alternative notations, and among these there is a perfectly acceptable variation of notation, called (*existence assumption*) *free logic*, that does treat existence as a predicate. In this notation quantification is over possible objects. You begin a sentence by indicating how many possible objects you are discussing, all or just some. You then apply predicates to them. If you want to say that something exists, you have to use a special predicate E that stands for existence. For example,

$\exists x(Fx \& Gx)$
means

There is a possible object that is F and G

But

$\exists x(Ex \& Fx \& Gx)$

means

There is possible object that exists and that is both *F* and *G*.

If what makes something a property is the fact that there is a predicate that stands for it, then free logic clearly treats existence as a property and treats *exists* as a predicate that stands for that property.²

Kant's failure to see existence as a predicate is perhaps best made clear by the observation made by medieval logicians, in their doctrine called *ampliation*, that the range of objects we talk about is not fixed once and for all, but varies from context to context. Sometimes we are speaking about just the people in the room, sometimes about our friends, sometimes about all Americans, sometimes about all things that now exist, sometimes about all things that existed in the past or will exist in the future, sometimes about all possible things. Medieval logicians pointed out that language contains special grammatical markers (including adverbs, and verb tenses and moods) that signal that we are changing or "amplifying" (hence these uses was called "ampliation") the range of things we are referring to. If I say *I was a very cute little boy*, I am not talking about the me who is now actually existing but about somebody who existed long ago (if then). If I say *Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street* or *An elephant would fit in this room*, I am not taking about an actual person or elephant. We can and often do talk about past or further objects, and even about objects that are possible but do not now actually exist, may not have ever existed, and may never exist in the future. We predicate properties of such things. Among the predicate we can apply is existence. We apply this predicate if we want to indicate that some subset of "possible" actually exists. For example, we might distinguish between two past persons, one of which now exists and one of which does not, as in, *The man who invented the Internet is still alive but the inventor of the telephone is dead*. We might distinguish between two possible entities indicating that one is in fact real and the other not, as in, *Rin Tin Tin was a real dog but Lassie was entirely fictitious*. In sort, there are speech contexts in which the relevant entities we are taking about has been "amplified" so that we are talking generally about entities that do not now actually exist. In such contexts – for example in discussions of the existence of god – predications of existence, both positive and negative, are perfectly meaningful and informative.

The fact that Kant may be wrong about whether existence is a predicate means that he is mistaken about grammar, not theology. It does not follow from the fact that existence is a predicate that the ontological argument has been rescued or that existence is part of the "essence" of the deity. What follows from the fact that *exists* is a legitimate predicate is simply that we use existence to distinguish one class of subjects – those that exist – from another – those that do not exist. Apart from the case of god, which is controversial, entities come into and pass out of existence. In Aristotelian terminology existence counts as an *accidental property*,

² Lambert, Karel, 1958, "Notes on E!," *Philosophical Studies*, 9: 60–63. Free logic is now a large topic.

one that holds of some members of a group but not all, or that holds of an individual sometimes but not always. For ordinary entities existence is not part of a substance's essence or, as Kant would say, it is not part of its concept. For ordinary things, then, Kant is right that the assertion that something exists, if true and meaningful, is not analytic. The defenders of the ontological argument hold, however, that god is an exception to this general rule. In god's case alone, they claim, existence is part of his essence or "idea." Kant tried, but if the discussion here is right, failed to refute this claim based on his argument that existence is not a predicate .

Of course, Kant's other refutation of the ontological argument is still devastating, and is independent of the issue of whether existence is a predicate. If an idea is essentially a group of defining properties $\{P_1, \dots, P_i, \dots, P_n\}$, then an analytic truth is one that asserts that one of these properties is a member of that set. That is, the assertion that

$$\{P_1, \dots, P_i, \dots, P_n\} \text{ is } P_i$$

is analytic, and is just another way of saying that

$$P_i \in \{P_1, \dots, P_i, \dots, P_n\}$$

But clearly that assertion is trivially true. It adds no new information, and makes no substantive claim about the world. It remains trivial and uninformative regardless of the properties or concept in question. It would be trivial even if the property P_i were existence and the concept $\{P_1, \dots, P_i, \dots, P_n\}$ were *god* or any other concept that included existence in its definition, like Guinilo's *perfect island*. The only existence claims that are interesting are those in which existence is not part of the subject term's definition.

It is relevant to remark, in addition, that even if existence were a part of an idea's definition it does not follow that there would actually exist something that falls under that idea. More generally, from the fact that an idea has as its definition $\{P_1, \dots, P_i, \dots, P_n\}$, it does not follow that there is anything in the world that possesses all the properties $P_1, \dots, P_i, \dots, P_n$, or even that there could be. The properties could be naturally incompatible or even logically contradictory. Putting existence into an idea's definition does not insure that the idea as a whole has an actual instance.

Let us conclude with the general observation that it is not at all clear how to decide whether something is a property. Perhaps the best approach is to understand the notion of a property as an explanatory concept introduced into the branch of philosophy called metaphysics or ontology for the purposes of explaining whatever it is that metaphysics and ontology are supposed to explain. Among the things that they are suppose to explain is the classification of entities that exist into their most fundamental kinds. It may infact be useful in philosophy to postulate the existence of a kind of entity called "properties." One reason for doing so is linguistic, or perhaps it is better to call it semantic or logical. This reason is the need to explain how expressions like adjectives, common nouns and intransitive verbs work in language. These terms encompass what are generally thought of as "predicates." The question for linguistic and semantic theory is, "What is the meaning of a predicate?" or "What does a predicate stand for?" The traditional answer, one that dates from Aristotle, is that a predicate stands for a property. On this understanding, then, the explanatory

role of the concept of property is to provide a referent in linguistic theory for predicates. A predicate stands for a property. But if that is the only legitimate explanatory role for “properties,” it follows that if logical theory treats the word *exists* as a predicate, then it should have a referent like other predicates. That is, existence is a genuine property because the predicate *exists* is a genuine predicate. In free logic existence is, in fact, treated as a predicate. If there is really no other legitimate role in philosophical theory for “properties” other than their role in semantics, which is to provide a referent for predicates, it seems to follow that existence is a property.