

Kant on Regulative Ideas and Doctrinal Beliefs

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[this is a translation of a paper in German, which I haven't done myself, so this version of the paper still needs a lot of refining, sorry!]

0. Introduction

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.¹ 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

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Wartenberg, T.E.: Order Through Reason: Kant's Transcendental Justification of Science. In: Kant-Studien, 70 (1979), 409–24; Wartenberg, T.E.: Reason and the Principles of Science. In: The Cambridge Companion to Kant. P. Guyer (ed.). Cambridge 1992, 224–48; O'Shea, J.R.: The Needs of Understanding: Kant on Empirical Laws and Regulative Ideas. In: International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 5 (1997), 216–54.

and in which way it is systematic. On the one hand, this claim seems to contradict Kant's contention that regulative ideas and principles have only a logical and heuristic function.² On the other, 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*. Both in the *Appendix* and in the *Canon*, Kant maintains that our reason can never expand our theoretical cognition directly by means of constitutive speculative concepts. However, some ideas of reason can obtain a conditional and indirect validity³ in so far as they enable the extension of our empirical cognition. Despite the topical proximity of the two chapters, Kant defines the indirect validity of this use of ideas in two different ways: in the *Appendix*, he maintains that ideas only have a regulative use;⁴ in the *Canon*, he holds the opinion that, from such a heuristic point of view, the assumption of ideas represents a case of justified belief that is called "doctrinal".⁵ Hence, the question I pose in the following is: Can the explanation of doctrinal belief as a special form of taking something to be true, contribute to a clearer understanding of the validity that is ascribed to regulative ideas in the *Appendix*?⁶

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Cf. Kemp Smith, N.: *A Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. London 1918, 543–58; Bennett, J.: *Kant's Dialectic*. Cambridge 1974, 270–80; Horstmann, R.-P.: *Why Must There Be a Transcendental Deduction in Kant's Critique of Judgment?* In: *Kant's Transcendental Deductions*. E. Förster (ed.). Stanford 1989, 157–76.

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Of course, ideas can also receive a certain validity in the context of practical philosophy.

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A663/B691.

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A826/B854.

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Accordingly, Andrew Chignell (*Belief in Kant*. In: *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007), 323–60, 351 f.) has suggested it would be better to understand the justification of regulative ideas as an instance of doctrinal belief.

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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*.

1. The Issue: What is the Validity of Regulative Ideas?

Having barred all attempts to expand our cognition through purely speculative ideas in the *Dialectic*, in the *Appendix* Kant ascribes to these very ideas the positive role of leading our quest for empirical concepts and systematic cognitions. Four ideas play this leading role, and can be divided into two groups:

- (1) The idea of a systematically ordered nature, together with the principles of homogeneity, specification, and continuity of the forms of this very nature;
- (2) The ideas of the soul, the world, and God.

According to Kant, all these ideas are not to be taken as *constitutive*, but rather as *regulative*. This means that such ideas cannot be considered cognitions of the objects they designate, but are to be regarded simply as ideal guides for the investigation of nature that provide the empirical use of our reason with unity.⁷ Even if Kant designates these ideas as regulative, he claims time and time again that they appear to have a certain transcendental legitimacy, and that they are *a priori* synthetic propositions endowed with objective indeterminate validity.

Was bei diesen Prinzipien merkwürdig ist und uns auch allein beschäftigt, ist dies: daß sie transzendental zu sein scheinen, und, ob sie gleich bloße Ideen zur Befolgung des empirischen Gebrauchs der Vernunft enthalten, [...] sie gleichwohl, als synthetische Sätze a priori, objektive, aber unbestimmte Gültigkeit haben, und zur Regel möglicher Erfahrung dienen [...].⁸

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Cf. A644/B672.

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[What is strange about these principles, and what alone concerns us, is this: that they seem to be transcendental, and even though they contain mere ideas to be followed in the empirical use of reason, [...] as synthetic propositions a priori, nevertheless have objective but indeterminate validity, and serve as a rule of possible experience [...].]⁹

What does it mean, then, that regulative principles are transcendental, and that they have objective, but indeterminate validity? Three different interpretative strategies seem possible to answer this question:

- (a) Regulative ideas have an indirect objectivity because the possibility of finding some sort of systematicity in our empirical concepts is always to be seen as a consequence of our research into nature, which is guided by the idea of an indeterminate systematicity and its conditions. However, this does not imply that we can maintain *a priori* that nature is systematic;
- (b) Regulative ideas are at least partly constitutive because they actually guarantee that nature is systematic, and that the conditions of this systematicity (i.e. the ideas of soul, world, and God) also apply, even though we do not know *in what way* and *to what extent* this nature is systematic, and how those conditions can be further specified;
- (c) Regulative ideas have an objective indeterminate validity because in the practice of research, and only in this context, we use them as if they referred to an object, without being able to specify the characteristics of these *objects in the idea*.¹⁰

It seems plausible to think that Kant tries to clarify the status of regulative ideas through a combination of these options. Kant explicitly claims to accept a version of (a).¹¹ Since, however, options (b) and (c) seem to embody conflicting views, it remains to be seen which one of these two can be associated with (a) – under the premise, of course, that Kant himself makes such an association. If Kant regards the regulative use of reason as an instance of doctrinal belief, then it is

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All English translations of quotations for the Critique stem from the 1998 Cambridge Edition of The Works Of Immanuel Kant, translated and edited by Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood.

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A670/B698.

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A665/B693, A670/B698.

more plausible to understand the objective indeterminate validity of the ideas in the light of option (c), because believing never justifies regarding assents as valid from a theoretical standpoint.

2. What is Doctrinal Belief?

In the Section *On having an opinion, knowing, and believing*, Kant identifies believing with a form of taking-to-be-true that is objectively insufficient, yet subjectively sufficient. The other forms of taking-to-be-true are having an opinion (both objectively and subjectively insufficient) and knowing (both objectively and subjectively sufficient).¹² But what really is the attitude of taking-to-be-true, and what does it mean, that believing is subjectively sufficient?

Taking-to-be-true designates the different positive propositional attitudes we can have towards a proposition. In this sense, having an opinion is a positive attitude towards a proposition for which we recognize lacking sufficient grounds to take it to be certain. In this case, our taking-to-be-true is consciously limited and temporary.

As far as the attitude of believing is concerned, on the contrary, there are sufficient grounds to take a proposition to be true. The grounds for believing, however, do not provide the acceptance of this proposition with any objective evidence, so that such grounds cannot be considered intersubjective and universal (otherwise we would namely have an instance of knowing). The grounds that justify a belief are thus subjectively sufficient, because they are able to produce a justified conviction in us, but are objectively deficient, because they cannot provide any evidence for the truth of the proposition.

But how can we justifiably believe a proposition when consciously lacking evidence to support it? Kant's answer is that we can justifiably believe something without evidence if this belief represents a condition for the attainment of our ends and interests.

Wenn einmal ein Zweck vorgesetzt ist, sind die Bedingungen der Erreichung desselben hypothetisch notwendig. Diese Notwendigkeit ist subjektiv, aber doch nur komparativ zureichend, wenn ich gar keine andere Bedingung weiß, unter denen der Zweck zu erreichen wäre; aber sie ist schlechthin und für jedermann zureichend, wenn ich gewiß weiß, daß niemand andere Bedingungen kennen könne, die auf den vorgesetzten Zweck führen.¹³

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[Once an end is proposed, then the conditions for attaining it are hypothetically necessary. This necessity is subjectively but still only comparatively sufficient if I do not know of any other conditions at all under which the end could be attained; but it is sufficient absolutely and for everyone if I know with certainty that no one else can know of any other conditions that lead to the proposed end].

Pursuing an end rationally, necessarily requires believing that the conditions for which we lack any positive or negative evidence, but that make the attainment of the end possible, are fulfilled. Thus, the justification of belief has a strong practical aspect because we legitimize a positive propositional attitude towards a proposition whose truth constitutes a condition for the successful attainment of an end through a certain practice.

In this context, doctrinal belief concerns propositions for whose truth we actually cannot find objectively sufficient grounds – Kant’s examples are the existence of inhabitants on other planets,¹⁴ the thesis of the existence of God,¹⁵ and the belief in future life¹⁶ –, and in which the ends are contingent.¹⁷ Even though, at times, Kant gives the impression that doctrinal belief concerns propositions whose truth would be a condition for the attainment of certain ends through a practice impossible to us,¹⁸ he describes the conditions that researchers must assume for the practice of research as an important case of this kind of belief. In this context, Kant notes that “die zweckmäßige Einheit eine so große Bedingung der Anwendung der Vernunft auf Natur” [“purposive unity is still so important a condition of the application of reason to nature”], and that it

A823–4/B 851–2.

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A825/B853.

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A826/B854.

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Pragmatic belief, instead, concerns propositions for which we are able to find, under other conditions, objectively sufficient grounds. In this case too, the ends are contingent. On the contrary, the ends of moral belief are a duty and we cannot find objectively sufficient grounds for our belief. Cf. Chignell: *Belief in Kant*, 345.

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Cf. A826/B854.

is not possible to identify any other condition of this unity of nature “als wenn ich voraussetze, daß eine höchste Intelligenz alles nach den weisesten Zwecken so geordnet habe” [“except insofar as I presuppose that a highest intelligence has arranged everything in accordance with the wisest ends”]. This is exactly why the existence of a wise author of the world is “eine Bedingung einer zwar zufälligen, aber doch nicht unerheblichen Absicht, nämlich, um eine Leitung in der Nachforschung der Natur zu haben” [“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”].¹⁹

It is easy to recognize how this instance of doctrinal belief brings together elements that bear, on the one hand, striking similarities with the regulative use of reason; and, on the other hand, display the justification strategy of belief, which is dependent on a relation with some ends we have. The fact that, in the *Canon*, Kant portrays the assumption of the ideas of the unity of nature and of an author of the world in the context of the investigation of nature as an instance of doctrinal belief indicates that we ought to understand the objective indeterminate validity of regulative ideas in terms of option (c). Accordingly, regulative ideas cannot be understood as an instance of knowledge, in which we have a valid, but indeterminate theoretical cognition of objects. Rather, regulative ideas build an instance of justified belief, in which we make use of these ideas in research practice, and only in this context, as if they could refer to objects.

3. Doctrinal Belief and Regulative Ideas

As we have seen, the justification of beliefs rests on a particular relation to ends that we pursue in our practice. In the *Appendix*, Kant seems to sometimes follow a similar strategy for the justification of the regulative use of ideas.²⁰ He explicitly observes that we can only ascribe a regulative, but objective validity to the ideas in so far as they are conditions for the rational pursuit of the speculative interest of our reason.

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Rauscher (Rauscher, F.: The Appendix to the Dialectic and the Canon of Pure Reason: The Positive Role of Reason. In: The Cambridge Companion to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. P. Guyer (ed.). Cambridge 2010, 290–309, 308–9) points to the similarities between the justification of belief and the analysis of regulative ideas.

Diese höchste Formale Einheit, welche allein auf Vernunftbegriffen beruht, ist die zweckmäßige Einheit der Dinge, und das spekulative Interesse der Vernunft macht es notwendig, alle Anordnung in der Welt so anzusehen, als ob sie aus der Absicht einer allerhöchsten Vernunft entsprossen wäre.²¹

[This highest formal unity that alone rests on concepts of reason is the purposive unity of things; and the speculative interest of reason makes it necessary to regard every ordinance in the world as if it had sprouted from the intention of a highest reason.]

Further confirmation for the assumption that, for Kant, regulative ideas only receive their validity as conditions for a particular practice is to be found in that they allow the elaboration of maxims – homogeneity, specification, and continuity – for the investigation of nature.²² Even if the concept of maxim has different functions in Kant,²³ the thesis must be held that the concepts of practice and end play an important role in its understanding. In this sense, we can describe a maxim as a practical rule we give ourselves to attain a certain end.

These analogies with the justification strategy of doctrinal belief suggests that we should read Kant's justification of regulative ideas as follow: we can neither rationally follow the speculative interest of reason nor the maxims depending on it, unless we believe, among other things, in the systematicity of nature and in the existence of God.²⁴ Thus, the objective indeterminate validity of ideas only indicates that, in the practice of research, we must hold a strong conviction that these ideas' are valid, even if they are by no means to be regarded as an instance of knowledge.²⁵ It seems to follow that we should interpret the objective indeterminate validity of the ideas in the direction of option (c) rather than option (b).

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A686/B715.

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Vgl. A666–7/B694–5.

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Cf. Bacin S.: *Massime e principi pratici in Kant*. In: *Annali dell'Istituto italiano per gli studi storici* 16 (1999), 323–62; Bacin S.: *Il senso dell'etica: Kant e la costruzione di una teoria morale*. Bologna 2006, Kap. III.2.

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Cf. A676/B704, A697–8/B725–6.

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Cf. A677–8/B705–6.

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Nonetheless, even if this interpretation definitely makes a combination of options (a) and (c) more likely than a combination of options (a) and (b), many terminological tensions remain. Two of these tensions, which I list below, prove particularly challenging for my argument:

- (1) In the *Canon*, the validity of belief is described as *subjective*, while Kant ascribes an *objective*, but indeterminate, validity to regulative ideas;
- (2) Belief is a justified taking-to-be-true, but it can never produce transcendental cognitions; nevertheless, Kant maintains that regulative ideas are transcendental principles.

Both in the *Appendix* and in the above analysed case of doctrinal belief, the use of ideas is motivated with regard to their function in a certain practice. If that is the case, how is the Kantian claim that doctrinal belief only has subjective validity, while regulative ideas are supposed to be transcendental conditions and can thus have objective indeterminate validity, to be understood? I believe that the fact that Kant designates the validity of ideas as *transcendental* is not so much to be explained in the light of the similarities to the line of thought of the *Canon*, as it is to be understood in reference to the indirect validity of the ideas I marked as interpretative option (a) in Section 1. Accordingly, Kant maintains that regulative ideas have a transcendental validity because they are conditions for finding a systematic order of empirical concepts of reason. This, however, does not mean that we can epistemically guarantee that there is systematicity in nature, or that a wise author of the world causes this systematicity (this would tend towards interpretative option (b)).²⁶ Kant's position implies rather the decidedly more modest claim that the possibility of finding certain empirical laws and a certain systematicity in nature²⁷ can only occur as a consequence of our research into nature, which we carry out in accordance with the regulative ideas. In this sense, regulative ideas are conditions of our cognition of nature, and for this reason Kant ascribed to them transcendental validity.

But if Kant's claim that regulative ideas are transcendental principles is based on their indirect validity, why does he associate arguments that have a lot in common with the justification of believing with this line of thought?

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Wartenberg (*Order Through Reason; Reason and the Principles*) suggests a reading of the *Appendix* in this direction.

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O'Shea (*The Needs of Understanding*) correctly argues that the regulative ideas are needed to direct reason towards the specification of the categories, and particularly of the category of causality.

Even if regulative ideas are in some sense transcendental conditions of our empirical cognition, they themselves cannot be considered transcendental cognitions. The use of regulative ideas does not guarantee that nature is actually systematic. Likewise, regulative ideas themselves cannot be considered cognitions of the objects they designate. However, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant seems to hold the opinion that transcendental principles can only have validity if they contain transcendental cognitions and are objectively legitimate to this effect.²⁸ This may be the reason why Kant strives to find a kind of objective validity for the ideas of reason too, even if it remains indeterminate. But then perhaps it becomes clearer why, in the *Appendix*, Kant associates a line of thought in many ways resembling the justification of belief with the argument founded on the indirect validity of ideas. Even if belief cannot be knowledge, in the practical context in which it is justified, it counts as cognition. It is then plausible to suggest that Kant considers regulative ideas in analogy to belief because he wants to show that they contain cognitions in at least one sense. Accordingly, Kant notes that he is “genötigt, diese Idee [d.h. eine regulative] zu realisieren, d.i. ihr einen wirklichen Gegenstand zu setzen” [“compelled to realize this [regulative] idea, i.e. to posit for it an actual object”].²⁹

Of course, this strategy remains problematic within the terminological means of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. When Kant’s attempt to defend the thesis that regulative ideas, as particular transcendental principles, are to be regarded as cognitions at least in one sense of the term, his vindication of this thesis seems inappropriate, since it rests on an argument that is structurally similar to the justification of belief. And this is inadequate because belief can never offer transcendental cognitions, but rather only cognitions that are valid from a practical point of view.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined in what way and to what extent an analysis of doctrinal belief can offer a new perspective on the *Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic*, a perspective which can contribute to solving some tensions in this section of the first *Critique*. This examination yielded a negative result at first. As long as Kant only ascribes subjective validity to belief and does not

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Cf. Horstmann: Why Must There Be a Transcendental Deduction, 168.

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A677/B705.

associate any transcendental cognition with it, an analysis of this form of taking-to-be-true cannot help us explaining what the indeterminate objective validity of the regulative ideas and their transcendental status actually are. However, the comparison with doctrinal belief has opened the possibility to exclude one of the interpretative options (namely option (b)) as implausible. In light of this interpretative strategy it proves misleading to award the objective validity of regulative ideas too strong a status. A final remark on the matter of inconsistencies in Kant's argumentation in the *Appendix*, which is made of apparently incompatible, if not contradictory statements: the reason for these inconsistencies is not a complete lack of attention for the coherence of his argument, but rather the attempt to grasp, with different strategies, the validity and the status of some principles that are difficult to classify under the basic concepts of the first *Critique*. In this context, it would of course be appropriate to ask whether in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant develops the suitable terminological means to comprehend transcendental, but regulative principles. But that is a question for another paper.