—— Henrik Jøker Bjerre, »Ideology as a Kantian logic of
ideas«

———A B S T R A C T————————————————

   One of the most original contemporary approaches to the
critique of ideology is that offered by Slavoj Žižek, who has
shown that ideology, far from being an exception to the »nor-
mal run of things«, is the precondition for social reality itself.
Žižek's approach to this question is based predominantly on
psychoanalysis, in combination with various insights from
German idealism. In this paper, I claim that it is possible to
develop a strict logic of ideas by drawing more systematically
on one of Žižek's sources – Immanuel Kant. In Kant's concept of
the regulative idea, we find an approach very close to Žižek's,
alongside a purely philosophical argument for why ideas must
govern our everyday apprehension of the world.

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■——IDEOLOGY AS A KANTIAN LOGIC OF IDEAS

■——The everyday understanding of ideology is that it is a set of beliefs or convictions that especially (overly) politically engaged people adhere to, as opposed to the normal functioning of things and the more pragmatic interest in maintaining and improving everyday life. »Ideologues« are people who advocate radical views on, for instance, religion, nation, capital, the environment, and so on. Most of the rest of us are not »ideological«, because we do not actively promote such views. The critique of ideology, however, has always been concerned with the forms of ideology that do not immediately present themselves as such. (»Sie wissen es nicht, aber sie tun es«, as Karl Marx said.) Louis Althusser's ground-breaking analysis of »ideological state apparatuses«[1] emphasized how we are always already subordinated to, or interpellated by, ideological forms of thinking, without being aware of it; more recently, Slavoj Žižek has taken this insight further in a combination of psychoanalysis and classical German philosophy to show how ideology, far from being an exception to the normal social order, is the precondition of this very order. In this article, I spell out how Kant's concept of »regulative ideas« in the *Critique of Pure Reason* unfolds the philosophical, indeed logical necessity of ideology in the sense that Žižek describes. Žižek, of course, is no stranger to Kant's thought; but instead of discussing his reading of Kant, I undertake a stricter line of reasoning in order to clarify some fundamental tenets of Žižek's conception of ideology in a way that Žižek does not explicitly do himself.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant develops what one might call a logic of ideas that can be translated into an *a priori* structure of ideology as a necessary, regulatory principle of reason. In the transcendental logic of the first critique, the second part is devoted to »transcendental dialectics«, which describes the necessary and natural tendency for reason to drive itself towards its ultimate limits: Does the subject exist independently of its experiences (paralogisms)? Is the world a coherent and limited whole, or has it got no limits in space and time (antinomies)? Is there a necessary creature (transcendental ideal)? As is well known, Kant denied reason access to »things-in-themselves«, but he also showed how the question of the absolute boundaries of the thinkable would haunt the reasoning subject, if it didn't make a regulative use

of ideas that could not be »proven« as valid claims about things-in-themselves. Without regulative ideas, we wouldn't have a coherent reality at all. To function in social reality, we must therefore rely on ideas that lie beyond anything that can be verified or justified, but instead have the status of faith. Kant thus offers a kind of prototypical structure of ideology that echoes in the understanding developed by Žižek.

According to Kant, reason in the narrow sense (*Vernunft*) is the ability to infer. While the understanding (*Verstand*) consists in being able to form a judgment, reason represents the ability to infer from one or more judgments other judgments. This ability enables us to expand and order our knowledge within the »space of reasons«, as it has been more recently called,[2] but it also contains the potential for more radical and disturbing effects. When the ability to infer is applied consistently, we end up with questions about the ultimate horizon of reason. For instance, if event A is caused by event B (according to a perfectly normal judgment of the understanding), reason compels us to think: »But what caused event B?« This in turn leads to event C, D, E, etc., until we arrive at the question: »Was there some original event that was not caused by anything, or is there an infinite chain of causes?« This, in simplified form, is what results in the antinomies of reason, according to which there is a group of questions to which reason can never find an ultimate answer, but which it cannot stop asking. Not because of some psychological impairment (or only in a quite specific understanding of what that would mean), but because of a necessary logical impasse in reason itself – we »are brought to« pure concepts of reason by »necessary inferences of reason«.[3] Reason ends up with absolute concepts of the world in its entirety, regardless of our limited capacities of perceiving it. And it ends up with contradictory versions of this totality. The world must be finite, but it must also be infinite, and if we insist on finding the right answer to this question, we will end up in a perpetual oscillation from one answer to the other.

Kant prohibited what he called a »constitutive use« of the transcendental ideas of reason. That is, he denied reason the power to legitimately enunciate the solutions to the antinomies as genuine insight into the state of things-in-themselves. What the first critique provided was a secure and solid foundation of objective knowledge in the sense of object experience within the limits of things-as-they-appear-to-us, but the cost of this foundation was a denial of access to the things-in-themselves. To claim a constitutive use of transcendental ideas of reason would be to violate this prohibition. What Kant did allow, rather, was a regulative use of them. And it is this regulative use that resembles the functioning of the kinds of ideology that repress their status as such. Simply put: If good old fashioned ideology in the sense of Stalinism, fascism, conservatism, and

so on, structurally resemble what in Kantian terms is the dogmatic and constitutive use of transcendental ideas of reason, then the post-Cold War acceptance of liberal democracy and some form of capitalism as the unquestioned socio-political horizon resembles a regulative use of ideas that are not dialectically scrutinized.

The task of critical philosophy since Kant has been to criticize explicit ideologies that deny the contingency of their standpoint; that act as if their rules or principles were the direct mediation of God's own words or objective historical necessity. Hume and Kant both provide ample ammunition for such critique. However, a more subtle critique of ideology has also been carried out in the critique of practices that pretend *not* to rely on any ideological convictions. In terms of Kant's regulative ideas, the task of critical philosophy could be said to be to make explicit the hidden »as if« in such »realist«, pragmatist and/or naturalist positions. The job, in other words, is to show how ideology is *both* necessary and illusory.

For Kant, the necessity of ideology in the sense described rests in the indispensability of a sense of unity and wholeness, which must accompany any concrete experience in order for it to be meaningful at all. An experience consists not only of »sense impression« and »concept« – it also relies on a sense of overall structure, into which the concrete observation or utterance »fits«. I see a cat, for instance, by combining sensual intuition and conceptual structure, but if there were no sense of the world in which the cat appears, it could not be on a mat, or indeed anywhere at all. Ideology in this sense means ideas tacitly regulating our experience, without which there would only have been a manifold of semantically fragmented and ultimately meaningless signs and sounds. Ideas give us reality; they make it possible for us to even have reality – a »place« where our experiences *take place*. But we must rely on an *as if* lurking behind the established order, which can always be made explicit, i.e. can be shown to rely only on the subjective necessity of regulative ideas, rather than on a coherent concept of, for instance, the world *an sich*. Most of the time, we proceed by a sort of necessary and benevolent repression of the fact that there is no ultimate ground under what we are doing. Reality itself is taking place as a kind of »cover up job«; we proceed as if reality were coherent and meaningful, otherwise we would be confronted with the dilemmas of absolute reason, which would literally drive us mad. To exemplify the point in a different way, Sigmund Freud lends us a good story that has been interpreted and generalized by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek.

In his *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud tells the story of a father who has lost his son due to fatal illness. After several exhausting days without sleep, sitting by the bed of his son, the

father finally gets some rest, while an old man keeps watch over the body. But his sleep is disturbed by the child:

———After sleeping for a few hours the father dreamed that the child was standing by his bed, clasping his arm and crying reproachfully: »Father, don't you see that I am burning?« The father woke up and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found the old man had fallen asleep, and the sheets and one arm of the beloved body were burnt by a fallen candle.[4]

One of the simple ways of interpreting dreams before Freud was to suppose that all dreams have a direct physical cause. If the alarm clock goes, we dream of a giant bell banging our head; if the blanket slips off, we dream we are in Siberia. By incorporating the external irritation into the dream, we are able to prolong our sleep. In much the same way, the appearance of the child in the dream could be caused by smoke from the next room. Freud, however, thought that the purely physical interpretation was too simple. There are almost always elements in a dream that can simply not be explained by physical interpretations. Freud's interpretation of the burning child, based on his principle of dreams as wish fulfillments, was that the father wanted to imagine that the son was still alive. This wish was granted for a moment in the dream. Lacan radicalizes this interpretation: For whatever the reason the child *appears* in the dream, the reason the father wakes up is more interesting. It is likely not to be the irritation of the smoke that becomes unbearable, but the Real of the dream, i.e. the traumatic feeling of guilt in front of the child: Why didn't you save me? In this sense, the dream is not an escape from reality, on the contrary: awakening into reality is an escape from the Real of the dream. The father escapes into reality by awakening – he rushes into the room, puts out the fire, and thereby escapes the terrifying image of his guilt. Here is how Žižek concludes his interpretation of the burning child:

———It is exactly the same with ideology. Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself. […] The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.[5]

Ideology serves the purpose of supporting our reality itself. Pressing the point, there would be no reality, if there were no ideology. Žižek's point is both political-polemical and principal: »fantasy«, in the strict Lacanian sense, does not mean that

we are »imagining« some better state of affairs than the ones we have, or even that we are falsely representing the current state of affairs as »better than it really is«. On the contrary: fantasy provides us with the basic coordinates for *having* a reality. The trauma of the father is unbearable and he is confronted with it in his dream. To escape it, he needs reality. Isn't this a familiar trait of how we deal with someone dying, especially a close one who dies too early? If the death of the loved one is too overwhelming to cope with, it is beneficial that a number of precautions be made – family to talk to, practical arrangements, a funeral, etc. Reality helps us escape from the traumatic impact of guilt, sorrow, or anxiety. Using the word »fantasy« for the structure of reality may seem coy (to a non-Lacanian), but the point is not that different from Kant's, when he talks of the necessary illusion.

The »traumatic, real kernel« in Kantian terminology would be the paradoxes, the antinomies, at the limits of reason. It is the tic-tac-toe that lies beneath any cognitive order. In order to have a guideline in the world, we must proceed »as if« the world were a coherent unity in accordance with the – implicit or explicit – principles with which we structure our knowledge. We »escape into reality« – for perfectly good reasons – because it would be an unbearable pressure to be constantly confronted with the underlying tension within reason itself. Ideology is what we have – there is no way to escape it once and for all. It gives us our »reality«, in Žižek's phrase – without ideology there wouldn't be any reality. Kant's statement in the analytics of the transcendental logics, that without the categories of understanding there would be no experience at all, but only »a rhapsody of impressions«,[6] should therefore be supplemented by the observation that without the principled »as if« of reason, there would be no reality at all – only a rhapsody of individual experiences without any structure or direction. This supplement is usually passed over in silence in readings of Kant that tone down the implications of dialectics: sense impressions must be synthesized into a sentential structure to constitute an experience, but individual experiences must, in turn, be guided by some unspoken understanding of the absolute, some idea of the »whole«, to constitute any coherent system of knowledge. In a concrete experience this all happens »at once«; we do not construct experiences like we construct LEGO-castles, by adding one element on top of the other. But we can nonetheless be more or less aware of the different aspects involved in having any one, meaningful experience. There is receptivity, there are concepts, and there is the sense of the »whole« where experiences take place. The structure »behind« is always already there for anything to be reasonable. The architectonic power of reason is the »art of systems«, as Kant himself says – a fundamentally important quality of

reason: »our cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody but must constitute a system, in which alone they can support and advance its essential ends. I understand by a system, however, the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea.«[7]

The ability to create coherent knowledge systems and belief sets (including moral) is a fundamental, indispensable dimension of reason. It is a regulative function of reason: although we cannot spell out a sense in which the whole »is there«, we can employ the idea of the whole in the systematization and attribution of meaning to our concrete experiences and actions. In the third critique, Kant says something similar in the following way. The infinite as such can not be perceived, since that would require a synthesis (*Zusammenfassung*) which would provide a measure for the infinite in something determinate, which is impossible, or a contradiction in terms: there can be no such *Anschauung*. However:

———[…] to be able even to think the infinite as *a whole* indicates a mental power that surpasses any standard of sense. […] If the human being is […] to *be able even to think* the given infinite without contradiction, it must have within itself a power that is supersensible, whose idea of a noumenon cannot be intuited but can yet be regarded as the substrate underlying what is mere appearance, namely, our intuition of the world.[8]

It is thanks to this capacity of reason that we have systems and coherence at all. There is some sense of »it all«, which accompanies every concrete experience or statement in so far as it makes sense and is considered part of a rational »space of reason« in relation to endless other (possible) experiences and statements. What »underlies mere appearance« is not a constitutive idea of a noumenon, but rather an »intuition of the world« as a unity. This background intuition tacitly guides our concrete experiences. Like the scientist, who as we know from Thomas Kuhn, works within a paradigm, which gives meaning and direction to individual observations, we acquire a mode of understanding that relies on a tacit universalism. How do you learn what a paradigm demands of you? By reading text books, studying exemplars, and repeating experiments in the lab. You gradually learn to see the universal pattern in the individual case, and it seems like you have to presuppose a coherent totality within which each case is articulated in order to make progress at all. Isn't this the same technique that Pascal famously recommended to people who wanted to believe in God but couldn't convince themselves? If you want to believe, you have to enter the cathedral, kneel down in front of the altar, fold your hands, and say a prayer. Once you have repeated it often enough, you believe – you acquire the *focus imaginarius*

that allows you to be comforted and encouraged to continue the struggle within the framework of your belief.

It would thus be more precise at this point to distinguish between *belief* and *faith*. A belief is something you can have in a sentence. One can believe, for instance, that Philadelphia is to the West of Pittsburgh, and thereby be committed to a number of related beliefs. Beliefs can commit us to more than we know, and we can even be said to have beliefs that we don't know we have (a point articulated by Robert Brandom in his book *Making It Explicit*[9]). We can talk about a set or a system of beliefs, a cluster of interrelated sentential structures that make sense of and refer to each other. Faith, on the other hand, is the conviction that the system as such, overall, makes sense. We find here a kind of quantum leap from belief to faith. The space of reason gives reasons for everything within it, but it does not give reasons for its own existence as such. To follow a line of argument to its conclusion, from anywhere inside the forest of linguistic reality, means either to end up in contradictions of reason or to take the leap of faith and return to reality as if it were in order. The difference between making explicit what follows from concrete statements and making explicit the implicit, pre-ontological sense of the »whole« could also be termed as the difference between making explicit unacknowledged *beliefs* and making explicit unacknowledged *faith*.

The point to be made here is precisely that there is a fundamental priority of faith over belief. Although you can, in the logics of dialectics, describe the movement from a certain set of beliefs, »outwards of the forest«, to their ultimate foundation in the »as if« of a regulative idea, this unfolding is an unfolding of the implicit faith always already at work for language to work. You could say that what we encounter in the antinomies of reason, and the necessity of regulative ideas to »overcome« them, is the fact that we always already relied on some implicit »as if«. This priority of faith can be spelled out in different ways: in more analytical terms, it would be an investigation of the relation between particular statements and the totality of particular statements (such as Wittgenstein's investigations in the *Tractatus* or Timothy Williamson's in »Everything«,[10] where he investigates how the concept of »everything« must mean unrestrictedly everything before it can be used to refer to only a limited area or group). Hermeneutically, you could talk of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit* or Donald Davidson's »principle of charity« – to grasp the meaning of a text or an utterance, you must have an expectation of a meaningful whole in advance. Or you might draw on psychoanalytic insights into how a subject acquires language and becomes a subject – the whole is there first, only later comes separation and difference.

To again draw on an example from Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis: Initially, there is only the mother. She provides

nutrition, comfort and love. Before there is even »world« in Gadamer's sense, there is no differentiation, no fluctuating signifiers – only immediacy and total dependency. The mother, which interests psychoanalysis, is the mother as the »primordial Other«, i.e. the original, immediate guarantor of coherence and stability. There is no crack in the edifice of reality – indeed, there is not even any *question* of stability or instability; only immediate outbursts and their immediate interpretation by the big (M)Other. She decides what the child's sounds mean, and there is no (possible) scepticism as to wrong and right. Mom is *it*. As Freud described it in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a crucial moment in the child's maturation comes when it discovers that mother is not unambiguously, unconditionally there only for its sake. She has other things to do and other things to care about. At a certain point she even starts being absent for longer periods! A split is thus inserted into the peaceful unity of the world – mom is there, but (sometimes) she isn't. Freud tells the story of his observation of a 1½ year old (his grandson), who had invented a game that apparently was played to cope with the absence of the mother. The child had a wooden spool with thread wound around it; first he tossed the spool away, uttering a long, loud *o-o-o-o*, which the family interpreted as a *Fort* (»gone«); then he rewound the thread and greeted the return of the spool with a merry *Da* (»there«). Freud called this game a »cultural effort« of the child,[11] since it represented a symbolic articulation of the absence and reappearance of the mother – an attempt at mastering the loss.

One might say that the »*Fort-Da*« game symbolizes an effort at dealing with the very first antinomy. What appeared to be a whole, uncomplicated unity of safety and love is split into absence and presence. She is there, and then she is gone. *Da-fort*, *fort-da*. There is mother, and there is not mother. The world is a coherent, meaningful totality, and it is not. You let loose the unwinding of the thread of dialectics, and you rewind it until you feel comfortable again – as if there were no problem. She will be back. We could also say that the game was about maintaining faith in the absence of justified belief. The child was naturally unable to construct a meaningful, explicit formulation to make sense of why the mother had to leave, and which good reasons there might be for her return – there was (probably) only an unarticulated, and fragile, sense that she *had* to come back. She was the mother, and mothers come back. The cultural effort of the child was to invent its own regulative idea: based on the evidence, there is no solution to the problem whether she will be back or not, however we must proceed as if she (definitely) will be.

The split introduced into the child's world is a split in the child itself. If before there was only immediacy and uncomplicated unity, there is now a potential uncertainty inscribed into

reality, and thereby a secret distance towards the Other. We must proceed as if, but *what* if… Can the Other be trusted? Why does she leave me? What do I have to do to get her back? The symbolic effort of the *Fort-Da* must be translated into an effort of interpreting what the Other wants from me. Thus arises the possibility of error. Did I do something wrong? Can I trust *myself*? Why did I do that? Not seldom, children start talking to themselves, as if in a dialogue between two parties, on what went wrong and what should be done to make things right again, and games such as the *Fort-Da* could of course also be interpreted as a sort of conversation on the same topic. (Why do children play role games about »father, mother, and children« if not to investigate and confirm the stability of the family order?) Maintaining faith in such circumstances is indeed a cultural effort. Typically, the place of the Other is later assumed by the father, who gives the paternal law: you must act like *this* in order to get our recognition. Although authoritarian patriarchy has had a bad press, there are obvious benefits to the child of being able to rely on an authority that maintains that »reality is like this… because I say so!« The anxiety of the choice of the right thing to do can be softened by a parent that takes responsibility on behalf of the child. Nonetheless, the doubt that was introduced still (potentially) prevails: »Why must I do it this way?« Again, a loss of the flawless Other looms on the horizon. A risky state for any child is exactly the revelation of the father's impotence. Although it is of great interest to most children to test the father's borders, actually reaching them can be a horrific moment. When he suddenly no longer has answers, a radical openness threatens to undermine reality itself. If *he* doesn't know it, then who does? If the one who was supposed to know how everything doesn't know, then the very foundation of our lives can be shaken. This is what seems to be the case when someone »loses their faith«, as it is called, be it in divine foresight or in a concrete person. I must have some faith that my actions are basically significant (to someone) and that they are roughly okay, whether this faith is founded on my »own« convictions or on the patterns of the family or of some other group. Covering up uncertainty could be a definition of ideology. Ideology means: it is done this way; we are doing it right. The *as if*, which must accompany any ordering of concrete experience, is silenced.

Jacques Lacan famously said that »the big Other doesn't exist, but it functions do nonetheless«. In other words, there is no ultimate explanation of how or why the world is ordered, but nonetheless it is. As if there was some grand scheme behind it all – as if something or someone wants it to function *this* way. We must presuppose some sort of coherence in the multiplicity that confronts us in order to orient ourselves at all. Kant himself formulates similar thoughts in »What does it

mean to orient oneself in thinking?«: »To orient oneself in thinking in general means: when objective principles of reason are insufficient for holding something true, to determine the matter according to a subjective principle.«[12]

In the dialectics of reason in the first critique, knowledge in an important sense is shown to be »lacking«. If you follow the metaphysical drive to the end, you realize that there is no safe haven in speculation. Because knowledge is ultimately lacking, there is a »lack of knowledge«,[13] reason itself stands in need, has a need, of some quilting point or guideline to give structure and meaning to its knowledge. Kant calls the solution to this need a rational faith (*Vernunftglaube*). He differentiates between two different concepts of *Glaube*, which mirror the distinction between belief and faith, defined above. In German, there are no two similar concepts to belief and faith, which is why a clarification of the two uses of *Glaube* is needed. Kant's differentiation is between »historical belief« and *Vernunftglaube*. An »historical belief«, for instance of the death of a great man according to reports in letters, can become knowledge if it is confirmed by the right sources (official documents like a death certificate, a will, etc.). *Glaube* in this sense resembles the Brandom's concept of a belief that one can have of a concrete state of affairs, and the truth of which is validated by an ascriber, or by the »symbolic order« in Lacan's terms. Believing that the man lived in this or that place at a given time and occupied such and such a position will guide us through the labyrinth of language and knowledge. In the best case, we end up with something like a full knowledge of the circumstances of his death. »By contrast«, says Kant:

——— … pure rational faith can never be transformed into knowledge by any natural data of reason and experience, because here the ground of holding true is merely subjective, namely a necessary need of reason.[14]

Kant calls the faith of reason a »roadmap« or a »compass«[15] and explicitly acknowledges that the compass he is talking about is the concept of God. As long as humans exist, the need will remain to *presuppose* the existence of a highest being, but never to demonstrate it.[16] This is exactly the difference between the necessary *as if* and the dogmatic postulate of a constitutive concept of God – let alone an *Anschauung* of the divine. The crucial point is that for Kant, the necessity of a concept of God – or the »as if« – is not strictly speaking a religious point but a *logical* one. Because knowledge does not order itself, we need a principle to order it by. We need to see it *as if* it was ordered. In this way it *becomes ordered* in reality – thanks to our ability to think the whole as a regulative idea. In order to order, we need to presuppose order.

In other words, we can relate to a part of the space of reason, however large, and be committed and entitled to more than we are actively aware of. However the entirety of this space is itself lacking. It does not explain itself; we need some »external« principle to guide us in it. Going down the road of dialectics means making explicit, becoming aware of, the necessary illusion that guides our everyday discourse. Critique of ideology in the sense of a Kantian logic of ideas could therefore be described as twofold: On the one hand, the critique of (those who hold) constitutive ideas of the world, for example dogmatic, pre-critical religion; and on the other hand, the critique of those who are guided by regulative ideas of the world, without being aware of it or without acknowledging it as ideological. The former critique resembles that directed at religion and metaphysics at least since David Hume. The latter is the more subtle one that has been developed by Žižek especially, based on the meta-psychological insights in psychoanalysis, according to which being ideological means failing to acknowledge the necessity of ideology.

Kant, Hegel and Schelling are in the background, and very often explicitly discussed in Slavoj Žižek's work. However, here I have developed an argument in Kant that is not systematically treated in Žižek's work, namely the »logic of ideas« in the employment of the regulative ideas of reason. This argument relates directly to how Žižek himself characterizes ideology; but it adds, in Kantian terms, a logical argument to the meta-psychological insights of Freud and Lacan.━━■

■━━ E N D N O T E S ━━━━━━━━━━━━━━

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