

How to do things with ideas: Katharina Kraus on the regulative function of Kant's Ideas of Reason

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ENG Abstract: This paper offers a critical discussion of Katharina Kraus's interpretation of Kant's ideas of reason, as presented in her recent book. Kraus criticizes two opposing views, the ideas of reason as assumed noumenal entities or as mere heuristic fictions. While I share her dissatisfaction with these views, I suggest a more nuanced approach to them by emphasizing their normative grounds, especially in doctrinal non-evidential belief. As a solution to the problems of noumenalism and fictionalism, Kraus presents an elaborate perspectivist reading of the ideas as serving a dual function: systematic structures for contexts of intelligibility and projected mind-independent normative standards for truth-evaluation. I raise questions about whether this account risks attributing a constitutive status to the ideas. I also suggest that the unique role of the idea of God is a regulative transformation of Kant's pre-critical conception of God as the ground of the systematicity and necessity of the laws of nature. Building on Kraus's insights, I propose an expressivist reading: the ideas of reason are meaningful not because they represent objects, hypothetical or fictional, but because they express the commitment to rational norms of inquiry. Because the ideas are expressions, they are grounded in reason's norms of inquiry but are not constitutive of them.

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The ideas of reason are one of Kant's most distinctive yet perplexing doctrines. On the one hand, the transcendental ideas designate the objects of special metaphysics, the soul, the world-whole, and God, objects of which the first critique prohibits any cognition. On the other hand, 'they have an excellent and indispensably necessary regulative use' (A644/B672), in accordance with the legitimate aims of the faculty of reason. But how exactly do they function? What can we do with concepts that cannot be part of our theoretical cognition of reality? And why is this function 'indispensably necessary'? Kant's language is opaque, and this naturally leads to a range of different answers to these questions. In her new book, Kraus proposes a novel perspectivist reading of the ideas of reason that aims to steer between two poles, noumenalism and fictionalism. According to this interpretation, Kantian ideas are neither representations of mind-independent entities nor mere fictions. Instead, they guide inquiry by structuring domains of intelligibility and providing normative standards for truth-evaluation. This reading is philosophically ambitious and textually sensitive. My comments below aim to clarify where the perspectivist framework is most promising, and where it might require further clarification.

Kraus situates her solution between two poles she labels noumenalism and fictionalism. Before commenting on Kraus' original account, I will explore her taxonomy of possible solutions. The first type of reading, noumenalism, treats the ideas as concepts that represent noumenal entities about which we can form justified beliefs that they exist and ground the phenomenal world in a way that guarantees the aims of reason to find systematic unity. While the main discussion of the regulative use of the ideas in the *Appendix* to the *Dialectic*¹ is ambiguous regarding their epistemic status, a short section in the Canon provides an account of the type of epistemic commitment to the existence of noumenal objects, labeled as 'doctrinal belief'. The section considers three types of taking a proposition to be true (*Furwahrhalten*): 'having an opinion, knowing, and believing' (A820/B848). While knowing (*Wissen*) requires objective evidence, belief (*Glauben*) can be subjectively justified without objective grounds. Kant groups 'doctrinal belief' in noumenal entities with two other non-evidential types of belief, pragmatic belief and moral belief. In all these types of belief, the justification relies on its being a condition for achieving an end: "Once an end is proposed, then the conditions for attaining it are hypothetically necessary" (A823/B851). The strength of the justification is then relative to the necessity of the hypothesis for that end and the importance of the end. For example, a doctor is justified in assuming a certain disease that explains the symptoms for the purpose of treating a patient in

1 Henceforth the *Appendix*.

great danger, even if the evidence is not conclusive (A824/B852). The urgent practical end justifies acting according to the belief that the hypothesis is true. Kant calls holding a hypothesis in this manner 'pragmatic belief'. Kant continues to discuss the 'doctrinal belief' in the existence of God as a justified hypothesis, claiming that it satisfies both conditions. The hypothesis of God is the only account of the systematicity of nature and the practical end of scientific progress is important (while not strictly necessary like moral ends):

I know no other condition for this unity that could serve me as a clue for the investigation of nature except insofar as I presuppose that a highest intelligence has arranged everything in accordance with the wisest ends. Consequently, the presupposition of a wise author of the world is a condition of an aim which is, to be sure, contingent but yet not inconsiderable, namely that of having a guide for the investigation of nature (A826/B854)

Since the systematic unity of nature is the central regulative principle discussed in the *Appendix*, it is plausible to apply the account of doctrinal belief to the transcendental idea of God as a condition for applying the regulative principle. While the discussion in the Canon focuses on the idea of God, it is applicable to any transcendental idea that serves the theoretical ends of reason. In her description of noumenalism, Kraus seems to claim that it is the belief in existence that grounds the normativity of the regulative principles. But the example of 'pragmatic belief' shows that it is the other way round. It is the commitment to the normative principles of scientific investigation that justifies the doctrinal belief, assenting to propositions about the existence of noumenal entities. The belief that there is something real that makes the end achievable grounds not the normative force of the end, but the rationality of pursuing that end. Noumenalists could argue that without doctrinal belief, the possibility of achieving the ends of reason would be unintelligible and hence pursuing those ends would be irrational.²

Kraus' criticisms of noumenalism and its use of doctrinal belief are mainly targeted at a recent version presented in Schafer (2023) as a commitment to the bare existence of the unconditioned. Kraus argues convincingly that such a commitment does little to explain the specific regulative uses of the three transcendental ideas. In Kant's discussion of doctrinal belief in the Canon, however, the subject matter is the specific idea of a 'wise author of the world.' But Kraus is right to point out that on the one hand, noumenalism comes too close to a constitutive use of the ideas, and on the other hand, doctrinal belief is too indeterminate to represent a noumenal explanation for the applicability of the regulative principles of reason to the subject matter of the sciences.

The other pole of the debate, fictionalism, holds that the transcendental ideas are heuristic fictions useful for scientific inquiry but lack any reference to existing entities. This view often treats the ideas analogously to idealizations in the sciences: we do not take frictionless planes or perfectly rational agents to exist, but they serve essential roles in constructing and testing theories. On a fictionalist reading, the use of the ideas similarly lacks an ontological commitment and functions purely as a tool for scientific inquiry. According to Kraus, fictionalism avoids illegitimate metaphysical propositions about noumenal objects by assuming that 'the referent of the idea does not exist.' (20), and 'that the claims such ideas give rise to are in fact empty' (2). But this reading is unnecessarily strong. There is a difference between claiming that the use of the ideas does not entail a commitment to the existence of corresponding objects and claiming that it requires a commitment to their non-existence. Such a view would render Kant's notion of practical belief, for example in the existence of God, problematic. It is difficult to reconcile a practical commitment to the existence of God with a theoretical commitment to God's non-existence. It would be more accurate to state that fictionalism entails this: 1. The existence of the referent of the idea is irrelevant to its regulative use and 2. The heuristic fiction is not the transcendental idea itself but its applicability to experience: our cognition of phenomenal nature can never achieve complete systematic unity. I think that the quotes from Grier and Guyer point to this understanding of fictionalism (20). For this reason, I would also group the 'hypothesis-formation view' (21) as a form of noumenalism rather than fictionalism. While the hypothesis about the existence of noumenal objects is not asserted as true, it is still logically possible and can be an object of doctrinal belief.

Kraus criticizes fictionalism for undercutting the normative force of Kant's account. If the ideas are merely fictions, then their role in guiding inquiry becomes contingent and optional, depending on merely subjective preferences without objective purport: "For how can an illusory assumption generate a prescriptive force for our epistemic activities that aim at the truth-apt cognition of empirical objects?" (20). Kraus claims that without even an assumption of reference, the ideas cannot function as a "mind-independent standard by which to measure the adequacy of our scientific endeavors" (22). But similarly to what I attributed to a reasonable version of noumenalism in which the norms of reason ground the belief in the existence of the ideas, it is not the fictions themselves that are normatively binding. It is the other way round, the normative end of reason to achieve systematic unity justifies the adoption of fictions. But Kraus is right to point out that the notion of a fiction cannot fully express the norms of reason that aim at truth and not merely internal systematicity.

Kraus' perspectivist interpretation aims to combine the true core of each of the two views, noumenalism and fictionalism while avoiding their pitfalls. The ideas should have an internal functional aspect that enables the systematization of cognitions without requiring non-referring fictions, and a realist aspect expressing a relation to a mind-independent reality without metaphysically robust commitments to the noumenal objects of the ideas. Thus, ideas of reason perform a dual function. First, in their semantic role, they outline domains of possible objects, thereby representing contexts of intelligibility in which the cognition of objects can be meaningful, functioning as a 'horizon' for concept formation (section 3.1). Second, in their truth-evaluative role,

2 (Chignell 2007; 2025) is a prime example of this version of noumenalism.

ideas project an ultimate reality as a '*focus imaginarius*' (section 3.2), which serves as a normative ideal for evaluating the success of human inquiries into nature, representing a world independently of any perspective that our cognition aims to approach. The combination of both roles avoids the metaphysical commitments of noumenalism and the deflationary tendencies of fictionalism. This picture is original and comprehensive, making sense of Kant's intriguing but cryptic metaphors of 'horizon' and '*focus imaginarius*' and assigning a different role to each of the three transcendental ideas. While the picture is elegant, I have a few questions about each part of the account.

The first semantic function of outlining contexts of intelligibility means that the ideas provide a priori maps or sketches of domains of reality, within which empirical cognition can be systematically organized and understood (section 4.3). They define meta-rules for applying the understanding's categories in specific domains, guiding the systematic extension of empirical concepts and cognitions. This involves defining a system of concepts that the understanding is meant to fill with appropriate empirical content. The ideas can have this function because they designate the highest genus concepts under which all concepts of a specific domain are integrated (section 4.4). Although the ideas do not constitute the content of empirical concepts, they constitute their intelligibility, i.e., their possibility of playing a role in theorizing, by outlining a priori structures of domains of reality and defining the most general kinds of objects in them. But does this mean that without the ideas all empirical concepts are unintelligible? This seems a very strong reading, making the ideas almost constitutive and not merely regulative. It would be more consistent with the regulative nature of the ideas that intelligibility comes in degrees, so that the ideas aim at increasing intelligibility, but do not encompass all conditions of intelligibility. Kraus bases her argument for the semantic function of ideas on the need to overcome the understanding's incompleteness regarding conceptual underdetermination and its ability to fully define empirical content. Kraus cites Geiger (2003) as a source of this kind of argument.³ But this kind of a strong transcendental reading of the *Appendix* (as opposed to merely heuristic readings) is concerned with the general regulative principle of systematic unity and not with each of the transcendental ideas. The domain contextualizing role of the specific ideas is a novel addition, but I wonder whether making it a condition of intelligibility risks giving the ideas a constitutive role that would amount to a transcendental argument for the existence of their referents.

Additionally, there is a question of how the semantic role fits with each specific transcendental idea. In Kraus' interpretation, the ideas that have a semantic function are the ideas of the soul and the idea of the world-whole. The idea of the soul generates a context of intelligibility for inner experience and defines psychological beings as a natural kind. It guides us to cognize inner appearances as if they inhere in a mental substance, even without such an intuition. It sets the topic for exploring psychological beings through the inner relation of their appearances to an assumed substantial whole. This part of Kraus' account is convincing since the role of demarcating a context of intelligibility is particularly salient regarding the idea of the soul which marks the distinction between inner and outer experience. Still, it might suffice to describe the idea of the soul as a guiding principle in a science of psychology without making it a condition for the intelligibility of inner experience overall.

The second idea that has a semantic function is the idea of the world-whole. According to Kraus, this idea outlines the context of intelligibility for outer experience and defines material objects of nature as a systematic whole. It sets the topic for exploring material beings through their external relations to one another in an assumed whole. But in the *Appendix* this idea has a rather minimal role. It would indeed seem that the idea of the totality of phenomena should have a relation to the scientific investigation of nature. But the idea of the world-whole is not only unrepresentable in possible experience, it leads to antinomies in contrast to the other two ideas:

Now there is not the least thing to hinder us from assuming these ideas as objective and hypostatic, except only the cosmological ones, where reason runs up against an antinomy when it tries to bring this about (the psychological and theological ideas contain nothing of that sort at all) (A673/B701).

Thus, unlike the psychological idea, the cosmological idea cannot express any kind of systematic unity prescribed by reason and it is not required for conceiving the spatio-temporal unity of the phenomenal world:

Yet to think of the latter [corporeal nature] 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 ... not as with the fundamental psychological concept (the I), which contains a priori a certain form of thinking, namely its unity (A684/B712)

The cosmological idea has indeed a regulative role, but it is merely negative, prescribing to regard all series of conditions in experience (spatial, temporal, or causal) as indefinitely extendable: '...in the explanation of given appearances (in a regress or ascent), we ought to proceed as if the series were in itself infinite, i.e., proceed *in indefinitum*' (A685/B713). To support her more positive approach to the cosmological ideas, Kraus presents the idea of absolute space from the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. This idea defines the domain of physics, providing a frame of reference for understanding mechanical motion in accordance with natural laws. This is a novel suggestion, absent from other readings of the *Appendix* and accounts of the ideas of reason. Still, it is not identical with the transcendental idea of the world-whole and has intricate relations to space as a form of intuition which would require further exploration. For example, Kraus states

3 (Geiger 2003). Other recent example are (Hamid 2022) and (Chulanon 2024).

that the idea of absolute space is a 'compositional whole' (53), but this is not compatible with the notion of an idea as a whole that precedes the parts: "the form of a whole of cognition, which precedes the determinate cognition of the parts and contains the conditions for determining a priori the place of each part and its relation to the others" (A645/B673). I will argue below that the idea of God is the positive regulative idea for the scientific investigation of nature, and not the cosmological idea.

The second function of the ideas is truth-evaluative. Reason seeks not only the internal systematicity of its cognition but also that the system approximates a mind-independent reality. Without an external standard, evaluating the success of human inquiries purely by internal systematicity would resemble 'a frictionless spinning in the void without testing our cognitions against the resistance of reality' (59). To overcome this, ideas of reason project an ultimate reality as a '*focus imaginarius*', an imaginary focal point as if behind the surface of a mirror, which appears to be the source of representations but lies outside the bounds of possible experience (A644/B672). This *focus imaginarius* is necessary as it serves as a normative standard for evaluating the success of scientific theorizing in achieving truth and completeness by representing a "world without perspective" of things-in-themselves. The idea of a normative standard is key to Kraus' interpretation, but this characterization of the *function* of ideas as standards of evaluation is perplexing. The ideas indeed represent noumenal objects, but given the rejection of noumenalism, it is not the representation of a reality that explains their regulative function. The ideas are not real external measures, since there is no way to actually use the content of the idea as a standard to assess the truth of any cognition or system of cognition. Yet I agree with Kraus that the ideas express something beyond mere internal systematicity. Since the aim of reason is to cognize the unconditioned, the ultimate explanation for all cognitions of the understanding, it is also the aim of the application of the regulative principles of reason. Therefore, if it is rational to apply the principles of reason, there must be an attitude of confidence that reality is amenable to them. The highest degree of confidence implies that continuous application of the principles can approximate reality as it is in itself. As I see it, the ideas of reason as concepts of a mind-independent but unknowable reality express this attitude of confidence, rather than provide an objective standard used to evaluate our empirical cognitions of nature.

This brings us to the most important transcendental idea that Kraus connects specifically with the truth-evaluative function, the idea of God. This idea projects a normative objective standard for all human cognitive endeavors, a 'view from nowhere' identical to the view of a divine perfect intellect. Most accounts of the regulative idea of God rely on the notion of purposiveness caused by 'a wise author of nature.' But Kraus ingeniously traces a more fundamental significance of the idea of God by appealing to the Transcendental Ideal section and its principle of thoroughgoing determination. To put it simply, this principle prescribes what is required for knowing everything there is to know about something: for every possible predicate, either it or its negation must apply to it. This knowledge (i.e., objective conceptual judgment) would suffice for cognizing it as an individual object solely through its concept. The idea of God expresses this principle by representing the ontological ground of all reality required to fully determine everything else as a partial subset of it. Furthermore, by being defined as the most perfect being instantiating all positive predicates to their maximal degree, it is the sole perfect example of a fully determined individuating concept. In this way the idea of God expresses the standard of perfect conceptual knowledge, the ultimate aim of all inquiry.

However, regarding the scientific explanation of nature, the idea of God expresses something more, the ground of the systematic unity and necessity of the laws of nature. This is evident when noting the continuity between the transcendental ideal of the *Critique* and the pre-critical proof for the existence of God. The sum-total of all realities that is presupposed by the principle of thoroughgoing determination, is also labeled 'the material of all possibility' (A573/B601)⁴. This notion is a clear allusion to Kant's pre-critical proof for the existence of God.⁵ The gist of the argument is that the possibility of any individual thing presupposes that the content of its predicates is given through some existing thing. If nothing exists, nothing is possible. Since it is impossible that nothing is possible, something exists necessarily. As the argument continues, this is God, the ground of all possibility. The affinity between this argument and the construal of the ideal of reason in the *Critique* is evident, textually and conceptually: the same 'all of reality' required for thoroughgoing determination of things is also the ground of their possibility.

What matters for understanding the regulative function of the idea of God, is that Kant explicitly argues that the conception of God as the ground of possibility coheres with the scientific picture and is conducive to its proper method. Thus, it anticipates the regulative role of the idea in the *Appendix*. Since the possibility of a thing is equated with its essence, God as the ground of possibility is also the ground of all essences. And since Kant endorses an essentialist picture in which the laws of nature are grounded in the essences of natural kinds, God is the ground of the systematic unity and necessity of the laws of nature. This entails that discovering unity between the laws of nature provides further evidence for their single ground, God:

Our mature judgement of the essential properties of the things known to us through experience enables us, even in the necessary determinations of their internal possibility, to perceive unity in what is manifold and harmoniousness in what is separated... Our purpose from now on will be to see whether the internal possibility of things is itself necessarily related to order and harmony, and whether unity is to be found in this measureless manifold, so that, on this basis, we could establish whether the essences of things themselves indicate an ultimate common ground. (OPA 2:92)

4 Also: 'the entire storehouse of material from which all possible predicates of things can be taken' (A576/B604).

5 Elaborated in the 1763 'The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God'. Henceforth OPA.

Kant explicitly states that the conception of God conducive to science is not that of a wise architect grounding the lawfulness of nature through its will contingently, but rather necessarily as a consequence of its essence (OPA 2:100). This necessitarian conception of the lawfulness of nature is also present in the *Appendix*: “The regulative principle demands that systematic unity be presupposed absolutely as a **unity of nature** ... as following from the **essence** of things (A693/B721).”

Hence, Kant continues to endorse the same conception of God in the *Appendix*, but not as a positive metaphysical theory, but as an expression of the demands of reason. The conception of God as the ground of essences is the regulative idea for the scientific inquiry of nature which is more than a mere methodological principle of systematic unity or a hypothesis of an intelligent designer. It expresses the scientific principle to conceptualize nature as ‘a system interconnected in accordance with necessary laws’ (A645/B673):

[T]he idea of that being [God], means nothing more than that reason bids us consider every connection in the world according to principles of a systematic unity (A686/ B714)

I agree with Kraus that it is vital to consider the transcendental ideal and the principle of thoroughgoing determination in relation to the regulative function of the idea of God in the *Appendix*, but so is the conception of God as the ground of the systematicity and necessity of the laws of nature inherited from the pre-critical metaphysics.

To conclude, I will briefly present my own orientation on the questions I raised in my comments. I find Kraus’s perspectivalism illuminating and largely convincing in carefully mapping the various regulative functions of reason and explicating Kant’s enigmatic visual metaphors. While I offered more nuanced versions of noumenalism and fictionalism that might resist some of her criticisms, I agree that these views do not go to the heart of the function of the ideas. However, I would go further than Kraus and situate my interpretation not as a mediation between the two poles, but as opposed to both. I argue that in both views, the ideas have a representational semantic function. In noumenalism, the ideas represent noumenal objects and are the content of doctrinal beliefs, hypotheses we assent to for the sake of applying principles of systematic unity. But unlike scientific hypotheses, the ideas of reason lack the determinate content to function as explanations. Fictionalism also uses the ideas as representations, but of non-existent objects that are nonetheless useful in directing inquiry towards the goals set by reason. Scientific idealizations aid in actual predictions or calculations, but the ideas lack the content to play such a role. The ideas just cannot function regulatively in the way representing concepts do in our theoretical inquiries of nature. As I argued above, the justification for using the ideas in noumenalism and fictionalism is their usefulness for applying the principles of reason. This means that the fundamental feature of the regulative use of reason is its normative character. The regulative principles of reason are norms of inquiry from which the meaning of the transcendental ideas is derived. Therefore, I suggest that the function of the ideas is not that of representing objects, whether real or fictional, but rather that of expressing the commitment to semantic and epistemic norms of reason that Kraus meticulously expounds.⁶ For example, the idea of God expresses the norm to conceptualize nature as governed by a system of necessary laws; the cosmological ideas reflect the norm of treating causal, temporal, and spatial series as indefinitely extendable; and the psychological idea expresses the norm of explaining mental life according to one enduring principle, a character. The expressivist interpretation aligns with Kant’s explication of the ideas as “analogues of schemata”:

One mistakes the significance of this idea right away if one takes it to be the assertion, or even only the presupposition, of an actual thing to which one would think of ascribing the ground for the systematic constitution of the world... in a word, this transcendental thing is merely the **schema** of that **regulative principle** through which reason, as far as it can, extends systematic unity over all experience. (A681-2/ B709-10 emphasis mine)

Just as the schemata of the understanding express the categories in the temporal form of sensibility, ideas express reason’s regulative principles in the understanding’s language of objects. The sole content used in the construal of the ideas is that of the maximal fulfilment of the norms of reason. Therefore, the ideas should not be thought of as representations of determinate relations (e.g., causal) between objects, but as an expression of norms of connecting concepts in a system and seeking out new ones, ‘to **indicate** the **procedure** in accordance with which the empirical and determinate use of the understanding in experience can be brought into thoroughgoing agreement with itself’ (A665-6/B693-4 emphasis mine). I believe that this kind of expressivism avoids the concerns I raised above regarding the ideas as constitutive of intelligibility and objective standards for truth evaluation.⁷

Kraus’ book represents a significant achievement. It advances an original account with which I have great sympathy, based on a comprehensive and close reading of the *Appendix*. Therefore, I highly recommend it to anyone interested in Kant’s theoretical philosophy. Despite my disagreement with some of its details, I am sure it will become a starting point for future discussions of one of Kant’s central but enigmatic doctrines.

6 I take here inspiration from Gibbard’s norm-expressivism. (Gibbard 1990). Gibbard argues that normative judgements about what is permissible or impermissible express the acceptance of norms.

7 Spagnesi has recently argued for a rule-based account according to which the ideas of reason are used to prescribe rules to the understanding (Spagnesi 2023). But I think that it is more accurate to treat the ideas as expressing norms, rather than prescribing norms. The ideas are construed from the norms of reason, but the norms can be stated explicitly without the ideas.

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