


Discussion of Katharina Kraus' Kant's Ideas of Reason

Jessica Tizzard

University of Tübingen ✉ 

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ENG Abstract: In this discussion of Katharina Kraus' Cambridge Element *Kant's Ideas of Reason*, I explore the interpretive upshot of her perspectivalist approach to the regulative use of ideas in Kant's theoretical philosophy. After briefly summarizing her basic framework, I pose a series of questions about how her position could be interpreted as a form of modest noumenalism, focusing on the claim that a grounding relation to unconditioned reality is needed to maintain an objective criterion of truth. This leads to some brief reflections on the nature of objectivity in Kant's broader philosophical system. I conclude by pointing out the advantages of her twofold approach to the regulative use of ideas, which serve both semantic and epistemic functions, and suggest this distinction is also essential to understanding the use of ideas in Kant's practical philosophy. **Keywords:** ideas, regulative use, perspectivalism, noumenalism, fictionalism.

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Kraus' perspectivalist reading offers a new take on the regulative use of ideas that Kant develops in the first *Critique*, one which promises to avoid the difficulties associated with well-known alternatives. Positioning her own reading with respect to the two extremes of noumenalism and fictionalism, Kraus explains how a perspectivalist interpretation of the transcendental ideas can embrace the advantages of each while also avoiding their shortcomings. Like the fictionalist, her account shows how the regulative use of ideas serves to promote the necessary aim of theoretical reason: namely, the production of an interconnected system of cognitions directed towards the understanding of nature. Because she does not treat ideas as empty fictions that can only serve this purpose, however, her perspectivalism also argues that the regulative use of ideas surpasses the merely logical use of reason, and provides objectively valid principles that are normatively binding precisely because they are connected to a mind-independent reality. In this respect she aligns herself with noumenalism without having to embrace its strongest and most problematic iterations, because this connection to objective reality is not secured via judgment about or commitment to the existence of determinate noumenal entities like God and the soul. Kraus' view is thereby able to frame the regulative use of ideas as an example of the real use of reason—i.e., one that goes beyond merely subjective conditions and relates to real objects—without running afoul of Kant's insistence that speculative reason can never enjoy determinate cognition of things-in-themselves via the categories.

Even when outlined in such broad strokes, the advantages of this position are obvious. Understood as a moderate form of noumenalism—a term Kraus herself is happy to adopt (Kraus 2025, p. 67)—I believe it represents the most textually plausible and philosophically desirable approach to reason's regulative use of the transcendental ideas.¹ From this standpoint, the discussion to follow will both highlight the advantages of Kraus' position and raise questions about its details.

The parallel issues that emerge through the comparison of noumenalism and fictionalism prove to be structurally illuminating, and run through the development of Kraus' interpretation. As she notes at the end of section 1, "an adequate interpretation of ideas of reason should preserve the true core of each view: the *productive* aspects of ideas as heuristic fictions of the human mind that promote the systematization of cognitions and the *realist* aspects of ideas that allow a relation to a mind-independent reality" (Kraus 2025, p. 22; emphasis mine). The need for reason to play a role in each of these functions is then explained in section 2, where Kraus turns directly to Kant's text to document the understanding's fundamental limits and

¹ Part of the reason why I endorse moderate noumenalism about theoretical reason's regulative use of ideas is because I have become convinced that practical reason's use of the ideas must amount to a strong form of noumenalism: that is, practical reason's use of the ideas is constitutive in character, and thus capable of determining particular noumenal objects or grounds via the categories. This approach to the practical philosophy sets the standard for strong noumenalism, leaving only a more moderate role for theoretical reason's regulative use. For a detailed defense of this position, see (Tizzard forthcoming).

the guiding role that reason must take up in response. In keeping with the framework that has already been introduced, we find two particular issues that reason must compensate for: conceptual underdetermination and insufficient criteria for truth (Kraus 2025, p. 23). The first issue affects the semantic function of the understanding and its ability to produce empirical concepts, while the second impacts its epistemic function and ability to assess the truth of empirical cognitions. In response, reason “plays a transcendental role for the empirical cognition of nature”, providing principles that guide the understanding in both of these essential tasks (Kraus 2025, p. 38).

The most immediate questions that I have respond to the second function, which is first introduced in connection with noumenalism and its interpretive advantage: namely, relation to a mind-independent reality. Preserving this aspect of noumenalism without the problematic metaphysical baggage associated with overly strong iterations is what allows Kraus to articulate an account of reason that compliments the epistemic function of the understanding and thus its ability for empirical truth-assessment. With respect to the regulative use of ideas, explaining how reason can guide the understanding in this way amounts to answering the following question: “how can we make sure that [the ideas] do not lead us astray but instead enable real progress in the cognition of nature?” (Kraus 2025, p. 54). This amounts to explaining the ‘normative bindingness of ideas’, which must be grounded—or assumed to be grounded—in an ‘ultimate reality’ (Kraus 2025, p. 54-5). It is, accordingly, the relation to reality itself that vindicates the regulative use of ideas as objectively valid, i.e., as a real use, which extends beyond the limits of fictionalism and the merely subjective, logical use of the faculty.

This set-up is carefully built and persuasively argued, and my questions pertain only to the details that fill out the account in the final pages of the text. I have difficulty grasping exactly what role the concept of an ultimate reality, *qua* reality, is meant to play in securing the normative bindingness of ideas. One can begin a response by noting first that the regulative use of ideas must be fulfilling a prescriptive role. Kraus begins section 5.3 by noting that the restrictions of the first *Critique*’s Appendix, which deter strong noumenalist accounts, support the argument that “ideas of reason have their legitimacy with regard to the cognition of nature only as normative ideals” (Kraus 2025, p. 62). She continues:

These ideas are projections of an ultimate reality beyond the human horizon. This is the reality against which we *should* measure the success of our cognition, *if* there were such a reality. But such a projection cannot itself amount to a truth-assessable assertion about such a reality. It can only ever be a *focus imaginarius* for us (Kraus 2025, p. 62).

To support this reading, Kraus reminds us that there can be no constitutive use for ideas via the categories, meaning they can only have “objective but indeterminate validity” (A663/B691) or be “valid, albeit only indirectly, for the object of experience” (A665/B693). The inclusion of this second quotation is helpful, as it allows us to see that the issue here is not the objects of the ideas themselves—that is, the soul, the world-whole, or God as existing things—but the objects of empirical cognition. The question, then, is whether ideas are constitutive for experience itself, and Kraus takes Kant’s qualified claim that the ideas have only an “indeterminate validity” to indicate that they are not. As she elaborates, these ideas do not establish positive claims about nature but rather “in a negative sense, they define restrictions on nature: they project ideals without which nature could not be intelligible to us at all. If cognition were not ‘cultivated and corrected’ against these ideals, it could not be evaluated as true (Kraus 2025, p. 63).

As the argument continues, we get a more detailed description of how these normative ideals function. The regulative use of the idea of God, for example, does not amount to positing God’s existence but rather positing “a substratum, unknown to us, of the systematic unity, order, and purposiveness of the world’s arrangement” (A696/B724). According to Kraus’ account, this substratum,

is the projection of an ultimate goal of our cognitive efforts. The regulative use of the idea of God enables the projection of an ultimate reality that would ground the world of appearances. An ultimate reality that would make the cognition of appearances true, independently of the way we carve up nature by our a priori forms and our empirical concepts (Kraus 2025, p. 63).

The term projection recurs throughout this discussion and is closely related to the function of a *focus imaginarius*, which represents an ideal standard for measuring progress in finding real systematic connections among appearances. Kraus distinguishes this approach from the fictionalist approach because “these projections are not arbitrary fictions...but placeholders for an ultimate reality” (Kraus 2025, p. 64).

This brings us to the heart of the issue, and my earlier question about the role of an ultimate reality *qua* reality. The talk of ideals, projections, and placeholders can suggest that a real relation to ultimate reality—needed to ensure that our empirical cognitions are not just subjectively systematic but objective or true—has not yet been identified. Kraus addresses this issue most directly in a paragraph at the end of 5.3, when she grants that this ultimate reality might be identified with things-in-themselves and takes it to be an essential assumption of transcendental idealism that things-in-themselves exist (Kraus 2025, p. 64). But the key question, which Kraus recognizes, “is whether this mind-independent reality actually matches our idea-based projections of it” (Kraus 2025, p. 64). I do not yet understand how the perspectivist can respond to this question, especially since the ultimate reality in question, which must be viewed from nowhere or without perspective, must remain beyond the limits of our cognition.

In short, it seems that perspectivalism is committed to both the normative functions of ideals and the actual existence of things-in-themselves, and thus an ultimate reality, but it remains unclear—at least to me—whether and how the two are related, and some kind of relation seems essential if we are to overcome

fictionalism. As Kraus writes in her initial set-up, “by denying that ideas even indeterminately point us to the existence of something absolutely unconditioned that grounds our cognition, fictionalism may be forced to dispense with objective criteria of truth” (Kraus 2025, p. 22). I would like to hear more about two points that can be related to this formulation: first, does the actual existence of things-in-themselves ground our empirical cognition according to the perspectivist view? If so, how? Second, what exactly is the relation between existing things-in-themselves and ideas as “ultimate circumstances of evaluation” for our cognition (Kraus 2025, p. 64)? Could we say that this relation is ‘real’ in character? Part of the difficulty, as I see it, is that there appear to be two notions of reality in play: the ultimate noumenal one that remains out of reach to immediate or even inferred cognition about determinate objects, and the one we project by means of the regulative use of ideas.² Each seems to harbor a crucial aspect of Kraus’ account, with ultimate reality itself on one side, and normatively guiding ideal projections of reason on the other. I would like to hear more about what could lead us to identify or relate these two conceptions, and above all, whether it is the actual existence of things in themselves or the projections of reason itself that provide a normative standard for truth-assessment. I suspect the answer may be that both are essential, but since I still do not fully grasp the relation between these two aspects of Kraus’ view, I would ask for more detail to fill out the picture.

Some context regarding the broader spirit in which I ask these questions: my worry is not so much that perspectivism could collapse into a strong version of fictionalism, one that still amounts to a ‘frictionless spinning in the void’, offering no way of testing our cognitions against the resistance of reality (Kraus 2025, p. 59). I think there is a deeper and more interesting question at stake, one regarding the nature of objectivity in Kant’s philosophy, especially where the real use of reason is involved. It is clear that in surpassing a merely logical, subjective use, the real use must tell us something about the nature of objects. Moreover, insofar as this use stems from a priori transcendental principles, it would tell us about objects, not as they affect us, but as they are in themselves. But now the question arises, how is reason able to make these projections about ultimate reality in order to determine normative standards for truth assessment? The question, essentially, is whether for Kant it is reason or the world that sets the standard for objective truth.

In the context of his practical philosophy, it is surely reason itself that sets the standard for objectivity via the moral law. Though we must of course rely on empirically given particulars represented as possible actions to fully answer the question of what would be good in a specific context, it is an objective law—one discoverable as a fact of reason—that guides our judgment by providing universal and necessary criteria for unconditioned objectivity, or moral goodness. In this case, Kant is explicit that the moral law as a principle of pure reason stands in immediate connection to the real existence of things-in-themselves, because our cognition of it reveals that we are transcendently free. It is not, however, the independently assumed existence of *causa noumena*, but the normative force of the moral law itself that reveals the truth about freedom and thereby forges the necessary connection to the ultimate nature of reality as it exists independently of our subjectively conditioned or human forms of representation.

Of course, there are obvious differences between the practical and theoretical uses of reason, and I would advocate for a version of strong noumenalism in the former but not the latter case. It is, however, still possible to argue that theoretical reason’s regulative use of ideas enjoys an indeterminate objectivity in virtue of the use of reason itself. A key question that remains is whether this use could pave the way towards modest statements about ultimate reality, whose objectivity or truth would be grounded through the normative ideals of reason as opposed to the bare, inaccessible existence of things-in-themselves. I wonder if Kraus would be open to describing perspectivism as a form of noumenalism that succeeds through this type of structure, which forges a relation between pure rational principles and things-in-themselves by treating the former as the source of objectivity.³ Such a picture could represent both the full extent and the limits of Kant’s idealism, showing that principles of reason set the normative standards for truth assessment and thus the conditions for the ultimate nature of reality, without venturing to make the traditional claims about supersensible objects that would amount to unchecked dogmatism.

One final point brings me back to the distinction between the productive/semantic and realist/epistemic functions of the ideas, and the need to distinguish between the two if we are to preserve the best parts of fictionalism and noumenalism to provide a complete account of reason’s role in guiding the judgments we make. This aspect of Kraus’ account seems to me essential for understanding the use of ideas in both the theoretical and practical contexts. In my view, there is room to argue that the ideas of freedom, the soul, and God also serve an important semantic function in the practical philosophy, by providing what, following Kraus, we could call contexts of intelligibility for practical cognition. Even if we embrace a stronger version of noumenalism here, it remains the case that our practical judgments take place from the human standpoint, and thus within a specific horizon that cannot be equated with ultimate reality. It is precisely because of this limited or restricted standpoint that we need the additional ideas of the soul and God as practical postulates.

To take the idea of the soul as an example, Kraus explains that, in the theoretical context, this idea provides a context of intelligibility for self-understanding by setting a topic for us: “we ought to explore psychological

2 As Kraus writes in the Conclusion, our idea of the world-whole, from the perspective of experience and reason’s regulative use of ideas, is never complete or wholly determined, and must therefore remain a heuristic fiction. It is not, however, a mere or empty fiction, because “it designates (in a weak sense) an empirical reality that is unfolding in time according to the idea” (p. 67). I take this to be the second sense of reality referred to above.

3 It may be that Kant’s famous distinction between a *ratio essendi* and a *ratio cognoscendi*, invoked in the Preface to the second *Critique*, could help us here (KpV 5:4, footnote). By distinguishing between the rational grounds for cognition and the real or metaphysical conditions that are necessarily tied up with its possibility, we can give normative priority to reason without dispensing with any relation to ultimate reality.

beings through the inner relation of their inner appearances to an assumed substantial whole” (Kraus 2025, p. 53). I would argue that this is also precisely how we must approach the empirical moral subject and their actions as appearances: to understand how an empirical moral being could fulfil the demands of morality, we must treat these appearances as related to an assumed substantial whole, namely, the complete moral personality or *Gesinnung* represented via the self as a noumenal substance. In both cases, reason must presuppose the whole represented by the idea of the soul in order to understand how concepts of the understanding can be applied in experience—whether this experience be directed towards cognition of nature or cognition of moral goodness. But, as Kraus also points out, these ideas do not merely serve as heuristic fictions, because reason does not only serve as a guide with respect to semantics and proper concept formation. To take the moral case, the idea of the soul is not merely something we need in order to form a proper concept of virtue or the maximally good moral personality from the human standpoint. It need not, accordingly, be limited to the context of the subject’s use of reason, indispensable though it may be for this purpose. In addition to this semantic function, Kant also goes so far as to claim that the soul must actually exist as a metaphysical condition on the real possibility of the highest good (KpV 5:143). By emphasizing the productive/semantic *and* realist/epistemic functions of the understanding and reason, Kraus’ view can inform and enrich our conception of ideas across Kant’s entire philosophical system.

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