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# SUBJECTIVE MEANINGS AND NORMATIVE VALUES IN ALFRED SCHUTZ'S PHILOSOPHY OF HUMAN ACTION

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## *abstract*

*In his explanation of human action Alfred Schutz resorts mainly to Max Weber's notion of subjective meaning and Husserl's notion of type. For him subjective meaning seems more important to understand human action than the fact that social actors internalize normative values. Accordingly, validity has mainly to do with projects of action, with fulfilled (or unfulfilled) expectations and to the stock of knowledge available, along with the actor's system of relevances. This raises two characteristic Schutzian problems: 1) the relation between the subjective meaning of an action and the objective criteria (namely, the juridical and the ethical ones) according to which any action can be evaluated; 2) the relation between an actor and his fellow human beings that arguably share the same system of relevances and act in the same normative framework. In this paper, I intend to offer an analysis of these issues, resorting mainly to Schutz's 1934 book *Der Sinnhafte Aufbau der Sozialen Welt*, and in some unpublished manuscripts.*

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## *keywords*

*phenomenology, subjective meaning, intentionality, types, systems of relevance*

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### 1. Meanings and Norms

In his explanation of human action Alfred Schutz resorts mainly to subjective meanings and types, and not to norms. For him subjective meaning seems more important than the fact that social actors internalize normative values. This entails huge consequences to his theory of validity, as long as it is possible to find one in his writings,<sup>1</sup> and to the methodological procedures to which he resorts in order to understand motives. In Schutz analysis, validity has mainly to do with projects of action, with fulfilled (or unfulfilled) expectations and to the stock of knowledge a social actor finds available. Nevertheless, Schutz thought – correctly, I think – that there is no special difference, from a logical point of view, between acting according to a norm and acting according to type-based expectations, that is, expectations grounded on the way persons and institutions behaved in past normal conditions (Schutz, 1996b, p. 101). If I am projecting to travel by airplane, I will abide to the same security norms I am used to follow in my past airplane travels; if I am traveling by plane for the first time I can ask, in my travel agency, for a booklet with the security norms. In both situations, my behavior will probably be the same. Human actions unfold, most of the times, within a frame of normative ethical and juridical values. Besides, they are almost always *Zweckrational*, as Max Weber used to say, i.e., in accordance with a rational choice of the means to reach the preestablished end. Perhaps this is not true of all of them but analyzing them this way allows us to better understand abnormal cases, which could be labelled “irrational”. An analysis of all these issues and of the way Schutz deals with them is the theme of my paper. Schutz addresses human action and the normative framework in which it takes place by means of an analysis of the role played by habitualities and idealities, two phenomenological concepts of the utmost importance in the writings of the later Husserl.<sup>2</sup> With the help of these concepts Schutz stresses the importance of the temporal structure of consciousness for

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1 Schutz concern with validity relates above all to the epistemological question of the universal and necessary validity of the propositions of social sciences. It is the same problem that physical sciences also face. Schutz stressed the fact that they can both possess universal and necessary validity for the domain of invariance of human behaviors they establish, but not a *priori* validity. Schutz limited the use of a *priori* statements to the transcendental realm of philosophy. Social sciences have a mundane character, and the validity of their statements must be restricted to the world of mundane phenomena (Schutz, 1996b, p. 103).

2 In Husserl’s published writings, the concept of habituality can be found in the *Cartesian Meditations*, from 1931, and the concept of idealization in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, from 1929. Schutz already uses the concept of ideality in his 1932 seminal work *Der Sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*. The definition of these two concepts will be given in the following.

the understanding of human action. Habitualities and idealities come first, norms come second in Schutz's analysis. Habitualities have to do with past experiences, and, in a way, they are related to because-motives; idealities, on the other hand, have to do with the future accomplishments of expectations and must be understood as in-order-to motives.

Schutz was fully aware of the importance of norms, but I think that in this particular he was influenced by the opinion of the Japanese philosopher of law Tomoo Otaka, who came to Europe in the early 1930's to study phenomenology with Husserl and was intellectually and friendly connected with Schutz. In fact, Otaka underpinned the fact that human agency is much more determined by a "feeling of the law" peculiar to a people than by the prospect of coercion in case of its violation. That feeling constituted for Otaka the immediate guarantee of the efficacy of the law (Schutz, 1996c, pp. 218-219).

However, while Husserl resorts to habitualities, in the first place, to explain solipsistic experience, opening the field of what he will label "passive synthesis", for Schutz habitualities have to do with the cultural basements of intersubjective experience, i.e., the experience of a socialized human being. Regarding the way to address the role of norms in individual behavior, the concept of habituality can be of a great help. Social, juridical, and ethical norms need not be specifically inculcated; we learn them – or, at least, an important part of them – in our lifeworld intercourse with other fellow human beings. Our evaluations of states of affairs, of events, of people's behaviors are largely conditioned by this kind of learning. This means that it is not only the world that we take-for-granted; in normal conditions the agent also takes for granted that other human beings will act in the appropriate way in the proper circumstances. That's the role played by idealizations. We can never be sure that someone will act in what I called the appropriate way, but we expect him or her to do it and we most of the times fill sure that our expectation will be fulfilled. What is in accordance with a social norm is bound to be repeated ever again.<sup>3</sup>

To show what can possibly be an action according to norms I will begin with an analysis of the general structure of human agency. Three things must be taken into account. First, projects of action have a temporal character that reflects the temporal structure of consciousness; secondly, actions do not have necessarily the same meaning for agents and observers; thirdly, the reflection about human action carried out by the social sciences and philosophy is a special case of the reflection agents make about what they have done; moreover, the former must give an account of the latter.

Now, Schutz differentiated between two types of motives for action: "in-order-to" motives and "because-motives". The distinction between the two will only become clear after an analysis of the temporal structure of consciousness. Projects of action are subjective in the sense that they are the outcome of a subjective evaluation of the context of action, of deliberation about the ends and about the means. Action, as Schutz says, unfolds in the *modus futuri exacti*; it is always future oriented (Schutz, 1974, p. 116); this means that the agent phantasies a future state-of-affairs not only as achievable, but also as already accomplished in

## 2. "Because-Motives" and "In-Order-To-Motives"

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3 Some huge problems arise here. I will only mention two of them. First, I cannot do the same forever (neither can my fellow human beings) since I am doomed to die; but this only means that the temporal structure of the law is different from the temporal structure of a man's life and of his stream of consciousness. In the second place, norms can change. This fact will probably entail the necessity of modifying the relation Husserl establishes (namely, in *Formal and Transcendental Logic*) between the "I can do it again" and the other idealization he labels "and so on". The first is only the subjective correlate of the second. Now, if norms can change, the "and so on" has not the same validity in normative sciences like jurisprudence (and perhaps also in the social sciences) as the one it has in the formal logical-mathematical sciences.

imagination. This temporal character entails the fact that the agent is aware of having begun and achieved the action and is able to acknowledge the phases between the beginning and the end as his own deeds. To explain this fact Schutz resorts to Husserl's concept of monothetical acts; they are a special kind of acts in which the intended events can be grasped all at once, without the need to analyze them step-by-step in their successive phases.

We can look to norms as a kind of frame that accompanies the choosing between projects of action. I will address this issue later. I just want to point out now to the fact that normative frameworks are not always thematically present in the mind of an agent, which does not mean that they are completely absent. Not unfrequently, norms are just a part of a stock of knowledge acquired through education and the sedimentation of past experiences.

Social Sciences are little concerned with in-order-to motives because they are difficult to study scientifically. However, Social Sciences can study because-motives, or retrospectively take a glance into the past factors (for example, the personal background, the individual's social milieu, the environment) that caused individuals to behave as they did. Since because-motives are "objective" they can be studied using scientific methods and dealt with as a special kind of causes. Since the actions have already occurred, the reasons for them are accessible to both the actor and the social scientist. The social scientist, however, has little or no concern for specifically individual motives. He wants above all to grasp the typical motives that led certain kinds of people, in certain circumstances, to do what they did. Moreover, the typical motives grasped by the social scientist, for Schutz, are not the final goal of his work. They must be related to the common-sense concepts of the life-world, if they want to claim any scientificity. Schutz labeled this relation the postulate of adequacy (Etzrodt, 2013, p. 31).

Because-motives have their roots in someone's former lived experiences, which determine the agent's present biographical situation; together, these experiences and their outcomes constitute the stock of knowledge available to grasp the present situation. The distinction between in-order-to motives and because-motives is central to an understanding of Schutz's theory of action. The distinction is not always easy to grasp, but the following example may help us. Suppose that I say that "the individual A undertakes the action B to get the state-of-affairs C". I am speaking of in-order-to motives; I suppose that A has a certain representation of C and looks at B as the surest way of getting it. The choice of B is determined by the knowledge at hand that A disposes of (Schutz, 1990, p. 20). However, someone could also say: "Circumstances X and Y explain the fact that A, since he wanted to get C, chose the means B to get it". Now, I am speaking of because-motives. The difference between the two can now be grasped. When we speak of in-order-to motives, the line that connects B and C is directed to the future; in the second case, the line that connects C with X and Y is directed to the past. Of course, a social scientist can follow the line B - C backwards, but in this circumstance his analyze will stop at B as the moment in which A, after having decided to get C, chose B as the most adequate means.

The observer and the agent don't share the same point of view. While engaged in action one is not focused on what one has acted: on the other hand, while acting one is always producing things enacted. (I am coining the expression "things enacted" to refer to the outcome of actions - the *Handlungen*, in German, in contrast to *handeln* -, which can be acknowledge as his own actions by a social agent.) This possibility is grounded on what Husserl, in his 1905 *Lessons on Time Consciousness*, labeled "double intentionality". This means that one can look either to the stream of one's intentional lived experiences or to what one intentionally addressed during the stream (William, 1973, p. 32). When the former case prevails, one becomes an observer of oneself and no longer remains just an actor. Of course, someone could argue that any in-order-to sentence can be rephrased in a because-sentence. It's true; however, the opposite is not true. This is clear if we think that although we can say that someone committed

a murder because he grew-up in a violent milieu, we cannot rephrase this because-sentence in an in-order-to sentence.

In contrast with because-motives, the in-order-to motives are always given to the agent in the agent's very acting. One is always aware of them. It is an orientation of the action to a future event, accompanied by the achievement of its goals in future perfect tense. For instance, if someone asks me: "why did you go out?" my answer can be: "in order to meet my friend".

In-order-to motives refer to a future state that an actor wishes to bring about by his actions, a future state that he imagines as having already been accomplished by these actions. Otherwise, he would not even begin to act. What makes it possible for me to imagine the outcome of the actions that I will carry out is the fact that I have already carried out in the past similar actions in similar situations, at least according to the knowledge I have regarding the situation in which I now find myself. Of course, I am not going out for the first time. However, since my former experiences of going out to meet someone proved successful, I retrieve the same behavior according to the idealization "I can do it again". From a sociological point of view, I am not going out for the umptieth time; I am doing a typical behavior.

The in-order-to motive is an important concept because it makes even more clear the temporal structure of the action. As we saw, an action is in the first place motivated by a desired outcome, or, in other words, by a different state-of-affairs that is judged preferable to the current one. Insofar as an action is motivated by a desired outcome, it is legitimate to say that it tends towards the future, aiming to fulfill an expectation. As I have already said, an agent may be conscious of his in-order-to motives. It is possible, however, that he does not have them explicitly present while acting. Nevertheless, once the action has come to an end, retention gives the agent the possibility of going back to those motives that triggered his action. Another example may help us understand this fact. Suppose that someone decides to murder in order to get some money. During the execution of his crime, he is probably not thinking about his in-order-to motive. The cautious execution of his act, with the aim of not being caught, fills probably his attention (Schutz, 1990, p. 22).

I think it has become clear that events must be "lifted out" from the stream of consciousness to become clear to the agent and get a meaning. This process of "lifting out" an event is what I have called above "reflection". Reflections may start due to different factors, like for example a question addressed to the agent about his motives. The question will cause the agent to answer and to provide the information the person wants to get. That's what happens in a judicial interrogation in a court of justice, but this scheme applies in a great number of other everyday situations.

Now, suppose someone asks a simple question: "where is my black ball pen?" The motive is to fill the form to apply for a scholarship which is known to the person only. Another person simply understands that he needs a pen. To grasp the ultimate motive, he has to gather additional information and observation. Therefore, Schultz says that it is by no means certain that we truly understand each other in everyday life. Fortunately, this is not always necessary. Social relations are characterized by a certain level of anonymity. For Schütz, the relationship with the other is always marked by a process of typifications. This means that a set of sedimented experiences that form part of the stock of knowledge that the lifeworld has made available to us will determine in advance our expectations regarding that relationship; shared experiences in a common spatial-temporal framework give rise to an identical system of relevances.

Subjective expectations (in cases in which A expects that B will behave in a certain way) may derive from the fact that the social agents are acquainted with each other. If agents A and B are contemporaries in the same cultural environment (even if they never had a face-to-face

**3. Lived Experiences and Juridical Norms**

relation, i.e., if they don't have familiar, friendly, or professional ties<sup>4</sup>) it is natural that most of the expectations of A regarding the behavior of B will be fulfilled. However, contemporaries don't always share the same cultural environment. They may only have in common what Schutz labels a *Mitwelt*.<sup>5</sup> I quote:

[...] in the face-to-face situation, directness of experience is essential, regardless of whether our apprehension of the Other is central or peripheral and regardless of how adequate our grasp of him is. I am still Thou-oriented, even to the man standing next to me in the streetcar. When we speak of "pure" Thou-orientation or "pure" We-relationship, we are ordinarily using these as limiting concepts referring to the simple givenness of the Other in abstraction from any specification of the degree of concreteness involved (Schutz, 1974, p. 245).

This entails the fact that the expectations of fulfillment in the case of *Mitwelt* relations are merely hypothetical; nevertheless, the tendency to create a personal ideal type, with which our fellow men's<sup>6</sup> behaviors are supposed to match – as in our previous example of the post office employees – , is always felt. For now, it's important to add that juridical norms are made for the world of contemporaries, even if they apply to partners. If two persons sign a contract, it's irrelevant if they already know each other well, if they are seeing each other for the first time, or if they developed for each other a feeling of distrust.

Now, we face two very similar procedures, the procedure of the social actor in his biographical situation and the procedure of the social scientist. Both execute a reflective going-back to the social agent's real actions. However, the procedures of the social scientist are, so to speak, second degree constructions (Willame, 1973, p. 102), which means that they must be constructed upon the personal ideal types I mentioned above. One of Schutz's main concerns – a concern also felt by some Austrian social scientists and economists of his generation and of the precedent one – was to determine to what extent these personal ideal types correspond to the scientific models of social and economic behavior drawn by social scientists. Jurisprudence, for instance, badly needed some clarification about this issue. Allow me to make a quotation from Felix Kaufman:

The correct description of the legal method requires – as has been convincingly demonstrated within the Pure Doctrine of Law – two groups of separate, if not unrelated analysis, namely the determination of the legal proposition as such, i.e., of those moments which, by virtue of its content, make a sentence a legal sentence, and the determination of the legal context, i.e., of those moments that allow a legal proposition to appear as a legal proposition of a specific legal order (Kaufmann, 1931, p. 16).

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4 Schutz would say that in this case they don't share the same *Umwelt*. The German word *Umwelt* in this context may be translated into "world of partners".

5 For a first analysis of the meaning of this concept see Schutz (1974, p. 245ff.). Some distinctions must be taken into account here. In a Thou-relation I may never speak to my fellow men nor even have looked them in the eyes. I have a Thou-relation to someone who seats at my side in the bus, without speaking to him or looking at him attentively. However, the possibility of these two things happening is always there. A We-relation has a totally different character. Although I speak to and look at the post office employee, I don't have a thou-relation with him. I just count with the fact that he will fulfill his job, of which I may specifically know nothing about. For him, I am just a person who entered the post office because he wanted to send a letter by mail.

6 "Fellow men" is the usual translation into English of the German word *Nebennmenschen*.



The example of making a Testament can shed some light on the problems that arise not only when we keep to the distinction between a subjective and an objective meaning, but also when we distinguish the sociological fact that someone wants someone to inherit his assets and the normative framework that bestows a legal character to this will. Someone may think that he has made a Testament just by writing some words concerning the destiny of his assets in a sheet of paper and signing at the end of the sheet. If a court of law cannot accept that document as a real Testament, it's due to the fact that some norms for writing a Testament – norms belonging to the invariant domain of the legal acts – have not been respected.

Let's try to make all this a bit clearer. For someone who writes his Testament in a sheet of paper (knowing nothing about the formalities necessary to give such an act its legal force), being understood by whoever reads it in the future may be the only relevant problem. He is not making a true Testament – at least from a normative point of view – although he is truly expressing his wishes. He also believes that his intentions are interchangeable, i.e., if he found another person who did not understand the meaning of what he has done, he would be able to explain it easily. The jurist, of course, has quite another system of relevances.

Now, for the social scientist every human action has a certain degree of anonymity. If two different social actors A and B act in a certain way, the relevant factor for the social scientist is the norm according to which both act that way, not the specific biographical situations of A and B, or the particular way both understand the norm, or whatever motives they have for accepting it. As Schutz would say, the social scientist only cares for the objective meaning of the action (Schutz, 1974, p. 42).<sup>7</sup> Here one could make use of the concept of truth and say that someone that has just made a list of his assets, stated the will to make of someone his heir and signed it has not made a true Testament. A true Testament is the statement of a will made in accordance with some juridical norms that give that statement an efficacy that otherwise it would not have. Moreover, these norms are a part of a system of juridical norms established in compliance with certain procedures. Following Kelsen's terminology, we could say that only subject to this condition the juridical norms that validate a Testament have positivity. We can state what happened in a modal sentence: "it is not possible to make a valid Testament not using these norms":

$$\sim P (T \wedge \sim N).^8$$

These norms have a mandatory character, they constitute an obligation to everyone who wants to make a valid Testament. Regarding specific human actions, only in circumstances similar to this one are we allowed to use the word "necessary". That's the reason why I think that the question: "is an ineffective norm still a norm?" must be answered in the affirmative. A true norm is just a norm that has been made in accordance with certain formal procedures, regardless of the fact that everybody, only somebody or even nobody complies with it. It is, at least in my opinion, difficult to imagine what a false norm could possibly be. Perhaps one can think of two different cases: 1) a norm that establishes a human behavior that is impossible to carry out from a physical point of view; 2) a norm that establishes something that everyone would be willing to do if he or she had the right opportunity of doing it, However, the fact that A just fears the consequences of not respecting a norm while B agrees with its content may be irrelevant for a jurist, while the same fact can be relevant for a social

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, when A tries to understand the action of B and B the action of A they are both looking for an objective meaning, although "objective meaning" here means a quite different thing than it does to the social scientist.

<sup>8</sup> P means "possible", T means "testament", and N means "acting according to norms. The signal ~ means "negation" and the signal  $\wedge$  means "and".



psychologist. The important issue here, regarding the methodological question, is the fact that the jurist and the social psychologist address the social reality on the basis of specific questions – according to their specific scientific domains – that will determine the answers they will get. For both, however, the specific individuality of A and B, the content of their stream of consciousness that accompanies the way both live the lifeworld situation in which they are engaged, is not relevant. Albeit both – the jurist and the social psychologist, and the same could be said, for instance, of the economist – always face individual actions, i.e., individual tokens of a universal type of action, it’s on the basis of universal types that they address the individual tokens. The specific biographical situation of an agent is not their business as social scientists. For them, what matters is what Kaufman labelled *Gelten auf Grund* (validity stemming from a basis): the validity of a Testament that stems from the fact that it was made on the basis of certain general norms (regardless of the person who made it, or the quantity of his assets).

**4. Problems of Meaning and Relevance**

Now, language enables men to share ideas about their respective worldviews and the respective systems of relevance (and the ensuing expectations) in their everyday lifeworld existence; for its part, imagination enables men to put themselves in the place of others and see things as they are seen by the others. (“As if I were there”, so to speak.) But this means two different things: 1) I can anticipate the possibilities of action of my fellow men, since we both share, to an approximately similar degree, the same system of relevances and the same system of norms; 2) I can put myself in the place of the others even when no other human being is factually present and evaluate my own action as it would be evaluated by another man, perhaps, ideally, by all the human beings that share with me the same evaluative community. Of course, I can figure out a stream of consciousness completely different from my own and imagine my real life, the world in which it occurs and the others with which I reciprocate, as well as our accepted normative framework, as being totally different from what they really are.

Language plays an important role here. Language is always more than a process of communication of specific information, a communication that would in any way be impossible if two conditions were not taken for granted: that a minimum of effort to understand each other sense-bestowing activities is put into practice by the one who speaks and by the one who hears; at the same time, that an effort is intersubjectively carried out in order to ground a common world of understanding, based in pragmatic motives. Of course, in special cases, observation of alien behaviors may also be a means of transmission of certain normative values, like it happens frequently when someone has to live in a foreign evaluative community, but without the help of language the process of transmission would be less efficacious and more ambiguous.

The normative contexts we live in have been constituted in polythetic acts (Husserl, 1950, 293ff.); this means that the layers of meaning they possess are always a synthesis of various intentionalities. To be fully explained and understood, those polythetic acts must be retrieved in each of their phases, but of course no one needs to retrieve all these phases when acting according to a norm. Sometimes, a monothetic act – in which the content of the norm is evoked – , for instance, a sentence like “this cannot be done”, said at the appropriate moment of time, will be enough. As Husserl stated in *Ideas I*: “To every such many-rayed (polythetical) constituting of synthetical objectivities – which, according to their essence can become conscious “originaliter” only synthetically – there belongs, according to an eidetic law, the possibility of *converting what is conscious in many rays into what is conscious simpliciter in one ray*, the possibility of “making objective” in a “monothetical” act *in the specific sense* what is constituted synthetically in the first act” (Husserl, 1950, p. 294). Schutz put it nicely in the following terms: “I grasp the field monothetically by one single ray, and I find that there

is a coincidence between the actual monothetic experience and the recollection – and the monothetically recollected, previous one” (Schutz, 1996d, p. 267).<sup>9</sup>

Now, what about relevance? First, let’s make clear that we don’t live exclusively concerned with the normative correctness of our actions. While driving my car, I may be attentive to the legal maximum of speed allowed or to other basic traffic rules, but my immediate concern will be, perhaps, the amount of traffic and how it will delay or not my arrival to an appointment. Shall we say that norms are not relevant in this situation? The answer must be “yes” and “no”. Lifeworld experiences are characterized by full attention to life, not to the normative frameworks.

However, as Schutz has shown, men live in multiple realities; and they can live in more than one at the same time (partly because they overlap, partly because one can go freely from one level of reality to another). What is relevant at one level may not be relevant at another, but most of the times the systems of relevance seem compatible. The fact is that in the business of living norms are sometimes “neutralized”.<sup>10</sup> They have not become ineffective – which would mean that they have lost all relevance – , since I got the habit of acting inside the framework they establish for my behavior. They can be recalled at any moment (at least in principle) monothetically. Sometimes, in more complex situations, they must be polythetically retrieved, which of course largely depends on my stock of knowledge. However, most of the times they don’t need to be thematically present.

The Schutzian concept of “provinces of meaning” may also help us here. A province of meaning is not a set of objects with a similar ontological structure, but rather a set of objects defined by the relation they have with the subject’s experience (Schutz, 1973, p. 23). Juridical norms are a province of meaning, constituted by a certain kind of intentional acts characteristic of the community of jurists. Those norms establish the framework within which human actions are legal human actions. Now, normative predications can only describe in a typified way life situations with a possible juridical meaning. This typified way may derive from many kinds of experiences, but not in the empiricist meaning of this word; rather it is a constructive process that resorts to abstraction, generalization or formalization. Clearly, this is not the way types are constructed in the lifeworld (Schutz, 1974, p. 343). We face then two different cognitive styles: the style of the social scientist and the style of the lived experience in the lifeworld. The job of a phenomenology of the social sciences is to show how the former grounds itself in the latter (Schnettler, 2007, p. 107).

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<sup>9</sup> Schutz stresses the fact that there is a difference between this monothetical intentional ray and the phenomenon of passive synthesis. This is a rather technical issue that I will skip here.

<sup>10</sup> In a manuscript belonging to the project of an unfinished book Schutz (1996a, p. 69) speaks about the difference between “knowledge at hand” and “knowledge in hand”. Neutralization means that norms are not “in hand”.

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