

“Existence Is Not a Predicate” by Immanuel Kant



Immanuel Kant, Thoemmes

About the author... Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) studied in Königsberg, East Prussia. Before he fully developed an interest in philosophy, he was fascinated with physics and astronomy—in fact, he anticipated William Herschel’s discovery of Uranus by a few years. Kant’s critical philosophy, one of the truly profound philosophies in the history of Western Civilization, was constructed to forge empiricism and rationalism into a “critical” philosophy which sought to overcome the many pressing shortcomings of each. What we call objective reality, Kant argues, is subject to whatever conforms to the structures of our perception and thinking. Virtually every epistemological theory since Kant, directly or indirectly, is oriented in reference to his *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

About the work... In ““Section IV. Of the Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God,””¹ drawn from his *Critique*, Kant addresses the logical problem of existential import. How do we talk or think about things without supposing, in some sense at least, that they exist? Bertrand Russell expressed one aspect of the problem this way: If it’s false that the present King of France is bald, then why doesn’t this fact

1. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn. 1781. Bk.2 Ch. 3 § IV, ¶ 55.

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imply that it’s true the present King of France is not bald? When the existence of the subjects of our statements are in question, the normal use of logic becomes unreliable. Kant argues that the use of words (or “predicates”) alone does not necessarily imply the existence of their referents. We can only assume the existence of entities named by our words; we cannot prove “existence” by means of the use of language alone.

Ideas of Interest from *The Critique of Pure Reason*

1. Define the term “*á priori* judgment” with the help of a dictionary, and give several different examples of an *á priori* judgment.
2. Use a good dictionary to define the term “analytic judgment,” and give several different examples. Is there any difference between an analytic judgment and a tautology?
3. Construct a good definition of the term “synthetic judgment,” and give several examples.
4. What is Kant’s argument that “existence is not a predicate”? How does this argument relate to Anselm’s Ontological argument?

The Reading Selection from *The Critique of Pure Reason*

[Existence Is Not a Property]

...It is absurd to introduce—under whatever term disguised—into the conception of a thing, which is to be cogitated solely in reference to its possibility, the conception of its existence. If this is admitted, you will have apparently gained the day, but in reality have enounced nothing but a mere tautology. I ask, is the proposition, this or that thing (which I am ad-

mitting to be possible) exists, an analytical² *E.g.*, or a synthetic proposition? If the former, there is no addition made to the subject of your thought by the affirmation of its existence; but then the conception in your mind is identical with the thing itself, or you have supposed the existence of a thing to be possible, and then inferred its existence from its internal possibility—which is but a miserable tautology. The word reality in the conception of the thing, and the word existence in the conception of the predicate, will not help you out of the difficulty. For, supposing you were to term all positing of a thing reality, you have thereby posited the thing with all its predicates in the conception of the subject and assumed its actual existence, and this you merely repeat in the predicate. But if you confess, as every reasonable person must, that every existential proposition is synthetic, how can it be maintained that the predicate of existence cannot be denied without contradiction?—a property which is the characteristic of analytical propositions, alone.

From the reading...

“Being is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing.”

I should have a reasonable hope of putting an end for ever to this sophistical mode of argumentation, by a strict definition of the conception of existence, did not my own experience teach me that the illusion arising from our confounding a logical with a real predicate (a predicate which aids in the determination of a thing) resists almost all the endeavours of explanation and illustration. A logical predicate may be what you please, even the subject may be predicated of itself; for logic pays no regard to the content of a judgement. But the determination of a conception is a predicate, which adds to and enlarges the conception. It must not, therefore, be contained in the conception.

2. An analytical statement is reducible to a valid formula of logic because the concept of the predicate can be shown to be inherent in the subject by means of synonyms or suitable paraphrases. *E.g.*, “Twins are two in number” or “A lodestone is magnetic.” The predicate of a synthetic statement adds additional information to its subject and so is not considered trivial or tautologous in the manner of which an analytic statement is. The critical question for the possibility of knowledge for Kant is whether or not all *à priori* statements are essentially analytic. *Ed.*

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Thalers, used during Immanuel Kant’s lifetime, (The Prussian “dollar.”)

Being is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations in it. Logically, it is merely the copula of a judgement. The proposition, God is omnipotent, contains two conceptions, which have a certain object or content; the word is, is no additional predicate—it merely indicates the relation of the predicate to the subject. Now, if I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (omnipotence being one), and say: God is, or, There is a God, I add no new predicate to the conception of God, I merely posit or affirm the existence of the subject with all its predicates—I posit the object in relation to my conception. The content of both is the same; and there is no addition made to the conception, which expresses merely the possibility of the object, by my cogitating the object—in the expression, it is—as absolutely given or existing. Thus the real contains no more than the possible.

A hundred real dollars contain no more than a hundred possible dollars. For, as the latter indicate the conception, and the former the object, on the supposition that the content of the former was greater than that of the latter, my conception would not be an expression of the whole object, and would consequently be an inadequate conception of it. But in reckoning my wealth there may be said to be more in a hundred real dollars than in a hundred possible dollars—that is, in the mere conception of them. For the real object—the dollars—is not analytically contained in my conception, but forms a synthetical addition to my conception (which is merely a determination of my mental state), although this objective reality—this existence—apart from my conceptions, does not in the least degree increase

the aforesaid hundred dollars.³



Fish and Vegetable Market, Königsberg, East Prussia, Library of Congress

By whatever and by whatever number of predicates—even to the complete determination of it—I may cogitate a thing, I do not in the least augment the object of my conception by the addition of the statement: This thing exists. Otherwise, not exactly the same, but something more than what was cogitated in my conception, would exist, and I could not affirm that the exact object of my conception had real existence. If I cogitate a thing as containing all modes of reality except one, the mode of reality which is absent is not added to the conception of the thing by the affirmation that the thing exists; on the contrary, the thing exists—if it exist at all—with the same defect as that cogitated in its conception; otherwise not that which was cogitated, but something different, exists. Now, if I cogitate a being as the highest reality, without defect or imperfection, the question still remains—whether this being exists or not? For, although no element is wanting in the possible real content of my conception, there is a defect in its relation to my mental state, that is, I am ignorant whether the cognition of the object indicated by the conception is possible *á posteriori*. And here the cause of the present difficulty becomes apparent. If the question regarded an object of sense merely, it would be impossible for me to confound the conception with the existence of a thing. For the conception merely enables me to cogitate an object as according with the

3. Bk. 2, Ch. 3, ¶ 70.

general conditions of experience; while the existence of the object permits me to cogitate it as contained in the sphere of actual experience. At the same time, this connection with the world of experience does not in the least augment the conception, although a possible perception has been added to the experience of the mind. But if we cogitate existence by the pure category alone, it is not to be wondered at, that we should find ourselves unable to present any criterion sufficient to distinguish it from mere possibility.

From the reading...

“Now, if I take the subject (God) with all its predicates (omnipotence being one), and say: God is, or, There is a God, I add no new predicate to the conception of God...”

Whatever be the content of our conception of an object, it is necessary to go beyond it, if we wish to predicate existence of the object. In the case of sensuous objects, this is attained by their connection according to empirical laws with some one of my perceptions; but there is no means of cognizing the existence of objects of pure thought, because it must be cognized completely *á priori*. But all our knowledge of existence (be it immediately by perception, or by inferences connecting some object with a perception) belongs entirely to the sphere of experience—which is in perfect unity with itself; and although an existence out of this sphere cannot be absolutely declared to be impossible, it is a hypothesis the truth of which we have no means of ascertaining.

[The Notion of God Does Not Imply Existence]

The notion of a Supreme Being is in many respects a highly useful idea; but for the very reason that it is an idea, it is incapable of enlarging our cognition with regard to the existence of things. It is not even sufficient to instruct us as to the possibility of a being which we do not know to exist. The analytical criterion of possibility, which consists in the absence of contradiction in propositions, cannot be denied it. But the connection of real properties in a thing is a synthesis of the possibility of which an *á priori* judgement cannot be formed, because these realities are not presented

to us specifically; and even if this were to happen, a judgement would still be impossible, because the criterion of the possibility of synthetical cognitions must be sought for in the world of experience, to which the object of an idea cannot belong. And thus the celebrated Leibnitz has utterly failed in his attempt to establish upon *á priori* grounds the possibility of this sublime ideal being.

From the reading...

“Whatever be the content of our conception of an object, it is necessary to go beyond it, if we wish to predicate existence of the object.”

The celebrated ontological or Cartesian argument for the existence of a Supreme Being is therefore insufficient; and we may as well hope to increase our stock of knowledge by the aid of mere ideas, as the merchant to augment his wealth by the addition of noughts to his cash account.

Related Ideas

Ontological Argument (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ontological-arguments/>). *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. A thorough survey of the Ontological Argument and its objections, including contemporary philosophical interest in the problem.

““Two Dogmas of Empiricism” by Willard van Orman Quine” (<http://www.ditext.com/quine/quine.html>). *Digital Texts in Philosophy*. A revision of Quine’s classic investigation of whether a criterion of synonymy is available to legitimize the distinction between analytic and synthetic. Difficult for beginners but worth the struggle.

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Topics Worth Investigating

1. Relate Kant’s argument that “existence is not a predicate” to the problem of existential import in syllogistic logic. Are we faced with two radically different logics?
2. Søren Kierkegaard writes

If it were proposed to prove Napoleon’s existence from Napoleon’s deeds, would it not be a most curious proceeding? His existence does indeed explain his deeds, but the deeds do not prove his existence, unless I have already understood the word “his” so as thereby to have assumed his existence. But Napoleon is only an individual, and insofar there exists no absolute relationship between him and his deeds; some other person might have performed the same deeds. Perhaps this is the reason why I cannot pass from the deeds to existence. If I call these deeds the deeds of Napoleon, the proof becomes superfluous, since I have already named him; if I ignore this, I can never prove the deeds that they are Napoleon’s, but only in a purely ideal manner that such deeds are the deeds of a great general, and so forth.⁴

4. Søren Kierkegaard. *Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. David F. Swenson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, 32-33.

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Evaluate Kierkegaard’s argument by setting up a syllogism to the conclusion, “Napoleon is an existent being” from the premises Kierkegaard mentions. Why must “existence” be presupposed in the argument?

3. Aristotle argues in his ““The Sea-Fight Tomorrow,”” a selection in this book, as follows:

For it is manifest that the circumstances are not influenced by the fact of an affirmation or denial on the part of anyone. For events will not take place or fail to take place because it was stated that they would or would not take place, nor is this any more the case if the prediction dates back ten thousand years or any other space of time. Wherefore, if through all time the nature of things was so constituted that a prediction about an event was true, then through all time it was necessary that that should find fulfillment; and with regard to all events, circumstances have always been such that their occurrence is a matter of necessity.⁵

Is the problem concerning “future truths” related to the problem of existential import? Try to relate the problem of existential import to the notions of possibility and actuality.

4. William C. Kneale, a well known historian of logic, writes:

Too often philosophers merely remark that Kant refuted the argument by showing that existence is not a predicate and that “one cannot build bridges from the conceptual realm to the real world.” But it is very doubtful that Kant specified a sense of “is a predicate” such that, in that sense, it is clear both that existence is not a predicate and that Anselm’s argument requires that it be one. Nor are the mere claims that no existential propositions are necessary or the above comment about bridge building impressive as refutations of Anselm—after all, he claims to have an argument for the necessity of at least one existential proposition. So one must either show just where his argument goes wrong, or else produce a solid argument for the claim that no existential (in the appropriate sense) propositions can be necessary—and this, I think, no one has succeeded in doing.⁶

5. Aristotle. *On Interpretation*, 8:35-9:4.

6. William Calvert Kneale. “Is Existence a Predicate?” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Vol. 15. Reprinted in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*. Ed. Herbert Feigl and Wilfrid Sellars. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1949, 29.

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If I state, “Pegasus exists,” aren’t I making a false claim that Pegasus is an existent thing? In what sense could existence in the statement be a predicate?

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