


How Many Types of Ideas Must be Considered to Reconstruct the Real Concept of Ideas in Kant?

Michael Lewin

Goethe University Frankfurt, University of Potsdam 

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.104109>

Received: 16-07-2025 • Accepted: 20-08-2025

ENG Abstract: Kraus's 'Kant's Ideas of Reason' offers a 'perspectivist interpretation' of a part of the *Transcendental Dialectic*. I will focus on two central topics: the concept of ideas and the concept of reason. First, I argue that Kraus's reconstruction of the concept of ideas requires significant refinement. Despite what the title of her work might suggest, her analysis is limited to transcendental ideas without engaging with Kant's broader typology, which includes at least seven distinct types of ideas. Greater attention to the fundamental features of the concept of ideas, as well as to the relevant scholarship, could help avoid the introduction of the problematic 'isms' 'noumenalism' and 'fictionalism'. Second, I highlight that Kraus does not clearly distinguish between reason in its broader and narrower senses, nor does she provide a precise definition of reason in the narrower sense. I propose modifying the 'perspectivist interpretation' in accordance with my suggestions.

Keywords: ideas; reason; transcendental ideas; Transcendental Dialectic.

Summary: Introduction. 1. The Real Concept of Idea. 2. The Real Concept of Reason. 3. Conclusion. 4. Bibliography.

How to cite: Lewin M. (2025). How Many Types of Ideas Must be Considered to Reconstruct the Real Concept of Ideas in Kant? *Con-Textos Kantianos. International Journal of Philosophy*, 22, 235-242.

Introduction

According to the series editors, authors of the *Cambridge Elements* 'The Philosophy of Immanuel Kant' must (a) "furnish an accessible guide to the main issues raised by the aspect of Kant's philosophy they have chosen to discuss (an up to date summary of the results of key research in the field)" as well as (b) "present their own distinctive view of the main questions raised and to draw original conclusions"¹. Kraus, in her *Element* 'Kant's Ideas of Reason', offers an interesting and provocative interpretation of a part of the *Transcendental Dialectic* (ad (b)). However, the author does not sufficiently address the 'key research' (ad (a)), which is reflected both in the choice of the book title and the reconstruction of Kant's concepts of ideas and reason. By 'key research' I understand existing contemporary contributions that enable theoretical progress in understanding Kant's theory of ideas regardless of language, prestige, citation network, academic club, and former influence (on the prestige bias in academia cf. Cruz 2018; on various aspects of the ethics of philosophical research cf. Lewin and Lewin (forthcoming)). For example, Klimmek's (2005) book 'Kant's System der transzendentalen Ideen' (Eng. 'Kant's System of Transcendental Ideas') offers a systematic account of *transcendental ideas* in the *Transcendental Dialectic* and their relationship to the categories. Lewin's (2021a), 'Kant's System der Ideen' goes a step further by omitting 'transcendental' in the title and giving a systematic account of seven different types of ideas in Kant. While the majority of Kant research continues discussing only three types of ideas, the *Element* with the title 'Kant's Ideas of Reason' (that also omits 'transcendental') could suggest a continuation of the debate started by Lewin. However, even if the *Element* is only about a specific interpretation of Kant's theory of *transcendental ideas*, it is a little surprising that 'Kant's Transcendental Dialectic: A Re-Evaluation' (Lewin and Meer 2022, reviewed by Scaglia 2023) was not considered, just as the mentioned and further relevant work (e.g., Pissis 2012, Bunte 2016, and Meer 2019).²

The following parts will contain a critical discussion of two topics: Kant's theory of ideas and his conception of reason. Before engaging in the critical analysis, it is worth acknowledging that the book offers a clear and accessible presentation of the subject, making it a suitable introductory text. Nevertheless, the forthcoming

¹ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/elements/the-philosophy-of-immanuel-kant> (accessed on June 9, 2025).

² Amongst further works that should be considered in the future research is also Ferrarin (2024).

critique will demonstrate that the introduction could have been more effective had certain key aspects been addressed. Incorporating these considerations would, however, necessitate at least a partial reconfiguration of the work—including its title, structure, content, and argumentative approach. In the conclusion, I will suggest that Kraus's 'perspectivist interpretation' of Kant's ideas of reason can be upheld, though only in a more refined form in light of my critiques in sections 1 and 2.

1. The Real Concept of Idea

Kraus notes in the introduction:

Ideas of reason are concepts of totalities or unconditioned wholes that play a crucial role in all areas of Kant's transcendental philosophy: for example, the idea of the systematic unity of nature in his theory of science, the ideas of freedom and the highest good in his moral philosophy, the idea of the sublime in his aesthetics, the idea of natural purposiveness in his account of life, and the idea of an original contract in his political philosophy. In general, ideas of reason provide normative guidance or regulative orientation to human activities, such as theoretical cognition or moral deliberation, that goes beyond what is accessible to the human senses. Yet it has remained controversial what kind of representation Kant's ideas of reason are and what their legitimate use consists in. This *Element* is primarily concerned with the ideas of *theoretical reason* and their regulative use in the study of nature (Kraus 2025, p. 1).

A reader of the *Element* titled *Kant's Ideas of Reason* might reasonably expect (1) a more structured and comprehensive overview of the various types of ideas in Kant's philosophy and (2) a precise definition of what the author refers to as 'ideas of theoretical reason'—a definition that, however, is not provided throughout the book. By 'ideas of theoretical reason' Kraus seems to understand the *transcendental ideas*, i.e., the three classes of ideas concerning the soul, the world-whole, and God (the transcendental ideal). She furthermore remarks that these "three classes of transcendental ideas should not be confused with other ideas of reason such as '*pure earth, pure water, pure air*' (A646/B674)" (ibid., p. 13).³ The formulation suggests that <pure earth>,⁴ <pure water>, and <pure air> belong to a different type of idea than the 'ideas of theoretical reason', which would imply that 'ideas of theoretical reason' is merely another expression for 'transcendental ideas'. However, if <pure earth> etc. are not 'of theoretical reason', what is their status? And what about such ideas of reason as <science>, <philosophy>, and <jurisprudence>, which Kant discusses in the *Architectonic* chapter of the first *Critique* and various logic lectures (cf. Lewin 2020b)—are they 'of theoretical reason'?

In all sciences, above all in those of reason, the idea of the science is its universal *abstract* or *outline*, hence the extension of all the cognitions that belong to it. Such an idea of the whole — the first thing one has to look to in a science, and which one has to seek — is *architectonic*, as, e.g., the idea of jurisprudence (Log, AA 09: 93).

A more systematic elaboration of Kant's typology would facilitate a clearer distinction, classification, and designation of the various types of ideas. A survey of the extension of the concept of idea enables a more nuanced comprehension, both in general terms and in relation to its specific articulation in the *Transcendental Dialectic*. The following table presents, for illustrative purposes, the range of distinct types of ideas in Kant. Neither the critical aim of "self-cognition of reason" (Prol, AA 05: 317) nor a work entitled *Kant's Ideas of Reason* can legitimately disregard this diversity in favor of an exclusive focus on transcendental ideas (cf. Lewin 2021a, pp. 41-113; the table—here in a slightly simplified form—is from ibid., pp. 104-105 and Lewin 2022, pp. 350-351):

types of ideas	ideas	functions
postulates	freedom	condition of the moral law
	immortality God	conditions for the realization of the highest good (morality and happiness)
simple practical ideas	duty personality etc.	necessary auxiliary concepts for moral self-determination
	virtue witness etc.	ends for hypothetical imperatives and judgments

3 All citations of Kant's works in this article are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Kant 1992ff.).

4 I use square brackets to refer to the concept and single quotation marks to refer to the word.

/ political ideas	international law social contract etc.	concepts for legal and political views and decisions
/ religious ideas	rational religion the realm of God etc.	concepts for practical regulative tasks
aesthetical ideas	the beautiful the sublime etc.	conditions for aesthetic judgments and artistic pursuit
transcendental ideas	soul world God	heuristic suppositions for ordering of the cognitions of the understanding
simple theoretical ideas	pure air pure earth etc.	heuristic suppositions for particular research in the natural sciences
architectonic ideas	jurisprudence philosophy etc.	heuristic suppositions for research, learning, and knowledge transfer
concepts of reason of reason	pure self-activity pure thinking pure will freedom the actual I etc.	conceptual articulation of the concept of reason of itself as the condition of ideas

The most general marks ('mark' in the Kantian sense, as "*a partial representation, insofar as it is considered as ground of cognition of the whole representation*", Log AA 09: 58) of the concept of idea include <pure concept> (part of the genus 'representation' and the top categories 'concept' and 'pure concept', cf. KrV, A 320/B 376f.), <product of the reason in the narrower sense>, <the unconditioned> ("the common title of all concepts of reason", KrV, A 324/B 380), <perfection> (ideas as archetypes), and <incongruence with the objects in the senses or in concreto> (cf., e.g., KrV, A 327/B 383). Concepts, e.g., <wisdom>, <philosophy>, and <infinity of the universe>, must meet these criteria to be classified as ideas. For example, the concept <philosophy>, understood as the system of all philosophical cognition and the "archetype for the assessment of all attempts to philosophize" (KrV, A 838/B 866), satisfies these criteria: "philosophy is a mere idea of a possible science, which is nowhere given *in concreto*" (ibid.). Different philosophies are ectypes, imperfect copies of the idea of philosophy (cf. ibid. and Lewin 2023, pp. 304-306). The marks <pure concept>, <product of the reason in the narrower sense>, <the unconditioned>, <perfection>, and <incongruence with the objects in the senses or in concreto> represent only the logical essence of the concept of idea. It is "*the first basic concept of all the necessary marks*" (Log, AA 09: 61) and not yet the complete and comprehensive understanding of <idea>, which can be reached only after examining all the different types of ideas and their respective peculiarities. Philosophers—in the Kantian sense, which would include Kant scholars—should look for this 'real concept' (the complete concept of the *object* of inquiry, a thorough *Sach-Erklärung*, cf. Lewin forthcoming1) of idea: "In morals, metaphysics, etc., on the other hand, there must be nothing but real definitions, because this is the aim toward which we must direct all our analysis, to bring about a complete concept" (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 920, cf. Log, AA 09: 144; KrV, A 240f./B 300). The real concept of idea or the real definition of idea is itself a "logical idea of perfection" (Log, AA 09: 143; cf. KrV, A 730f./B 758f.) that philosophers seek to achieve.

The *Element* must be assessed—not by its title, as might be (rightfully) expected within academic discourse, but rather in light of its stated objective. It neither intends nor provides a comprehensive and complete account of ideas in general or of transcendental ideas in particular. While Kraus (cf. p. 13) mentions at least some of the general marks of the concept of idea, she does not duly adhere to them as to the logical essence of the concept of idea in her 'perspectivist interpretation'. The interpretation, as Kraus notes, "highlights how ideas mark the distinctively human standpoint and are indispensable for coping with the perspectival situatedness of our attempts to understand the world" (ibid., 66). In the author's view, ideas (transcendental ideas) enable such coping as they are neither mere fictions nor ideas of 'real things'. Kraus attributes the first claim to what she calls 'fictionalism', and the latter to 'noumenalism'. Both 'isms', in the non-moderate form, are construed and do not necessarily correspond to positions in the Kant scholarship. The author admits

it herself, at least regarding 'noumenalism' (cf. *ibid.*, 17). The task of the book and the 'perspectivalism' is to show that moderate fictionalism (ideas give an a priori structure to the world of appearances) and moderate noumenalism (ideas direct the human mind towards a mind-independent world that provides a normative ideal for truth-evaluation, cf. *ibid.*, 66) are compatible. The book never makes it entirely clear what exactly is meant by 'perspectivalism' and therefore the 'perspectivalist interpretation'. What are the main perspectivalist's tenets, if there are any? And why cannot a perspectivalist be simply a proponent of perspectival fictionalism or perspectival noumenalism (or perspectival realism etc.)? Perspectivalism can serve many different masters (cf. Lewin (forthcoming2)).

The detour through the construction of 'isms' could be avoided by adhering more closely to Kant's text, the distinction between various types of ideas, and to the marks that constitute the logical essence of the concept of ideas. For example, the proposition "ideas of reason serve as the highest genus-concepts opening up the universal horizon of human understanding" (Kraus 2025, p. 35) has several weak spots. Firstly, 'ideas of reason' functions as a *totum pro parte* that could easily be replaced by 'the transcendental ideas'—here and throughout the entire *Element*—if that is what is meant. Secondly, actually meaning 'ideas of reason' (and not only 'the transcendental ideas') fits the metaphor of horizon even better. The horizon of human understanding is neither limited to the three classes of transcendental ideas nor to the theoretical cognition of nature. Thirdly, <genus-concept> is not a mark of the concept of ideas—if <spatial and temporal infinity of the universe>, <the beginning of the world in time and space>, and <the transcendental ideal (God)> (consider further examples from the given table) are genus-concepts, what, then, are their corresponding species?

Kraus claims that noumenalists (if there are any) can base their theory of transcendental ideas on the passage from KrV, A 643/B 671: "Noumenalism treats ideas as 'concepts of real things' (e.g., A643/B671)". The full quotation, however, is:

Thus, the transcendental ideas too will presumably have a good and consequently *immanent* use, even though, *if their significance is misunderstood* and they are *taken for concepts of real things* [emphasis added], they can be transcendent in their application and for that very reason deceptive. For in regard to the whole of possible experience, it is not the idea itself but only its use that can be either *extravagant* (transcendent) or *indigenous* (immanent), according to whether one directs them straightway to a supposed object corresponding to them, or only to the use of the understanding in general regarding the objects with which it has to do; and all errors of subreption are always to be ascribed to a defect in judgment, never to understanding or to reason (KrV, A 643/B 671).

Ergo, a noumenalist would have to be a Kant scholar who believes that the error of subreption is in fact not an error and that the transcendent use of ideas is the intended use in the Kantian sense—the noumenalist would take an apparently absurd position. Perhaps an analysis of the relevant literature on the epistemic and ontological status of ideas could bring the inquiry and discussion (cf. also Kraus 2025, pp. 18 and 63) on a better track—e.g., regarding such keywords as 'quasi-object' and '*entia rationis*' (cf., e.g., Zocher (1958), Meer 2019, pp. 194-204, and Lewin 2021a, pp. 92-102; cf. also Leech 2024).

Kraus's assertion that a part of contemporary research approximates a radical noumenalist position is not persuasive. The only evidence—apart from the mentioned literature without page numbers (cf. Kraus 2025, p. 2 fn. 4 and p. 17 fn. 37)—is a quote from Schafer (2023; cf. Kraus 17ff.). According to Schafer, the reason's supreme principle (find the unconditioned for the conditioned) "*does* commit us to the bare existence of the 'whole series of conditions' and so to the unconditioned" (Schafer 2023, p. 175). However, the formulation suggests the *commitment* to the unconditioned and not an ontological claim about the *existence* of the unconditioned (a clear understanding of the author's exact intention requires further textual evidence, which is not provided by Kraus). Indeed, there is a discussion about the epistemic vs. ontological reading of the word 'given' in the passage on the supreme principle:

[W]hen the conditioned is given, then the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself unconditioned, is also given (i.e., contained in the object and its connection) (KrV, A 307f./B 364).

As Willaschek (2018, p. 72) notes, 'given' could mean either 'exist' or 'made cognitively accessible'. Even if some Kant scholars, e.g., Willaschek and other authors mentioned by Kraus (2025, p. 11 fn. 26), argue for the ontological reading, it does not mean that they adopt any form of 'noumenalism'. The ontological reading is congruent with Kant's intention to explain reason's natural tendency to transcend the boundaries of experience and to fall prey to the 'transcendental illusion'. This illusion "does not cease even though it is uncovered and its nullity is clearly seen into by transcendental criticism (e.g. the illusion in the proposition: 'The world must have a beginning in time')" (KrV, A 297/B 353). It is "a *natural* and unavoidable *illusion* which itself rests on subjective principles and passes them off as objective" (KrV, A 298/B 354). It therefore appears unconvincing to isolate this natural tendency and elevate it to the status of an independent position under the label 'noumenalism'. This could be a result of Kraus's insufficient engagement with the Kantian account of reason's natural inclination toward metaphysics and transcendental illusion. Transcendental illusion is treated merely as an object of critique (cf. Kraus 2025, pp. 11 and 20), rather than as a constitutive and enduring element within what Willaschek refers to as the 'natural sources' of metaphysics. Yet the 'positive side' of the *Transcendental Dialectic* has long been acknowledged in the broader scholarly discourse, to which also the topical issue 'Kant's Transcendental Dialectic: A Re-Evaluation' (Lewin and Meer 2022) has contributed. A part of the re-evaluation is also the understanding that the categories are necessary for the ordering and the logical determination of transcendental ideas 'in thought' (cf., e.g., Klimmek 2005, p. 69; Bunte 2016, pp. 154

ff.; Lewin 2021a, pp. 106–111, the response in Bunte 2022, p. 399, fn. 14., and Leech 2024), which Kraus (cf., e.g., the formulation on the p. 11) does not consider. The relation of ideas to *subject*, *object*, or *both*, as prototypes of *soul*, *world*, and *God* (KrV, A 323/B 379f.) and to the “idea [...] of the form of a whole of cognition” (KrV, A 645/B 673) remain open questions in the literature, as I have mentioned elsewhere (Lewin 2020a, p. 318 and 2021b, pp. 568f.). The idea of the form of a whole of cognition is a *principium vagum* (cf. KrV, A 680f./B 708f., A 665/B 693, and A 645/B 673)—the indeterminate unity (the whole of cognition) is determined precisely by the three classes of transcendental ideas. This may shed light on the relationship between the indeterminate and determinate unconditioned—an issue raised but not resolved by Kraus (2025, p. 18).

If, as I have argued, the construction of a position termed ‘noumenalism’ proves unproductive, then its counterpart, ‘fictionalism’, is equally improbable to offer a fruitful framework for understanding the theory of transcendental ideas. According to Kraus (2025, p. 20), fictionalists claim that the referents of ideas do not exist. This construction seems completely unnecessary, because any attentive reader of the first *Critique* should know that to form opinions about objects outside the field of experience “is the same as to play with thoughts” (KrV, A 775/B 803). The referents of ideas cannot be said to either exist or not exist with any epistemic certainty:

I am not, to be sure, of the opinion that [...] that one can still hope someday to find self-evident demonstrations of the two cardinal propositions of our pure reason: there is a God, and there is a future life. Rather, I am certain that this will never happen. For whence will reason derive the ground for such synthetic assertions, which are not related to objects of experience and their inner possibility? *But it is also apodictically certain that no human being will ever step forward who could assert the opposite with the least plausibility, let alone assert it dogmatically.* For since he could only establish this through pure reason, he would have to undertake to prove that a highest being or the thinking subject in us as pure intelligence is impossible. But whence will he derive the knowledge that would justify him in judging synthetically about things beyond all possible experience? (KrV, A 741f./B 769f., emphasis added).

If, according to Kant, claims concerning the existence and non-existence of the referents of ideas are equally dogmatic, what justification remains for a Kant scholar to adopt ‘noumenalism’, ‘fictionalism’, or any ‘perspectivalist’ combination of the two? Kraus’s answer is:

[I]f one denies ideas any relation to a mind-independent reality, one may also have to give up on a mind-independent standard by which to measure the adequacy of our scientific endeavours. That is, 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 or even with a non-relativist account of truth altogether (Kraus 2025, p. 22).

Kraus claims that Kant’s transcendental ideas, especially the idea of God, enable a reference to the mind-independent, ultimate reality as a normatively binding standard of truth “across all times and places, across all cognitive subjects and epistemic groups” (ibid., p. 65). The regulative use of ideas thereby “supplies the contexts within which the understanding can properly operate and generate objective, truth-assessable content” (ibid., p. 39). Kraus argues that the idea of God occupies a special status, insofar as Kant associates with it the concepts of perfection and complete purposive unity to a greater extent than with other ideas (ibid., pp. 59–62). It grounds the principle that all things in nature are completely determined. Therefore, the idea of God “must be presupposed in the empirical study of nature, since it enables the ideal of an external measure of truth” (ibid., p. 59) and for the formation of empirical concepts (ibid., pp. 3 and 29–31; cf. also p. 58).

Do we require the idea of God in order to efficiently and correctly form such empirical concepts as <rose>, <dog>, and <tree>? According to Kraus, apparently yes—though this raises the question of how individuals or cultures lacking the idea of God could nonetheless distinguish, for example, dogs from cats. This also brings into focus the issue of whether the ‘perspectivalist interpretation’ ignores the logical essence of the concept of idea and unintentionally renders the regulative use constitutive. Firstly, consider that for Kant, the nature is

twofold: either thinking nature or corporeal nature. Yet to think of the latter as regards its inner possibility, i.e., to determine the application of the categories to it, we do not need any idea, i.e., any representation transcending experience; no such representation is possible in regard to it, because here we are guided merely by sensible intuition (KrV, A 684/B 713).

To articulate the concept of rose—to use Kraus’s (2025, p. 58) own example—with such representations or conceptual marks as <red>, <five petals>, and <a stem with thorns>, we need the sensible intuition and the faculty of the understanding. We “do not need any idea, i.e., any representation transcending experience” (KrV, A 684/B 713). Pure reason claims as its domain the comprehensive reflection upon the totality of nature or the entirety of the conditions necessary for completeness. Secondly, the as-if maxims (‘regard the soul or the world as if...’) allow only for doctrinal beliefs and problematic applications of ideas:

The hypothetical use of reason, on the basis of ideas as problematic concepts, is not properly *constitutive*, that is, not such that if one judges in all strictness the truth of the universal rule assumed as a hypothesis thereby follows [...] The hypothetical use of reason is therefore directed at the systematic unity of the understanding’s cognitions, which, however, is the *touchstone of truth* for its rules (KrV, A 647/B 675).

The touchstone of truth is not the mind-independent standard given by reason’s ideas. For example, the as-if maxim ‘consider every connection in the world as if all had arisen from God’ cannot be used to impose ends on

nature “forcibly and dictatorially, instead of seeking for them reasonably on the path of physical investigation” (KrV, A 692/B 720). The “systematic unity of the understanding’s cognitions” (KrV, A 647/B 675) based on the understanding and experience serves as the touchstone of truth in the course of physical investigation. The relative presupposition (*suppositio relativa*) of a supreme intelligence that gives the substratum for the greatest possible unity of experience, according to Kant, can be a useful additional heuristic perspective for a scientist.⁵ A scientist’s search for a teleological connection (*nexus finalis*) can foster finding a mechanical or physical connection (*nexus effectivus*) (cf. KrV, A 687/B 715). However, the as-if maxim cannot provide any objective standard of truth (the idea of the unified world created by God is—cf. the logical essence of the concept of idea—a concept of reason, to which no congruent object can be given *in concreto*) and may be easily misused by what Kant calls ‘lazy reason’ and ‘perverse reason’ (cf. KrV, A 689ff./B 717ff.).

2. The Real Concept of Reason

At the beginning of the *Element*, Kraus clarifies the following:

Note that at times Kant employs the notion of ‘reason in general’ (e.g., A760/B788) to refer to all higher intellectual faculties, including the understanding and the power of judgement. I use ‘reason’ to denote the faculty in the narrow sense (Kraus 2025, p. 5 fn. 10).

However, this is not only insufficient—since no explicit explanation of reason in the narrower sense is provided—but also confusing, as she sometimes appears to employ a broader conception of reason throughout the book. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Reason, however, is not satisfied with singular cognitions. By its nature, reason keeps asking for further and further conditions of the apple. It asks, for example, about the condition of why the apple rolled off my kitchen table, but also why the apple ended up on my kitchen table in the first place, why it came into being, which biochemical processes led to its existence, and perhaps also why it has become an object of my culinary preferences. This quest of reason seems to come to an end only when reason has completely determined the apple. But in this quest for completeness, reason seeks a kind of unity ‘that can never come forth in experience’ (A765/B793). Reason, therefore, runs the risk of transcending the bounds of sense. (ibid., p. 9).

‘Reason’ here obviously refers to both the understanding, the power of judgment, and reason in the narrower sense. Reason, as furthermore claimed on the p. 23, guides the understanding in “assessing the truth of empirical cognition” and “in forming empirical concepts”. On the p. 14, reason is (rightfully) understood as the faculty of inferring and the faculty of principles. What, then, is reason in the narrower sense?

The best way to distinguish reason in the narrower sense from reason in the broader sense is to identify and analyze the conceptual marks that belong to the concept <reason in the narrower sense>. Another designation for ‘reason in the narrower sense’ that can be found in Kant’s work is “the faculty of ideas” (RefI 5553, AA 18: 228 and KU, AA 05: 269; cf. Lewin 2022). In most general terms, reason in the narrower sense is a faculty that in any way deals with ideas—and not, e.g., with empirical concepts. Empirical concepts are formed via three interconnected logical operations of the understanding: comparison, reflection, and abstraction (cf. Log, AA 09: 94). It is correct to say that reason “prepares the field for the understanding” (KrV, A 658/B 686) by providing the logical principles of homogeneity, specification, and continuity of forms to systematize genera and species. However, this does not mean that these principles are required for each empirical concept formation. While Kraus makes a far-reaching claim that even the formation of the concept <tree> needs guidance from reason *in the narrower sense*, because it cannot be “not be simply read off of sensible intuition alone” (cf. Kraus 2024, p. 25), Kant notes:

To make concepts out of representations one must thus be able to compare, to reflect, and to abstract, for these three logical operations of the understanding are the essential and universal conditions for generation of every concept whatsoever. I see, e.g., a spruce, a willow, and a linden. By first comparing these objects with one another I note that they are different from one another in regard to the trunk, the branches, the leaves, etc.; but next I reflect on that which they have in common among themselves, trunk, branches, and leaves themselves, and I abstract from the quantity, the figure, etc., of these; thus I acquire a concept of a tree (Log AA 09: 94f.).

At the theoretical level, these operations may be described as involving genera and species; however, they amount to nothing more than the interplay between various representations—namely, sensible intuitions and empirical concepts—and the three logical functions of the understanding. By contrast, the three logical principles of reason—homogeneity, specification, and continuity of forms—are required for the formation and articulation of larger systematic unities, which Kant also refers to as ‘unities of reason’ (*Vernunfteinheiten*).

5 This presupposition *based on the idea of God* is to distinguish from the transcendental presupposition of the systematic unity of nature as objectively valid and necessary *based on reason’s law to seek unity* (cf. KrV, A 651/B 679) and order cognitions by the logical principles of homogeneity, specification, and continuity. The former results from the explicit use of the idea of God, while the latter arises from reason’s natural predisposition as a rational faculty. Kraus does not appear to sufficiently distinguish between these two dimensions of the use of reason. The logical principles and the transcendental presupposition of the systematic unity are not based on the idea of God. Cf.: the “continuity of forms is a mere idea, for which a corresponding object can by no means be displayed in experience” (KrV, A 661/B 689). The idea of God can additionally be employed to support the idea of the continuity of forms by grounding it in the notion of an origin in God’s reason—an idea which, like the ideas of systematic unity, continuity, etc., lacks a corresponding object in experience and functions solely as a ground for a problematic and regulative as-if maxim.

For example, the “idea of a *fundamental power*” (KrV, A 649/B 677) is a problem set by the systematic representation and classification of powers: the powers must be “compared with one another, so as to discover their unanimity and thereby bring them close to a single radical, i.e., absolutely fundamental, power. But this unity of reason is merely hypothetical” (ibid.). As Kant writes, it is “unbearable to hear a representation of the color red called an idea” (KrV, A 320/B 377); similarly, it seems mistaken to refer to the term ‘tree’ as a unity of reason (*Vernunftseinheit*).

The three logical principles of reason belong indeed to the theory of the faculty of ideas, or reason in the narrower sense, because it is the *faculty of principles* that are related to ideas. But <the faculty of principles> is only one among several distinguishing marks that must both be differentiated and related to one another to grasp the logical essence (the first basic concept) and the real, complete concept of reason in the narrower sense (at the end of a thoroughgoing inquiry). At least nine conceptual marks must be distinguished:

- (I) basic features:
 - (1) faculty,
 - (2) rational (Rb in contrast to the empirical),
 - (3) the narrower sense (Rn in contrast to other higher faculties of cognition).
- (II) causal functional features:
 - (4) makes intermediate inferences,
 - (5) gives ideas (seven kinds of ideas),
 - (6) gives principles.
- (III) additional functional features:
 - (7) has uses,
 - (8) is the source of interests and ends,
 - (9) is unified (Lewin 2022, p. 342).

Each conceptual mark represents a substantial object of inquiry in its own right. The adequacy of the understanding of Kant’s theory of reason depends, to a large extent, on the depth and quality of research devoted to each of these aspects. For instance, Kant scholarship that identifies only three types of ideas under characteristic (5) or focuses exclusively on transcendental ideas will arrive at a less comprehensive or ‘real’ concept of reason than research that explores seven distinct types. Naturally, Kraus could not address every aspect in full detail within the scope of her book. Nevertheless, a more precise concept of reason in the narrower sense remains desirable.

3. Conclusion

I identified several critical issues along with possible avenues for improvement. While Kraus’s reconstruction of the theory of transcendental ideas may serve as a useful introduction for some readers, some points could be further refined. Notably, the book’s title is misleading. It suggests a comprehensive treatment of Kant’s ideas of reason. In fact, Kraus focuses solely on transcendental ideas, which are referred to as ‘ideas of theoretical reason’, leaving out the extended typology of ideas. Addressing at least seven types of ideas would not only better reflect the book’s title but also clarify the general concept of ideas and contribute to a more profound understanding of transcendental ideas. The critical goal of “self-cognition of reason” (Prol, AA 05: 317) cannot be achieved merely through reflection on the transcendental ideas. A full understanding of reason requires engagement with the complete extension of the concept of ideas, since ideas guide thought and will in several different domains of reason.

Further points concern the distinction between understanding and reason. The latter operates with larger unities (unities of reason). As demonstrated, the application of the three logical principles of reason to simple empirical concepts is difficult to justify, as it conflicts with Kant’s own theories and relevant passages from his work. Consequently, Kraus’s proposal to understand reason as having a quasi-constitutive function—as the giver of the criterion of truth even with regard to the empirical concepts—cannot be upheld. The transcendental ideas of reason allow only for heuristic as-if maxims related to larger unities given in thought.

A closer engagement with the text was also suggested regarding the introduction of the ‘isms’ ‘noumenalism’ and ‘fictionalism’. These appear highly constructed and do not align with existing positions in the scholarship. Their deployment could be avoided by referring more closely to Kant’s text and terminology, and by taking into account the current literature on the ‘positive side’ of the *Transcendental Dialectic*. The theory of natural transcendental illusion forms part of Kant’s theory of reason and of transcendental ideas—the isolation of this theory to base an ‘ism’ (‘noumenalism’) on it is possible, but it does not seem explanatorily meaningful. Similarly, it does not seem a good strategy to isolate Kant’s theory of heuristic maxims and doctrinal beliefs to construct a position labelled ‘fictionalism’. The ‘higher unity’ of the two Kantian doctrines can consist in nothing more than the awareness of the critical philosopher of the natural illusion and the employment of the heuristic as-if maxims. Reinterpreting reason as a quasi-constitutive faculty is possible only within the two labelled constructions and their partial combination, and not within the scope of Kant’s own theories.

A ‘perspectivalist interpretation’ of Kant’s ideas of reason remains possible even if all the above critiques are taken into account: a ‘perspectivalist’ critical understanding of the slumber within the perspective of natural transcendental illusion; a ‘perspectivalist’ account of heuristics within different perspectives based on different transcendental ideas; and a ‘perspectivalist’ description of the horizon of human reason based on an analysis of all seven types of ideas in Kant.

Bibliography

- Bunte, M. (2022). "Determining and Grounding: The Twofold Function of the Transcendental Dialectic". *Open Philosophy* 5, 1, 396-402.
- Bunte, M. (2016). *Erkenntnis und Funktion. Zur Vollständigkeit der Urteilstafel und Einheit des kantischen Systems*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston.
- Cruz, Helen De. (2018). "Prestige Bias: An Obstacle to a Just Academic Philosophy", *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy*, 5/10, pp. 259-287. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0005.010>.
- Ferrarin, A. (ed.) (2024). "Le idee nella filosofia di Kant", *Il Pensiero*, LXIII/2, <https://www.ilpensiero.org/en/post/lxiii-2024-2-1> (accessed on July 13, 2025).
- Kant, I. (1992 ff.). *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Ed. P. Guyer, A. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klimmek, N. F. (2005). *Kants System der transzendentalen Ideen*, De Gruyter, Berlin/New York.
- Leech, J. (2024). "The Significance of Kant's Mere Thoughts", *Inquiry* 67/6, 1403-1433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1938903>.
- Lewin, M. (forthcoming1). "Nominal and Real Concepts. On the Relation between Words, Concepts, and Conceptions in Kant and Contemporary Philosophy." In: Leech, J. and Šoć, A. (eds.), *Kant's Legacy for the 21st Century: Knowledge, Culture, Beauty*. London: Routledge.
- Lewin, M. (forthcoming2). "Relativism, Perspectivism, and the Universal Epistemic Language". *Philosophy of the History of Philosophy* 5.
- Lewin, M. (2023). "Kant's Metaphilosophy", *Open Philosophy*, 4/1, 292-310. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2020-0190>.
- Lewin, M. (2022). "The Faculty of Ideas. Kant's Concept of Reason in the Narrower Sense", *Open Philosophy*, 5/1, pp. 340-359, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0203>.
- Lewin, M. (2021a). *Das System der Ideen. Zur perspektivistisch-metaphilosophischen Begründung der Vernunft im Anschluss an Kant und Fichte*, Alber, Freiburg/München, <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783495825242>.
- Lewin, M. (2021b). "Rudolf Meer, *Der transzendente Grundsatz der Vernunft. Funktion und Struktur des Anhangs zur Transzendentalen Dialektik der Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kantstudien-Ergänzungshefte Band 207, Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2019, 314 pp.", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 103/3, pp. 562-570. <https://doi.org/10.1515/agph-2021-2020>.
- Lewin, M. (2020a). "Marcus Willaschek, Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics. The Dialectic of Pure Reason, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018, 298 p.", *Idealistic Studies* 50/3, 291-296. <https://doi.org/10.5840/idstudies2020503121>.
- Lewin, M. (2020b). "The Universe of Science. The Architectonic Ideas of Science, Sciences and Their Parts in Kant", *Kantian Journal*, 39/2, pp. 26-45, <https://doi.org/10.5922/0207-6918-2020-2-2>.
- Lewin, M. and Lewin P. (forthcoming). "Moral Metaphilosophy: The Study of Moral Violations In, Against, and Through Philosophy".
- Lewin, M. and Meer, R. (eds.) (2022). *Kant's Transcendental Dialectic. A Re-Evaluation*, *Open Philosophy*, 5/1, <https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/opphil/5/1/html>.
- Meer, R. (2019). *Der transzendente Grundsatz der Vernunft. Funktion und Struktur des Anhangs zur Transzendentalen Dialektik der Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston.
- Pissis, J. (2012). *Kants Transzendente Dialektik. Zu ihrer systematischen Bedeutung*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston.
- Scaglia, L. (2023). "Una reevaluación de la Dialéctica trascendental", *Con-Textos Kantianos*, 17, pp. 151-153, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.88707>.
- Schafer, K. (2023). *Kant's Reason: The Unity of Reason and the Limits of Comprehension in Kant*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Willaschek, M. (2018). *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics: The Dialectic of Pure Reason*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Zoher, R. (1958). "Zu Kants transzendentaler Deduktion der Ideen der reinen Vernunft", *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 12, pp. 43-58.