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## Extremely Bad Things: Some Reflective Analysis of Valuation

“What’s worse than murder?”—“Lots of things. What about someone who tortures and rapes a six-month old child and films the whole thing so that he can show it to similarly minded individuals?” (Ian Ranken, *Tooth and Nail* [New York: St. Martin’s Paperbacks, 1996], p. 69.)

### ABSTRACT

After some remarks about how, prior to eidetic and transcendental epochēs, phenomenology is theoretical, reflective, analytic, descriptive, and culture-appreciative, the attempt will be made to distinguish the components of valuing and values within encounterings and things-as-encountered, and then to clarify the concepts of the extremely bad and the morally evil. The question of how valuing might be justified is raised at the end.

### INTRODUCTION

1.—Phenomenology is better characterized as an approach than as a doctrine, particularly since there have been quite a variety of results in our century-old and worldwide tradition. This variety is presumably due not only to different thematic interests, but also to different skills at following the approach. “Approach” is preferable to “method” to the degree that the latter expression has come to connote a mechanical following of rules. But in any case, methodological discussions in phenomenology have unfortunately tended to focus on the transcendental phenomenological epochē, reduction, and purification and the eidetic epochē, reduction, and purification. This is unfortunate because other procedures in the methodology are then under-appreciated.

2.—The methodology of eidetic cognition offered by Husserl is no doubt a great advance over the other methodologies offered in Plato and since. But judging from the occurrence of general nouns in language, eideation is something humans have done for millennia before attempts were made to describe it. Trained intellectuals tend to do it rather well, it is a skill shared by most people, with only a few—such as the brain-injured patients investigated by Kurt Goldstein—having difficulty doing it, whether they know it or not.

3.—In contrast, the methodology that Husserl offers for establishing transcendental phenomenology seems novel, despite glimmerings of results of the procedure in work by various previous figures, particularly including—according to Husserl—David Hume. But transcendental epochē and its effects are only needed when the quest is for ultimate grounding in first philosophy, and there is often no need to go that far.

4.—Focus on the transcendental and eidetic methods has tended to marginalize at least five necessary procedures that they presuppose.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, phenomenological investigation is conducted in a *theoretical* attitude. This attitude includes a striving for cognition that is distinct both from practical action and from the suffering as well as enjoyment found in non-scientific life.

5.—In the second place, while most science is conducted in a straightforward attitude, phenomenology—on the philosophical as well as on the cultural-scientific levels—is *reflective*. In the reflective theoretical perspective, one can then speak of correlations between “encounterings” and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Lester Embree, *Análisis reflexivo: Una primera introducción a la investigación fenomenológica*, trans. Luis Román Rabanaque / *Reflective Analysis: A First Introduction into Phenomenological Investigation*, Edición Bilingüe Inglés / Castellano (Morelia: Jitanjáfora, 2003).

“things-as-encountered,” which phenomenologists traditionally and more technically call “noesis” and “noema.”

6.—In the third place, phenomenology is *analytic*, which is to say that it distinguishes components within pregiven wholes. For example, it is possible to distinguish two kinds of components within encounterings, i.e., those called “positings” and those called “experiencings.” Positings can then be distinguished into at least three sorts, i.e., those called—in broad significations—“believings,” “valuings,” and “willings”

7.—In contrast, experiencings can be distinguished into those that are “direct experiencings,” e.g., “perceivings,” “rememberings,” and “expectings,” and those that are “indirect experiencings,” as is the case with experiencings that include indications, depictions, and symbols in the foundations of intendings to the things focused on.

8.—In the fourth place, phenomenology is fundamentally *descriptive*. Its descriptions are usually offered in eidetic terms, but can be articulated in factual terms. “All encountering is encountering of something” is an eidetic claim, while “the world exists” is a factual claim. Description contrasts with explanation. There are indeed explanations in terms of motives and purposes in phenomenological accounts, but both that which will become the explanandum and that which will serve as the explanans need to be described first. Thus description is fundamental. And it needs to be added that most description is in morphological rather than exact eidetic terms, so that recourse not only to mathematization but also to logical argumentation is problematical.

9.—In the fifth place, one further methodical move deserves comment. Scientific investigation begins in the “natural” or better, the *worldly* attitude and, as Husserl’s *Ideen II* (1912) shows well, this general

attitude has two species. One is the “personalistic”—or better, the *cultural-theoretical* attitude shared by non-positivistic historical, psychological, and social sciences. These sciences address aspects of the concrete socio-historical lifeworld. It is original, i.e., one is already in it when one begins from the lifeworld and first adopts a theoretical attitude, reflective or not.

10.—A specific abstraction is then required in order to set aside the way in which things, others, and situations are originally fraught with values and uses within socio-cultural worlds,. This is an abstraction yielding the second, “naturalistic” species of the worldly theoretical attitude. If only values and uses are abstractively excluded, zoology can still be engaged in as a naturalistic science. But if one goes on to abstract from the mental components of other animate beings, the result is a sheerly physicalistic subspecies of the naturalistic theoretical attitude.

11.—This genealogy of attitudes—which has itself been produced in the reflective theoretical attitude—is valuable for science theory. However, when people come routinely and naively to adopt a naturalistic attitude in everyday life, science, and even in philosophy, the result is called “naturalism.” Sadly, this habitual and traditional adoption is now in a way part of common-sense culture, first of all in most of educated people in the West. One manifestation of this is the way the word “science” now tends exclusively to signify naturalistic science, with the cultural sciences ignored. Moreover, that the concrete socio-cultural lifeworld from which all science and philosophy ultimately begin *is* socio-cultural is widely overlooked. This makes it more difficult to understand relations and interactions of social classes, ethnic groups, genders, generations, national cultures, political parties, etc. One can abide, however, by the full range of lifeworldly

encountering and things-as-encountered, including values and uses, rather than automatically performing the abstraction essential to naturalism.

12.—Mindful that the contents of constitutive phenomenology in the worldly attitude parallel those of transcendental phenomenology, this essay seeks to honor the primacy of the socio-cultural world as well as to rely on a theoretical attitude in which one reflectively analyzes and describes encounterings and things-as-encountered. The first section will begin by distinguishing the stratum of valuing and values within encounterings and things-as-encountered; next the ordering of values as good and bad, better and worse, and best and worst will be described and illustrated. “Extremely bad” can then be considered the worst in any area, and “moral evil” is the extremely bad in the area of action by humans on living things. In the second section, how the valuing of something as “evil” or, better, *extremely negatively valued* might be justified will be briefly sketched.

### §1.—COMPARATIVE AND EXTREME VALUING.<sup>2</sup>

13.—Phenomenology seeks to persuade through descriptions in which things are shown. This task is often aided by the use of examples. Shocking examples have their place, but ordinary cases are often more useful. Suppose that, in an evening, one has swept one’s room, studied in a book important for one’s research project, and then listened to music for a while before

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the following is derived from lectures by Dorion Cairns at the New School for Social Research during the 1960s. For some of Husserl’s thought in this connection, cf. Lester Embree, “Some Noetico-Noematic Analyses of Action and Practical Life,” in *The Phenomenology of the Noema*, ed. John Drummond and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), 157-210, and “Advances regarding Evaluation and Action in Husserl’s *Ideas II*,” in *Issues in Husserl’s “Ideas II*,” ed. Thomas Nenon and Lester Embree (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1996) 173-98.

going to bed and falling sleep. Sweeping is predominantly a practical or conational activity in which the broom is the means and a cleaner floor the end, while other components within mental life—such as preferring the clean to the dirty, as well as cognitive and experiential components intensive to floors—are subordinate. In contrast, studying is predominantly a cognitive activity in which the valuing of understanding the thought of a book’s author as well as the willing of such activities as sitting and turning pages are subordinate. And enjoying music is predominantly a valuational activity, but there are conational and valuational components subordinate within it as well.

14.—For the sake of clarity and distinctness, analysis requires a generic term at this point. As already indicated, sweeping, studying, and enjoying can be said to belong to species of a genus called “encountering,” these species being “conational encountering,” “cognitive encountering,” and “valuational encounterings,” while the floor, book, and music of the example are things that are encountered in these various ways. And note that one is already relying on reflective analysis in recognizing this genus and these species.

15.—The interest in the present investigation is in valuation. How it differs from conational and cognitive encountering is already intimated and should become clearer in what follows. But within valuation, the first difference is between valuing and things-as-valued. Suppose one is in the park and amused to watch a mother helping a small child try to walk. Being amused is a type of liking, which is to say, “positive valuing,” and in correlation with this component, the interacting mother and child have “positive value” for the observer.

16.—If one’s attention is then drawn to the mess surrounding an overflowing trash barrel, one can reflectively find a component of “negative valuing” in one’s stream of mental life; in other words, one finds a disliking that is a particular falling under the species “disvaluing.” Correlatively, when reflectively analyzed, the thing intended to, i.e., the overflowing trash barrel, can be reflectively seen to have “negative value” correlative to it. Besides positive and negative valuing, i.e., liking and disliking, there can also be neutral valuing. Once one has this concept, one can more easily look for cases where one is indifferent or apathetic, but this does not need to be done here.

17.—There are positive, negative, and even neutral modes in cognitive and conational encounterings as well, e.g., the negative modes would be disbelieving and willing-against. And yet another distinction holds in all three spheres. This is a difference between what can be called “firm” and “shaky” in the positive and negative modes of cognitive, valuative, and conational encountering (although there is no firm/shaky difference in the neutral modes). In conational positing, for example, there is a difference to be recognized between the firm and shaky that is often expressed as a difference between “resoluteness” and “hesitancy.” In the cognitive sphere, there is “certitude” and “skepticism”—or since “skepticism” includes neutral believing for some authors and disbelieving for others, “conjecture” may be preferable with things-as-believed-in correlatively said to be “certain” and “probable.” Or else one can be resolutely or hesitantly negative rather than positive in one’s willing, and can be negatively conjectural in one’s believing with things correlatively improbable.

18.—As for valuational encountering, there seem to be no specific words in ordinary English to convey that liking and disliking are sometimes

firm and sometimes shaky. But this lack does not preclude speaking of “firm liking,” “shaky liking,” “firm disliking,” and “shaky disliking.” The word “ambivalence” might sometimes refer to shaky valuing, but it is best reserved for mixed or vacillating feelings.

19.—Confining the theme now to valuing and things-as-valued, there is a clear distinction between the “intrinsic” values of things valued for their own sakes and “extrinsic” values of things valued for the sakes of other things. The present analysis will focus on intrinsic valuing and values. But what is even more relevant here is how valuing is often comparative, i.e., a matter of preferring whereby X is “better than” Y and Y is “worse than” X or one is “as good (or bad)” as the other. This makes it possible to rank things in terms of their values. Is wine better than beer and beer better than Coca-Cola?

20.—Once it is recognized that valued things can be ordered in this way, the question arises of extremes. The extreme for the positively valued is the best and the extreme for the negatively valued is the worst. Comparative valuing can thus lead to recognizing not only the better and the worse, but also the best and the worst, which are intended to in what can be called “extreme valuing.”

21.—Before this analysis of the valuational is continued, something needs to be said about “objectivation.” This is an act of believing, one in which the I engages and busies herself with something in such a way that the thing intended to thereupon originally receives the categorical form “something.” In order to speak or write about values, they need to be objectivated. After that, they can be predicated and predicated about. Thus objectivation has already been relied upon above in statements about value,



for it is objectivation that allows one to say that “X is positively valued” and “Y has negative value.”

22.—When objectivation establishes predicate terms (e.g., “positively valued”) that are also nominalized, a change of name is convenient: “X is good,” “Y is worse,” and so on. In parallel fashion, “X is useful” and “Y is existent” arise in the conational and cognitive spheres from objectivation and terminological transformation, as do the concepts expressed as “usefulness” and “existence.”

23.—On the basis of the foregoing, it is now possible to clarify the expression “moral evil.” It is possible that there are philosophers who express the positive-negative value contrast with the words “good” and “evil” and describe as evil a hole in one’s sock. But it is better simply to say that it is bad, and more significantly, to speak of “badness” as the extreme opposite of “goodness.” “Bad” and “badness” can then be used to express generic concepts pertaining to the negatively valued.

24.—Various species of the bad can be determined according to what is valued, including the trivial badness of a hole in one’s sock. Again, the determination of the species of value is done on the basis of reflection on the thing valued. If there were any need for such an expression, one could speak of “sock-hole value” and of the badness of sock holes. But what about “moral value”?

25.—“Moral” can refer to other selves. This raises, however, at least three questions. First, there is the question of whether the selves referred to are exclusively human or whether, in this age of ecology, non-human animals ought to be excluded, which would imply the possibility that some treatment of them is morally evil.

26.—Second, there is the question of whether the term “moral” refers exclusively to other subjects or includes oneself as well—an issue that raises the question not only of how one is the object of the actions of others, but also, more subtly, whether there is morality and immorality already in and for subjects when they perform actions on others.

27.—And third, it might be asked if morality refers solely to individuals and their actions or also includes groups at least as subjects of moral actions. In this last respect, the term “ethics” might have a narrow signification referring to individual action, while actions by groups, whether on other groups or on individuals, could be the theme of politics. Examples of moral evil would then include cases of genocide as well as that of the baby raping referred to in the epigraph to this essay.

## §2.—THE PROBLEM OF EXAMINING VALUATION.<sup>3</sup>

28.—Besides the reference to subjects—individual as well as group, own as well as other, and non-human as well as human—the moral has to do not only, as intimated, with action, but also with action that is right or wrong. The rightness and wrongness of moral action relates to positive and negative valuing. As already indicated, there is not only comparative valuing, but also the valuing of positive and negative extremes. When this valuing is negative and when what is valued involves action or actions by as well as on individual and collective human and non-human subjects, it is possible to identify cases of extremely negative valuing—the correlate of

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dorion Cairns, “Reason and Emotion,” ed. Lester Embree, Fred Kersten, and Richard M. Zaner, *Husserl Studies* 17 (2001), 21-33.

one species of which is extreme moral badness, which can be called moral evil.

29.—As the epigraph of this essay can also illustrate, one might consider something as extremely bad and then find something worse. Is baby raping worse than murder? Is genocide worse than war? Such questions can be approached phenomenologically. But it may often suffice simply to recognize moral evil rather than seeking its species and attempting to determine the worst of the worst.

30.—If a normal adult human reflects on how she encounters cases of baby raping and genocide fictively if not seriously, she can easily find her negative valuing of them and objectivate the values of them as valued. Indeed, these are cases of extreme negative valuation and, since subjects are involved, these are cases of moral evil. For most people, nothing more needs to be said, action is called for, but philosophers often go on from this point to ask how the valuings involved might be justified. This is a huge topic, but that is no excuse for not at least attempting to begin to approach it.

31.—A chart may help keep things sorted out.

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Figure 1

willing	things-as willed
valuing	things-as-valued
believing in	things-as-believed-in
experiencing	things-as-experienced

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32.—A higher component within an encountering can be founded upon and motivated by lower ones. The concern for justification requires

reflecting on the way in which experiencing founds and motivates believing, believing founds and motivates valuing, and valuing founds and motivates willing. Two of these three connections of justification are less problematical than the third. When believing is justified, one can speak of cognition. The question of what justifies believing can be answered phenomenologically with the word “evidencing” (*Evidenz*), which signifies recourse to the best possible experiencing for things of the kind in question. The evidencing of the existence and determinations of material things has been much discussed in phenomenology. The indirect experiencing that functions as evidencing for other subjects is more complex and deserve even more analysis. The evidencing of ideal objects is actually simpler and easier to analyze than that of material or social objects. For all the difficulties, however, the principle whereby experiencing of some sort is what justifies believing is fairly plausible.

33.—As for willing, it is equally plausible that it is justified by valuing. If one were actually asked why one wanted genocide and the raping of babies stopped and prevented in all possible ways, the answer would probably begin with the assertion that such things are evil, i.e., extremely negatively valued actions on animate beings. However, this question is only a beginning, since few would fail to find that another question immediately arises: namely, the question of what justifies this negative valuing.

34.—One might contend that it is once again evidencing that justifies valuing. Actual moral (or immoral) actions can be experienced through testimony, autopsy reports, and even the archaeology of mass graves, as well as directly. But one can also rely on *feigning* such things as baby raping and genocide. Feigning can justify believing in the *possibilities* of such horrifying things. What can then justify the negative valuing is the justified

believing in the possibilities founding and motivating extremely negative valuing.

35.—Obviously much, much more needs to be worked out here. But the reflective analysis of valuation begun in this sketch may serve to show how a phenomenological approach can address not only the comfortable course of life in the socio-cultural world, but its darker side as well.

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