Kant on Regulative Principles and Practical Beliefs

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Kant’s account of regulative ideas and principles is an aspect of his thought that has often been associated to a pragmatist approach. A regulative principle is one which we are practically required to assume in our research into nature for its essential role in leading inquiry, even though we have no evidence that this principle exemplifies a true proposition. This lack of evidence notwithstanding, we are said to be justified in pursuing our research into nature as if this principle were true because it is a condition to successfully carry out this very research. Take for example the principles of the homogeneity, specification and continuity of nature. We have no evidence that nature conforms to these principles, but since we would not be able to find any systematic ordering in natural beings if we did not assume that nature obeys to those principles, we are practically justified to assume their validity. This view displays some similarities to some aspects of the classical pragmatists’ account of inquiry. For example, Charles S. Peirce argued that we are justified in pursuing our research guided by some ‘regulative hopes’ (as the hope that the facts under scrutiny admit of rationalization by us), even though we have no guarantee that these hopes will be met.

Yet, even though there are these similarities between Kant and the pragmatists, Kant’s claim in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic of the Critique of Pure Reason that regulative ideas and principles have an objective but indeterminate validity badly suits with the hypothesis that Kant in fact understood these ideas and principles in a pragmatist spirit. This claim can be understood as maintaining that regulative ideas and principles are at least in part constitutive, because they actually guarantee a priori that nature is systematic, even though we cannot anticipate to what extent and in which way it is systematic. While this claim seems to contradict Kant’s contention that regulative ideas and principles have only a logical and heuristic function, it also challenges the idea that in the Appendix Kant displays a sort of pragmatist approach.

In this paper I will investigate whether Kant’s analysis of doctrinal belief in the third section of the Canon of Pure Reason of the first Critique can offer a new perspective on the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic. More specifically, I will consider whether the elucidation of doctrinal belief as a particular form of ‘taking-to-be-true’ [Fürwahrhalten] can contribute to clarify the kind of validity which is ascribed to regulative ideas and principles in the Appendix. For Kant, a belief [Glaube] is a positive propositional attitude we are justified to hold with respect to a proposition when the latter is undecided on theoretical grounds but is a condition for attaining an end we are pursuing in our praxis. Kant claims that we cannot rationally pursue that end, if we do not believe that the conditions for its attainment are fulfilled. Therefore, the question is whether the objective but indeterminate validity of the regulative ideas and principles simply hints to the fact that, in the praxis of inquiry and only in this context, we are justified in having a positive propositional attitude toward these principles and ‘take them for true’ on practical grounds. If the objective indeterminate validity could be interpreted in this way, there would be no tension with a pragmatist interpretation of the Appendix after all.

The paper is structured as follows: in the first section I will illustrate the problems that hinder the interpretation of the validity of regulative ideas and principles in the Appendix. In a second step I will analyze Kant’s account of belief [Glaube] in the section On Having Opinion, Knowing and Believing of the Critique of Pure Reason and I will take into consideration the justification strategy
for doctrinal belief in particular. Finally, the third section will be dedicated to the relationships between the justification of regulative ideas and principles in the Appendix and the characterization of doctrinal belief in the Canon.