

The Phenomenological Derivation of Oughts and Shalls from Ises or Why it is Right to Take the Stairs

Lester Embree

The impossibility of logically deriving “oughts,” i.e., norms or, better, *evaluational propositions*, from “ises,” i.e., theoretical or, better, *cognitional propositions*, is now widely accepted. That a great deal of effort has been devoted to this question of derivation nevertheless suggests that something has been dimly glimpsed. Perhaps the derivability is other than directly logical.

How Edmund Husserl distinguished propositions of these sorts seems not widely appreciated. In the following essay, his account of norms or evaluational propositions will first be supplemented with an account of what can be called “shalls,” i.e., imperatives or, better, *volitional propositions*, and then the derivation of the justification of evaluational and then volitional propositions from the cognitional in pre-predicative conscious life will be explored in a reflective-descriptive manner.

A running example will be useful. Years ago the present writer was persuaded by an article that climbing a flight or two of stairs whenever possible fosters a healthier heart. Later, it also occurred to him that doing so was often an alternative to taking the elevator, which, especially if done by many, saves electricity and decreases the need for repair and replacement of elevators, i.e., conserves resources. Persuaded by such environmental as well as health benefits, he successfully sought to institute the habit of taking the stairs whenever feasible. How might it be shown that this preference and choice and the *eidōs* they exemplify are right?

I.

Husserl’s account in Chapter 2 of the “Prolegomena to Pure Logic” in the

Logical Investigations (1900) urges that what are here called evaluational propositions, e.g.,

One ought to take the stairs,

are equivalent to a cognitional propositions, e.g.,

A person who takes the stairs is good.

Even though traditionally called value judgments, the latter is as cognitional a proposition as, e.g.,

Thomas takes the stairs.

In the latter case, the whole, “Thomas,” is grasped with the subject term and a part, e.g., an activity in a situation, is grasped with the predicate term and predicated of the whole. What is distinctive of a value judgment is that a value is predicated, i.e., affirmed or denied.

Going beyond the letter but not the spirit of Husserl in the “Prolegomena,” what are best called “volitional propositions” because of the similarity with “cognitional” and “evaluational propositions,” e.g.,

You shall take the stairs,

can be analyzed analogously. Linguistically, “ought” is often used in ordinary English not merely to express advice but often indirectly and politely to express an imperative, but for clarity’s sake expressions indicative of willing rather than evaluation in the speaker can be formed strictly by using “shall.” It is not uncommon to hear reference to the background evaluation when action and thus volition is under discussion. One does not strictly pursue the good but the right purpose that is made right by its being good. The volitional equivalent of

Thomas shall take the stairs

is, perhaps awkwardly,

Thomas taking the stairs is useful.

This formulation may be thought awkward because the reader is immediately lead to ask “Useful for what and/or for whom?” Perhaps “good” is not as leading, so

to speak, as “useful” because it is more familiar or readily refers to a matter with a positional characteristic, i.e., intrinsic value, but actually it refers to matters of extrinsic value. We need to recognize intrinsic and extrinsic uses as well as values even if the usage is unfamiliar and thus awkward.

Ises or cognitional propositions, i.e., propositions of the form “S is p,” can be tested. Thus, if and only if the state of affairs is as alleged, e.g., Thomas taking the stairs is for health and the planet useful, then the allegation is true. Perhaps this consideration also makes the expression “cognitional proposition” more attractive. While their equivalents are solely cognitional, the evaluational norms and volitional imperatives are not, for norms can affect the course of events if accepted rather than declined, as can imperatives if obeyed rather than not.

It appears possible to construct a square of opposition for shalls just as Husserl has constructed one for oughts, but a solution to the problem of derivation requires searching below the logical level and as a departure point for that propositions of the universal and particular positive forms are sufficient.

II.

It is not clear to the present writer that conscious life always includes predicating or even thinking, although it does always include believing, valuing, and willing. Thus it may become thematic for us that our friend Thomas routinely takes the stairs rather than the elevator. (One can begin reflecting with a case in an other’s life as well as in one’s own.) It is difficult to doubt that an experienced person entering a situation, perhaps an office building, believes that both the staircase and the elevator are conducive to higher floors. Setting aside cases where the floor conducted to is relatively high, e.g., three or more stories above, what is involved in taking the stairs?

Reflectively considered, the staircase vs. elevator encounter is a matter that can be seriously or fictively reflected upon noematically, i.e., the encountered

alternative as encountered, and noetically there is the encountering of the staircase/elevator alternative as intensitive. Although it will be returned to below, it is not relevant at this point whether the encountering is an *Akt* or, better, an operation in which an I is engaged, or secondarily passive or, better, habitual. Four correlative noetic and noematic strata can in any case be abstractly distinguished in the encounter reflectively observed and asked about: awareness, belief, evaluation, and volition.

The awareness in which the elevator/staircase alternative is encountered is sensuous perception. Little of the phenomenology of sensuous perceiving and objects as perceived needs to be rehearsed here. Believing and the objects as believed in are somewhat more interesting. Absent sufficient motivation to the contrary, what is sensuously perceived is believed in with positive certainty. In most cases, elevators and stairs are perceived by experienced persons as leading from the first or ground floor to non-appearing parts of the perceptual object, i.e., other floors of the building, just as the building approached from the front is perceived as having non-appearing other sides. At the same time, the elevator and staircase are believed to be conducive, i.e., to be ways to, other floors and thereby halls and rooms within the building.

Strictly speaking, expressions such as “elevator,” “stairs,” “staircase,” “buildings,” “floors,” “halls,” and “rooms” ought not to be used to describe that which is encountered as encountered in the abstract awareness stratum of sensuous perceiving, because those are the names of functional, use, or, best, cultural objects, which, again strictly speaking, indicate the willing stratum and that stratum is part of what is abstracted from thus far in the present analysis, but, this said, confusion should be avoidable. Were precision and detail required, colors, shapes, smells, sounds, textures, etc. could be described for the objects as purely sensuously perceived.

Especially interesting here is how a person can also believe that climbing

stairs rather than taking the elevator can have environmental and cardiac effects, perhaps through confidence in expert advice from engineers and medical doctors. Besides going beyond the spatial and temporal to include the causal determinations of the complex sensuous object that is the building in which the person encounters the alternative of elevator/staircase as ways to the floor, hall, and room one is going to, there are the effects on the soma of the person in whom the encountering occurs. Furthermore, it would seem necessary that there be a basis beyond sensuous perceiving for believing that the elevator would require less energy and last longer if fewer people took it over the years to get up one or two stories in the building and that the same would hold for hearts under the same circumstances. This too will be returned to below. For now it may be noted that one can believe in more than what one perceives.

Turning to evaluation, i.e., the valuing and value components abstractly observable reflectively in the noesis and correlative noema of encountering the elevator/staircase alternative, the staircase is the way from the first to the second or third floor that is preferred; differently put, The stairs are better than the elevator.

While the prompted question “For whom?” may be awkward for the unreflective attitude that was tacitly assumed above, it is useful here and can be answered, reflectively, on the basis of the beliefs mentioned: “For Earth and for Thomas.” At least he prefers the stairs to the elevator and does so because he values a healthier planet and heart. Better put, a healthier heart and planet have positive intrinsic values and taking the stairs for a flight or two whenever possible has higher positive extrinsic value in relation to them for him than taking the elevator.

The situation in the abstractly observable volitional stratum is analogous. The word “use” can be used analogously to “value” and, in that case, means are objects with extrinsic use in relation to purposes, ends, or objects with intrinsic use. Differently put, some items, such as healthier hearts and planets, are willed for their

own sakes and the use of other items, such as elevators and staircases are willed for the sakes of items of the first sort, i.e., the ends or purposes, items with correlative intrinsic use. The structural similarity of willing and the willed as willed and valuing and the valued as valued seems often to lead to their confusion, but they can be kept distinct with careful reflection and terminology. (The interesting question of whether there are intrinsic and extrinsic belief characteristics in objects as encountered, i.e., objects believed in for their own sakes and objects believed in for the sakes of objects believed in for their own sakes, e.g., effects and causes or vice versa, need not to be pursued here.)

Extrinsic uses can be immediate or mediate and also multiple. Thus taking the stairs (or the elevator) is, for the person entering the building, the immediate means to a floor of the building, the hallway is a mediate means, and the room traveled to is another mediate means when the end is a visit with a person located there, but the health of the visitor and the planet are also ends. The question of the ultimate human end does not need to be pursued here. The staircase can also be characterized as a means to the hallway, which is then the immediate end, but then it is often necessary to distinguish relative and ultimate ends and to ask about the scope of the action, i.e., is the person taking the stairs to get to the hallway or to the room or to the meeting with the other person? Analogous distinctions can be made for valuing and intrinsic and extrinsic values rather than willing and the end and means uses constituted in it.

III.

By certain changes of attitude that do not need to be investigated here, non-predicative life can give rise to propositions. These can be cognitional of the original sort that start from believing in the object and its naturalistic determinations, such as shape or animate activity, or they can be evaluational, e.g., Thomas ought to take the stairs,

or volitional, e.g.,

Thomas shall take the stairs.

These indicate the encounterings and attitudes in which believing, valuing, and willing predominate. Shalls in particular are aimed at the creation, destruction, fostering, impeding, preserving, protecting, or at least changing of matters, human lives included.

Shalls as well as oughts can be addressed by Thomas to himself as well as by others to him, pronouns “one” included, can be substituted for the subject noun, etc.) As shown, the evaluational and volitional propositions have their cognitional equivalents, which can be tested, but this ought not to distract one from how such propositions have original forms, which arise from the pre-predicative encounterings of objects in which valuing and willings predominate and which are, again, not aimed at knowledge, but at influencing the course of events and obedience respectively.

When a concrete encountering of an object is noetico-noematically analyzed into abstract components of awareness, belief, valuing, and volition, psychologists, sociologists, historians, and other cultural scientists will be inclined to seek explanations in terms of causes and purposes, but philosophers will be inclined to pursue questions of justification. Thus the believing in the building with its rooms, hallways, staircases, elevators, etc., can be justified in terms of earlier along with current perceiving of the same and similar buildings. Similarly, the willing of an alternative can be justified by the valuing it can be evidenced reflectively as founded upon and motivated by, e.g., the willing of health over illness is justified by the valuing of health over illness.

Most philosophers will probably resist, however, the suggestion that believing might justify valuing, perhaps because values and value systems seem so much more diverse than beliefs and belief systems, something that emphasis on science and the ignorance of the vast diversity of religious and common-sense belief

systems might foster. This is not the occasion to justify this claim about justification; it will be sufficient to proceed hypothetically. Nevertheless, if it was shown scientifically that taking the stairs rather than the elevator actually has *adverse effects* on one's heart, then most people who learned this would begin taking the elevator more often, some perhaps even contending that this new willing was justified by the valuing justified by the new and better justified believing.

If believing that taking the stairs instead of the elevator is conducive to cardiac and environmental health justifies the valuing of those effects intrinsically and thus the staircase preference extrinsically and if justified valuing justifies willing, then one might speak of the derivation of the justification of willing from valuing immediately, from believing mediately, and from pertinent types of awareness, i.e., evidencing, ultimately. And if volitional and evaluational propositions arise from encounterings of objects in which willings and valuing predominate just as cognitional propositions arise from encounters in which beliefs predominate, then one might speak of a derivation of shalls and oughts from ises through reflection on non-predicative conscious life. Perhaps it was a vague sense of this possibility that motivated the attempt merely logically to derive evaluational and volitional from cognitional propositions among philosophical tendencies in which philosophy is applied logic.

It may be added that truth is not justification, that the word "health" has value connotations that can nevertheless be abstracted from, and that choice as volitional can be distinguished from preference as evaluational. It deserves repetition that persons in authority often use "ought" when they are nevertheless issuing imperatives and thus mean "shall." And, while one can as an I engage in performing what are then best called "operations," far more of conscious life is habitual in individuals and traditional in groups, and thus there can be efforts to alter what Husserl calls "secondary passivity" so that it is better justified i.e., that culture is more justified or rational. Finally, it may be added that one can speak of taking the

stairs as both good *and* useful and also as *rightly* good and/or useful in order to convey that there is justification behind such claims, or “ought” often connotes this also.

In sum, while oughts and shalls cannot be derived from ises logically, such propositions can indicate justified valuings and willings derived from justified believings phenomenologically.