

Regulative Principles and Regulative Ideas

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The purpose of this paper is to explicate the distinction between and the sense of Kant's two uses of the term "regulative" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The Analogies are described by Kant as "regulative" principles¹ in contrast to the "constitutive" principles that were laid out in the Axioms of Intuition and the Anticipations of Perception. However, it is not only in the Transcendental Analytic that Kant uses the term "regulative" as, in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, he also describes the Ideas of Pure Reason as having an only "regulative" use. The point of this paper will be to assess the uses of the term "regulative" in these distinct contexts making clear thereby how Kant understands the status of the regulative principles as distinct from that of the regulative ideas.

Regulative vs. Constitutive Principles

Kant presents the distinction between constitutive and regulative principles in his general discussion of the principle underlying all the analogies of experience. The principles of the Axioms and Anticipations are here characterised as including a

¹ This term is also applied to the Postulates of Empirical Thought and serves to distinguish both the Analogies and the Postulates from the Axioms of Intuition and the Anticipations of Perception. The Analogies and Postulates are also described as "dynamical" principles in contrast to the "mathematical" Axioms and Anticipations. It would be the work of future papers to determine the import of the classification of the Postulates as "regulative" and of a further one to relate the characterisations of "dynamical" and "regulative" to each other.

mathematical synthesis which involves numerical magnitudes and it is due to this that Kant terms them “constitutive” principles as with them it is possible to *construct* a procedure for quantification. By contrast to these principles there are ones that are concerned with “the *existence* of appearances under rules *a priori*” (A179/B222). Now if the constitutive principles are so-called precisely because they give us a generative relation to appearances according to rules then it is quite different if we are dealing with existences since there is no procedure to construct the existence of something.

So the regulative principles, by contrast to the constitutive ones, apply only to *relations* between existences, not a constitution procedure for the existences. The relations in question, in conformity with the prior discussion of the schematism, are temporal ones so that two elements of what are given to perception are brought into a connection by means of a necessary temporal relation. Kant further amplifies this by stating:

An analogy of experience is, therefore, only a rule according to which a unity of experience may arise from perception. It does not tell us how mere perception or empirical intuition in general itself comes about. (A180/B222)

The analogies thus in a sense presuppose the previously given constitutive principles which have told us how “mere perception or empirical intuition in general” have come about. What those principles did not tell us however is precisely how a rule may arise from perception according to which a unity of experience may come about. Finally, Kant adds that the regulative principles are distinguished from the constitutive not in terms of certainty as both have *a priori* certainty but rather in the nature of their

evidence since the constitutive principles have immediate evidence being intuitive whilst the regulative principles, as discursive, do not possess this.

However, having summarized Kant's description of the distinction between constitutive and regulative principles, it is now time to look at a basic objection to this distinction that has been raised by Paul Guyer. As we shall see later, this objection, whilst not explicitly adopted by others, is nonetheless closely connected with a view of the distinction between the two kinds of principle that is widely asserted. So Guyer views the claim concerning the regulative status of the Second Analogy as one that is necessarily *indeterminate* or as he puts it: "For any given event it tells us that there is some cause or other, but not what that cause is".² This indeterminacy of the Second Analogy principle on Guyer's view emerges from the general indeterminacy of regulative principles and contrasts them with constitutive principles which are, by distinction, determinate principles for Kant. However, a final twist in Guyer's account is that although he takes the distinction to between constitutive and regulative principles on Kant's account to be understood by Kant as one between determinate and indeterminate principles Guyer does not view Kant's procedure with regard to the distinction as justified. So although the distinction is apparently meant to be one between determinate and indeterminate principles Kant cannot justify it as one between such and thus the difference between constitutive and regulative effectively collapses on Guyer's reading.³

The reason why Guyer interprets the distinction between constitutive and regulative principles as one between determinate and indeterminate is grounded

² Paul Guyer (1987) *Kant and the Claims of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York), p. 188.

³ "To the extent that any of these principles are valid, they are all certainly regulative in the sense defined." Guyer *ibid* p. 189.

only on one citation where Kant states that even if we could grant that there are ways of inferring that something exists “we could not know it determinately” (A178/B221). However, this remark is made just prior to the central point concerning constitutive principles, namely, that by means of them, a procedure can be generated by which construction of a magnitude can be given. Regulative principles, by contrast, offer no such procedure, refer in no sense therefore to magnitudes and cannot thus be connected to a construction. Regulative principles are not distinct from constitutive by means of a contrast between determinate and indeterminate, they are rather distinguished from them in producing a rule by means of which a unity of experience can be given. Constitutive principles relate only to the form and matter of intuition and do so by means of procedures of enabling quantities of intuition to be constructed according to a rule, hence, they show how “mere perception or empirical intuition in general” comes about. Regulative principles do not do this but rather provide a discursive procedure by means of which a *rule of experience* arises from perception.⁴ It is the difference between rules of perception and intuition on the one hand and rules that enable us to speak meaningfully about experience on the other that is at issue in the distinction between constitutive and regulative, not that between principles that are determinate and those that are indeterminate.

Regulative Ideas of Reason and the Constitutive Categories of Understanding

⁴ It is tempting to summarize the difference by referring to Lewis White Beck’s distinction between “Lockean” and “Kantian” experience and to describe the constitutive principles as “Lockean” by contrast to the “Kantian” regulative principles but the fact that the constitutive principles are *a priori* and possess true, not comparative, universality would prevent this from being entirely accurate. For the distinction see Lewis White Beck (???)

The distinction between regulative and constitutive principles involves the articulation of the distinctively Kantian sense of “experience”. This is involved in a different way when Kant articulates the notion of regulative use of ideas of reason. Kant discusses this in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic where he presents the positive use such ideas can be put to. Reason is here distinguished from understanding in that reason does not itself provide us with concepts of objects but only orders the concepts that we have. In providing concepts of objects with order reason gives them unity in terms of totality. Hence reason takes the understanding and its concepts as its object whilst the understanding, by contrast, relates to objects themselves and provides us with the concepts for grasping them. It is relating to the ideas of reason as if they were like concepts of understanding that is to treat them as *constitutive*.

When Kant attacks the *constitutive* view of the ideas of reason he means something quite different from when he describes the Axioms and Anticipations as *constitutive* principles. The constitutive principles are so described as they provide rules for construction of quantities whilst the reference to the whole group of concepts of understanding as constitutive is meant to indicate they combine together to enable us to understand what “objects” are. If the ideas of pure reason should not be seen as “constitutive” in this way, then, what is meant by treating them as, instead, “regulative”? Kant says that in viewing these ideas in this way we see them as directing the understanding to a general point that lies beyond possible experience and acts as the notion of greatest possible unity, hence extending beyond the unity of the regulative principles of understanding. In bringing this unity into view an approximation to universality is attained, not states Kant, some kind of “proof” of universality such as he

might be thought to have given to the concepts of pure understanding.

The unity that is aimed at by means of the regulative ideas of reason is merely one that Kant takes to be projected, not one that can be shown to be given, it is only aimed at giving the understanding's principles aims. This is done primarily by means of three principles, which are presented by Kant as enabling reason to give such aid to the understanding. The principles are those of homogeneity of the manifold under higher genera, variety of the homogeneous under lower species and the affinity of all concepts. The last of these is also termed the "continuity" of all forms and is said by Kant to emerge from the previous two.⁵

So, if the regulative principles of understanding were so named for providing *rules* for the relations of objects such that they producing a sense of the unity of experience, the regulative principles of pure reason by contrast *order* the concepts of understanding such that these concepts aim at a greater unity than was provided by the regulative principles alone. There is therefore a relationship between the two senses of "regulative" in the *Critique* but there are also important differences between them. The regulative principles enable the unity of experience to emerge as it is through them that the connection is made, beyond the form and matter of intuition, to something that we term "objects" of experience. The "objects" are not, however, constituted by means of the regulative use of ideas of reason. Rather, the objects are only ordered by means of the rules that are given by means of this regulative use of ideas.

⁵ This reference to "continuity" needs in its turn to be related both to the central significance of the reference to a different "continuity" in the account of the Anticipations of Perception, the concluding reference to "continuity" in the Analogies and the various appeals to "continuity" made by Kant in the *Lectures on Metaphysics*. So intriguing is this notion that it is worthy of an extended study all of its own.

The regulative use of ideas provides us with a different sort of *principle* to that given in the explicit discussion of regulative principles in the Transcendental Analytic. Kant frames the *principle* in question as one whose necessity we recognize even though we have no knowledge of its source (A676/B704). Now, whilst we found that Kant did not distinguish between constitutive and regulative principles of understanding according to a distinction between determinate and indeterminate as Paul Guyer suggests it is precisely to such a distinction that he does turn when discussing the regulative use of ideas of pure reason. For example he writes the following:

Since the systematic connection which reason can give to the empirical employment of the understanding not only furthers its extension, but also guarantees its correctness, the principle of such systematic unity is so far also objective, but in an indeterminate manner (*principium vagum*). It is not a constitutive principle that enables us to determine anything in respect of its direct object, but only a merely regulative principle and maxim, to further and strengthen *in infinitum* (indeterminately) the empirical employment of reason (A680/B708)

The reason why the distinction between determinate and indeterminate does work to distinguish the regulative use of ideas of pure reason from the concepts of pure understanding is that the former works according to an asymptotic approximation whilst the latter, by contrast, determines a relation to a direct object. This contrast is thus quite different than

that between constitutive and regulative principles of pure understanding.⁶

Kant also returns to the understanding of the distinction between the constitutive and regulative principles of pure understanding in his account of the regulative use of pure ideas. Whilst repeating the distinction that he made within the *Transcendental Analytic* he also claims here that the laws that emerge from the treatment of the Analogies and Postulates are themselves “constitutive in respect of *experience*” meaning by this that they provide us with concepts of experience. This accords with the distinction between perceptual and experiential import described in the account of the difference between regulative and constitutive principles of pure understanding itself.

However, although Kant describes the regulative use of ideas of pure reason as distinct from constitutive principles of pure understanding as not relating to a direct object and also as not enabling us to state something concerning the essence of nature itself he nonetheless describes the principles that emerge from this regulative use as applying to the unity in nature and thus as, in some apparent sense, relating to the unity of nature itself. For example Kant writes the following:

The law of reason which requires us to seek for this unity, is a necessary law, since without it we should have no reason at all, and without reason no coherent employment of the understanding, and in the absence of this no *sufficient criterion* of empirical truth. In order, therefore, to secure an empirical criterion we have no option save to presuppose the systematic unity of nature as

⁶ Strictly speaking the regulative idea gives rise also to Ideals or “transcendental things” which are only “the schema of the regulative principle” (A682/B710): namely the “I”, the “world” and “God”.

objectively valid and necessary. (A651/B679, my emphasis)

This assertion concerning the criterion of empirical truth indicates that there is a basis for the employment of the understanding that does not emerge from understanding itself. However it also points to a central question that has bedevilled interpretation of Kant's treatment of the regulative use of ideas of pure reason. Are these ideas to be understood only as heuristic or do they also have some kind of "realist" status?⁷ The former term is explicitly used by Kant when discussing the way in which the principles of manifoldness, affinity and unity have related to the development of laws of the planets subsequent to which he states that the principles in question can be employed with "great advantage in the elaboration of experience, as heuristic principles" (A663/B691). However, in a later passage, Kant distinguishes between the concepts of reason that he again terms "heuristic fictions" with the "regulative principles of the systematic employment of the understanding" which is based on such fictions thus indicating here that it is not the principles themselves that are heuristic fictions (A771/B799). We have also seen that he has presented an argument to the effect that without the assumption of systematic unity that there is a problem with arriving at a criterion of

⁷ This way of stating the problem is presented by Robert Abela (2002) *Kant's Empirical Realism* (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York), Chapter 5. Abela's discussion is only very inconclusive and marred by a constant conflation of the regulative use of ideas of pure reason with the principles of reflective judgment which he takes as pretty much co-extensive with each other. In this conflation Abela is self-consciously following the example of Gerd Buchdahl (1969) *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford and New York). In subsequent work I intend to show in some detail grounds for distinguishing regulative use of pure ideas from reflective judgment. For discussion that also attempts to distinguish them though in not in ways that I think are successful see Paul Guyer (1990) "Reason and Reflective Judgement: Kant On the Significance of Systematicity" in Guyer (2005) *Kant's System of Nature and Freedom: Selected Essays* (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York).

empirical truth, a point emphasized in a different context when Kant states that: “everyone presupposes that this unity of reason accords with nature itself, and that reason—although indeed unable to determine the limits of this unity—does not here beg but command” (A653/B681).

If “everyone presupposes” this accord of the unity of reason with the unity of nature itself then the rationale for this presupposition needs to be made clearer. Kant gives an example of the way in which this presupposition works when he states that the principle of homogeneity, for example, is one without which “no empirical concepts, and therefore no experience, would be possible” (A654/B682).⁸ The advocates of a generally heuristic approach to the regulative use of ideas of pure reason must essentially reject the position that Kant states here. If the regulative use of ideas of pure reason is only heuristic it should follow that such ideas, unlike the categories of pure understanding, are not strictly speaking *necessary* conditions of experience. On a heuristic model of such regulative use of the ideas of pure reason such regulative use is something additional to the necessary conditions of experience and the necessary conditions are entirely specified in the constitutive principles of pure understanding.

The basic reason supporting the heuristic reading of the regulative use of ideas of pure reason is, however, that such use does not itself provide us directly with concepts of objects. This is directly admitted by Kant and is the basis of distinction of such regulative use of

⁸ This point is picked up by Michelle Grier when she writes that “Kant’s theory of ideas is crucial to his understanding of the role of reason in science”. Michelle Grier (2001) *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York), p. 301. It is somewhat unclear, however, whether Grier understands the use of the principles arrived at by means of the regulative of ideas of pure reason as only “heuristic” or not though the weight of her argument suggests that she does so view them.

ideas from the constitutive principles of pure understanding. However, the regulative use of ideas is directly stated by Kant to be required to arrive at a criterion of empirical truth and one of the ways this is illustrated is through the necessity of use of such a principle as that of homogeneity, a principle that is not one of pure understanding.⁹ This suggests, as Ido Geiger puts it, that “the idea of systematic unity is a necessary condition of experience yet not constitutive of it”.¹⁰ The reason it is not constitutive, as Geiger also points out, is because the totality aimed at in the idea of systematic unity, as asymptotic, is never available for experience and is intrinsically incapable of being experienced. This element of the idea of systematic unity is precisely what leads us, in utilising it, towards the *illusion* of a constitutive object as described by it. However, whilst this *illusion* is thus a necessary element of conceiving the idea of such systematic unity, it does not follow from this that the idea of such unity is itself illusory. Rather it is a *necessary* element of being able to conceive of experience at all as without it there would be no grounds for experience. The basis of this claim is made manifest when Kant reflects on the logical law of genera and states that it would have no standing if amongst the appearances that we are presented with there were so great a variety in content that “even the acutest human understanding could never by comparison of them detect the slightest similarity” (A653/B681). So if the logical law is to be

⁹ An intriguing question that can be posed here concerns Kant’s reference in the A Deduction to the notion of “affinity”, a notion that is perhaps used there in a manner intended to make manifest that the categories don’t cohere representations alone but require in addition a principle that effectively emerges from the regulative use of pure ideas. For an account of this principle that, whilst not making this argument, can be read as suggestive of it see Henry Allison (1974) “Transcendental Affinity – Kant’s Answer to Hume” in L.W. Beck (ed.) (1974) *Kant’s Theory of Knowledge* (D. Reidel: Dordrecht and Boston).

¹⁰ Ido Geiger (2003) “Is the Assumption of a Systematic Whole of Empirical Concepts a Necessary Condition of Knowledge?” *Kant-Studien* 94: p. 293.

applied to nature, Kant adds, then it presupposes a *transcendental principle* which latter (homogeneity) is the ground of empirical concepts.

This argument suggests that whilst the content of empirical concepts has been described in the account of the Transcendental Analytic that the basis of the possibility of their application is not completed without the discussion of the regulative use of ideas of pure reason. This regulative use includes the conception that not only the ideas themselves aim at systematic unity but that they do so since nature is not intrinsically incapable of attaining such unity. Thus whilst the ideas refer us to concepts (such as the world and God) that are “heuristic fictions” the use of the ideas is not itself a heuristic fiction but is rather the basis of the employment of empirical concepts as it provides such concepts with a *criterion of use*.

Summary on the Two Senses of Regulative

So we have found that Kant’s two uses of the term “regulative” both point to central conditions of his picture of experience and that neither should be regarded as providing principles that are unnecessary for the account of empirical concepts. Whilst the regulative principles of pure understanding allow us to move from the generic account of intuition provided by the constitutive principles of understanding, the regulative use of ideas of pure reason provides the ground of the *criterion* of empirical concepts through its postulation of a systematic unity that cannot itself become an object of experience. The regulative principles of pure understanding are the principles of understanding that allow us to attain the notion of empirical objects whilst the regulative use of ideas of pure reason provide the *criterion* of empirical concepts. So both are essential to the sense of what “experience” itself consists in on a Kantian account.