**Kant and Frege on Existence**[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**1 – Introduction**

Kant famously claims that being is “obviously not a real predicate” (*KrV*, A 598/B 626)[[2]](#footnote-2), i.e. a determination or a property of a thing. As Frege similarly states that existence is not a first-level predicate of objects but a second-level predicate of concepts, it is not surprising that the two philosophers have been compared on this point. Indeed, Jonathan Bennett speaks of the “Kant-Frege view”, according to which Frege first gave solid logical foundations for Kant’s claim (Bennett 1974, 62–5, 231).[[3]](#footnote-3) To my mind, although there is some truth to the Kant-Frege view, there is a fundamental disparity between Kant’s and Frege’s conceptions of existence that far outweighs their similarities.

I submit – similarly to Hans Sluga (1980, 88) but for different reasons – that although Kant and Frege agree on what existence *is not*, they agree neither on what existence *is* nor on the importance and justification of existential propositions. Furthermore, the two philosophers are deeply at odds in their treatment of truth about merely possible objects. This difference, I argue, goes to the heart of philosophy and especially of the question, whether and how metaphysics could be justified. Consequently it is not true that Frege gave logical clarity to Kant’s thesis about existence: they have fundamentally different and competing theories of existence.

I will spell out the disparity between the philosophers in three main sections. Sections 2 and 3 introduce and analyse Kant’s and Frege’s conceptions of existence, respectively, whereas section 4 identifies three of their key disagreements: First, whereas for Frege existence is a non-relational property of a concept, for Kant it is a relational property that pertains between the concept and intuition of an object. Second, whereas for Frege truth about individuals presupposes their existence, for Kant truth is in many cases (including judgments about individuals) independent of the (possible) existence of objects. Third, whereas Frege binds existence to logic and “eliminates alethic modalities from his logic” (Haaparanta 1985, 146; cf. *BS*, §4), for Kant existence is a *modal category* that is emphatically removed from the domain of (general) logic and set in the core of metaphysics. Consequently, whereas for Kant assertions about (merely) possibly existing objects or individuals are crucial to his critical metaphysics, for Frege they are nothing less than senseless. I will conclude in section 5 by explicating how this difference makes it impossible for Frege to conduct the kind of meta-metaphysical inquiry that is essential to Kant’s philosophy. Note that apart from pointing out some of the immediate virtues of Kant’s and Frege’s respective stances, it is not here my aim to thoroughly assess their relative advantages and disadvantages.

**2 – Kant**

Despite having been a major focus of Kant-scholarship, Kant’s view of existence is generally not well understood, and the number of competing interpretations is great.[[4]](#footnote-4) To my mind, there are three major reasons for this, only the latter two of which will be addressed here. First, Kant’s claims about existence have not been sufficiently related to those of his immediate predecessors – especially Alexander Baumgarten – in light of which, however, they should properly be interpreted (see Kannisto 2016). Second, the focus has mainly been on Kant’s negative claim that existence is not a real predicate – on which Kant and Frege fully agree – whereas his positive characterisation of it as “absolute positing” – that sets the two philosophers apart – has received little attention. Third, it has not been sufficiently recognised that Kant’s theory of existence is founded on his more general theory of modality, which in turn is opposed to that of Frege.

*2. 1. Kant on Existence and Predication*

Kant’s famous claim that existence is not a (real) predicate predates the *Critique of Pure Reason* by almost two decades. In *The Only Possible Ground for a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (*OPG*, 1763) Kant supports his claim that “*[e]xistence is not a predicate or a determination of a thing*” (*OPG*, 72) with the following explanation:

Take any subject you please, for example, Julius Caesar. Draw up a list of all the predicates which may be thought to belong to him, not excepting even those of space and time. You will quickly see that he can either exist with all these determinations, or not exist at all. The Being who gave existence to the world and to our hero within that world could know every single one of these predicates without exception, and yet still be able to regard him as a merely possible thing which, in the absence of that Being's decision to create him, would not exist. […] It cannot happen, therefore, that if they [merely possible things] were to exist they would contain an extra predicate; for, in the case of the possibility of a thing in its complete determination, no predicate at all can be missing. (*Ibid*.)

However many predicates we may attribute to a thing, it remains undecided whether the thing, along with these predicates, exists. In the *Critique* the same claim is presented concisely and without reference to God: “If the concept of a thing is already entirely complete, I can still ask about this object whether it is merely possible, or also actual,[[5]](#footnote-5) or, if it is the latter, whether it is also necessary? No further determinations in the object are hereby thought […].” (*KrV*, A 219/B 266.) It is these claims that are incorporated in the famous slogan: “*Being* is obviously not a real predicate, i.e., a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing.” (*KrV*, A 598/B 626.)

Notably, however, although existence adds nothing to the thing or its concept, it does add something: “*Through the actuality* of a thing I certainly posit more than possibility, but not *in the thing*; for that can never contain more in actuality than what was contained in its complete possibility.” (*KrV*, A 234–5/B 287 n.) The reason why existence adds nothing *to* the thing is simple: it rather *adds the thing itself*:

[A] distinction must be drawn between what is posited and how it is posited. As far as the former is concerned: no more is posited *in* an actual thing than is posited *in* a merely possible thing, for all the determinations and predicates of the actual thing are also to be found in the mere possibility of that same thing. However, as far as the latter [the “how”] is concerned: more is posited *through* actuality […], for positing *through* an existent thing involves the absolute positing of the thing itself as well. (*OPG*, 75, my emphasis.)

For an actual thing to correspond to its concept, it must instantiate exactly the same predicates that are also thought in its concept, and so the “absolute positing” (a concept to be clarified shortly) cannot add any predicates or properties to the object:

A hundred actual dollars do not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones. For since the latter signifies the concept and the former its object and its positing in itself, then, in case the former contained more than the latter, my concept would not express the entire object and thus would not be the suitable concept of it. (*KrV*, A 599/B 627.)

But what does it mean for actual dollars to “contain” no more than possible ones? For Kant *containment* is a technical term, defined as follows:

Every concept, *as partial concept*, is contained in the representation of things; as *ground of cognition*, *i.e., as mark*, these things are contained *under* it. In the former respect every concept has a *content* [*Inhalt*], in the other an *extension* [*Umfang*]. (*JL*, 95.)

This distinction is similar to the contemporary one between *intension* and *extension* of concepts. The content of a concept is the set of partial concepts (conjunction of predicates) that constitute its thought-content (intension); its extension is the set of (actually) existing things to which it refers.[[6]](#footnote-6) E.g. the concept *bachelor* contains the concepts *man* and *unmarried*, whereas its extension are all actual things that instantiate the predicates of *man* and *unmarried*. The partial or sub-concepts of a concept Kant calls its (characteristic) marks (*Merkmale*) – a term Frege employs similarly (see 3.1).

Dollars “contain” those properties[[7]](#footnote-7) that they have in virtue of instantiating the predicates contained in the concept of dollar. Rather than enlarging the intension of *A* by adding a predicate to it, “A exists” posits a non-empty extension for *A* by positing the thing itself – the referent of *A*. Thus actual dollars must instantiate exactly the predicates expressed by their concept (i.e. possible dollars), and whatever difference actual and possible dollars may have, it does not consist in the former having an extra property: existence. If existence added to the content of *A*, “A exists” would change the intension of *A* rather than positing a non-empty extension that corresponds exactly to this intension.[[8]](#footnote-8) But what does “positing” mean?

*2. 2. Existence as Absolute Positing*

In *The Only Possible Ground* Kant defines positing as follows:

The concept of positing or setting [*Setzung*] is perfectly simple: it is identical with the concept of being in general. Now, something can be thought as posited merely relatively, or, to express the matter better, it can be thought merely as the relation (*respectus logicus*) of something as a characteristic mark to a thing. In this case, being, that is to say, the positing of this relation, is nothing other than the *copula* in a judgment. If what is considered is not merely this relation but the thing posited in and for itself, then this being is the same as existence. (*OPG*, 73, translation altered.)

Kant also distinguishes between *relative* and *absolute* positing (*OPG*, 73–4; *AA* 28: 554; *AA* 29: 822; Longuenesse 1998, 352). In the former predicates are posited to the subject-term, whereas the latter posits the subject itself. This distinction is manifest in the two uses of *is*, logical and existential, in “A is B” and “A is”:

In the logical use [being] is merely the copula of a judgment. The proposition *God is omnipotent* contains two concepts that have their objects: God and omnipotence; the little word *“is”* is not a predicate in it, but only that which posits the predicate *in relation* to the subject. Now if I take the subject (God) together with all his predicates […] and say *God is*, or there is a God, then I posit no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit the *object* in relation to my *concept*. Both must contain exactly the same, and hence when I think this object as given absolutely (through the expression, “it is”), nothing is thereby added to the concept that expresses merely its possibility. (*KrV*, A 598–9/B 626–7, translation altered.)

*Being* is not a predicate of a thing either in its relative or absolute use. The logical “is” of “A is B” states that the predicate *B* belongs to the subject *A* – it predicates *B* of *A*.[[9]](#footnote-9) The absolute “is” of existence in “A is” states that *A* itself is instantiated by an actual thing, i.e. that *A*, along with its content, exists. It does not posit anything additional *in* the thing but posits *the thing itself*: “[w]ith actuality, the object is added to a concept, but nothing is added to the object” (*AA* 29: 822). “Wombats (actually) exist,” or “There (actually) are wombats,” states that some actual things instantiate all the predicates contained in the concept of wombat.

Although even absolute positing in fact involves a *relation* (see the long quote above), this relation is essentially different from that of relative positing. Whereas the latter relates two concepts (subject and predicate terms), the former relates the subject concept to *objects* or *things* (as its referents), i.e. to entities of a wholly different kind.[[10]](#footnote-10) (Cf. 3.2 and 4.2.) Thus absolute and relative positing denotes two different and mutually independent relations. Relative positing adds the predicate *B* to the subject *A* but does not as such concern the (possible) existence of *A*. This existence is added via the absolute positing of *A*, which determines some thing *a* as instantiating the predicates of *A*.

Although the two positings can appear together, and often do (most notably always in empirical judgments), they are independent to the extent that one can predicate *B* of *A* without positing *A* itself absolutely, and one can posit *A* absolutely without adding any new predicate *B* to it. Since no consideration of existence is involved in relative positing, it can even be used to relate fictions (non-entities) to one another:

If I say: ‘God is omnipotent’ all that is being thought is the logical relation between God and omnipotence, for the latter is a characteristic mark of the former. […] Whether God is, that is to say, whether God is posited absolutely or exists, is not contained in the original assertion at all. For this reason, ‘being’ is also correctly employed even in the case of the relations which non-entities [*Undinge*] have to each other. For example: ‘The God of Spinoza is subject to continuous change.’ (*OPG*, 74, translation altered.)

*2. 3. Kant on Existence and Truth*

Since existence does not belong to the content of concepts, analytic judgments cannot decide anything about it. This is because, as Kant’s explanation of the analytic/synthetic distinction makes clear, an analytic judgment merely analyses or makes explicit this content:

In all judgments in which the relation of a subject to the predicate is thought […] this relation is possible in two different ways. Either the predicate *B* belongs to the subject *A* as something that is (covertly) contained in this concept *A*; or *B* lies entirely outside the concept *A*, though to be sure it stands in connection with it. In the first case I call the judgment *analytic*, in the second *synthetic*. (*KrV*, A 6–7/B 10.)

If existence cannot be a part of the content of concepts, analytic judgments can neither express nor on their own involve existence of either the subject or the predicate. This fits Kant’s view that analytic judgments can be (necessarily) *true* without being true *of any objects*, namely if the objects it speaks of do not exist.[[11]](#footnote-11) (E.g. *KrV*, A 151–2/B 190–91.) For example, “Unicorns are one-horned” is a necessary analytic truth despite there (likely) being no unicorns. Kant employs this point extensively in the Transcendental Dialectic, e.g.:

However, that the I of the “I think” must always be regarded as *subject* […] is an apodictic and even *identical proposition* [i.e. necessarily true]; but it does not signify that I as *object* am for myself a self-*subsisting being* or *substance*. (*KrV*, B 407, translation altered.)

God is omnipotent; that is a necessary [i.e. necessarily true] judgment. Omnipotence cannot be cancelled if you posit a divinity, i.e., an infinite being, which is identical to this concept [i.e. the judgment is analytic][[12]](#footnote-12). But if you say, *God is not*, then neither omnipotence nor any other of his predicates is given; for they are all cancelled together with the subject, and in this thought not the least contradiction shows itself. (*KrV*, A 595/B 623; cf. *OPG*, 74.)

Truth’s independence of existence might appear to conflict with Kant’s definition of truth as *correspondence* (e.g. *KrV*, A 58–60/B 82–5; *JL*, 50–3). But in fact, first, for Kant correspondence *between concept and object* is required only for what he calls “material truth,” namely truth about (possibly existing) objects. What he calls “formal” or “logical” truth does not concern objects but merely “the agreement of cognition with itself, in complete abstraction from all objects whatsoever” (*JL*, 51). Hence an analytic judgment can be formally true or false even when its material truth is impossible.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Existential judgments concern the move from formal to material truth by determining *whether* and *how* the concept is *instantiated*. Ascribing a modality to a concept determines whether the concept *can* instantiated, *is* instantiated, or *must be* instantiated. In each case the concept and the predicates contained in it must be the same, which is why existence (or any other modal concept) cannot amplify this content.

While the truth of analytic judgments is for Kant independent of the existence of their objects, this is not so for all synthetic judgments. Knowing whether “Socrates is a man” is true requires experiential knowledge about him, which seems to depend on him existing or having existed. Thus, plausibly, the truth of empirical judgments of this sort implies the existence of their objects. This picture is substantially complicated by *fictions* or *imaginary* beings, however: the truth of “Gilgamesh is a man” should not imply his existence. One way to deal with this is to say that judgments about fictions indeed *cannot* be true – this is the Fregean view – but this seems intuitively unappealing: asserting that Gilgamesh is a woman will certainly earn as strong objections from historians as claiming that Socrates is a woman. (Cf. 3.3 and note 27.)

There is a bevy of complex problems associated with the existential status of fictions, and for the greater part they must be set aside here. What is important is that there is *conceptual space* in Kant for true synthetic judgments about non-existing things. Since synthetic judgments require intuitions, there would have to be intuitions of non-existing objects. This is indeed a plausible reading of how Kant sees *imagination*, the capacity for “representing an object even *without its presence* in intuition” (*KrV*, B 151) or “a faculty of intuition without the presence of the object” (*AA* 7: 167). In a lecture note, Kant specifically states that imagination “is the faculty for producing images from oneself, independent of the actuality of objects” (*AA* 28: 237).[[14]](#footnote-14) Indeed, among others, synthetic *a priori* judgments of geometry e.g. about a million-angle are true irrespective of whether there actually are any million-angles. Thus the view suggested here is that the judgments “Socrates is a man” and “Gilgamesh is a man” are both true synthetic judgments, but since Socrates exists and Gilgamesh not, only the former is true of an actually existing object while the latter is true only of a possibly existing object. In terms of correspondence, the judgment can correspond to actual states of affairs and objects or to merely possible ones (see 4.3). This allows Kant to keep truth separate from (actual) existence also for some synthetic judgments. (Cf. Vanzo 2014, 226–8.)

Explication of the status of such *possibilia* and the exact nature of existence, construed as a relative property, will have to wait until section 4. An analysis of Frege’s theory of existence provides us with powerful tools for developing the thus far merely preliminary analysis of Kant’s theory of existence further.

**3 – Frege**

According to the Kant-Frege view, Frege approved of Kant’s critique of the ontological argument and gave logical and formal clarity to Kant’s idea “that being is a property of thought […] in the view that existence is a property of a concept” (Haaparanta 1985, 144; cf. Bennett 1974, 62; *GA*, § 53). Frege grounds his formalisation of existence on an analysis of the ambiguity in the word “is.” He recognises four different meanings of “is”: identity, predication, existence, and subordination or class-inclusion (e.g. *GA*, § 57; *BG*, 194 ff.; Haaparanta 1986, 269–70). If I say “7 + 5 is 12” or “Hesperus is Phosphorus,” I mean that *7 + 5* denotes the same individual object as *12* and *Hesperus* the same individual as *Phosphorus*. Here meanings (*Bedeutungen*) of propernames are identified with each other (*SB*, 25). Subordination, in turn, relates *classes* or *sets* of objects: “Planets are celestial bodies.” Predication occurs when an individual is subsumed under a class, e.g. “Venus is a planet.” Finally, the existential “is” states e.g. that “Planets are” or “There are planets.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

One of Frege’s great contributions to logic is that he assigns each sense of *is* a different logical form. In contemporary notation, identity is expressed by the identity sign *a = b*; predication by *F(a)*;[[16]](#footnote-16) subordination by *∀x(F(x) → G(x))*; and existence by *∃xF(x)* (Haaparanta 1985, 14–15; 1986, 269–70). Thus existence is denoted by the existential quantifier.[[17]](#footnote-17) Frege also adheres to the interdefinability of the existential and universal quantifiers (*∃xF(x)* ⇔ *¬∀x¬F(x)*) proposed by George Boole and Augustus De Morgan a few decades earlier (Vilkko & Hintikka 2006, 370–1). In this view “all” is parsed as a lack of exception, which, when combined with Frege’s view of existence as denoted by the existential quantifier, introduces an extremely important asymmetry to the quantifiers: since lack of exception does not imply existence of positive instances, the universal quantifier “all” lacks existential force but the existential quantifier “some” has it. Hence in contemporary logic the classically valid inference from *all* to *some* becomes invalid, for the former can involve empty terms while the latter implies their non-emptiness.

*3. 1. Existence as Second-Level Concept*

What does it mean that existence is denoted by a quantifier? The answer lies in Frege’s view that all logical operations share the same basic form of a function that takes an argument. A function alone is “unsaturated” and has to be completed by an argument. (*FB*, 6.) In identity the function is expressed by the identity sign *( ) = ( )*, where the arguments taking the empty places are individuals *a* and *b* – e.g. Hesperus and Phosphorus. In predication the function is *F( )* (a concept) and the argument is an individual *a*: *F(a)*, e.g. “Hesperus is a planet.” What is the function for existence? According to Frege, in contemporary notation it is *∃( )* so that the argument place is filled with a first order predicate *F( )*: *∃x(F(x))*. Here “x” denotes the variable object or argument of predication. In predication the concept *F* applies to an individual *a*; in existential propositions the existential quantifier *∃* is applied to the concept *F*. That the concept *F* rather than the object *a* is the argument of the existential quantifier means that existence is a second-level property of *concepts* rather than a first-level property of *objects*: it is a function of concepts, not of their objects.[[18]](#footnote-18) (*GA*, § 53; *BG*, 199.)[[19]](#footnote-19) Frege exemplifies his view of existence thus:

I have called existence a property of a concept. How I mean this to be taken is best made clear by an example. In the sentence ‘there is at least one square root of 4’, we have an assertion, not about (say) the definite number 2, nor about -2 [i.e. about the objects 2 or -2], but about a concept, *square root of 4*; viz., that it is not empty. (*BG*, 199.)

Thus “There are A’s” is true just in case the concept of A is instantiated by at least one object, which is to say that the concept *A* has the property of being non-empty (having a meaning) rather than the object *a* having a property of existing. In other words, for Frege existence is a concept’s property of *being instantiated* (*NS*, 73–4).

But what kind of a property is a second-level property? Notably, Frege rejects certain obvious candidates: in the sentence “the concept ‘horse’ is a concept easily attained” (*BG*, 195), “the concept ‘horse’” designates an object while “easily attained” designates a first-level concept. According to him, the sentence is an example of subordination that “must not be confused with” something falling under a higher-level concept (*ibid.*). Subordination is for Frege a second-level *relation* (not a property) between two (first-level) concepts (Macbeth 2005, 91–2, 104; Künne 2010, 222).

Leila Haaparanta clarifies Frege’s point via his distinction between *properties* and *characteristics* (*Merkmale*) (Haaparanta 1986, 271–2; cf. also Kluge 1980, 99; Kenny 1995, 75; *GA*, §53; *BG*, 201–2). By characteristics (or characteristic marks) Frege – like Kant – means the predicates or sub-concepts that make up the concept (*GA*, §53) – or, in Kant’s terms, its *content* (cf. 2.1). An object that falls under a first-level concept has the characteristics of that concept as its properties (Haaparanta 1986, 271–2). That existence is for Frege a second-level property of concepts means that it cannot be one of their characteristic marks (for those are properties of objects). Thus Frege’s claim is very reminiscent of Kant indeed: in Kantian terms, existence does not belong to the *content* of the concept as its predicate (characteristic), and hence the object falling under it does not have any existence-property; rather existence is a property of (not in) the concept itself. “A is” means that the predicates of the concept-word *A* – in Kantian terms, the content of the concept *A* – are instantiated by something, which is a property of the concept rather than of this “something.”

Now, what Frege does *not* mean is that existence were a property of the concept in the sense that it – the concept – exists. (Cf. note 31.) Although an obvious point, it is still surprising to an extent, for the view that Frege is taken to oppose is that “Wombats exist” means that (some) wombats have the property of existing. To say that it is rather the concept of wombat that has this property might seem to suggest that it is the concept that exists. That this is not the case shows that Frege makes *two* transformations: he not only moves the property of existence up one level but also makes existence a *specific kind* of property, the property of *being instantiated*.

This is important, for it suggests certain alternatives to Frege’s conception. Perhaps existence is not a property of a concept to be instantiated but a property of an *object* to *instantiate*: “a exists” would be true if the object denoted by “a” has the property of instantiating some concept. (That this point concerns *individual objects* will become important in 3.2, 4.1 & 4.2.) This is similar to Meinong’s view that (*pace* Frege) existence is a property of (some) objects.[[20]](#footnote-20) A third alternative also seems possible: perhaps existence denotes an instantiation-*relation* between the concepts and objects – a kind of correspondence or concurrence (*Zusammenfallen*). Although these differences may seem minute, they are highly central given that for Frege relations and concepts are mutually exclusive: “We called such functions of one argument concepts; we call such functions of two arguments relations.” (*FB*, 28.) This becomes crucial, for, as I will argue shortly, Kant holds a variant of such a relational interpretation of existence, rather than either the Fregean second-level property or Meinongian first-level property view.

*3. 2. The Existential Quantifier*

The question why Frege does not construe existence as a relation proper arises also with the (Fregean as well as contemporary) notation of existential sentences, in contemporary notation: *∃x(F(x))*. Although the *∃*-quantifier is to take *F(x)* as its sole argument, the formalisation cannot dispose of the *x*, i.e., the thing(s) that *F* in turn takes as its argument. Moreover, rather than *F(x)*, *x* would appear to be the immediate argument of *∃*. It is an *x* that exists: “There is an x such that…” In this picture one might construe the *∃*-function as taking *two* arguments: *x* and *F(x)*. Since a two-placed function is a *relation* (*FB*, 28), one might try to interpret existence (as existential quantifier) as a relation between an object *x* and its concept *F(x)*. But according to Frege, *F(x)* is the sole argument of the *∃*-function, and the reference to *x* is just to “delimit[] the scope” (*BS*, §11) of the quantifier. For example, the universal quantifier states: “whatever we may take for its argument, the function is a fact” (*BS*, §11).

Indeed, on a closer look it is clear that the “x” in *∃x(F(x))* does not stand for an argument at all. It expresses the scope of objects of which we state that at least one of them instantiates *F*. That the existential quantifier is not a relation – at least not in the sense of being a two-placed function – is evident also in following ways. First, completing the relation-word *x > y* e.g. as *3 > 2* retains all the elements – the *>*-function and the two arguments *3* and *2*. But in the case of *∃x(F(x))*, substituting *x* with an object *a* (existential instantiation) makes the *∃*-function disappear: one does not write *∃a(F(a))* as if replacing *x* with *a*, but simply *F(a)*: *a* instantiates *F*. Second, whereas *x > 2* has no truth value until *x* is determined, *∃x(F(x))* clearly does: it is true if at least one member – determinate or not – of the scope *x* is *F*, otherwise false. The “x” stands for a *class of objects* that make up the scope – in the unlimited case it is the class of *all* objects. Thus one also commonly writes e.g. *∃x ∈* ***R****: F(x)* to include the scope (here: the set of real numbers). Thus *∃x(F(x))* does not state anything of an individual object but rather of the class of *x*’s that it instantiates *F*.[[21]](#footnote-21)

According to Frege, “[i]f I say ‘the King's carriage is drawn by four horses’, then I assign the number four to the concept ‘horse that draws the King's carriage’” (*GA*, § 46) rather than to any of the horses. As MacFarlane notes: “Ascriptions of number as Frege understands them do not involve the subsumption of objects under concepts at all.” (MacFarlane 2002, 57–8.) It is the same with the existential quantifier that does not assign existence to any of the individual objects that make up the scope but to the concept that is instantiated by at least one of the objects. Thus according to Frege’s famous dictum, “existence is analogous to number” in that the “[a]ffirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number nought” (*GA*, § 53). (The affirmation of zero is the same as self-contradiction and impossibility (*GA*, § 74).) In other words, whereas numbers are determinate quantities, the existential quantifier expresses an *indeterminate number-ascription*: it states that *F* is instantiated by at least one thing.

This reveals an important distinction between what could be called individual existence and quantity of existence. The *number* or *quantity* of existing things is *prima* *facie* different from the existence of a determinate individual. The fact that some determinate man such as Julius Caesar exists is not the same as the fact that men exist, for the former implies the latter but not *vice versa*. This is a central distinction, as Frege indeed claims that utterances like “There is Socrates” are *senseless*[[22]](#footnote-22), thus restricting his sense of existence to the *quantity* of existence. As we saw, for Kant, on the contrary, the problem of existence frequently concerns individuals like Julius Caesar or God. (Cf. Rosefeldt 2011, 341.)[[23]](#footnote-23) I will return to this crucial difference in 4.2.

*3. 3. Frege on Existence and Truth*

In order to make precise the relationship between truth and existence in Frege, it is useful to draw on his distinction between the sense (*Sinn*) and meaning (*Bedeutung*) of signs or names. Setting aside here the sense of a sentence – a thought (*SB*, 32) – according to Frege its meaning is its truth-value: either *the True* or *the False* (*SB*, 34). Furthermore, for him the universe of discourse for proper names[[24]](#footnote-24) consists of all (existing) objects (excluding merely possible ones), and accordingly the meaning of a proper name is an (existing) individual object (so that e.g. “Pegasus” has no meaning, i.e. is empty). (*SB*, 30.) The meanings of sentences and proper names come together in Frege’s highly central principle that a sentence containing proper names has a meaning only if the proper names have meanings (*SB*, 32–4). That is, a judgment can be true or false only if its proper names refer: “Bucephalus is a horse” is true and “Alexander is a horse” is false, whereas “Pegasus is a horse” is neither true nor false but meaningless. Hence both the truth and falsity of a sentence containing proper names presupposes (*setzt voraus*) the existence of the individuals it is about – i.e. that the proper names are not empty.[[25]](#footnote-25) (This is not true of sentences composed only of concepts however.)

That true judgments about individuals presuppose their existence leads to the rule of *existential generalisation*: if an individual, say Pegasus, instantiates the concept of horse, then horses exist, i.e. *H(p) ⇒ ∃x(H(x))*. The most general case of this is *identity*: either “Pegasus = Pegasus” is meaningless[[26]](#footnote-26) or there is Pegasus. And since identity is true of all things, i.e. *x = x* for every *x*, one can generally say that *(a = a) ⇒ ∃x(x = a)*. Since non-existing things cannot instantiate concepts, existence can neither be a property of an object nor a relation, as only existing things can stand or not stand in that relation with a concept to begin with. That is, in order to assess whether the relation holds, we must already presuppose that the object as the other *relatum* exists, and so it is trivially true that all objects stand in that relation (cf. 4.4).

Frege has little to say about sentences containing empty proper names. Sometimes he suggests that we are not interested in truth in the case of fictions and even that the “question of truth would cause us to abandon aesthetic delight for an attitude of scientific investigation” (*SB*, 33). Other times he takes talk about fictions as “indirect” talk about e.g. literary entities: “Gilgamesh is a woman” would be about an actual yet merely literary object (e.g. the mythical person spoken of in the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*). I will not here assess the plausibility either of Frege’s view or of its further developments in secondary literature.[[27]](#footnote-27) What is important here is that, as we shall see, the treatment of fictive individuals becomes a great divider between Kant’s and Frege’s conceptions of truth and existence.

**4 – Kant and Frege**

We have seen that both Kant and Frege deny that existence were a first-level property or a real predicate of a thing.[[28]](#footnote-28) Existence determines objects only by determining the thought/concept of that object. But does Kant, then, maintain with Frege that existence – or absolute positing – is a second-level concept?

*4. 1. Kant and Existence as a Second-Level Concept*

In *The Only Possible Ground* Kant seems to suggest the second-level view of existence: “when existence occurs as a predicate in common speech, it is a predicate not so much of the thing itself as of the thought which one has of the thing” (*OPG*, 72). Insofar as the “thought of the thing” means the concept of the thing, this seems to confirm the Kant-Frege view. There are three problems here, however. First, Kant refers to “common speech,” and it is unclear how much of this characterisation survives his subsequent technical and philosophical analysis. Second, as Timothy Rosenkoetter (2009, 544) points out, this view belongs to what Kant explicitly characterises as a preliminary analysis of existence (*OPG*, 71) – and there is no sign of it later. Finally, this passage seems not only to be the *sole* explicit instance of existence being a property of a concept but also a *pre-critical* one, and it is not clear what remains of it in Kant’s critical period.

Yet, the Kant-Frege view need not rely on this passage alone, for Kant does say similar things about the *categories of modality*, including existence. According to him, the modal categories are ‘special’ concepts that do not express “further determinations in the object” (*KrV*, A 219/B 266). They are “ascribed as predicates” to concepts rather than to the objects of concepts (*ibid.*). They add a “determination to the concept of a thing” (*KrV*, A 233/B 286). Possibility, actuality, and necessity are predicates that “add to the concept of a thing” (*KrV*, A 234/B 286). Finally, according to him the “principles of modality” – through which the modal categories are applied – “assert” something “of a concept” (*KrV*, A 234/B 287).

However, numerous passages also speak against the Kant-Frege view by attributing modality to objects. The categories of modality are characterised as “a determination of the object” (*KrV*, A 219/B 266).[[29]](#footnote-29) One also asks “about this object [not its concept] whether it is merely possible, or also actual, or […] necessary” (*ibid.*), and to do so is to ask: “how is the objectitself (together with all its determinations) related to the understanding and its empirical use, to the empirical power of judgment, and to reason (in its application to experience)” (*ibid.*). So where does Kant stand?[[30]](#footnote-30)

Recall the preliminary suggestion (in 3.1) that existence could denote a relation between a concept and its object.[[31]](#footnote-31) Should existence involve such a relation, it would pertain both to the concept and its object, and it would become irrelevant which quotes one picks, for they would all merely emphasise different sides of this relation. I believe Kant does hold a relational view of existence. In an unpublished note from ca. 1785–1789 he distinguishes between two “dynamical” category groups: relation (substance, causality, reciprocity) and modality (possibility, actuality, necessity). Both are “relation-concepts”; the former express relations “of objects among each other” whereas the latter express relations of objects “to the cognitive capacity” (R5697, *AA* 18: 329). In the *Critique* Kant confirms that the dynamical categories deal with “the existence of […] objects” either “in relation to each other” in the case of categories of relation or in relation “to the understanding”[[32]](#footnote-32) in the case of modality (*KrV*, B 110; cf. B 201–2n).

If this is correct, while Kant and Frege may agree on the negative thesis that existence is not a first-level property of objects, they disagree on its positive characterisation. For Frege existence is a second-level property of concepts of objects; for Kant it is strictly speaking not a property at all but denotes a two-placed function or relation between first-level concepts and null-level objects, as it were (cf. Rosenkoetter 2009, 548; Künne 2010, 224). Thus existence would for Kant be a special kind of hybrid-level function – that Frege calls “unequal-levelled functions” (*FB*, 28) – that takes first-level and null-level arguments.[[33]](#footnote-33) Although the views are close they are still different, for Kant denies that existence has *either* solely a second- *or* a first-level interpretation: a relation between the two is not reducible to either *relata* exclusively.[[34]](#footnote-34)

But since, as we saw, *∃x(F(x))* does not in fact denote a relation between an individual object and a concept, it might seem that Kant is simply mistaken. But for Kant existence does not primarily mean its *indeterminate quantity* (“There are men”) but *determinate individual existence* (“Socrates exists”). That the former (expressed by a quantifier) does not denote a relation does not mean that the latter would not either. It remains open for Kant to interpret determinate individual existence as denoting a relation between a concept and an object.

*4. 2. Kant and Frege on Existence and Truth*

I have already indicated that Kant and Frege disagree when it comes to truth about individuals. For Kant, judgments – even ones about individuals – can be formally or materially true even if the objects do not actually exist. For Frege a judgment about individuals on the contrary cannot be true if they do not exist. I will not rehearse this here; rather, I will show how Kant can substantiate the separation of truth from existence by decoupling existence and the particular quantifier.

In the standard interpretation of Aristotelian logic, both the *all*- and *some-*quantifiers have existential force – although there is considerable debate on this point (e.g. Kneale & Kneale 1962, 58–67; Vilkko & Hintikka 2006). This would in any case explain why the inference from *all* to *some* is valid in Aristotelian logic, as empty terms are not a concern. According to Kant, too, the “*inference from the universal to the particular is valid*” (*JL*, 116; cf. *ibid*., 115, 119; *KrV*, A 303–4/B 360). However, a contradiction looms when he denies existential force of analytic judgments – as is clear e.g. from his repeated statements in the Transcendental Dialectic that certain metaphysical claims like “God is omnipotent” (*KrV*, A 595/B 623; *OPG*, 74) are necessary analytic truths yet do not imply the existence of God. Kant frequently formulates analytic judgments via the universal quantifier, e.g. “All bodies are extended” (*KrV*, A 7/B 11) or even “To everything *x*, to which the concept of body (*a* + *b*) belongs, belongs also *extension* (*b*)” (*JL*, 111). Not only must universal quantifier therefore (at least sometimes) lack existential force, also the particular quantifier must on the pain of contradiction do so.[[35]](#footnote-35) Indeed according to Kant such particular judgments as “*some men are men*” are “merely *tautological*” (*JL*, 115), i.e. explicit analytic judgments (*JL*, 111). (Cf. Vilkko & Hintikka 2006, 363–5, 369.)

That Kant separates the particular quantifier from modality is in a sense perfectly obvious, for – as Rosefeldt points out (2011, 341) – he explicitly treats them as different logical forms. In the table of judgments that enumerates the fundamental logical forms or functions of judgments, the particular quantifier is (unsurprisingly) found under the heading “Quantity” (along with the universal and singular quantifier) that is decidedly distinct from the “Modality” of the same table (*KrV*, A 70/B 95). Neither the “all”- nor “some”-quantifier alone has existential force; they have to be supplemented by a modal determination of their object.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Since identity is necessary,[[37]](#footnote-37) “all hobbits are hobbits” is true, and since for Kant “all” implies “some”, “some hobbits are hobbits” is also true, which in turn implies the truth of “some things are hobbits”. Since “hobbits exist” is not true, however, Kant’s particular quantifier “some” cannot be Frege’s existential quantifier *∃* (cf. *DPE*, 70; Vanzo 2014, 228). Similarly, since Kant grants that e.g. “God is omnipotent” is true, “some things are omnipotent” is also true, which is, however, not to say that omnipotent things (or God) exist – such inferences are exactly what his Transcendental Dialectic seeks to undermine. We can make the difference formally explicit by distinguishing between two functions: the *∃*-function expressing existence “Some existing things are such that…”[[38]](#footnote-38) and, say, the *Σ*-function (for “some”) expressing simply “Some things (existent or not) are such that…” The *∃*-function is the *Σ*-function with the added claim that the members of its scope exist – *∃x(F(x))* implies *Σx(F(x))* but not *vice versa*. Of course, for Frege the *Σ*-function is senseless or at least superfluous, for every individual exists, i.e. *Σx(F(x))* ⇔ *∃x(F(x))*. But it is certainly reasonable to dispute this equivalence – as some philosophers have done (e.g. Hintikka 1969).

Thus one can opt to deny existential force of the existential quantifier and so choose the *Σ*-function, which is exactly what Kant does. That is, although *some* things are hobbits (Frodo is one), no *existing* thing is a hobbit (we presume). Similarly Kant can agree to the truth of *Σn(3 < n < 5*), where *n* is a natural number, without thereby committing himself to the existence of numbers and so to Platonism or some other form of mathematical realism. Thus we can read *Σx(F(x))* as stating that the domain of discourse *D* = {a1, …, an} has a member of which *F(x)* is true.[[39]](#footnote-39) The main point here is that it requires additional investigation whether some members of the domain *D* exist: this domain of discourse may consist of all *possibly* existing things, as in possible worlds semantics – a route that Frege cannot take, for he bans modality from logic in general and merely possibly existing objects in particular (cf. Haaparanta 1985, 129–30).

In the absence of existential force, the sentence “Some hobbits are male” can speak either of actual hobbits (false) or fictitious, merely possible hobbits (true). The existential commitment can be made explicit by saying: “Some existing hobbits are male.” The “some” in both cases states the indeterminate quantity (“at least one”) of members of the scope that instantiate hobbitness; the existential case only adds that these members also exist. The “some” is called a quantifier exactly because it has to do with quantities, and as such the judgment “Some hobbits are male” differs from the judgment “Two hobbits are male” only in their determinacy. And the *some*-function is the same whether we say “Some possible hobbits are male” or “Some actual hobbits are male.”

I noted above that whereas Frege focuses on indeterminate quantity of existence, for Kant existence is primarily about individual existence. Neither philosopher can however avoid talking about both. Although the Fregean *∃x(F(x))* asserts nothing about any individual, but rather states indeterminately of the concept that it is instantiated by some objects, it implies that a determinate individual exists – even if we do not know which one. Although the existential quantifier *abstracts* from determinate individuals, it cannot altogether *discard* them. “There are hobbits” implies that at least one determinate individual – such as Frodo – instantiates *hobbitness*. We may then ask, like Kant does, what it means for Frodo to exist – a question Frege largely sidesteps due to its alleged triviality (e.g. *DPE*, 68–75).[[40]](#footnote-40) Similarly we may ask, like Frege does and Kant not so much, what it means that there are hobbits in general rather than an individual hobbit in particular. While Kant could adopt the Fregean treatment in the case of indeterminate existence, Frege cannot due to their fundamental differences adopt the Kantian treatment of individual existence. It thus seems that while Frege ultimately has no answer to what individual existence is, Kant’s theory of modality does provide one.[[41]](#footnote-41)

*4. 3. Kant and Frege on Existence and Modality*

Modality is what makes Kant’s relational view of existence work. This is because it makes sense to speak of existence as involving a relation between objects and concepts only if an object can in principle fail to stand in that relation, i.e. if there are *merely possible objects*. This is exactly what we have seen Kant assert: “If the concept of a thing is already entirely complete, I can still ask about this object whether it is merely possible, or also actual, or, if it is the latter, whether it is also necessary?” (*KrV*, A 219/B 266.) Even if one has already determined the truth of e.g. *H(b)*, that “Bucephalus is a horse,” and to however many of Bucephalus’s properties one has done this, one can still ask whether “Bucephalus” denotes a merely possible, actual, or necessary thing. Whether Bucephalus exists or not, the predicate “horse” pertains to it and both *H(b)* and *Σx(H(x))* are true. But *∃x(H(x))* follows from *H(b)* only if Bucephalus actually exists/existed. Here Bucephalus and Pegasus are both horses, so that *H(b)* and *H(p)* are both true, but since only Bucephalus exists, only *∃x(H(x))* is true, whereas *H(p)* implies merely that *Σx(H(x))*.

That Kant considers existence to be a modal concept sets him and Frege far apart. For Kant, talk of (merely) possible objects is not only legitimate but, as he makes clear in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), also *necessary*:

It is absolutely necessary for the human understanding to distinguish between the possibility and the actuality of things. The reason for this lies in the subject and the nature of its cognitive faculties. For if two entirely heterogeneous elements were not required for the exercise of these faculties, understanding for concepts and sensible intuition for objects corresponding to them, then there would be no such distinction (between the possible and the actual). […] Now, however, all of our distinction between the merely possible and the actual rests on the fact that the former signifies only the positing [*Position*] of the representation of a thing with respect to our concept and, in general, to our faculty for thinking, while the latter signifies the positing [*Position*] of the thing in itself (apart from this concept). (AA 5: 401–2, translation altered.)

Frege, for his part, could hardly agree that it is “absolutely necessary” to distinguish possibility and actuality of things, for he quite famously banished all alethic modality from his logic (Haaparanta 1985, 146). For him there is only *actual* existence and objects; for Kant there is possible, actual, and necessary existence and objects.[[42]](#footnote-42)

What, then, determines whether a particular existential judgment is true? While Frege has little to say here, Kant’s answer lies in the relationship of the concept of an object to the cognitive capacities:

If a concept of a thing is already entirely complete, I can still ask about this object whether it is merely possible, or also actual, or, if it is the latter, whether it is also necessary? No further determinations in the object itself are hereby thought; rather, it is only asked: how is the object itself (together with all its determinations) related to the understanding and its empirical use, to the empirical power of judgment, and to reason (in its application to experience)? (*KrV*, A 219/B 266.)

Although Kant’s theory of modality is too intricate and complex to elaborate in any detail here, some remarks are helpful in pinpointing the difference between Kant and Frege.[[43]](#footnote-43) First, recall Kant’s famous dictum that cognition of an object requires both concepts and intuitions: through the former the understanding *thinks* the object and through the latter sensibility *gives* it: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.” (*KrV*, A 51/B 75.) When the *concept* of an object *o*, *C(o)*, is properly related to an *intuition* of that object, *i(o)*, the (true) cognition “o is C” is formed. The “properly” here expresses the condition that the intuition *i* contains or instantiates the predicates contained in the concept *C* – or in Frege’s terms, that in *∃x(C(x))* the two occurrences of *x* denote the *same* object.[[44]](#footnote-44) In other words, the predicates *thought* in *C* have to be *intuited* in *i*.

Thus we see that the preliminary analysis of Kant’s theory of existence must in fact undergo a crucial modification: the instantiation-relation is not primarily between a concept and an object after all but between a concept and an intuition *of an object*. That the instantiation-relation thus pertains between two *representations* – rather than between a representation (concept) and its object – is one of the core features of transcendental idealism. Namely, for Kant an object “is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is *united*” (*KrV*, B 137).[[45]](#footnote-45) That an object is thus always an object *of* a concept and *of* an intuition is exactly why determining the relation between the latter two also determines – allows us to cognise – the object itself, be it as actual or as merely possible. That it may seem odd should not make us doubt that it is Kant’s considered view – it should rather serve to underscore the fundamental difference between Frege’s realist and Kant’s transcendentally idealistic conceptions of existence.

Importantly, since *exists* is a monadic predicate, one should not say that existence strictly speaking *is* a relation (a polyadic predicate) but that it is a *relational* property. Consider e.g. the monadic predicate “( ) is a spouse”: while “x is a spouse” is meaningful on its own, it implies the relation “x is married to ( ).” Similarly, in Kant’s analysis “x exists” is true if and only if the relation “( ) is instantiated by ( )” holds between the concept of *x* and the intuition of *x*.[[46]](#footnote-46) Note that since intuitions in Kant are singular representations of individuals (*JL*, 91), they would in Frege’s terminology denote null-level objects, making the relation pertain between first- and a null-level representations, just as I argued above (cf. 4.1).

Now, whether the concept and intuition are properly related is determined by our cognitive faculties, which also set certain necessary conditions for this relation. Kant links this to (real) modality: if the concept and the intuition can be related at least in (empirical) thinking or imagination, the object is really possible (exists possibly) – or, conversely, if the concept contains predicates that cannot even be imagined, the object is really impossible.[[47]](#footnote-47) If the relation holds also in perception so that the corresponding intuition can be given in sensation, then the object of the concept and intuition actually exists.[[48]](#footnote-48) Finally, if the relation between the two is determined via reason, then the two must be united and the object exists necessarily. (*KrV*, A 218–35/B 265–87.) Note that although existence is here parsed via a relation between concepts and intuitions, it is still *the object* that exists possibly, actually, or necessarily (similarly despite existence being a property of a concept for Frege, it is the object that exists, see 3.1).[[49]](#footnote-49)

*4. 4. Relational and Non-Relational Interpretations of Existence*

The structure of existence (and its modalities) is relational in the following sense: “o exists” is true if and only if an instantiation-relation *E* holds between the concept of an object *C(o)* and an intuition of it *i(o)*: *E(C(o), i(o))*. Modal predicates are then attributed to this relation depending on what grounds it holds. Modalities are thus predicated of the relation (existence) rather than of either the concept or the intuition alone: possibility is “a predicate that belongs […] to the positing of the thing insofar as it [the thing] agrees with [*übereinstimmt*] the laws of thinking” (*AA* 29: 822), and “existence must belong directly to the manner in which [the] concept is posited” (*OPG*, 74). Existence is positing – a relational property – and its modality is a property of this positing.

According to the postulate of possibility, if the concept of an object *C(o)* can be instantiated by an intuition *i(o)* under “the formal conditions of experience (in accordance with intuition and concepts)” (*KrV*, A 218/B 265), the object *o* possibly exists. That is, if the concept contains predicates that (1) are compatible with the categories and (2) do not violate space and time, then one can give it a corresponding intuition (and hence an object) *at least in imagination*. The postulate of actuality adds to this the requirement that if the intuition *i(o)* can be given in *perception*, i.e. via sensation, the object *o* exists actually: “That which is connected with the material conditions of experience (of sensation) is *actual*” (*KrV*, A 218/B 266–7; cf. A 225/B 272 for perception). Here the object is not merely intuited but is intuited *because* it is given in sensation (perceived) – not because it is merely imagined. In mere possibility *only* the intuition instantiates the concept, whereas here the source of the sensation in the intuition, i.e. the object of the intuition, also instantiates it. Finally, the postulate of necessity builds on the postulate of actuality so that if the necessary conditions of experience alone determine that the concept *C(o)* is instantiated by an intuition *i(o)* given through sensation, then the object *o* exists necessarily: “That whose connection with the actual is determined in accordance with general [i.e. formal and material] conditions of experience is (exists) *necessarily*.” (*KrV*, A 218/B 266). In a more compact form:

If something [an object] is only thought, then it is possible. If something is thought because it is already given, then it is actual. And if it is given because it is thought, then it is necessary. (*AA* 28: 554.)

It is noteworthy that if for Kant the instantiation-relation pertained directly between concepts and objects rather than concepts and intuitions of objects, then if the object did not exist, there would not be two *relata* in the relation. This is why Frege so forcibly advocates the senselessness of negative existential assertions about individuals (objects): it is a consistent position to hold if one construes instantiation as pertaining between a concept and an object. By making the relation hold between concepts and intuitions of objects instead, Kant can make sense of negative existential assertions about individual objects: even when there is no actual object, the relation between the *concept* of an object and its *intuition* can hold (e.g. in case the concept of unicorn stands in instantiation-relation to an imagined intuition – making the latter an imagined intuition *of a unicorn*).[[50]](#footnote-50) Consequently, Kant’s *possibilia* are imaginary objects.

To summarise, consider how Frege, Meinong, and Kant exhaust the three different ways of parsing existence (as presented in 3.1): as a property of the concept, as a property of the object, and as a relation between the concept and intuition of an object. If an object *o*, correctly characterised by the concept *C* and intuition *i*, actually exists, we get:

(Frege) The concept *C( )* has the property of existence: *∃x(C(x))*.

(Meinong) The object *o* has the property of existence: *E(o)*.

(Kant) The relation *E(C(o)*, *i(o))* can be perceived to hold.

If the object *o* does not exist (but is possible), we get:

(Frege) The concept *C( )* does not have the property of existence: *¬∃x(C(x))*.

(Meinong) The object *o* does not have the property of existence: *¬E(o)*.

(Kant) The relation *E(C(o), i(o))* can only be imagined or thought to hold.

As we can see, Frege’s view is logically simpler than Kant’s, whereas only the latter can deal with merely possible individuals (Frege can only deal with general concepts of merely possible objects). Meinong’s position, which shall not be assessed here, does combine simplicity with the capacity to deal with merely possible individuals, yet it has to deal with the myriad of problems associated with taking existence to be a property of objects.

**5 – Concluding remarks**

I have argued that the Kant-Frege view is mistaken: while Kant and Frege do agree that existence is not a property of an object or a characteristic mark contained in the concept, there are at least five major differences between them. First, whereas for Frege existence is denoted by the existential quantifier, for Kant the quantifier merely expresses the quantity of existence: that at least one thing exists. Thus, second, unlike Frege’s existential quantifier, Kant’s particular quantifier does not have existential force. Third, whereas for Frege existence is a property of a concept to be instantiated, according to Kant for an object to exist is for its concept and its intuition to stand in an instantiation-relation. Thus, fourth, for Frege a concept either is or is not instantiated so that an object either exists or not; for Kant the instantiation-relation can pertain in three different ways so that the object exists possibly, actually, or necessarily. For this reason, fifth, whereas for Frege there can be truths only about existing objects (individuals), for Kant truths can be also about merely possible objects in the case of material truth and even about really impossible objects in the case of merely formal truth.

Now much of what Frege says about existence is motivated by his desire to develop logic as a formal and unambiguous language of science, with the express presupposition that the objects of science exist (*GGA I*, § 5; *NS*, 135; Haaparanta 1985, 135–7). His reply to the sceptic or “idealist” makes his philosophical interest absolutely clear: “I answer that it is not our goal to speak of our representation of the Moon […] when we say ‘the Moon’; we rather presuppose a meaning” (*SB*, 31). That one might digress and maintain that “Sauron is Sauron” is a necessary truth rather than a meaningless utterance of fiction without a truth-value is irrelevant to Frege’s aspirations. But that Frege’s view may be reasonable for certain goals does not mean that it is helpful in others. The obvious case is when we desire to determine whether something that is not an object of natural science really exists. While questioning the existence of the Moon or entertaining the thought that Sauron really exists may be beneath a scientist, in metaphysics such contemplations seem crucial: Does God exist?

For Frege, logic is applied in science, hence one can presuppose the objectivity of that science. In his “Dialogue with Pünjer on Existence” Frege does ultimately grant Pünjer’s claim that inferring “There are men” from “Sachse is a man” requires a further sentence “Sachse exists” – that “it is correct that the condition ‘Sachse exists’ must be satisfied” (*DPE*, 60). He nonetheless states that “[t]he rules of logic always presuppose that the words we use are not empty, […] that one is not merely playing with words” (*ibid.*). But in that very same vein it is exactly Kant’s aim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to determine whether, how, and under what conditions *metaphysics can indeed be scientific* and *not* mere play with words. The question of existence – delegated by Frege to the sciences – is what drives Kant’s critical and meta-metaphysical project: how could we for example show (*contra* Hume) that causal relations *exist* and are not just *thought*? To such questions Frege does not even purport to seek answers. Nor does he from a Kantian perspective have the tools for providing any, for by shunning modal questions and trivialising the problem of individual existence, Frege arrives at a far too restrictive sense of existence that renders senseless the very meta-metaphysical questions that Kant – as I have argued elsewhere (Kannisto 2012) – set in the core of his philosophy.[[51]](#footnote-51) What Kant sought to show, Frege has already taken for granted. Thus what might at first appear as a precise formulation of Kant’s negative thesis that existence is not a real predicate turns out to be a fundamentally different answer to the positive theory of what existence *is*.

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2. Translations of Kant’s works are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Translations used for Frege citations are listed in the bibliography. References to Kant follow the *Akademie-Ausgabe* (AA 1–28) pagination, except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, for which the original 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) edition paginations are used. References to Frege follow the paginations of the original German publications. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Several scholars concur with Bennett’s claim to a varying degree, e.g. Haaparanta 1985 & 1986; Röd 1989; Wolff 1995: 128; Van Cleve 1999; Allison 2004, 414–5; Forgie 2000, 165 & 2007; Vilkko & Hintikka 2006; Rosenkoetter 2009, 548–50. It is contested at least by Sluga 1982, 88–90; Rosefeldt 2008 & 2011; Vanzo 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. Röd 1989; Wolff 1995: 128; Van Cleve 1999; Allison 2004: 414f.; Forgie 2000: 165, & 2007; Vilkko & Hintikka 2006; Rosenkoetter 2009: 548–50; Rosefeldt 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kant frequently uses “actual” and “existence” as equivalent to ”actual existence”; this is particularly clear in that the Table of Categories lists “existence – non-existence” as the second modal category, whereas in the Postulates of Empirical Thinking in General the second modal category is actuality (*Wirklichkeit*). Note that Frege on the contrary distinguishes sharply between actuality and existence, counting only the latter as part of logic: actuality is spatiotemporal and causally efficacious existence. (*GGA I*, xxv; Künne 2010, 374–5, 536–41; Sluga 1980, 90.) Although for Kant, too, actuality involves spatiotemporality and causality (due to its restriction to appearances), it would not be correct to say that Kant’s *existence* were Fregean *actuality*: actual existence, as far as the meaning of the term goes, could for Kant too involve non-spatiotemporal and causally inert entities if only we could apply it beyond the world of appearances. Cf. note 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is sometimes thought that for Kant the extension of concepts consists of other concepts rather than objects. But the cited passage and other similar passages make it clear that here it is the ”things” that constitute the extension. Kant does speak of the ”logical extension of concepts” and how concepts are subordinated to each other with regard to their extension, but a concept is in this sense ”contained under” another concept only because its extension (referent things) is a subset of that of the higher concept. See *JL*, §§ 7–14. For a different view, see Schulthess (1981, 103 ff.), who distinguishes (somewhat subtly) between “extensional” and “intensional” extension (cf. also Longuenesse 1998, 77n8, 383n97). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kant’s terminology here is woefully ambiguous, with “containment” used both of concepts and things. To avoid confusion, I have here employed a broadly Fregean distinction between *predicates* and *properties*: concepts contain predicates, and if a thing instantiates these predicates, it has (or, in Kantian terms, contains) the corresponding properties. (Properties are, then, instantiated predicates.) See also note 8 and Rosefeldt 2011, 345n11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For a detailed presentation of this point, see Kannisto 2016, 301–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Longuenesse 1998, 352. This, however, is not Frege’s sense of predication. See section 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kant specifically states that he does not use the term ”absolute” to ”indicate that something is valid of a thing considered *in itself* and thus *internally*” but to ”indicate that something is valid in every relation (unlimitedly)” (*KrV*, A 324/B 381; cf. A 326/B 382). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. MacFarlane disagrees: on ”Kant's view, then, there can be no such thing as a judgment about concepts themselves” (MacFarlane 2002, 51). He adds: “*Analytic* judgments are no exception. Although we need not look beyond the concepts themselves to know the truth of an analytic judgment and can therefore abstract from their relation to objects […], analytic judgments are still judgments about *objects*, not concepts […]. Without 'relation to an object' they would not be judgments at all." (*Ibid.*, 51n38.) (Cf. also Longuenesse 1998, 87; Rosenkoetter 2008.) I grant that every judgment may have an objective *purport* in that they are conditionally about objects: even an analytic judgment like “unicorns are one-horned” states objectively that *in case* there are unicorns, they have one horn. (Thus I disagree also with Gram 1980, 179.) We may even always *seek* to say something about objects, as Frege maintains (*SB*, 31). But if MacFarlane means that the *truth* of a judgment requires a relation to an object, I disagree: the formal truth and the status of analytic judgments *as judgments* does not depend on them having even possible objects. E.g. “A is A” or “A is either A or B” are true analytic judgments insofar as *A* is not a self-contradictory concept, irrespective of whether *A*’s object is really possible or not, and in this sense they are certainly judgments “about concepts”, namely about their interrelations. (Cf. e.g. *JL*, 50–53, 111.) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This identity makes the judgment analytic, as analytic judgments are grounded on the principle of contradiction or identity (e.g. *KrV*, A 594/B 622). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. An example is any judgment about a *bi-angle*, i.e. a “figure that is enclosed between two straight lines and their intersection” (*KrV*, A 220/B 268). It is logically possible yet really impossible, for it contradicts “the conditions of space and its determinations” (*KrV*, A 221/B 268). On formal truth, see Stuhlmann-Laeisz 1976, 61–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. also: ”The faculty of intuition, insofar as it begins from the presence of the object, is sense; insofar as it is without object, but yet is in respect to time [i.e. to past in memory and to future in anticipation], is power of imagination; and without any relation of the object to time, the fictive faculty. These three faculties constitute the intuition of objects.” (*AA* 29: 881.) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Note that Kant’s predication ”A is B” between concepts is in Frege’s classification an instance of *subordination* rather than predication. Frege’s predication is thus closer to Kant’s absolute than relative positing. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The subject-predicate structure of Aristotelian logic is replaced by function-argument structure – something Frege took to be one of his main inventions (*BS*, 7). Indeed, this change is part of the quantificational revolution that made logic quantify over individuals rather than operate on concepts, judgments, and inferences. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Note, however, that Frege did not have an explicit existential quantifier: instead he used the complex expression (that is in our notation) *¬∀x¬F(x)*. (Cf. Haaparanta 1985, 15; Künne 2010, 740.) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It is worth clarifying that Kant and Frege understand concepts very differently: for Kant a concept is a thought-entity whereas for Frege it is a part of reality. Kant’s concepts are closer to Frege’s concept-words than to his concepts (referents of concept-words). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Frege uses the definite and indefinite article (of German) to distinguish between *object* and *concept* (e.g. *GA*, §§ 38, 51, 57; *BG*, 195). If a name is preceded by the definite article “the,” it denotes an object (in a wide sense, cf. *SB*, 42), and if it is preceded by the indefinite article “a,” it denotes a concept. According to Frege, “There is Julius Caesar” is senseless, i.e. neither true nor false, for the existential quantifier applies to concepts, whereas Julius Caesar is an object (Künne 2010, 224). On the other hand, “the sentence ‘there is a man whose name is Julius Caesar’ has a sense, but here again we have a concept, as the indefinite article [in ‘a man’] shows” (*BG*, 200). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. On Frege and Meinong, see Rosefeldt 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. A defender of the relation-view might suggest that there is then an object here after all: the class that constitutes the range *x*. And indeed classes are objects for Frege (Kluge 1980, 121; Haaparanta 1986, 273). In other words, one could suggest that *∃x(F(x))* expresses a relation between a concept and a class of objects. Thus the situation is fairly complicated – partly because for Frege what constitutes a function is context-dependent: “The situation is the same for the proposition that Cato killed Cato. If we here think of ‘Cato’ as replaceable at its first occurrence, ‘to kill Cato’ is the function; if we think of ‘Cato’ as replaceable at its second occurrence, ‘to be killed by Cato’ is the function; if, finally, we think of ‘Cato’ as replaceable at both occurrences, ‘to kill oneself’ is the function.” (*BS*, § 9.) I will not here assess this suggestion further. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Except, perhaps, when interpreted as the uninformative “Socrates is Socrates.” (Cf. *DPE*, 60–2, 70–1; Haaparanta 1985, 131, 140–1; Stuhlmann-Laeisz 1975, 126; Künne 2010, 702.) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Hintikka notes that in general the ”problem of the existence of individuals *as individuals* has […] received only scattered attention” (Hintikka 1969, 23.) [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Here I mean ”proper name” in the strict sense of e.g. ”Julius Caesar.” Frege sometimes contrasts proper names with sentences (e.g. *SB*, 32) even though he takes a sentence to *be* a special kind of proper name that denotes the True or the False (e.g. *SB*, 34). Be that as it may, I do not here mean to claim (or deny) that the True or the False are therefore existing individual objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Due to his theory of existence, Frege prefers to avoid the redundancy of saying that the objects denoted by proper names ”exist.” Yet he notes that: ”If ’Sachse exists’ is supposed to mean ’The word ”Sachse” […] designates something’, then it is true that the condition ’Sachse exists’ must be satisfied” (*DPE*, 60). As long as we keep this in mind, we can speak of existential presuppositions (cf. Künne 2010, 449). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. ”x = y” is either true or false if “x” and “y” have a meaning. ”x = x”, however, could only be false if there is no *x*, in which case the sentence is meaningless. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See e.g. Haaparanta 1986, 129–30, 137–9; Künne 2007; 2010, 289 ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. According to Sluga, one difference between Kant and Frege is that ”Frege does not say, as Kant does, that ’being’ is no real predicate, but only that it is not a predicate of an object” (Sluga 1980, 89). But for Kant a real predicate is precisely a predicate of an object, or a “determination of a thing” (*OPG*, 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The apparent conflict between this and the previous characterisations can be dispelled by reference to *content*, cf. 2.1. See also Kannisto 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. I sympathise with Rosefeldt’s claim that Kant seems to “waver” between the two positions because his view has both Fregean and Meinongian elements (Rosefeldt 2011, 337). I do not, however, think that Kant’s view is either Fregean or Meinongian in any strong sense: while Rosefeldt maintains that for Kant existence is in a very (but not fully) Meinongian fashion “a property that some objects have” (*ibid*., 343), my relational interpretation takes a very different approach to a different conclusion (4.4). A major facilitator in my break with Rosefeldt is my emphasis on Kant’s theory of modality (4.3) that Rosefeldt mentions only in passing (*ibid.*, 338, 341). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Strictly speaking for Kant the relation does not hold between a concept and its object, but between the concept and an intuition of an object. This preliminary analysis, sufficient for current purposes, will be modified in 4.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. This is to be taken in the wider sense of “understanding” that Kant often uses to encompass all the higher cognitive faculties: understanding proper (faculty of concepts), power of judgment (faculty of judgments), and reason (faculty of inference). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Frege’s examples of such hybrids are differential quotients and definite integrals (*FB*, 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Frege does reference a relational interpretation, suggested by Benno Kerry, in which “one might, like Kerry, regard an object falling under a concept as a relation […]. The words 'object' and 'concept' would then serve only to indicate the different positions in the relation.” (*BG*, 192–3) He even grants that “[t]his may be done” (*BG*, 193), although he rejects the view because it only shifts the difficulty Kerry seeks to avoid, namely how to distinguish sharply between a concept and an object. There are two important details here, however. First, Kerry’s suggestion is more precisely that “concept” and “object” are simply names for whatever takes the roles of concept (that which refers) and object (that which is referred), whereas for Kant, like for Frege, there is a qualitative difference between concepts and objects that prohibits substituting one with the other. Second, that the relational view does not solve Kerry’s problem is one thing, but there may be – and Kant does have – other reasons to opt for it. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cf. Rosefeldt 2011, Vanzo 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In fact the particular quantifier and existence are further apart still, for existence does not belong to the table of judgments at all but to the table of categories. I will not here explore further Kant’s distinction between the modalities in the two tables (see Kannisto 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Kant does not very explicitly state that identity is necessary, yet identical propositions are tautologies (“A is A”), which are immediately certain propositions (see e.g. *JL*, 111; *AA* 24: 937; *AA* 24: 767). Frege asserts the necessity of identity e.g. in *GGA I*: 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Kant uses this form explicitly: ”there belongs to an existent thing those predicates which […]” (*OPG*, 74). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. On Kant’s discussion of domain, extension (*Umfang*), or sphere (*Sphäre*), see e.g. *KrV*, A 71–4/B 96–9; *JL*, 96–100, 102–4, 106–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. It does not seem that Frege has any philosophically pertinent reasons for sidestepping the issue – only his intentions, goals, or wishes: “If I utter a sentence with the grammatical subject ‘all men’, I do *not* wish to say something about some Central African chief wholly unknown to me.” (Frege 1895, 454.) For whether he wishes it or not, he necessarily *does* say something about that chief, namely whatever he wants to say about all men. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Presumably one could propose a Fregean theory of individual existence even though Frege himself does not advance one. Similarly one could likely use the particular quantifier to express indeterminate existence in Kant without violating his philosophical system. It is, however, not pertinent to my main thesis to assess this: I seek only to establish that Kant’s and Frege’s explicit theories and definitions of existence differ. Accordingly, that Kant could use the particular quantifier to express a quantity of existence would not change the fact that for him it is not the quantifier that denotes existence. And that Frege could tell a story of what it is for Julius Caesar to exist or how to assess truth-values of judgments about fictions would not change the fact that for him it is the quantifier that denotes existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For Kant ”object” is the ”highest concept in ontology” (AA 29: 811) and is divided into possible and impossible as well as into possible and actual objects (*KrV*, A 290/B 346; AA 29: 960–61). Alberto Vanzo (2014) also argues convincingly that Kant predicates properties of merely possible objects. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For an explication of Kant’s theory of modality, see Kannisto 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The role that *intuition* plays in Kant is roughly speaking played by *object* or *individual* in Frege. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Several central passages express this complex relationship between concepts, intuitions, and objects. Consider e.g.: ”Since no representation pertains to the object immediately except intuition alone, a concept is thus never immediately related to an object, but is always related to some other representation of it” (*KrV*, A 68/B 93). ”In all subsumptions of an object under a concept the *representations* of the former must be *homogeneous* with the latter, i.e., the concept must contain that which is represented in the object that is to be subsumed under it […]. Thus the empirical concept of a *plate* has homogeneity with the pure geometrical concept of a *circle*, for the roundness that is thought in the former can be intuited in the latter.” (*KrV*, A 137/B 176, first emphasis mine.) This latter quote makes it clear that for Kant an object is “subsumed” under (i.e. instantiates) concepts only indirectly when its *intuition* is so subsumed – which in turn happens when what is thought in the concept is intuited. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. I am indebted to the anonymous referee for drawing due attention to this crucial point. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. The role of imagination is essential here, as it provides this intuition even in the absence of a corresponding existing object (cf. 2.3). The interplay between understanding (concepts) and sensibility (intuition) in acts of imagination is complex and need not be addressed here. (Cf. e.g. *KrV*, B 150–6.) [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. There are two important things to note here. First, one cannot always first imagine everything that can also be perceived: one cannot e.g. imagine a new colour *a priori* but needs to perceive it first. For Kant there are plenty of possibilities that can only be cognised *a posteriori* via their actuality, i.e. by first perceiving them (*KrV*, A 222–3/B 269–70). Second, existence does not require *direct perception*: “cognizing the *actuality* of things requires […] not immediate perception of the object itself […], but still its connection with some actual perception in accordance with the analogies of experience” (*KrV*, A 225/B 272). This avoids two obvious problems: that we cannot always directly perceive existing things (like magnetism, *KrV*, A 226/B 273) and the Berkeleyan position that things would only exist insofaras they are perceived – it suffices for the existence of a thing that by belonging to the causal nexus of nature, it is connected to experience in general and is therefore *perceivable*. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. That existence requires intuition raises a worry about the existence of things in themselves, which we cannot intuit. As the intricacies of transcendental idealism can hardly be taken up here in any detail, I can only offer a brief sketch of how to develop a full response. Existence is a category for Kant, and all categories have ”merely empirical use [to appearances], without any permission or allowance for their transcendental use [to things in themselves]” (*KrV*, A 219/B 266). Thus the transcendental use of existence to things in themselves is a special case of a notorious, general Kantian problem (manifest e.g. in noumenal causation and freedom). One can accordingly apply existing solutions – e.g. distinguish between schematised and unschematised existence and thereby between the humanely cognisable existence of appearances and merely thinkable existence of things in themselves. This is not hand waving either: Kant not only allows for non-human (e.g. intellectual) intuition but also exactly connects it to existence. The representations of a “divine understanding” “that itself intuited” would *create* their objects (*KrV*, B 145; cf. Allison 2004, 13–14). Far from breaking the relational interpretation of existence, such a being capable of cognising things in themselves would seem to conform to it perfectly: its objects exist because its thought and intuition necessarily coincide (for they are the same), which is something that Kant could hardly say if coinciding thought and intuition had nothing to do with existence. The relational view thus does apply to things in themselves as a limit case – it is the type of cognition rather than the sense of existence that is the relevant difference here. Note that in the passage from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* cited above Kant addresses this issue by remarking that for a being that did not have two separate cognitive faculties – thinking and intuition – the modal difference between possible and actual existence would collapse and “all objects that I cognize would *be* (exist)” (*AA* 5: 403). I am grateful to the anonymous referee for challenging me to address this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Similarly to Frege, for Meinong existence and possibility could not be instantiation-relations: if they were such relations rather than properties of objects, then e.g. “Pegasus does not exist” would mean that the concept of Pegasus is not instantiated by Pegasus even though there *is* Pegasus (that just happens not to have the property of existence). It would be odd indeed if despite being, Pegasus wouldnot instantiate or be a referent of its own concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. E.-H. W. Kluge’s book *The Metaphysics of Gottlob Frege* (1980) might cast a dubious light on this claim. But, first, Kluge himself notes that ”it is generally not even recognized or suspected that [Frege] had such a [metaphysical] system” (Kluge 1980, 5), which is to say that the sense in which Frege has metaphysics at all is problematic. And second, in any case even if Frege does have a metaphysics of a kind, it does not mean that he has tools for dealing with *meta-*metaphysical questions about the *justification* of metaphysics. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)