

EXISTENCE DUALISM IN KANT AND ITS CARTESIAN ROOTS

Dualismo da existência em Kant e suas raízes cartesianas

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Abstract: We argue that Kant advocates existence dualism in a largely Cartesian vein. In such a dualism, there are two basic kinds of existence or ways of being: I-existence and categorial existence. I-existence denotes my existence, while categorial existence denotes, basically, the existence of ordinary things. First, we show how the route to existence is fundamentally different in the two cases. Then we ask whether they also indicate two ontologically distinct kinds and argue that I-existence should be regarded as the fundamental kind of existence in any case. One important consequence of this is that I-existence stands outside the Kantian conditions of experience, being the one un-Copernican element left intact after Kant's Copernican turn.

Keywords: categories; Descartes; existence; Kant; self.

Resumo: Argumentamos que Kant advoga o dualismo da existência em uma veia amplamente cartesiana. Em tal dualismo, há dois tipos básicos de existência ou modos de ser: o Eu-existência e a existência categorial. O Eu-existência denota a minha existência, enquanto a existência categorial denota, basicamente, a existência das coisas ordinárias. Primeiro, mostramos como o caminho para a existência é fundamentalmente diferente nos dois casos. Então, perguntamos se eles também indicam dois tipos ontologicamente distintos e argumentamos que o Eu-existência deve ser considerado como o tipo fundamental de existência em qualquer caso. Uma consequência importante disso é que o Eu-existência fica fora das condições kantianas da experiência, sendo o único elemento “não-copernicano” que foi deixado intacto após a virada copernicana de Kant.

Palavras-chave: categorias; Descartes; existência; Kant; eu.

Thus when I think a thing, through whichever and however many predicates I like (even in its thoroughgoing determination), not the least bit gets added to the thing when I posit in addition that this thing is.

Immanuel Kant
(*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1781)

It left me breathless. Never, until these last few days, had I understood the meaning of “existence.” I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, all dressed in their spring finery. I said, like them, “The ocean *is* green; that white speck up there *is* a seagull,” but I didn’t feel that it existed or that the seagull was an “existing seagull”; usually existence hides itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is *us*, you can’t say two words without mentioning it, but

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you can never touch it. When I believed I was thinking about it, I must believe that I was thinking nothing, my head was empty, or there was just one word in my head, the word “to be.” Or else I was thinking ... how can I explain it? I was thinking of *belonging*, I was telling myself that the sea belonged to the class of green objects, or that the green was a part of the quality of the sea. Even when I looked at things, I was miles from dreaming that they existed: they looked like scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, I foresaw their resistance. But that all happened on the surface. If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste [*pâte*, better translated as *dough*] of things[.]

Jean-Paul Sartre
(*La Nauseé*, 1938)

1. Introduction

There is something deeply similar in Descartes’s and Kant’s treatment of *I-existence*.¹ For Descartes, the “I” manifests a primitive, immediately present existence that is there in the activity of thinking itself, and, as we will see in section 2, Kant argues along similar lines. In brief, both see the existence of (or through) the “I” as fundamental. The special case of *I-existence*, however, leaves open the question about the existence of ordinary things such as desks and chairs. Here there is no similarly intimate connection: the criterion for attributing *categorical existence* to appearing things, examined in sections 3 and 4, is not the direct evidence of their presence, but their lawful behavior among other appearing things. As we elaborate further in section 5, although there are ways of understanding all kinds of existence unitarily, at least an epistemic version of existence dualism seems inescapable, and it was certainly so to Kant in a largely Cartesian vein. As we conclude in section 6, existence dualism reveals a kind of un-Copernican element in the critical Kant: unlike *categorical existence* attributed to appearing things, *I-existence* is confined neither to the spatiotemporal point of view nor to the

¹ When referring to Descartes and Kant, we follow the standard practice: ‘AT’, followed by volume and page numbers, refers to the *Ceuvres de Descartes* edited by Adam and Tannery. ‘CSM’, followed by volume and page numbers, refers to Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch’s English translations in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. ‘A/B’, followed by page numbers, refers to the two editions of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787). Other Kant’s works are referenced by using the abbreviation of the title, followed by volume and page numbers of the Academy edition of Kant’s works. Unless otherwise stated, the translations of Kant’s texts are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

categorial framework—the two Kantian requisites for cognitive experience—but underlies them.

All in all, we want to draw the attention to a small but important point that we think has gone almost unnoticed in the literature, namely, existence dualism in Kant and the similarity of Kant's and Descartes's approaches in this regard. We are therefore not going into extensive review on secondary literature on related topics such as "I think" or substance dualism, since the ultimate point is not about these, but about existence itself. Perhaps it should therefore be also clarified from the outset that existence dualism does not need to mean that there are mental existents, on the one hand, and material existents, on the other—this would be a further question.

2. My existence

Like Descartes before him, Kant, too, ties thinking with the existence of the "I." In fact, much of what Kant has to say on the topic reminds us of Descartes. Formulations such as "I exist thinking" (*KrV*, B429) and "I (as a thinking being) am" (*KrV*, A 368) give a good indication of this. More precisely, Kant regards the concepts (see *KrV*, A 341/B 399) or propositions "I think" (*Ich denke*) and "I exist" (*Ich existiere*) as identical (*KrV*, B 422n). We take the identity to indicate that "I think" ultimately means "I exist."² This in turn entails that my thinking and my existence are inseparably combined in the sense that one implies the other. Indeed, if I now regard myself as thinking, I also regard myself as existing—both my thinking and my existence are as certain as can be.

Another crucial feature of Kant's view is that there is a sense in which "I" is not a concept. To this extent, the way Kant describes the "I" (or its "representation") in the *Prolegomena* is most telling—he calls it a feeling of existence:

If the representation of apperception, the *I*, were a concept through which anything might be thought, it could then be used as a predicate for other things, or contain such predicates in itself. But it is nothing more than a feeling of an existence [*Gefühl eines Daseins*] without the least concept, and is only a representation of that to which all thinking stands in relation (*relatione accidentis*). (*Prolog*, 4: 334n)

While Kant's choice of words could be considered non-optimal, given the many connotations of the term feeling, he nevertheless succeeds in making an important point.

² Kant explicates identity relation in the *Critique* (*KrV*, A 6–7/B 10–11) and *Jäsche Logic* (*Log*, 9: 111).

Existence is here neither an abstract category nor a property that we predicate to ourselves and through which we could determine ourselves in one way or another. Instead, one might say that even trying to do so already gives the (representation of the) existing “I” (whatever that exactly is). Existence in this sense is not only something that we recognize immediately, but something primitive and fundamental. As one might also put it, existence in this fundamental sense is unanalyzable, like a raw feeling. (Compare Sartre’s protagonist, Antoine Roquentin, who notices how in the merely predicative use of existence he had never *felt* the existence of things.)

In a similar vein, Descartes’s starting point is not so much thinking as such, not to mention the “I” as a logical subject, but the very existence itself (see Beyssade, 2008, p. 34). More precisely, existence is not something separate that we get from the fact that we think, or something we infer from our activity of thinking.³ Instead, we “recognize [existence] as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind” (CSM II, 100; AT VII, 140), Descartes’s ultimate point being that insofar as I think at all, *I-exist-thinking*.⁴ When put this way, Descartes comes very close to Kant—or, rather, vice versa. Indeed, it should not come as a surprise, then, why Kant uses the very same phrase (B429) or reformulations like “I (as a thinking being) am” (*KrV*, A 368).

All in all, even though Kant would not accept all the consequences Descartes wanted to draw from the *cogito*—in particular, Kant would deny that the “I” refers to a soul that is simple and immortal, or at least he would deny that we are in a position to know this (see, e.g., *KrV*, A 400–401; B 409)—Kant nevertheless wholeheartedly shares with Descartes the same basic idea regarding the “I” and its fundamental kind of existence (see also, e.g., *KrV*, A 367–368, 370). Moreover, Descartes, too, refers to a feeling of existence as he explains (in his Replies to the Second Set of Objections) that “it is taught to him from the fact that he feels [*experiatur*] in himself that it cannot be the case that he thinks, unless he exists” (AT VII,

³ Some things Descartes says in the *Principles of Philosophy* and *Discourse on Method* do support an “inferential” reading (see esp. AT IX, §7, 27; see also CSM I, 195n1; AT VI, 31–32; CSM I, 126–127). However, in his replies to the second set of objections to the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes explicitly denies the use of any syllogistic procedure (AT VII, 140; CSM II, 100; see also Longuenesse, 2008, p. 13; cf. Allison, 2004, p. 501n39). Indeed, in the *Meditations*, Descartes does not seem to treat the relation between “I think” and “I exist” as inferential at all. He rather suggests that only something far more fundamental and cognitively primitive than a logico-conceptual operation proceeding from premises to a conclusion can lead us to the intimate connection between my thinking and my existence. For more on treating Descartes’s *cogito* as an inference, see Hintikka 1962.

⁴ See also Koistinen, 2014.

140; quoted from Longuenesse, 2008, p. 13).⁵ Certainly, this is not exactly the same what Kant says about the feeling of existence in the *Prolegomena*. Still, the main point remains the same: namely, that the non-inferentially given *I-existence* is embedded in the activity of thinking itself and that the two are inseparably combined in the sense that the very moment we think—whatever it is that we think—our existence is immediately revealed to us. As we see in the next section, the full importance of the specialty of *I-existence* can only be realized when *I-existence* is contrasted to what we call *categorical existence*.

3. Categorical existence

The previous section centered on *I-existence*. Next, we turn to the question of the existence of ordinary things such as desks and chairs and stones. Let us start by quickly examining two central theoretical items in Kant's theory of cognition presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There, Kant draws a distinction between intuiting (roughly, perceiving) and thinking. Both intuiting and thinking have a priori conditions. The a priori conditions for intuiting are space and time, whereas categories are the a priori conditions for thinking of the things intuited. For example, the substance-accident relationship is not given in intuition (perception) but thought in the object intuited. In the same way, the cause-effect relationship is not given sensibly in intuition; instead, it is something that is (as one might perhaps put it) “detected” through thinking. For our concerns here, it is of prime importance that existence is also one of the categories. Existence, understood as a category, is not given by the senses. Thus, for Kant, the existence of external objects represented in space-time is not a revelation, but rather something that is to be decided through thinking.

The application of the category of Existence (*Dasein*) may seem to simply mean the determination of objects in space and time insofar as their existence is concerned—roughly, whether they exist or do not exist somewhere sometime. However, it must be kept in mind that Existence—or, more precisely, *Existence–Non-existence*—is a special kind of category (*V-Met-L2/Pölitz*, 28: 554). Just as is the case with all the three categories belonging to the fourth group entitled Modality (*Modalität*)—the other modal categories being *Possibility–Impossibility* and *Necessity–Contingency*—the application of Existence does not strictly consist in the determination of things, ordinarily understood. Recall the quote from the beginning of this

⁵ The French version of the *Meditations* uses the verb *sentir*, which makes Longuenesse's choice of the English word ‘feeling’ perfectly appropriate in this context: “elle lui est enseignée de ce qu’il sent [i.e., feels] en lui-même qu’il ne se peut pas faire qu’il pense, s’il n’existe” (Descartes, 1992, p. 565; AT IX, 110–111).

article: “Thus when I think a thing, through whichever and however many predicates I like (even in its thoroughgoing determination), not the least bit gets added to the thing when I posit in addition that this thing is” (*KrV*, A 600/B 628). In the quote, Kant uses the term positing (*Setzung*, also *Position*) to indicate the attribution of existence or being to a thing. By this he implies that existence is not a real predicate, which idea he extends to all three modal categories (*V-Met/Mron*, 29: 822; see also Abaci, 2008, p. 576).

Put differently, instead of determining the object by “augment[ing] the concept of which they are asserted in such a way as to add something to the representation of the object” (*KrV*, A233/B286), the modal categories are used to relate the object to the faculty of cognition and its various powers (*KrV*, A 219/B 266; A 234/B 286). While this sounds uninformative on its own, Kant seems to have in mind the following three ways to relate the object to the cognitive faculty, these three ways being basically the same as the so-called postulates of empirical thinking in general (*KrV*, A 218/B 265–266). First, insofar as the object can be related or seen in agreement with the formal conditions of possible experience (i.e., the object is potentially representable in accordance with space-time and the categories), it is to be regarded as possible. Second, insofar as the object can also be seen in agreement with the material conditions of experience (i.e., the object is an object of sense perception, which is to say that the object has a link to sensation in one way or another), it is to be regarded as actual and hence as existing.⁶ Third, insofar as the object is not only actual but connected with other perceptions “in accordance with general laws of experience” (*KrV*, A 227/B 279), its existence—or, rather, the modifications to its state according to the law of causality—is to be regarded as necessary in relation to other objects.

We only need to focus on the second way of relating to objects to notice that the attribution of existence is, cognitively speaking, ineliminably tied to perceivability. This makes sense: something unperceivable that has neither a direct nor indirect relation (see esp. *KrV*, A 225–226/B 272–274) to any perceiver is certainly the first candidate for an object we would not classify as existing. There are some interesting conclusions to be drawn from Kant’s limitation of the scope of the category of Existence, the most obvious being that its application is experientially or empirically restricted (see also Abaci, 2008, p. 592). For now, it suffices to conclude that the application of Existence does not mean strictly determining

⁶ At least in this context, Kant regards existence as synonymous with actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). For textual evidence, see *KrV*, A 218–219/B 266, where the terms possible, actual (*wirklich*) and necessary are explicitly used to refer to the three categories of modality.

objects with regard to their existence, understood as one of their properties, but relating to objects in space-time in a way that allows us to regard them as actual, causally interconnected objects.

Let us label existence as specified above *categorical existence*. Although this is our term, Kant refers quite explicitly to this kind of existence in the “notoriously obscure” (Allison, 2004, p. 352) footnote in the B-edition Paralogisms of Pure Reason.⁷ Most importantly for our purposes, the footnote reveals how the kind of existence expressed by the proposition “I exist” is to be contrasted with the kind of existence expressed by the category of Existence. Since we regard it as a key text, here is the footnote in full:

The “I think” is, as has already been said, an empirical proposition, and contains within itself the proposition “I exist.” But I cannot say “Everything that thinks, exists”; for then the property of thinking would make all beings possessing it into necessary beings. Hence my existence [*Existenz*] also cannot be regarded as inferred from the proposition “I think,” as Descartes held (for otherwise the major premise, “Everything that thinks, exists” would have to precede it), but rather it is identical with it. It expresses an indeterminate empirical intuition, i.e., a perception (hence it proves that sensation, which consequently belongs to sensibility, grounds this existential proposition), but it precedes the experience that is to determine the object of perception through the category in regard to time; and here existence is not a category [*und die Existenz ist hier noch keine Kategorie*],⁸ which is not related to an indeterminately given object, but rather to an object of which one has a concept, and about which one wants to know whether or not it is posited outside this concept. An indeterminate perception here signifies only something real, which was given, and indeed only to thinking in general, thus not as appearance, and also not as a thing in itself (a noumenon), but rather as something that in fact exists and is indicated as an existing thing in the proposition “I think.” For it is to be noted that if I have called the proposition “I think” an empirical proposition, I would not say by this that the I in this proposition is an empirical representation; for it is rather purely intellectual, because it belongs to thinking in general. Only without any empirical representation, which provides the material for thinking, the act I think would not take place, and the empirical is only the condition of the application, or use, of the pure intellectual faculty. (*KrV*, B 422–423n)

In the footnote, we are given the following crucial distinction. On the one hand, there is existence—*Dasein* in German—that serves the attribution of existence to objects in the specific sense examined above. “This stone exists” is a good and easy example. Here, as we

⁷ Interestingly, the two different senses of existence present in the footnote—which we take to be crucial in understanding Kant’s philosophical method—are often bypassed in Kant commentaries. Henry Allison, for example, seems to think that Kant’s only concern in the footnote is the avoidance of making illegitimate claims (“hypostatizing”) about the ultimate nature of the thinking subject (see Allison, 2004, pp. 352–356).

⁸ We have altered the Guyer-Wood translation, where this part of the sentence reads “and here existence is not yet a category.” To our ears, putting it this way may suggest a temporal reading, as if existence has not yet become a category, but would become so at a later stage in a cognitive process. However, we do not think this is how the German ‘noch’ functions in the sentence, but rather as a conjunction. A more articulate translation of Kant’s German might thus go something like this: “and nor is existence here a category.”

think about the stone insofar as its existence is concerned, existence acts like a predicate. Of course, as already pointed out, existence for Kant is not a real predicate. Still, it does serve a similar logical function to that of any predicate we might use in a judgment—as in, say, “The bird flies.”⁹ As has also already been pointed out, such an attribution is legitimate and successful if the stone can in fact be regarded as an object the experience of which meets both the formal and material conditions for experience.

On the other hand, there is existence—now the German term is *Existenz*¹⁰—that applies to the existence of the thinking self. For this, “I think”—also known as “mere apperception” (*KrV*, A 343/B 401) and “the sole text of rational psychology” (*ibid.*)—is all that is needed, because “I think” already presupposes, or, even better, comes with, existence. In other words, existence in this sense is inseparable from the activity of thinking and precedes the determination of possible objects in space and time. As Béatrice Longuenesse has recently put it, here we do not have “a case of the application of the *category* of existence, but rather an immediate, pre-categorial perception of existence” (Longuenesse, 2017, p. 90; see also Kumar, 2016, p. 117). One could also express the same idea less phenomenologically by stressing that *I-existence* preconditions the attribution of existence to spatiotemporal objects and hence the application of the category of Existence or *Dasein* itself.

In contrast, the existence of chairs and stones is tied to empirical circumstances and subject to the *category test* (which in turn depends on intuition; see above and esp. *KrV*, B 288–289). This is to say that, as far as *categorial existence* goes, we can always legitimately ask the question: Does the concept of Existence apply to this instance or not? (In the footnote: “[...] category, which is [...] related [...] to an object of which one has a concept, and about which one wants to know whether or not it is posited outside this concept.”) *I-existence*, by contrast, is self-revelatory, as it were; already revealed in mere thinking, whatever the contents of the actual thoughts might be. Therefore, not only does *I-existence* not require a category test to be verified, but *I-existence* is not even a possible candidate for such a test.

Differently put, a successful application of *Dasein* to objects in space-time always requires more than entertaining (say) stone-representations in one’s mind. Although the

⁹ As Kant famously pointed out in his criticism of the ontological argument of the existence of God, asserting that something is or exists does not add anything to the *object* (*KrV*, A 597–601/B 625–629). To put it differently, to state that a thing exists is to use the predicate ‘is’ or ‘exists’ merely logically or “copulatively”, which alone does not say anything about the existence of the thing (see esp. *KrV*, A 593/B 621). Hintikka (1986) criticizes Kant’s view. See also, e.g., Abaci, 2008; Plantinga, 1996.

¹⁰ This is not to insist that Kant always uses the terms *Dasein* and *Existenz* in the same way, but only to indicate how he draws the distinction between the two kinds of existence using these two specific terms.

stone in front of us may suggest, clearly and vividly, that it is something independent of us, it is after all possible (at least in some cases) that we only seem to perceive a stone. By contrast, as far as the evidence for *I-existence* is concerned, any thought—or indeed any kind of awareness of any kind of representational activity whatsoever—will suffice.¹¹ It thus seems that whereas we evidence *I-existence* directly, the application of the category of Existence to extra-mental objects is inherently an indirect operation (see Abaci, 2008, p. 593). This indicates that a justified attribution of existence in the categorial sense requires cognitive effort on your part: what you need to do is find out whether the category of Existence applies to the object, i.e., that the object in question in fact belongs to the worldly objects of experience. The situation might be compared to that of investigating whether the façade before you is the front side of a real saloon or just a movie prop.

4. A further contrast: the lawful connectedness of appearing objects

We discovered in the previous section that whereas embracing the mere fact of representational activity is sufficient for *I-existence*, this is not the case with *categorial existence*. We thus need an external basis for confirming that a representation of an object is in fact a genuine perception of an existing thing. In other words, we need a criterion for telling dreams, hallucinations and the like apart from veridical perceptions of things.¹²

Again, Descartes and Kant come very close. As both would have it, having an outer appearance as such is insufficient, because the possibility of misrepresentation cannot be ruled out. One of Kant's takes on dreams is useful to get an initial grasp on the matter:

The egoist says: in dreaming I also imagine a world, and am in it, and nevertheless it is not so. Can it not also be the same with me when awake? But against this is that dreams do not connect with each other, rather I now dream this, now that, but when awake appearances are connected according to general rules. (*V-Met/Mron*, 29: 927)

¹¹ Although we are not interested in skepticism in this paper, our analysis does have significance in that respect as well, since *I-existence* appears to be not only immune to the skeptical challenge but prompts the question of whether objects distinct from me—in their otherness, as it were—exist in some different sense than I do. For an interesting critical discussion on Kant and skepticism, and how it might relate to Descartes's position, see Stroud, 1984, Chapter 4.

¹² To avoid a possible misunderstanding, let it be emphasized that the kind of indirectness implied by categorial existence does not need to mean (and we do not think that it means) that for Kant a veridical perception of objects is a matter of inference. Or, for that matter, that Kant would think that we need to constantly affirm our trust in the existence of an objective world. As perhaps best evidenced by the Refutation of Idealism (*KrV*, B 274–279; see also B XXXIX-XLI*), Kant rather thinks that the fact that our existence is temporally determined vindicates the idea that our intuitions *generally* do latch onto actual existing objects. At the same time, Kant wants—and who would not—to retain the possibility of false positives in *particular* cases. See esp. *KrV*, B 278–279. For discussion, see Stephenson 2015.

As the quote suggests, what needs to be the case, to rule out the possibility of misrepresentation, is that the outer appearance, as it represents the world as being in a certain way, also consistently behaves in certain right ways.

Remember the motion picture *Beautiful Mind* and its protagonist, John Nash, played by Russell Crowe, who suddenly realizes that the Department of Defense agents do not age at all? At this crucial moment in the film, it occurs to Nash that there is something wrong in his world. What he ultimately recognizes is that the world, as he has been experiencing it recently, breaks the laws of nature, or, more simply, that things cannot be the way they appear to him—in this case, that it just cannot be right that these people around him, who always look exactly the same, are actual people.

The point is that either our perceptions show lawful behavior, so to speak, or become indicators of hallucination or dreaming. As Descartes suggests in the conclusion to his *Meditations*, a thing exists because it is perceivable as a part of the world that shows coherence and structure; an existing thing has a place in a bigger scheme of things without gaps and sudden apparitions (AT VII, 89–90; CSM II, 61–62). In even simpler terms, nature is not chaotic. If it were, structured experience would not be possible. In other words, there must be a kind of harmony among appearing things. Indeed, if nature lacked nomological harmony altogether, the difference between reality and dream would not even arise. This is the criterion to look for.

The very same criterion is also one of Kant's preconditions of experience. As Kant expresses it in his lectures on metaphysics from the 1780s:

Experience consists just in this, that my perceptions are connected with each other by the connection of cause and effect. If this does not exist, then my perception is not much more than a dream that has merely private validity for me – but never can be called experience.¹³ [...] When we look upon the appearances, they all fit together according to the laws of nature. (*V-Met/Mron*, 29: 860–861)

It could therefore be said that *categorial existence* reflects a kind of nomological ground of existence. The existence of a particular object is dependent on a complex nexus of other

¹³ It might be noted that Kant does not always use the term “experience” in this limited but demanding sense. Even in these same lecture notes he is recorded to have said, “I cannot refute the egoist [see the quote at the beginning of the current section] by experience, for this instructs as immediately only of our own existence” (*V-Met/Mron*, 29: 927). Of course, this latter quote might be interpreted to simply mean that my experience as such is always beyond doubt, whereas a particular outer experience may not on a closer inspection live up to the standard of genuine experience.

objects, all governed by natural laws. To perform a successful category test is to confirm that the object really fits among them, and this it can do, basically, by fitting the facts concerning the natural world as a whole.

To allude again to our epigraph from Sartre's *La Nausée*, the crucial point is that the existence of a thing comes from its being part of something larger; the existence the thing partakes in is the "dough" that grounds the existence of all things. From the viewpoint of Descartes and Kant, however, Sartre went too far. For Sartre, outer existence is a kind of revelation, but we doubt that Descartes and Kant thought so. Both Descartes and Kant rather stress that *I-existence*, intimately linked to the activity of thinking as such, stands in contrast to the law-governed attribution of existence according to the categories.¹⁴

For Descartes, thinking appears as the sole haven of freedom (*Discourse*, AT VI, 25; CSM I, 123). In a similar vein, Kant remarks in his personal notes that "the use of reason itself is freedom" (*HN*, 18: 254, R5613).¹⁵ In turn, in his notes to his personal copy of the first *Critique*, Kant refers to the "I think" as "spontaneity" that "does not depend on any object" (quoted from Kant, 2000, p. 219, footnote *c*). This of course does not need to mean that for Kant the existence of you and me would (somehow) be actually independent of objects. The point, rather, is that *I-existence* cannot be reduced to the categorial attribution of existence. On the contrary, *I-existence* grounds the latter and every other application of the categories. To use Kant's own term, the "I think" is the "vehicle" of the categories (*KrV*, A 348/B 406).

The last point can be further underlined by pointing out again how *I-existence* is not affected by the category test. This is to say that as long as there is thinking taking place at all, the "I" of the "I think" never loses its connection to existence. Unlike the subjects of the category test, which may turn out to be hallucinations or illusions, the "I" as such can never become a mere apparition. Indeed, when it comes to the success of category tests, the existential status of the "I" remains equally unaffected in both veridical and non-veridical cases. This is to say that in all possible cognitive situations, the "I" continues to be the fixed point regardless of their actual content and the existential status of the things in question. Basically, the "I" is that to whom the things appear, and that is not like any ordinary thing, including human beings understood as bodily things. (As it is stated in the footnote, my

¹⁴ For an interesting comparison of Kant and Sartre in this regard, see Gardner, 2009, p. 35.

¹⁵ See also, e.g., *HN*, 18: 181–182, R5436–5440. All in all, Kant seems to regard the human subject as a locus of self-activity, of which one is immediately aware, or as a kind of *actus originarius* (see *HN*, 16: 796, R3355, and 17: 462–463, R4219–4221).

existence rather indicates “something real, which was given [...] not as appearance, and also not as a thing in itself (a noumenon), but rather as something that in fact exists and is indicated as an existing thing in the proposition ‘I think.’”)

We thus have at least two good reasons to treat *categorial existence* as separate from *I-existence*. The attribution of existence in the categorial sense requires a criterion that cannot be met by the sheer presence of representational activity that suggests an object. Unlike the immediately revealed *I-existence*, *categorial existence* is a matter of further discovery (see *KrV*, A 226/B 274). The verification of any such discovery in turn requires the understanding of relational facts holding between worldly objects, thanks to which we are able to justifiably regard the candidate objects as causally connected to other objects, which binds and limits the scope of *categorial existence* in ways that do not seem to be the case with *I-existence* as such. As we see in the next section, this opens up some interesting vistas.

5. Full-blown existence dualism or not?

Both Descartes and Kant advocate existence dualism in the epistemic or evidential sense described in the previous sections. Put this way, however, the ontological question regarding existence dualism remains. To this extent, one way is to proceed monistically—that “either something is or isn’t, and that’s all there is to say about a thing’s existential status” (McDaniel, 2017, p. 140; cf. Gibson, 1998, p. 6). When taken ontologically, and not merely semantically, this would mean that both *I-existence* and *categorial existence* pick up one and the same all-encompassing existence in the end, even if there are two distinct routes for capturing it. The other way is to endorse a strictly pluralist or dualist ontology with respect to existence. Of course, the question might be undecidable as well; Kant in particular has a tendency to avoid strong ontological commitments.

To get some grip on the matter, recall from above how both Descartes and Kant saw the activity of thinking as such as largely free from the law-governed world of appearing things. Following this line of thought, perhaps it could be claimed that thinking as such reveals existence because a thinking thing is able to generate new thoughts and is thus causally efficient in at least this minimal sense. However, treating causal efficacy as the criterion of existence is not necessarily helpful in answering the ontological question, because it is unclear how to extend the causal efficiency of the thinking realm to the realm of non-thinking things. One might consider that causally effective things generate existing effects, but this alone hardly suffices for their existence, since even hallucinated things can be regarded as causally

efficient—they may, for instance, frighten the hallucinating person. Hence, while causal efficiency as such may be a good way to model *I-existence* (as controversial as that may sound), it is difficult to model *categorical existence* in the same way. To do this, it seems that an additional premise or background assumption is required, such as panpsychism. The basic idea would then be that because thinking and existence are indubitably interconnected, why not use thinking as the ultimate indicator of existence?

While panpsychism might not be entirely unviable view, partly because plain materialism does not necessarily fare any better, for many it is simply impossible to accept that everything exists as thinking or that everything is “mental.” The Berkeleyan idealist position, according to which things exist only insofar as they bear connection to them being perceived, hardly fares better in this respect. Such “common-sense” factors might in fact explain why Descartes ended up with (some kind of) substance dualism between the physical and mental.

It seems, however, that the “critical” Kant would never commit himself to substance dualism. At the same time, Kant seems to readily grant that his transcendently idealist yet empirically realist view is compatible with dualism (*KrV*, A 370)—whatever dualism exactly means in this context in addition to the rather uninformative and possibly misleading “possible certainty of objects of outer sense” (*KrV*, A 367; cf. *V-Met/Mron*, 29: 928). Admitting this much, however, does not seem to imply anything in strictly ontological terms, but sounds more like saying that there is nothing in position A that would blatantly contradict position B, whether B is true or not. Moreover, substance dualism is not to be conflated with existence dualism: the distinctive mark between *I-existence* and *categorical existence* was not that there are mental existents, on the one hand, and material existents, on the other, but that the two kinds of existence are revealed in ways that are irreducible to each other.

Is there anything else—preferably something ontologically significant—to say about Kant’s position? As radical as it may sound, it is a particularly considerable option that Kant’s position indeed implies that, ontologically speaking, all existence indicates the existence of thinking. Importantly, such a reading does not need to exploit Kant’s supposedly idealist tendencies—say, by arguing (wrongly, if you ask us) that existence proper would be limited to appearance. On the contrary, the possibility of such a reading comes from the fact that Kant openly opposes both materialism and idealism (in the Berkeleyan sense) (*KrV*, B XXXIV; see also B 274). Add to this the fact that Kant does not deny the existence of things in themselves, and you get the following picture.

Even though Kant greatly limits theoretical knowledge about things in themselves in the first *Critique*, he does not obviously mean that the concept of a *thing-as-it-is-in-itself* is meaningless. On the contrary, it could be said that things in themselves are for Kant ontologically necessary grounds of appearances. Accordingly, even if we did not know anything about the constitution of things as they are in themselves, independently of our sensible constitution, we can at least know relationally that the objects given as appearances bear connection to such non-sensible objects (see esp. *KrV*, A 251–252). Moreover, Kant explicitly states in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that a person, or the moral subject, is “conscious of himself as a thing in itself” (*KpV*, 5: 97; see also *GMS*, 4: 451). It is tempting to read this claim as suggesting that there is nothing in Kant’s view that prevents us identifying the “I,” or the thinking subject as such, as a thing in itself, and, therefore, as the link between thinking and the noumenal realm. In any event, Kant’s remark suggests, much in line with what we have established about *I-existence*, the primacy of intellectual existence as the kind of existence that is irreducible to *categorial existence* and hence impossible to treat materialistically as something thoroughly governed by the laws of nature—which point of view, besides, would be limited to the appearing things anyway.

One problem here is that such an argument would depend on the assumption that the things in themselves form an ontologically unitary group. However, even if *I-existence* indicated something noumenal, connecting the noumenal with thinking, why would we have to think everything noumenal to be so connected? Indeed, even if the two kinds of existence converged noumenally, so to say, this much we do not know, and Kant himself would be the first to point this out. Another problem might be that in the “notorious” footnote, Kant suggests that the “I” of the “I think” is given neither as an appearance nor as a thing in itself. This is not a big problem, however. All Kant really says is that *the “I”* is not *given* as a thing in itself, which is not to deny its status as a thing in itself as suggested in his practical philosophy. In the same vein, saying that the “I” of the “I think” is not given as an appearance is not to deny that there might be another sense in which we should understand ourselves in terms of appearance—most notably, Kant would limit the *cognition* of ourselves to the way we appear to ourselves (e.g., *KrV*, B 158).

It seems that our little attempt has revealed something important. It should be rather obvious by now that *I-existence* cannot count as cognition in Kant’s technical sense. As we have seen, in the *Prolegomena* Kant ended up calling it feeling, and most likely for the very same reason: namely, because there is no way something primitive like that could count as

an object of cognition proper. According to Kant, cognition proper requires an interplay between intuitions and concepts, which means, basically, that for us to cognize a thing, the thing must be spatiotemporally given and conceptually specified. While this much must be true of the objects to which we can legitimately attribute the category of Existence, *I-existence*, as we have seen, is beyond any such intuitive-cum-conceptual specification or “category testing.” Yet, there is nothing that prevents us perfectly knowing that we exist and indeed in some essential sense as the very ground of our own thoughts.

Neither would Kant deny that we can perfectly know that the “I” as such, understood as the locus of all representational activity regardless of the actual content of such activity, eludes substance-accident analysis in the specific sense that would allow us to pinpoint the “I” as a determinate spatiotemporal enduring thing that has such and such properties (see *KrV*, A 242–243/B 300–301). At the same time, Kant clearly regards the “I” as something that you and I are aware of—if nothing else, I am at least conscious of my own existence or “that I am” (*KrV*, B 157). To our mind, this kind of consciousness, albeit inseparably linked to thinking, must be more fundamental than just “elementary qualitative awareness of thinking” (Longuenesse, 2017, p. 89), since it also reveals the existence of the thinker itself.

Just as importantly, it cannot be that the term “I” refers to a mere precondition, logical subject, form of representation, or some such, or merely to thinking “taken in itself” (B 428). As is often the case in the Kant literature, the conclusion is only taken this far, as if Kant’s position in this regard was totally void of “metaphysical consequences” (Rosenberg, 2005, p. 263). This is to say that the issue with the “I” is taken up merely in relation to Kant’s argument in the Paralogisms, which underlines how the “I” cannot be cognized as a simple substance, for instance (e.g., Sellars, 1970; Rosenberg, 2005, pp. 258–263). We would like to emphasize, however, that even if Kant regards the “I” as indeterminate or “mere Something” (*KrV*, A 355), he nevertheless regards the “I” of the “I think” as an *existing thing*. (In the footnote: “something that *in fact exists and is indicated as an existing thing* in the proposition ‘I think’.” Our emphases.)

Now, if the “I” of the “I think”—*this existing thing*—is neither a spatiotemporally specifiable object of intuition (see also *KrV*, B 429) nor a legitimate object for the categories, it must be something that stands outside the Kantian conditions of experience. This at least partially confirms that the thinking subject might indeed be understood as a thing in itself, the existence of which goes beyond experiential considerations. Certainly, this alone is not

to say much, and there are Kantian reasons to keep it that way, but we think there is room for some further illustration.

Let us start by acknowledging the obvious: namely, that the “notorious” footnote suggests that the propositions “I think” and “I exist” “[express] an indeterminate empirical intuition” (*KrV*, B 422–423n). Indeed, it may even seem that the footnote claims that my existence is simply grounded on sensation (*KrV*, B 423n), which would probably distance Kant dramatically from Descartes, among other things. (In the footnote: “[...] hence it proves that sensation, which consequently belongs to sensibility, grounds this existential proposition [...].”)

It thus seems that the “I” is to be seen, somewhat contradictorily, both as an existing thing at the limit of the confines of experience and as a sensation-based object of intuition limited to appearance. To solve this apparent tension, one must, to begin with, distinguish between Kant’s use of the term ‘I’ to refer to the thinking subject and Kant’s use of the same term to refer to what could be called the empirical self. As far as the thinking subject as such goes, “I am conscious of myself not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am” (*KrV*, B 157), which is not to say that I have an intuition of myself. By contrast, I do have an intuition of myself as far “as I appear to myself” as a bodily thing that happens to be operating a laptop right here and right now. Crucially, however, the latter kind of self-cognition presupposes the “I” in the former sense. As we put it above, the “I” in this fundamental sense is the fixed point thanks to which there can be any kind of cognition, including empirical self-cognition, in the first place. Appearance is always appearance *to*—ultimately, to that which makes the actual mental states “mine.” Obviously, the “I” in this latter sense cannot be scrutinized by the same standards as the things that appear to that “I,” whatever they might be.

In addition, ‘intuition’ can mean either intellectual intuition or empirical intuition. Kant thinks that human beings do not have any kind of intellectual intuition whatsoever (e.g., *KrV*, B 309; *GMS*, 4: 316n). Presumably, this limitation must include intellectual self-intuition as well (see also *KrV*, B157). In fact, this would be another reason why Kant sometimes claims that we only appear to ourselves: namely, because we cannot determinately represent ourselves as extra-temporal and extra-spatial as an intuitive intellect might. Rather, when we examine the content of our mind, there is, roughly, a collection of present and past psychological states, where empirical intuition serves primarily the determination of temporal

relations and durations. In an important sense, such an intuition is not so much about the self as such as it is about the way the person is at some point in time.

However, Kant's ultimate point must be that there is *also* a sense in which the "I" is not process-like and determined by empirical content.¹⁶ Such an idea finds particularly significant application in Kant's practical philosophy, where one of the basic major points is that moral subjecthood requires that the person can act from duty by rising above their empirically determined inclinations (see, e.g., *GMS*, 4: 398–401; *KpV*, 5: 27–28). To continue with the above-quoted phrase from the second *Critique*:

But the very same subject, being on the other side conscious of himself as a thing in itself, also views his existence *insofar as it does not stand under conditions of time* and himself as determinable only through laws that he gives himself by reason; and in this existence of his nothing is, for him, antecedent to the determination of his will, but every action – and in general every determination of his existence, changing conformably with inner sense, even the whole sequence of his existence as a sensible being – is to be regarded in the consciousness of his intelligible existence as nothing but the consequence and never as the determining ground of his causality as a *noumenon*. (*KpV*, 5: 97)

Putting aside the difficulties in interpreting Kant's theory of action, the atemporal point of view implies, among other things, that *I-existence* can be regarded as independent of the actual contents of our thoughts and other psychological states, including the worldly events that make them possible, hence suggesting an existence that is not bound to the same conditions that govern everything empirical.

When Kant alludes to the Janus-faced character of the self and its existence in his remarks to the second edition Paralogisms (*KrV*, B 429–432), he indirectly points out that rational psychology does not gain anything from such an "occasion for presupposing ourselves to be legislative fully *a priori* in regard to our own existence, and as self-determining in this existence" (*KrV*, B 430). At the same time, however, Kant admits that such a self-determination is something that we in fact do recognize in us when we become conscious of the moral law (*KrV*, B 431)—a point which he then develops further in the second *Critique*.

A crucial thing to note here is that we can only actually become familiar with anything like that—or indeed with anything at all—alongside our actual thoughts and other empirically

¹⁶ For further evidence on this, see the Refutation of Idealism, where Kant distinguishes between empirical and intellectual consciousness of my existence. Even though the argument itself concerns empirical consciousness, Kant explicitly takes intellectual consciousness to *precede* empirical consciousness or the inner intuition of our representational state (*KrV*, B XL*). There is thus a sense in which we possess consciousness (or are conscious) of ourselves in a double way (see also *GMS*, 4: 337).

governed mental states. *I-existence* itself is not something that we confront separately as if it were some kind of free-floating entity. However, it does not follow from this that the “I” as such would have to be an empirical representation, or nothing but an empirical representation, bound to sensation and intuition. (In the footnote: “if I have called the proposition ‘I think’ an empirical proposition, I would not say by this that the I in this proposition is an empirical representation; for it is rather purely intellectual [...].”)

The situation is analogical to the role of experience in the genesis of cognition more generally. As Kant remarks in the introduction to the 1787 edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “But although all our cognition commences with experience, yet it does not on that account all arise from experience” (*KrV*, B 1). In the same vein, the mental activity must be there, and only sensation can get it going, but this just means that the “I” must have some material available to it, and this much gets revealed whenever you find yourself thinking. Still, the material itself does not constitute your existence, or yourself as an existing thing, just as the sensory material received by the senses does not alone constitute your experience.

While Kant may not have enough theoretical resources to affirm either existence dualism or existence monism in the strictly ontological sense, it should be clear by now that, for Kant, like for Descartes before him, *I-existence* is the fundamental kind of existence. Indeed, its place in Kant’s philosophical system is so special that there is a sense in which *I-existence* would be the best candidate for expressing a fundamental or indeed the sole kind of existence in the noumenal sense as well. *Categorical existence*, in turn, is relational at best, ultimately stemming from the lawful connectedness of appearing things.

6. Concluding remarks

In the above, we examined two kinds of existence—*I-existence* and *categorical existence*—present in Descartes’s and Kant’s philosophy. On the one hand, there is existence—*my* existence—which is immediately revealed in thinking, the subject of which never loses its connection to existence. Existence in this sense is a kind of untouchable, since the “I” remains unaffected by misrepresentation, almost as if *I-existence* was independent of the existential status of extra-mental things. On the other hand, there are the extra-mental things the existence of which is susceptible to category testing: Is it really the case that the category of Existence is attributable to the appearing object?

We argued that the mere fact of representational activity is sufficient for *I-existence*, which makes it unsusceptible to category testing. As we expressed it above, *I-existence* is self-

revelatory. In contrast, the legitimate attribution of *categorial existence* requires that the represented spatiotemporal object fits into the nomological structure more familiarly known as nature. We saw how Kant's position and Descartes's position in the end of the *Meditations* come very close to each other in this regard. We also suggested more generally that Kant's existence dualism has Cartesian origins.

Focusing on Kant, we showed how the dualism in question is largely epistemic and does not necessarily have strictly ontological purport, even though it leaves room for further interpretation. However, while Kant can be seen as a modest thinker who does not want to make strong ontological commitments, even if his position could be regarded as compatible with ontologically stricter views, the promoting of which he himself avoids, it is clear that *I-existence* has a very unique place in his philosophy. As we have seen, *I-existence*, for Kant, is simply something fundamental.

In fact, the existence of the "I" appears to be so fundamental that it pushes the limits of the critical philosophy itself. In this latter regard, our two most crucial findings are the following. First, in terms of Kant's theory of cognition, our analysis shows that the category of existence is not cognitively ubiquitous or exhaustive. By this we mean that it is not the case that everything that we can legitimately label as existing belongs in this category or is necessarily cognized through this category. On the contrary, there is at least one kind of existence that does not fall under the category of existence at all, namely the existence of myself as thinking. Moreover, the categorial cognition of existence is strictly dependent on *I-existence*, not the other way around.

Second, we saw how, for Kant, the "I" as such, even though not a proper object of cognition, is nevertheless an existing thing and known to be such. This is to say that the "I" is neither a spatiotemporally specifiable object of intuition nor a legitimate object for the categories. Still, the "I" is something of which we are perfectly aware—or better, something through which we evidence existence directly. Even though Kant insists that we cannot determinately say much about the "I"—although his practical philosophy suggests more—we can say at least this: the "I" as such must be something that stands outside the Kantian conditions of experience. What else could it then be but that which grounds both the categories and the frame of reference otherwise restricted to the intuition of space and time? Indeed, the "I" or the thinking self as such must be the one un-Copernican element left intact after Kant's Copernican turn.

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