Abstract: This article surveys recent work on Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, with a particular focus on his doctrine of the fact of reason and his doctrine of the practical postulates, assessing the implications of such work for the debate about realism and antirealism in Kant’s moral philosophy. Section 1 briefly surveys some salient considerations raised by Kant’s first *Critique* and *Groundwork*. In section 2, I survey recent work on the Kant’s doctrine of the fact of reason and argue that it does not support an anti-realist interpretation of Kant’s ethics. In section 3, I argue that recent work on Kant’s doctrine of the practical postulates does not support an anti-realist interpretation of Kant’s ethics.

Interpreters of the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) disagree significantly about the ontological significance of the foundational claims of his moral philosophy. Kant is often characterized as a “constructivist” anti-realist about morality and its presuppositions. Within Kant’s system, it is often claimed, the supreme principle of morality is a cognitive claim that may possess objective validity (thereby distinguishing Kant’s position from non-cognitivist anti-realism and cognitivist error theories), but its validity is fundamentally “stance dependent” or dependent upon our beliefs, conceptions, or constructive activity and is free of genuine ontological commitments. Others have argued that Kant’s moral philosophy should be understood as a form of realism because the moral law purports to be valid for every free rational agent, independently of its beliefs, conceptions, and activities, and purports to involve robust ontological presuppositions such as the reality of “transcendental freedom,” God, and immortality. What is at issue is what, if any, ontological commitments are included in or entailed by Kant’s account of the moral law: whether its validity depends upon our non-factive mental states or activities, and whether Kant’s complete account of its objective status involves reference to other entities.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) Kant articulates two important doctrines with significant implications for this dispute about his moral ontology. First, Kant insists that the moral law “offers itself to us” as a “fact of reason” “of which we become immediately conscious (as soon as we draw up maxims of the will for ourselves),” (5:29) an “undeniable” (5:32) fact that “points to a pure world of the understanding and, indeed, even determines it positively and lets us cognize something of it, namely a law” (5:43). Second, Kant claims that the fact of reason is the basis for a “deduction” of the reality of transcendental freedom and that practical reason must “postulate” freedom, the reality of God and the immortality of the soul, three apparently metaphysical commitments with putative moral significance (5:4, 46–8, 122f). This article surveys recent work on Kant’s doctrine of the fact of reason and his doctrine of the practical postulates, assessing the implications of such work for the debate about realism and anti-realism in Kant’s moral philosophy. Section 1 briefly surveys some salient considerations raised by Kant’s first *Critique* and *Groundwork*. In section 2, I survey recent work on the Kant’s doctrine of the fact of reason and argue that it does not support an anti-realist interpretation of Kant’s ethics. In section 3, I argue that recent work on Kant’s doctrine of the practical postulates does not support an anti-realist interpretation of Kant’s ethics.

1. Considerations from the first *Critique* and *Groundwork*

Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 1787) and *Groundwork* (1785) may seem to have anti-realist implications for Kant’s moral philosophy. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant develops a defense of synthetic a priori judgments that lie at the foundations of our theoretical cognition. Such judgments are possible, he argues, only if space and time are “transcendently ideal” – merely “forms of our intuition”
– and the “categories” (or fundamental concepts of judgment) are contributed by our minds. On Kant’s account, theoretical cognition must involve the proper combination of concepts and sensible intuitions in experience. Kant contends that this account entails a chastening of traditional metaphysics because it implies that our theoretical cognition is limited to objects of our possible experience. While our pure concepts form the basis for our “ideas” of God, the world, and the soul, theoretical or speculative reason is unable to establish either the reality or the logical impossibility of any such transcendent objects. These ideas may play an important “regulative” role in unifying our theoretical investigations, but any attempt to employ these ideas for theoretical cognition independent of the conditions of the possibility of experience (to which Kant insists we are naturally tempted), results in deceptive “illusion” rather than genuine insight. Since Kant’s account of theoretical cognition implies that the only objectively cognizable objects are empirical objects (which are fundamentally mind-dependent) and that attempts to cognize anything else are illusory, the upshot appears to be a combination of naturalism or “empirical realism” and idealism. The implications for Kant’s moral philosophy may seem clear: if all ontological questions are settled by Kant’s transcendental idealism or his account of theoretical cognition then Kant must be a moral anti-realist (especially given Kant’s claims that the moral law cannot be grounded in the empirical world). Similarly, if Kant’s defense of the authority of the moral law takes the same form as his account of the synthetic a priori judgments of theoretical reason, it would seem that his moral philosophy must be fundamentally idealist or anti-realist (and relatively free of metaphysical “baggage” that could conflict with naturalism). Kant’s claims in the *Groundwork* that the categorical necessity of the moral law must be understood as a form of autonomy or “self-legislation” (4:431f), has struck many as confirmation for such an anti-realist interpretation of Kant’s moral philosophy.

Yet crucial assumptions of this case for an anti-realist reading of Kant’s moral philosophy are controversial in their own right. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the apparent ontological implications of Kant’s account of theoretical cognition are complicated by Kant’s insistence that his account assumes the transcendent reality of things-in-themselves, even if we cannot possess positive knowledge of their determinate natures (e.g. A380); that there is, in addition to the speculative or theoretical use of reason “an absolutely necessary practical use of pure reason (the moral use), in which reason unavoidably extends itself beyond the boundaries of sensibility”; and that his critique aims to chasten metaphysics “in order to make room for faith” (Bxxv–xxx). Kant’s insistence in the *Groundwork* that the moral law applies to all rational beings (not merely human beings or beings with our forms of intuition or beings that are possible objects of our experience), that it is not dependent upon our activity, and that its validity is grounded independently of possible experience suggest that Kant’s conception of self-legislation turns out to be less compatible with moral anti-realism than it may first appear.

While it would be a mistake to consider the ontological significance of the central doctrines of Kant’s second *Critique* – the fact of reason and the practical postulates – in complete isolation from these controversial questions about the first *Critique* and *Groundwork*, it is worth assessing the details of those doctrines more or less on their own terms as one important source of evidence for and against realist interpretations of Kant’s moral philosophy.

2. The Fact of Reason

Recent work on Kant’s doctrine of the fact of reason has focused on (i) its systematic role; (ii) its content; (iii) its “factual” nature; and (iv) its epistemic status. Each of these four aspects of this doctrine, which we will consider in turn, has raised questions about realism and anti-realism in Kant’s moral philosophy.

(i) O’Neill (*Constructions of Reason*; “Autonomy”) and Lukow argue that the fact of reason is a reflective mental act which functions merely to “make the moral law accessible to ordinary people in ordinary practical contexts” (O’Neill, ‘Autonomy’ 83). They identify, in the first *Critique* and the *Groundwork* (and thus independently of the account of the fact of reason), both an argument based on theoretical grounds for the legitimacy of a “standpoint” of freedom and a “constructive” procedure that provides a philosophical “vindication” of reason: reason’s supreme principle, the categorical imperative, is vindicated because anyone committed to reasoning together with others must will to employ only
principles that can be accepted by all. The upshot is an explicitly constructivist anti-realist interpretation of Kant’s moral philosophy: the vindication appears to secure a kind of objectivity to morality that is nonetheless commitment- or stance-dependent and need not involve any additional metaphysical claims. On this interpretation, the fact of reason does not and need not constitute an “uncritical,” dogmatically asserted “given” datum lying at the foundations of Kant’s moral philosophy nor need it involve any ontological commitments.

The way that the fact of reason may serve to reveal or exhibit the moral law to ordinary people is indeed worth emphasizing (Rawls). Proops suggests that the putative moral awareness of ordinary people may also provide evidence for Kant’s claim that moral concepts have a pure or a priori origin, thereby constituting, within Kant’s “legal” conception of a “deduction,” a “factual” basis for his deduction of freedom (cf. Allison, Kant’s Theory of Freedom). But the anti-realist conclusion drawn by O’Neill and Lukow turns on their contention that the fact of reason is needed and intended to play only this role, a contention which depends in large part on the plausibility of their proposed vindication of the moral law and freedom. One problem with the proposed theoretical vindication is that, on its own terms, it only provides a conditional or hypothetical vindication of the authority of reason (it is contingent upon peoples’ alleged commitment to reasoning together with others), but this would seem quite inadequate to justify the allegedly categorical demands of reason in its practical use.

Even if some of Kant’s texts suggest such a theoretical vindication that could support such an anti-realist interpretation, this position is difficult to reconcile with the text of the second Critique and its claims about the role of the fact of reason. Ameriks (Kant’s Theory of Mind) has persuasively argued that the “fact of reason” is part of a “great reversal” on Kant’s part. In the third section of the Groundwork Kant had argued that our capacities for reason and judgment provide a basis for asserting our freedom and he claimed to deduce the authority of the moral law from that freedom. In the second Critique, however, Kant fails to endorse such arguments and maintains that “the objective reality of the moral law cannot be proved by any deduction . . . and it is nevertheless firmly established of itself” and “has no need of justifying grounds.” In the second Critique it is the “fact of reason” that “serves as the principle of the deduction of . . . the faculty of freedom,” which cannot be established otherwise (5:47, cf. 5:4n). This direct evidence in the second Critique of Kant’s “great reversal” is corroborated by other contemporary evidence of Kant’s increasing “critical” worries about his earlier arguments for freedom (Ameriks, Kant’s Theory of Mind; Interpreting Kant’s Critiques).

Kant’s distinction between logical possibility and real possibility is significant at several points in the second Critique (Kuehn; Ferreira; Adams; Guyer, Kant on Freedom). This distinction sheds further light upon Kant’s conception of the role of the fact of reason. Kant insists that “the real possibility of any object requires not just that the concept of it be free of internal contradiction but also that the possible object have some sort of ground in something that actually exists” (Guyer, Kant on Freedom 346). Kant’s account of theoretical cognition is intended to show that freedom is not logically impossible, but, he came to insist, that account also implies that no theoretical argument could provide an adequate basis for asserting the real possibility or actuality of freedom (or any other transcendent object) (5:5, 47, 134). One of the central roles of the fact of reason, Kant insisted, is that only it could serve as the basis for such assertions.

(ii) Although the apparently foundational role of the fact of reason undermines much of O’Neill’s and Lukow’s case for anti-realism, such a foundational role is compatible with an anti-realist approach which focuses on the content of the fact of reason. Kant’s descriptions of the fact of reason are notoriously fluid, suggesting, for example, that the fact of reason is the moral law, or the categorical imperative, or that it is consciousness of the law. Appealing to Kant’s distinction between the categorical imperative and the moral law, Rauscher (“Kant’s Moral Anti-Realism”) argues that Kant is committed to claiming that, in the fact of reason, human beings immediately experience the categorical imperative rather than the moral law, an experience which leads them to postulate pure practical reason, freedom, and the moral law. This constitutes a form of anti-realism if, as Rauscher contends, Kant understands the practical postulates (and by extension the moral law) to be mere ideas lacking any corresponding reality.
Since the categorical imperative cannot have its source in mere ideas, it turns out to be merely a “peculiar” or “idiosyncratic,” if universal and “undeniable,” feature of human mental experience, stemming from “empirically conditioned reason”. Rauscher offers two arguments for his crucial claim that the moral law must be introduced as a postulate, both of which are, I think, problematic. In section 3 we will return to the suggestion that the postulates are mere ideas. First, he contends that on Kant’s account the moral law must be postulated because its concept involves more than the concept of the categorical imperative. Rauscher takes Kant to suggest that the former but not the latter presupposes the existence of pure practical reason and of perfectly rational beings; however, on Kant’s account, the concept of the moral law is “contained in” that of the categorical imperative and both seem to require pure practical reason – the moral law appears to us as a categorical imperative because, in addition to pure practical reason, we have temptations to violate it. Rauscher’s second, systematic argument maintains that Kant needs to distinguish between the fact of reason (i.e., the categorical imperative) as the basis of the deduction of freedom and the moral law as a subsequent postulate in order to avoid a “vicious circle” involving the deduction of freedom. I think this interpolated distinction is neither necessary nor warranted. If there were any vicious circle between freedom and the moral law, the interpolation would simply replace it with a similar circle between freedom and the categorical imperative. Moreover, insofar as Kant clearly identifies the moral law as the ratio cognoscendi of freedom and freedom as the ratio essendi of the moral law there does not appear to be any vicious circle. By distinguishing between the order of cognition and the order of being Kant avoids a vicious circle, and simultaneously implies that freedom and the moral law involve some genuine ontological commitment. We deduce or postulate the reality of freedom, because it is an ontological precondition of the moral law which we encounter first in ourselves in the fact of reason. “The principle of morality . . . is not a postulate but a law by which reason determines the will immediately.” Epistemically, all of the postulates proceed from it (5:132). Ontologically, the moral law is the law of a free will (5:29). Freedom is real, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law. But among all the ideas of speculative reason freedom is . . . the only one the possibility of which we know [wissen] a priori, though without having insight into it, because it is the condition of the moral law, which we do know. While there is some ambiguity about the precise content of the fact of reason, this ambiguity provides little reason to draw Rauscher’s anti-realist conclusion that the moral law must be a postulate and the categorical imperative merely an idiosyncratic feature of our empirical consciousness.

(iii) Kant’s characterizations of the “factual” nature of the fact of reason are also somewhat ambiguous. Some interpreters have noted that the term “fact” [Faktum] is derived from facere (Lat. “to make”) and have suggested that Kant’s “factual” language and his claims about pure reason being “originally lawgiving” (5:32) and “proving itself” through what it does (5:3) imply that the fact of reason amounts to a “willful” or “violent” act of reason, rather than as a given “datum” (Franks, cf. Engstrom, “Introduction”, Sussman, O’Neill, Constructions of Reason; “Constructivism in Rawls and Kant”). As the matter currently stands, etymological connections between “facts” and “deeds,” seem to be an insufficient basis for interpreting Kant as an anti-realist about the moral law (Proops). This evidence must be weighed against Kant’s other claims that we are aware of the moral law as something “given,” rather than “sought” or “invented” (5:31, 47, 105) and, more generally, his claims that the moral law cannot depend upon or be the product of any psychological act or event, but must be grounded “in the nature of things” (8:339) as the law of our “proper self” (4:457–8, 461), which is present to us in practical reason (Ameriks, Interpreting Kant’s Critiques, Kain, “Self-Legislation”). In my opinion, such questions about the “factual” nature of the fact of reason deserve further elaboration and critical attention. On balance, I would argue, Kant’s characterizations of the fact of reason seem to favor a realistic construal.

(iv) Yet, it is important to recall that Kant’s reliance upon this “fact of reason” does signal a significant philosophical retreat that raises a number of epistemological questions. Kant rests substantial normative and ontological commitments on this rather limited basis and his account of our awareness of
the moral law in the fact of reason is somewhat cryptic. He suggests that we become conscious of moral laws “by attending to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us” (5:30). The moral law cannot be encountered as an empirical object intuited via the senses, so he denies that our awareness of the moral law is, or is derived from “any intuition, either pure or empirical”; so it cannot be “given” in the way empirical facts are (5:31, cf. 46; Lukow;Ameriks, Interpreting Kant’s Critiques). Since the moral law employs “pure concepts,” he is committed to thinking that our awareness of it must involve an act of the understanding. While Kant leaves the precise processes responsible for this awareness unexplained, Proops has suggested that the widespread experience of the fact of reason may provide some support for its veridicality, at least if it can be defended against deflationary explanations. Rawls has emphasized Kant’s suggestion that practical reason and its fact of reason possess a “credential” or epistemic warrant because of the way they provide a determinate conception of freedom that coheres with and completes the deliverances of theoretical reason (5:48). While such suggestions may lend some plausibility to the account, they leave room for many doubts (Ameriks, Interpreting Kant’s Critiques). One might hesitate to take our apparent awareness of the moral law as veridical (Lukow) and suspect instead that what some or all of us think is an awareness of the moral law is in fact a “mere phantom of a human imagination overstepping itself through self-conceit” (4:407). But Kant’s inability to refute all forms of moral skepticism does not entail that he is a moral anti-realist, however. From Kant’s perspective, to consider our moral cognition merely an idiosyncratic “phantom” of our minds is to embrace not moral anti-realism, but moral skepticism.20 Yet, in morality, as in other domains, one need not have a refutation of skepticism in order to remain a realist.

3. The Postulates of Practical Reason

In the second Critique, Kant introduces and defends the postulates of God, freedom, and immortality as the solution to a complex of problems that emerge from reflection upon the fact of reason.21 The fact of reason is supposed to reveal the unconditional, categorical demands of the moral law, but how can we rationally acknowledge and comply with those demands unless we are indeed transcendentally free? Kant argues that we are categorically obligated to promote the highest good, a systematic union of virtue and happiness, but how can we rationally intend to promote this end unless we rationally believe it is possible, and how can we rationally believe it is possible without rationally believing that there is a divine ruler and judge and that our souls are immortal? Kant insists (as we noted in section 1) that theoretical reason is unable to demonstrate these “theoretical propositions” (5:122) or their denials because it requires a combination of concepts and sensible intuition in (possible) experience – and Kant claims that sensible intuitions of God, freedom, and immortality are impossible (5:124–5).22 Yet Kant makes it clear that his denial of theoretical cognition of such “supersensible” objects (5:6, 56, 135) does not preclude other forms of “assent” to them or “holding [them] to be true.” He calls each of these claims a practical postulate because each “is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditionally valid practical law” (5:122). When it comes to interpreting the ontological significance of these postulates, it is important to understand both (i) how Kant thinks the postulates are “attached” to the moral law; and (ii) what sort of epistemic status and ontological commitment he thinks these postulates involve. We shall consider recent work on each of these matters in turn.

(i) Kant contends (as we saw in section 2) that the postulate of freedom is “attached” to the law quite directly: freedom, while not the ratio cognoscendi of the moral law, “is indeed the ratio essendi of the moral law . . . [W]ere there no freedom, the moral law would not be encountered at all in ourselves” (5:4n).23 Kant claims that the postulates of God and immortality are attached to the moral law via the concept of the highest good, the systematic union of virtue and happiness in proportion to it.24 Since more work has been done on Kant’s account of the theological postulate, we can usefully focus on it. Caswell has argued that Kant’s mature moral psychology plays a crucial role in establishing that finite rational beings are rationally required to adopt the highest good as an end. If rational agency involves the choice of one’s character (Gesinnung) or single fundamental maxim, and finite rational agents possess an interest in both happiness and the worthiness to be happy (Caswell; Kain, “Prudential Reason”; Engstrom,
“Concept”), then every possible fundamental maxim must include both elements; the only morally permissible way to relate these two elements is in terms of the highest good (Caswell). Thus, while Kant’s moral theory requires that the moral law, rather than some further end, be the fundamental criteria for and motivating ground of a good will, it turns out that finite rational beings ought nonetheless intend to promote the highest good. This analysis reveals one respect in which the theological postulate rests on “subjective grounds” (A829/B857): it applies only to finite rational agents. Kant contends that we “must postulate the existence of God as belonging necessarily to the possibility of the highest good (which object of our will is necessarily connected with the lawgiving of pure reason)” (5:124). In terms of his conception of real possibility (described in section 2), Kant supposes that rational agents can rationally will an end, in this case the highest good, only if they can rationally consider it to be really possible (Guyer, Kant on Freedom). This leads to a second set of subjective factors: as finite beings with needs and cognitive limitations, living in a world where the proportionality between virtue and happiness is not guaranteed by the observable natural laws, we lack grounds in theoretical cognition for thinking that the highest good is really possible. In light of these factors, Kant concludes that the existence of God is the only condition we can rationally consider to be adequate for the real possibility of the highest good, which we are required to promote (esp. 5:124–6).

Kant’s proposal is that the putatively rational demand of the moral law is part of what legitimates the assumptions of the real possibility of freedom and the moral law; the fact of reason provides “determinacy” for the concepts of freedom and the moral law, and the “proper” self it reveals purports to be the object of these concepts (5:105; 4:457–8, 461). The real possibility of these concepts is supposed to legitimate, in turn, our assertion of the real possibility of the highest good and, through it, of the real possibility and actuality of God and of our immortality (Adams).

The ideas of God and immortality . . . are not conditions of the moral law but only conditions of the necessary object of a will determined by this law . . . They are . . . conditions of applying the morally determined will to its object given to it a priori (the highest good). . . . By means of the concept of freedom objective reality is given to the ideas of God and immortality and a warrant, indeed a subjective necessity (a need of pure reason) is given to assume them, although reason is not thereby extended in theoretical cognition. (5:4–5)

The fact of reason is taken as an epistemic ground for the assertions that such “supersensible” objects are actual and really possible. The postulates, in turn, purport to make explicit what we must consider to actually be the case, ontologically, supposing that the moral law is real and its object (the highest good) is really possible: they are the “physical or metaphysical conditions – in a word, those [conditions] which lie in the nature of things – of the possibility of the highest good” (5:143).

(ii) This picture of the connection of God, freedom, and immortality to the moral law suggests that the primary point or function of the postulates is to sustain the rationality of our commitment to and compliance with moral requirements. Some interpreters have suggested that the numerous “subjective” aspects of the arguments for the postulates and Kant’s concern for a psychologically sustainable commitment to the highest good imply that Kant’s interest in the postulates is fundamentally or exclusively psychological, a matter of explaining how certain intentions are maintained (Sussman; Caswell; Guyer, Kant on Freedom; Frierson); but Kant’s persistent appeal to the demands of rational consistency and his talk of a “deduction” of the postulates imply that the postulates are intended to possess an ineliminable rational-normative significance as well (Denis; Hare; Kain, “Interpreting Kant’s Theory”; Kuehn). Such characterizations of the role of the postulates are not themselves a complete specification of what the act of postulation involves or how it is supposed to fulfill its role. Kant’s ostensible claim is that only certain thoughts, with both propositional content and ontological import, can play this role; so postulation cannot be reduced to a brute intention to promote the highest good, to act only “as if” one had such thoughts regardless of whether or not one has them. Nonetheless, the precise epistemic status and ontological implications of the requisite thoughts remain somewhat controversial.

“Belief” or “faith” (Glaube), the form of assent involved in the postulates, is one of the several
types of propositional attitude or assent considered by Kant (esp. A820/B848f; Chignell; Stevenson). Kant claims that such belief is voluntary and rests on practical or subjective grounds (5:142–6). The suggestion of voluntariness is problematic since both our ordinary concept of belief and Kant’s own conception of assent seem to preclude direct voluntary control (Chignell; Wood, “Rational Theology”). More generally, if assent is directly voluntary or if its origins are otherwise suspicious or mysterious, doubt is cast on its epistemic and ontological significance: such propositional attitudes are hardly a strong basis for ascribing warranted ontological commitment. Yet, Kant’s claims about the voluntariness of postulation need not be construed as assertions of direct voluntary control: they seem primarily intended to stress that assent to the postulates should not be coerced or considered a moral obligation (Kuehn) and, I would add, might be taken to emphasize that the will plays an important role in determining such judgments, even if it does so only indirectly, through its interest in the highest good. It could also be that some type of propositional attitude which is under our direct voluntary control could prepare the way for a more robust types of assent which need not be under our direct control (Chignell). Kant seems to suppose, with little discussion, that rational assent or full-blown belief can result from a consideration of the subjective and objective factors appealed to in his arguments, perhaps roughly in the way we rationally assent in a variety of other contexts, without direct voluntary control. While further clarification would be helpful, such a psychological account of the origin of belief in the postulates need not compromise the content or status of such asents.

Three recent proposals suggest that postulation might involve something less than full-blown assent or “holding to be true,” thereby avoiding any genuine ontological commitments. Sussman has noted how trust may often function best in the absence of explicit cognitive commitments. Drawing on Kant’s suggestions that aesthetic experiences and symbols may be of moral use without requiring any robust cognitive attitudes or ontological commitments, Guyer (Kant on Freedom) proposes that the postulates might function analogously. Caswell emphasizes how, in other domains, Kant claims that concepts may serve a regulative or “orienting” role absent ontological commitment and suggests the postulates could do much the same. It seems to me that these three analogies highlight important elements of postulation other than full-blown assent and ontological commitment, but they do so without providing much justification for excluding either. Implicit trust, for example, while itself distinct from ordinary belief, typically relies upon some background of dispositional beliefs about its objects. Without denying that morally significant, non-propositional aesthetic ideas and experiences offer a useful analogue for the postulates, one must note how Kant’s emphasis upon the specifically propositional character of the postulates and their role in securing the rationality of a commitment to the obligatory intentions implies a more cognitive conception than Guyer allows. There are also important and undeniable similarities between the postulates and regulative ideas: for example, Caswell and Guyer correctly note that, on Kant’s account, the concepts employed in the postulates (as in the case of regulative ideas) must originate in the “pure understanding” and not in any sensible intuition of their putative objects. Yet Kant also stresses important differences between the postulates and merely regulative ideas (Moore). In order to distinguish the postulates as rational “extensions” legitimately calling for “assertoric judgment” and ontological commitment from mere regulative ideas, Kant specifically appeals to the fact of reason’s absolute demand and how the reality of freedom, its ratio essendi, serves as both an anchor and source of relative determinacy for the other postulates. In the case of the postulates, we are allowed to “act as if we know” them (even though we cannot know them in Kant’s technical sense); while Kant warns us not to fall prey to the “illusion” that we have such knowledge, he does not deny that robust assent and an accompanying ontological commitment to its objects is warranted.

As Chignell emphasizes, insofar as Kant considers assent to the reality of God, freedom, and immortality on “subjective” and “practical” grounds to be rationally required and warranted for us, his position turns out to be surprisingly epistemically and ontologically generous. Kant attempts to resist giving free reign to all forms of “wishful thinking”: he demands that the postulates be consistent with what can be theoretically cognized, that they spring from a necessary rational need and are tethered down by the moral law which is the basis of that need, and he insists that they are limited to a practical use (5:5,
Kant doesn’t claim to have proven the reality or real possibility of the postulated objects; just to have established the legitimacy and the rational indispensability of believing that they are really possible and real.

As we noted above in section 2, Kant is resting significant normative and ontological commitments upon a rather limited justificatory foundation. In addition to the aforementioned grounds for skepticism about the fact of reason itself, here one might also be skeptical that the “fact of reason” can legitimize ontological commitments such as the postulates and one might worry that Kant’s uncritical acceptance of the fact of reason and its postulates violates any principled limits. But Kant’s failure to prove that such supersensible objects are real does not entail that he is committed to anti-realism about them, nor does the possibility of skepticism. While there are numerous questions about the philosophical defensibility of the doctrine of the postulates, the ontological intention of the doctrine seems clear: if the postulates are to be of any moral use, then morality must not be considered a mere illusion, and if the postulates are to be of moral use in virtue of their propositional form and rational indispensability, as Kant suggests, then the postulates cannot be considered mere ideas or illusions either, at least by their possessors.

4. Conclusion

This critical survey of recent work on Kant’s doctrines of the fact of reason and the practical postulates suggests that the moral philosophy of Kant’s second Critique includes reference to a moral law which purports to be valid independently of our stances, beliefs, conceptions, and activities, and which purports to rationally require commitment to the reality of freedom, God, and immortality, commitments which purport to be realities that are stance-independent and independent of our conceptions of and beliefs about them. The second Critique thereby points in the direction of a realist interpretation of Kant’s moral philosophy. The remaining challenge for realist interpreters of Kant’s moral philosophy is to demonstrate that these doctrines, so understood, are compatible with a coherent reading of Kant’s transcendental idealism and the limits he places on theoretical cognition. The challenge for antirealist interpreters is a bit more daunting: to muster additional resources for an anti-realist construal of these doctrines or to accept the realist implications of these doctrines and minimize their place, and that of the second Critique, within Kant’s critical project.

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Notes

1 This type of constructivism is distinguished from non-cognitivist and non-objectivistic moral anti-realisms, yet is classified as a form of moral anti-realism because of its insistence upon the ultimate stance-dependence of the validity of the moral law. (It is also typically anti-realist in a broader sense insofar as it denies that this validity has ontological commitments other than to minds and their non-factive mental states or stances.) It claims not merely that there is a procedure through which one can construct or justify particular ethical judgments, but that the procedure’s validity, or that of the fundamental principles which underlie it, is ultimately stance dependent. On moral constructivism and the definition of moral realism, see e.g., Sayre-McCord; Shafer-Landau; Kain, “Self-Legislation”; Rauscher; “Kant’s Moral Anti-Realism”; O’Neill, “Constructivism in Rawls and Kant”; “Constructivism vs. Contractualism.” Constructivist anti-realist interpretations of Kant’s moral philosophy can be found, for example, in Williams; Milo; Rawls; Darwall; Larmore; Schneewind “Natural Law”; Invention of Autonomy; Rauscher. [461] “Kant’s Moral Anti-realism”; Krasnoff; and numerous works by O’Neill and
Korsgaard. Constructivist anti-realist theorists differ amongst themselves over which stances (beliefs, conceptions, or activities) may ground such validity and whether it is actual or ideal stances that do the work. It seems, however, that those grounding validity in an ideal stance need an account of the validity of the ideal: an account which will turn out to be either stance-independent (and thereby realist at some level) or dependent upon an agent’s actual stance.

2 Wood, Kant’s Ethical Thought; Ameriks, Kant and the Fate of Autonomy; Interpreting Kant’s Critiques; Kain, “Self-Legislation”; Watkins and FitzPatrick; FitzPatrick.

3 This is not primarily a dispute about the ontological status of moral propositions, properties, or facts (e.g. whether they are “Platonic” abstracta, concepta, or concrete objects) but about the necessary and sufficient conditions of their truth, validity, or instantiation. Realists maintain that, on Kant’s account, the validity of the moral law is not dependent upon our actual stances, but may be dependent upon or entail commitment to the mind-independent reality of transcendental freedom, God, and/or immortality.

4 Apart from the Critique of Pure Reason, all references to Kant’s works are to the volume and page number of the “Akademie-Ausgabe,” the Critique of Practical Reason in volume 5 and the Groundwork in volume 4. See Kants gesammelte Schriften, ed. the Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (formerly the Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–). References to the Critique of Pure Reason are to the standard A and B pagination of the first and second editions. Translations from the Groundwork and Critique of Practical Reason are based upon the translations of Mary Gregor in Practical Philosophy (1996); from the Critique of Pure Reason on the translation by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood in Critique of Pure Reason (1997), all part of The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant.

5 It is worth noting that many of these central claims of the first Critique are reiterated in the second, e.g. 5:3–14, 49, 107, 120–1.

6 Allison interprets transcendental idealism as a metaphilosophical standpoint that explicitly rejects the possibility that there is any “context-independent fact or truth about the matter” independent of some point of view (Kant’s Transcendental Idealism 48). Allison’s interpretation allows two points of view, neither of which is ontological privileged and neither of which has any real ontological implications. Others have suggested that, for Kant, ontological commitment can occur only in the domain of theoretical reason. (O’Neill, Constructions of Reason; Korsgaard, Creating the Kingdom of Ends; Rawls; Rauscher, “Kant’s Two Priorities”).

7 Kant does suggest some analogy involving these various synthetic a priori propositions, see, e.g. 4:454 and Reflection 7201 (19:721). (Allison 1990, esp. 234, Rauscher 2002, Darwall 1998) On the relationship between Kant’s moral philosophy and naturalism or the “modern scientific worldview,” see Schneewind, “Natural Law”; Korsgaard, Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Sources of Normativity; Guyer, Kant on Freedom; Rauscher, “Kant’s Moral Anti-Realism.” For a somewhat different view, see Ameriks, Kant and the Fate of Autonomy.

8 For constructivist interpretations of moral self-legislation, see for example, Rawls; Korsgaard, Creating the Kingdom of Ends; O’Neill, Constructions of Reason; Reath, “Legislating the Moral Law”; Larmore.

9 Such aspects of the first Critique have been emphasized by Guyer, Kant and the Claims of Knowledge; Langton; Adams; Ameriks, Interpreting Kant’s Critiques.


11 O’Neill (Constructions of Reason) and Lukow suggest that Kant establishes freedom based on an argument from the third antinomy and second analogy. Recently, O’Neill has become less sanguine about the theoretical grounds for freedom, suggesting that the defense of freedom may rest instead on “wider philosophical considerations” (“Autonomy and the Fact of Reason” 97). David Sussman maintains, along with O’Neill and Lukow, the adequacy of the Kant’s theoretical deduction of freedom, but argues that the fact of reason is needed to establish the overriding “authority” of the moral law, which it does by revealing the law’s fundamental role in our coming to grasp any normative concepts.

12 O’Neill suggests in recent work that this form of “radical constructivism” presupposes anti-realism, “rejects or brackets” moral realism, or shows that realism is “redundant” (for purposes of justification?) (“Constructivism in Rawls and Kant” 348, 354; “Constructivism vs. Contractualism” 320–1). {462}

13 O’Neill, “Autonomy and the Fact of Reason” 83, 88–9; O’Neill, Constructions of Reason; Lukow. O’Neill claims that the fact of reason plays no role in the justification of the moral law. Lukow suggests that it provides “circumstantial evidence,” “a credible witness,” or an “alibi” on reason’s behalf, that it “testifies to [its] legitimacy.” Drawing on Kant’s juridical conception of a deduction, he suggests that the fact of reason addresses the quid facit question in confirmation of the quid juris response (207, 215).

14 This is implicit in O’Neill’s (mistaken, I think) assertion that freedom is a merely regulative idea (Constructions of Reason 36) and explicit in the conditional assumptions of her proposed vindication: e.g. that people are committed above all else to reasoning together with others (63–4; “Constructivism in Rawls and Kant” 358; “Vindicating Reason” 291, 297; “Autonomy” 191). It seems that reasoning (in the full-blown sense), and reasoning together with others, may be eschewed or engaged in for purely instrumental reasons; whereas Kantian morality is supposed to be independent of possibilities. It is also unclear whether the modal understandings of the conditional vindication itself are in fact free of additional ontological commitments. See Watkins and Fitzpatrick; Watkins 738n8.

15 Kant’s idea is that the mere fact that a concept is not self-contradictory or logically impossible is not a sufficient condition for its legitimacy: many logically possible concepts are “empty” or lacking in “positive content” and are not to be taken seriously as candidates for genuine reference (Adams). Real possibility requires something more than mere “thinkability,” something such as an actual experience of such an object, or a plausible account of how such an object might be related to something actual or actually experienced (Chignell).

16 Allison, Kant’s Theory of Freedom 231ff.; Proops.

17 Sussman may have a similar conclusion in mind when he suggests that Kant is an “empirical realist” in morality (112). Kant claims that “the concept of duty . . . contains that of a good will though under certain subjective limitations and hindrances” (4:397).

18 There are discussions of the relation between the moral law and freedom in which Kant appears to reverse their classification as “fact” and “postulate.” See, e.g. 5:46, 5:468–70. But there is no inconsistency in his claims about the epistemic order or its contrast with the ontological order, and the apparent reversals of classification are readily explicable precisely because of the close connection between them such that the law may be “the self-consciousness of a pure practical reason” (5:29) and that consciousness of moral laws “is the same thing” as consciousness of positive freedom (5:46).

By contrast, theoretical reason is free to avoid speculation about the grounds of real possibility; and its needs are less determinate. 5:5, 134, 142–3; A633–4/B661–2; “Orientation” 8:139; “Real Progress” 20:997.

Guyer and Caswell may consider these to be accidental features of Kant’s account. But this would seem to leave unexplained Kant’s call to cultivate them in such a propositional form. As Kant himself seems to note at A818/B846 (Kain, “Interpreting Kant’s Theory”), Kant’s “need” is absolute, whereas theoretical reason is free to avoid speculation about the grounds of real possibility; and practical reason’s “need” is sufficiently determinate. 5:5, 134, 142–3; A633–4/B661–2; “Orientation” 8:139; “Real Progress” 20:997.

While some of Kant’s other works focus on the promotion of more limited goals such as “perpetual peace” or an ideal “ethical commonwealth” which may not themselves require as strong a set of postulates, there is no obvious incompatibility between these specific and more “secular” or “historical” components of the highest good and the larger whole, nor is there a clear shift in Kant’s corpus away from such a whole (Caswell; Mariña; Kain, “Interpreting Kant’s Theory”; discussing suggestions in Reath, “Two Conceptions”; Yovel; Pegge).

Because of the argument’s dependence upon these “subjective” factors, Kant claims it is not a fully objective proof, valid for every rational being. The argument also has subjective implications and manifestations: to fail to judge that God exists is to imply that the highest good is impossible and that one is a sordid, failing to live up to one’s obligations (Wood, Kant’s Moral Religion). At the same time, Kant insists that the relevant subjective factors are common to all human beings, and that they give rise to a rational demand to avoid conflicting judgments; this is why Kant considers the theological postulate to be the product of a “deduction,” and implies that it is more than a merely “personal,” existential, or idiosyncratic commitment (Kuehn; Caswell; Kain, “Interpreting Kant’s Theory”). After 1796, Kant may have adopted a more idealistic conception of the theological postulate, which helps to explain his talk of “abstracting from [God’s] existence” in the Metaphysics of Morals at 6:487 (Fürster; Palmquist; Kain, “Interpreting Kant’s Theory”; cf. Rauscher, “Kant’s Moral Anti-Realism”).

For useful elaboration of and analysis of this argument, see e.g. Wood, Kant’s Moral Religion; “Rational Theology”; Kuehn; Hare; O’Neill, “Kant on Reason and Religion.” Sussman and Caswell have recently emphasized how Kant’s argument may be buttressed by bringing in an additional “subjective” factor: his doctrine of the human propensity to evil. Kant repeatedly asserts that the existence of God is linked to the real possibility of highest good. The existence of God is considered to be an important necessary, though not sufficient condition for the highest good. Contra Ferriera, the actuality of God would not directly entail the realization of the “complete” highest good in the relevant sense, since it does not entail that we attain virtue.

This highlights two important differences between the arguments for the postulates and theoretical arguments for God’s existence: practical reason’s “need” is absolute, whereas theoretical reason is free to avoid speculation about the grounds of real possibility; and practical reason’s need is sufficiently determinate. 5:5, 134, 142–3; A633–4/B661–2; “Orientation” 8:139; “Real Progress” 20:997.

Guyer and Caswell may consider these to be accidental features of Kant’s account. This would seem to leave unexplained Kant’s call to cultivate them in such a propositional form. As Kant himself seems to note at Religion 6:71n, things would be simpler if we could appropriately treat all of the practical postulates as mere regulative ideas.

By contrast, theoretical reason is free to avoid speculation about the grounds of real possibility; and its needs are less determinate. 5:5, 134, 142–3; A633–4/B661–2; “Orientation” 8:139; “Real Progress” 20:997.

See Kant’s 1793 draft of his “Real Progress of Metaphysics” essay (20:298). The passage suggests that we act as if we know it, thus supposing we cannot know it, but does not say “act as if it were true,” supposing it isn’t true. The “illusion” Kant identifies there seems to be that of conflating belief with knowledge, rather than that of thinking, without any basis, there is a real object (20:300). This contrasts with Guyer’s reading (Kant on Freedom 364).

Chignell argues that Kant also allows for a wider range of “doctrinal Glaube” in non-moral contexts than ordinarily thought. Kant contends that the postulates involve an “extension” of our knowledge beyond that provided by speculative reason, while the extension is limited in specific ways: we are not to further “extend” our theoretical knowledge to include determinate knowledge of the nature of things in themselves by combining the postulates with empirical observations or alleged “supersensible intuitions”; nor to explain the nature of freedom; nor to facilitate the interpretation of specific events in the empirical world as “miracles”; nor to support claims, based upon putative divine revelation, about the existence of specific obligations (5:134–5, cf. Critique of Judgment 5:453f).

There are significant disagreements, which cannot be resolved here, about how to interpret Kant’s claim that the [464] postulates are assumed only “for practical purposes.” For present purposes it is worth noting that none of these limitations nor the subjective starting points of the arguments for the postulates need imply that the entities postulated should be considered either dependent upon us or as ultimately illusory.

Bibliography


