

# Ought as an Is: On the Positive-Normative Distinction

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**Abstract:** It is common for those who affirm positive-normative talk to do so on the basis of a distinction between *is* and *ought*. But does distinguishing between *is* and *ought* make for an important, useful distinction? Are *ought* sentences, as a category, substantively different from *is* sentences? I don't think so. Here I suggest that: (1) it is easy to recast any *ought* sentence as an *is* sentence, and vice versa; (2) every *is* sentence can be understood as conveying tacit "oughts;" (3) every *ought* can be understood as an *is*. I invite the reader to consider whether positive-normative talk might be, for her, always and everywhere a dominated alternative, as it is for me.

**Keywords:** Positive, normative, ought, should, supposed to, God, the impartial spectator.

**JEL codes:** A11, A13

We should resent more from a sense of the propriety of resentment, from a sense that mankind expect and require it of us, than because we feel in ourselves the furies of that disagreeable passion. There is no passion, of which the human mind is capable, concerning whose justness we ought to be so doubtful, concerning whose indulgence we ought so carefully to consult our natural sense of propriety, or so diligently to consider what will be the sentiments of the cool and impartial spectator.

Adam Smith (1790: 38)

I am deeply grateful to Virgil Storr and SIEO for organizing five commentaries on my book *Knowledge and Coordination: A Liberal Interpretation*, and to the commentators, Garrett Jones, Art Carden, Deirdre McCloskey, Gene Callahan and Andreas Hoffman, and Solomon Stein, for their kind and thoughtful commentary.

The commentaries by Garrett Jones (2014), Art Carden (2014), and Deirdre McCloskey (2014) are favorable toward the book, offering little in the way of criticism. I am thankful for the time and care each took to engage the book and express what in it they found of interest. For those unacquainted with the book, the commentaries will help them to decide whether to pursue it.

Gene Callahan and Andreas Hoffman (2014) address business cycles, a topic not treated in my book, seeking to put to work in that context the distinction between the two coordinations (concatenate and mutual); again there is little in the way of criticism, and I much appreciate this engagement and fruitful development.

The essay by Solomon Stein titled “Coordination: Descriptive or Normative?” is the one that is critical. It is thoughtful, meticulous, and well written. It engages the book scrupulously; I am deeply grateful.

The positive-normative distinction is something I have wanted to write about. I asked the organizer of this symposium whether it would be okay for me to take this opportunity to write on the positive-normative distinction, and he said yes. What I offer here is a meditation that relates to Stein’s commentary only, and even there is not specific to his commentary. I hope that the authors and readers are not disappointed by my not responding to the various points of the kind and generous commentaries.

## For Me, the Positive-Normative Distinction Is a Dominated Alternative

Stein's commentary is a critique, a careful, thoughtful, stern, and fair critique. According to Stein (2014), my book faults "modern economists ... for their dishonesty or delusion in claiming to be engaged in a positive project when they are 'really' engaged in a normative one" (49). Stein says that my book is an "attempt to combine the positive and normative into a single approach" (42). He says, "intermingling between positive and normative approaches weakens, rather than improves, the quality of both" (42). He suggests that such intermingling "comes at a high cost" (53).

When a critic says, "Our author does X and X is bad," one response, however uncommon, is for the author to accept the criticism and retract doing X. It is more common for the author to object to the criticism. In objecting to the criticism, the author's defense usually takes one of two forms: either he says, "No, I do *not* do that bad thing X," or he says, "Yes, I do X, but X *isn't* bad; it's good."

My reply takes a form that is perhaps different than any of those. I object, but neither by asserting that I do not do X nor by asserting that X is good. Rather, I say that X is not a worthy formulation. My counter-attack is that Stein errs at a point that precedes, as it were, the first word of his piece. He errs in adopting the positive-normative distinction.

I do not employ the positive-normative distinction in the book. In fact, I do not talk that way ever, anywhere. For me, the positive-normative distinction is always and everywhere a dominated alternative.

Often the distinction is beaten by some other distinction. Figure 1 shows six distinctions. I remark only on the first in the list. The wording comes from Adam Smith's distinction between two kinds of rules. In the matter of moral rules, or the rules of the virtues, he says that for all the virtues except one the rules are "loose, vague, and indeterminate;" the one exception is commutative justice, the rules of which are "precise and accurate" (Smith 1790: 174-75, 327). Smith draws a parallel to the rules of writing, saying that critical or aesthetic rules of writing are loose, vague, and indeterminate, while those of grammar are precise and accurate. For our purposes, the distinction can be thought of as pertaining to the sentence or to the business of judging or assessing the sentence (that is, assessing its truth, validity, soundness, worthiness, merit). For example, if someone says, "Raising the minimum wage by \$1.65 an hour will make society better off," we might be inclined to say that the sentence is rather loose, vague, and indeterminate, because the idea of society being better off is. Or we might say that *assessing* the sentence is a business that is rather loose,

vague, and indeterminate. Perhaps this distinction (that is, between the sentence and the business of assessing the sentence) is rather empty, but I draw it here nonetheless because doing so might help show the ways to apply the first row of Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Distinctions that sometimes beat the positive-normative distinction**

1.	precise and accurate	loose, vague, and indeterminate
2.	reserved	outspoken
3.	unassuming; tactful	strident; overbearing
4.	uncontroversial	controversial
5.	conventional	unconventional
6.	centrist; establishment or status-quo oriented	socialist/progressive/libertarian/ etc. etc. (as the case may be)

It has been my experience, on encountering talk of positive-normative, that the sentences in question can be improved upon. It is not that positive-normative talk is meaningless. It is that any meaning that is worth retaining can be clarified, sharpened, by instead using one or more other distinctions, such as those in Figure 1 (which is not a complete list). Besides replacing positive-normative talk, sometimes simply deleting such talk, without replacement, is an improvement. The suggestion is that such talk is always dominated. If it is in your vocabulary, perhaps you should expunge it.

### *Is and Ought*

In the first sentence of his famous essay “The Methodology of Positive Economics,” Milton Friedman quotes John Neville Keynes distinguishing between positive and normative. The first edition of Keynes’s book *The Scope and Method of Political Economy* appeared in 1891, and it may have helped start “normative” talk (see Figure 2; by the way, “positive science” starts around 1800).

Figure 2: N-gram figure for “normative”, 1880-2008 (Eng. corpus, 1-yr smoothing)



Source: Google’s [Ngram Viewer](#)

J. Neville Keynes distinguishes “a *positive science* ... [,] a body of systematized knowledge concerning what is; a *normative or regulative science* ... [,] a body of systematized knowledge discussing criteria of what ought to be ...” (Keynes as quoted by Friedman 1953, 3). Friedman also quotes Keynes saying that confusion between the two “has been the source of many mischievous errors,” and urging the importance of “recognizing a distinct positive science of political economy.”<sup>2</sup> Friedman endorses all of this, saying: “Positive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgments. As Keynes says, it deals with ‘what is,’ not with ‘what ought to be’” (Friedman 1953: 4).

It is common for those like Keynes and Friedman who affirm positive-normative talk to do so on the basis of a distinction between *is* and *ought*. But is the distinction between *is* and *ought* an important, useful distinction? Are *is* sentences, as a category, substantively different from *ought* sentences? I don’t think so. I will suggest that: (1) it is easy to recast any *ought* sentence as an *is* sentence, and vice versa; (2) every *is* sentence can be understood as conveying tacit “oughts;” (3) every *ought* can be understood as an *is*.

## Recasting an *Ought* Sentence as an *Is* Sentence, and Vice Versa

Say X is some policy reform, and consider the sentence: “The government ought to do X.” That sentence, it seems to me, is substantively the same as, practically equivalent to, any of the following:

“The government’s doing X would increase overall social well-being.”

“The government’s doing X is desirable.”

“Reform X is good.”

“It is desirable/good that the government do X.”

There is a simpler, more universal way to recast an *ought* sentence as an *is* sentence. The *is/ought* dichotomy refers, I presume, to the main clause of a sentence. Thus, “The government ought to do X” is an *ought* sentence while “I think the government ought to do X” is an *is* sentence. By inserting “I think” at the start of any *ought* sentence you make an *is* sentence.

Also, one can recast “The government ought to do X,” as “Wisdom holds that the government ought to do X.” John Neville Keynes advises us to use the term *science* narrowly, to denote some distinct positive science of economics. He informs us: “The best recent authorities, however, at any rate in this country, use the term in the narrower sense” (1904, 35 fn 2). Is there a substantive difference between saying, “You ought to use the term *science* narrowly,” and saying, “The best authorities think you ought to use the term narrowly”? I hardly think so.

Here, by the way, Keynes was differentiating his standpoint from that of “Adam Smith and his contemporaries, as well as some modern economists,” who “mean by a science any systematic body of knowledge, whether consisting of theoretical propositions, or of practical rules of action” (ibid.).

As for recasting an *is* sentence as an *ought* sentence, we can recast “Richmond is the capital of Virginia” as “You ought to think/believe Richmond is the capital of Virginia.”

### ***Is* as Conveying Tacit “Oughts”**

Besides seeing a tacit “You ought to think/believe ...” at the start of every *is* sentence, there is another sense in which one can see tacit “oughts” in an *is* sentence. Every instance of our discourse is embedded in a situation of human purposes. In his first sentence Milton Friedman signals the purpose of avoiding “mischievous errors.” Friedman writes of “the *importance* of” recognizing a distinct positive science (*italics added*).

Importance has a ubiquity that is important here. Again, every sentence takes place in a discourse situation, embedded in human purposes. And human purposes are embedded in judgments about what are the most important things. The most important things include the questions to examine, and sometimes they are made explicit. For example, one section of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* is called, “Of the Questions which ought to be examined in a Theory of Moral Sentiments” (Smith 1790: 265). But it is folly, and out of step with Michael Polanyi and Friedrich Hayek, to think that all of the important things can be made explicit. The most important things include the most important aspects of human betterment, the most important interpretations to employ in addressing such matters, the most important problems, troubles, or

challenges, the most important formulations of a particular issue, the most important positions on the issue, the most important arguments for a position, the most important grounds or evidence for an argument, and so on. Every “most important” refers to what is most important among the whole universe of things to consider, so a judgment of what is most important, and how things stack up, relates to the judge’s wide knowledge of things. All such judgments are made in service to purposes involved in any *is* sentence.

When someone reports what the trend of joblessness *is*, he might also be saying: “We ought not focus so much on what the official *unemployment* rate is.” When someone says that black markets and reductions in quality and safety *are* consequences of drug prohibition or of rent control, he might also be saying we ought not flatten our analysis down to a simple supply-and-demand diagram. When someone says that a policy reform will tend to have certain dynamic political or policy consequences, or moral and cultural consequences, he might again be saying what things our account of important consequences ought to include.

Also, when someone formulates an *is* sentence, he is suggesting how we ought to formulate matters. When someone says that one of the benefits of raising the tax on cigarettes is that it will reduce smoking, he is also saying that we ought to think of such a consequence as a benefit.

Indeed, an *is* sentence is an affirmation of the words used in the sentence. Where Adam Smith (1776) says, “The division of labour is limited by the extent of the market” (31), he is in effect saying that you ought to embrace expressing thinking in terms of “the division of labour,” and in terms of “the extent of the market.” Where he says, “To hinder, besides, the farmer from sending his goods at all times to the best market, is evidently to sacrifice the ordinary laws of justice to an idea of public utility ...” (539), he is in effect saying that you ought to embrace expressing thinking in terms of “the ordinary laws of justice.” Where he says, “To remove a man who has committed no misdemeanour from the parish where he chuses to reside, is an evident violation of natural liberty and justice” (157), he is in effect saying that you ought to embrace expressing thinking in terms of “natural liberty.”

Where Solomon Stein says that I intermingle “positive and normative approaches,” he is in effect saying you ought to embrace expressing thinking in terms of “positive and normative”—and it is that “ought” that I here take issue with.

Where Milton Friedman says, “John Neville Keynes distinguishes ...,” he is in effect saying that in these matters you ought to regard Keynes as high authority. Every such invocation of authority in effect carries such an “ought.” Indeed, in everything an author says, he is in effect saying, “you ought to consider thinking about the matter as I do.” Every author is saying, in effect, “I

have thought carefully and scrupulously about the matter, so you ought to regard me as something of an authority on it.”

The key point, here, is that in the situation of writing or saying the sentence, there is no clear, upper-most, final framework that sets the terms and standards with which judgments of importance are then determined. I grant that, if there were two realms of human matters, two realms clearly different and separated by a bright, shining line, then some kind of distinction fitting that line, a distinction between two realms, would presumably be in order. Proponents of the positive-normative distinction typically write as though there is some such pair of realms. They speak of means versus ends (sometimes “given” ends). They speak of facts versus values (sometimes “ultimate” values). Such talk is practiced by John Neville Keynes, Milton Friedman, and Solomon Stein.<sup>3</sup> It is practiced by E. M. Zemach, who, in rejecting John Searle’s 1964 paper “How to Derive an ‘Ought’ from an ‘Is’” and related thoughts in Searle (1969), says: “What we need here is the ‘absolute’ kind of obligation, which is meaningless and void outside the game boundaries” (Zemach 1971, 62). I say we need only to sense the layers of obligation about us, and to see that, wherever we are able to talk intelligibly, such layers will be about us. Traversing layers, refocusing the conversation from one layer to next looser, vaguer, more indeterminate layer, might be very difficult. The first steps in such a refocusing often begin clumsily. Thomas Paine (1795) said: “One step above the sublime makes the ridiculous, and one step above the ridiculous makes the sublime again.” But there is no definitive ending. There is no absolute, ultimate, upper-most layer.

I do not mean to suggest that speaking of means versus ends, or facts versus values, is never useful. But to propose to organize discourse—striving to keep one sort of discourse separate or distinct from some other sort—on the basis of some such distinction is like proposing to do that on the basis of up versus down, right versus left, or beginning versus ending. All of these notions find their meaning within the discourse situation. What to me, in my apartment, is up is down to my upstairs neighbors. What is an ending here is a beginning there. What in one conversation is an end is a means (or potential means) in another conversation. What in one conversation is a value is a fact (perhaps a factual potentiality) in another conversation. It seems to me that the whole positive-normative aspiration entails a denial that we are always, continually, ineluctably contesting, exploring, correcting, modifying, and revising our judgments about what things—be they words, interpretations, formulations, interests, human experiences, issues, positions, arguments, forms of evidence, and so on—*ought* to be regarded as most important or most worthwhile. Until that great shining demarcation line in the sky is discovered and jointly beheld, we should expect to sense tacit “oughts” in every *is* sentence.



And, by the way, since we do (and should) become committed, to one degree or another, to judgments about the most important things, we necessarily have and use sentiments in doing our science. (Sentiments include both passions, which have a tendency to impel action, and emotions, which may be only passive.) For example, it has been argued that a sentiment of regret is essential to the concept of error (Klein 2012, 344). Other sentiments are essential in correcting or overcoming error. If such claims are right, and if an essential part of science is correcting error, then it is nonsensical to try to wring sentiment out of science. The passion to separate such things as science, reason, analysis, and logic from sentiment is a bad one.

### *Ought as an Is*

In spoken English, instead of using “ought to,” people will often use “supposed to.” A mother tells her toddler, “When someone gives you something, you are supposed to say ‘thank you.’” Before getting to “ought,” and then “should,” let me begin with “supposed to.”

Suppose an elderly couple have invited their son and his fiancée for dinner at home. During the day the father telephones the son, “We are out of wine. Can you pick a bottle on your way over?” The son says, “Sure, I’ll do that.” Later the young couple approach the home in their car, and the fiancée says, “Honey, weren’t we supposed to pick up a bottle of wine?” The sentence “We are supposed to pick up wine” is an *is* sentence.

Return to the mother saying to the toddler, “When someone gives you something, you are supposed to say ‘thank you.’” That too is an *is* sentence; it is looser and vaguer in its associated task of assessment: Who is supposing that the toddler will say thank you? Are we so sure that that being supposes that the toddler will say “thank you”? People know, after all, that toddlers are still learning their manners. The mother’s “supposed to” is looser, vaguer, than the fiancée’s, but both are *is* statements.

After dinner the son and his fiancée arrive back home, and he grows affectionate. “Stop,” she says, “we’re supposed to wait till after the wedding.” That is another *is* sentence, again loose and vague. If one were to ask her, “Who is supposing?,” she might say God. Sentences about what God supposes are *is* sentences. Sentences about what a fictitious character, such as Shrek, supposes, wants, does are *is* sentences. “John F. Kennedy is turning over in his grave” is an *is* sentence. And so is “America wants new leadership.”

Or, when asked, “Who is supposing?,” the fiancée might say, “I am the one supposing.” That makes sense. We understand the statement to her fiancé to be saying that some larger, more enduring, more central, more sacred part of her consciousness expects and depends on their waiting till after the wedding.

As Adam Smith might say, her “man in the breast” is supposing. Another *is* sentence.

Suppose a man named Hutcheson lends ten pounds to a man named Smith. Then we might say, “Smith owes Hutcheson ten pounds.” Suppose that Hutcheson also teaches and aids Smith. Then we might say, “Smith owes Hutcheson gratitude/esteem/love.” Beyond Hutcheson, Smith might feel that he has been taught and aided by humankind generally, and Smith might say, “I owe humankind love.” These are all *is* sentences.

Adam Smith himself says:

If I owe a man ten pounds, justice requires that I should precisely pay him ten pounds, either at the time agreed upon, or when he demands it. What I ought to perform, how much I ought to perform, when and where I ought to perform it, the whole nature and circumstances of the action prescribed, are all of them precisely fixt and determined. (Smith 1790: 175)

Here Smith goes naturally from “owe” to “ought.” That *ought* derives etymologically from *owe* is confirmed by both the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Online Etymological Dictionary*. The latter, in the *ought* entry,<sup>a</sup> says that *ought* came from the Old English word *agan*, meaning “to own, possess, owe.” Specifically, *ought* comes from its past tense, which is *abte*. In fact, in the *owe* entry,<sup>b</sup> it indicates that until the 15<sup>th</sup> century the past tense of *owe* was *oughite*, which then was replaced by *owed*, while *oughite* developed into *ought*. Further, in the *ought* entry, it says that *ought* “has been detached from *owe* since 17c., though *he aught me ten pounds* is recorded as active in East Anglian dialect from c.1825.”

I imagine the following dialog between an Interviewer and Adam Smith:

*Interviewer:* You say you ought to pay Hutcheson ten pounds. What do you mean by that?

*Smith:* I owe him ten pounds, and so I have a duty to him.

*Interviewer:* Yes. But what does it mean to say you ought meet the duty to Hutcheson?

*Smith:* Well, I owe it to myself to meet the duty to him, and so I have a duty to myself.

<sup>a</sup> Here is a [link](#) to the *ought* entry of the *Online Etymological Dictionary*.

<sup>b</sup> Here is a [link](#) to the *owe* entry of the *Online Etymological Dictionary*.

*Interviewer:* Fine. But what does it mean to say that you ought to meet the duty to yourself.

*Smith:* Well, I owe it to myself to meet *that* duty, and so I have a duty to meet that duty.

*Interviewer:* Fine! But what does it mean to say you ought to meet the duty to meeting that duty?

*Smith:* Well, we have supplied a spiral without end.

*Interviewer:* I see that. And that means we haven't gotten to the bottom of it—in fact, that we *won't get to the bottom*.

*Smith:* I should only counsel that you make yourself accustomed to that. Should it trouble you so?

*Interviewer:* Well, in my schooling, I learned that *ought* statements are different than *is* statements. I recognize that your “owe” statements are *is* statements, so I am trying to find the differences in *ought* statements.

*Smith:* I see no necessary difference between some two sets of statements so characterized. What sort of schooling is practiced where you come from?

*Interviewer:* I have attended the best universities of my times, and been taught by the best authorities. What's more, I have studied the best authorities from the time of John Neville Keynes. And they all seem to agree on this matter.

*Smith:* I see. Well. One authority of your times, McCloskey, says: “Economists do not pay enough heed to moral questions, hiding behind the sophomore philosophy of normative/positive” (1995, 553). Is not she, or any of the many authorities she shows saying much the same, one of the best?

*Interviewer:* No, she's not. The best authorities find her provocative, but disagree with her on many things.

*Smith*: And with me as well, I suspect. I may illustrate my difference from them. Where I write:

“Nature, accordingly, has endowed [man], not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of; or of being what he himself approves of in other men;” (117)

I am saying:

Each of us, such as James, is endowed with a desire of being of such character that would be approved of in a society in which people owed to themselves duties like those of which James approves.

There, I have expelled “ought” leaving only *is*, as it were. There is no important difference between the two sentences, though the first is more natural.

*Interviewer*: Hmm. Interesting. Well, I should let you go. I need to reflect on what you say. Thank you Dr. Smith.

Finally, let’s turn to *should*. I again use the *Online Etymological Dictionary*. At the *should* entry, it says: “c.1200, from Old English *sceolde*, past tense of *sceal* (see shall).” At the *shall* entry,<sup>c</sup> the first and main paragraph is as follows:

**shall (v.)** Old English *sceal*, Northumbrian *scule* “I owe/he owes, will have to, ought to, must” (infinitive *sculan*, past tense *sceolde*), a common Germanic preterite-present verb (along with *can*, *may*, *will*), from Proto-Germanic \**skal-* (cf. Old Saxon *sculan*, Old Frisian *skil*, Old Norse and Swedish *skola*, Middle Dutch *sullen*, Old High German *solan*, German *sollen*, Gothic *skulan* “to owe, be under obligation;” related via past tense form to Old English *scyld* “guilt,” German *Schuld* “guilt, debt;” also Old Norse *Skuld*, name of one of the Norns), from PIE root \**skel-* (2) “to be under an obligation.” (Online Etymological Dictionary entry for *shall*)

The immediately foregoing block quotation suggests that *should*, like *ought*, derives from words that mean “to owe.” But I want to remark on something else about the foregoing. It mentions the Swedish infinitive verb *skola*, which, by the way, is the infinitive verb for the word today of ordinary Swedish *skulle*, meaning “would” or “should.” Well, *skola*, today, is also the noun for “school”. In fact, many of the words in the foregoing are close to

<sup>c</sup> Here is a [link](#) to the *shall* entry of the *Online Etymological Dictionary*.

words for “school” in the respective language. In its *school* entry,<sup>d</sup> the *Online Etymological Dictionary* says:

**school (n.1)** “place of instruction,” Old English *scol*, from Latin *schola* ... The Latin word was widely borrowed, cf. Old French *escole*, French *école*, Spanish *escuela*, Italian *scuola*, Old High German *scuola*, German *Schule*, Swedish *skola*, Gaelic *sgiol*, Welsh *ysgol*, Russian *shkola*. (Online Etymological Dictionary entry for *school*)

Compare these old and varied origins of the noun *school* with the old and varied origins with the verb *should* (through *shall*). It seems pretty clear that they are related. Heck, to turn “schooled” into “should,” just drop the *c*, change the second *o* into an *u*, and drop the *e*. The relation might be that *should* evolved from *schooled*, or that they co-evolved from related origins.

I suggest that, besides seeing *should* as being, like *ought*, a loose, vague, and indeterminate form of “to owe,” we may see it as a loose, vague, and indeterminate form “to be schooled to” – or, more elaborately, of “to be schooled, even if only in a wide metaphorical sense, to.” One form is present perfect, as in, “have been schooled to.” Another is a future perfect, “will have been schooled to [once I explain the reasons].” Another is a conditional: “would be schooled to [if I explained the reasons].” For some *should* talk we will need to go even further. Thus, “It should be sunny tomorrow” may be read as “You would be schooled to believe that it will be sunny tomorrow if I explained why I say it will be sunny tomorrow.”

One might say that there is a narrowness to “to be schooled to” that makes what I am suggesting untenable. Nonetheless I press on with the suggestion, namely that “to be schooled to” can be thought of widely so as to permit us to read every “should” as a form of “to be schooled to.”

Smith writes: “A very young child has no self-command; but, whatever are its emotions, whether fear, or grief, or anger, it endeavours always, by the violence of its outcries, to alarm, as much as it can, the attention of its nurse, or of its parents” (1790: 145). And as long as it remains at home in the care of its “partial protectors,” the child is indulged. But venturing beyond home advances the child’s schooling:

When it is old enough to go to school, or to mix with its equals, it soon finds that they have no such indulgent partiality. It naturally wishes to gain their favour, and to avoid their hatred or contempt. Regard even to its own safety teaches it to do so; and it soon finds that it can do so in

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<sup>d</sup> Here is a [link](#) to the *school* entry of the *Online Etymological Dictionary*.

no other way than by moderating, not only its anger, but all its other passions, to the degree which its play-fellows and companions are likely to be pleased with. It thus enters into *the great school of self-command*, it studies to be more and more master of itself, and begins to exercise over its own feelings a discipline which the practice of the longest life is very seldom sufficient to bring to complete perfection. (1790: 145; italics added)

Smith is speaking of belonging to society as a form of schooling. Indeed, Smith offers a full, eloquent paragraph describing the “man of real constancy and firmness, the wise and just man.” At the heart of the paragraph Smith writes: “He has never dared to forget for one moment the judgment which the impartial spectator would pass upon his sentiments and conduct. He has never dared to suffer the man within the breast to be absent one moment from his attention. With the eyes of this great inmate he has always been accustomed to regard whatever relates to himself.” This man, he says, “has been thoroughly bred in *the great school of self-command*, in the bustle and business of the world, exposed, perhaps, to the violence and injustice of faction, and to the hardships and hazards of war” (146; italics added).

Thus, when Smith writes “should,” for example in the opening quotation of this article—“We should resent more from a sense of the propriety of resentment, from a sense that mankind expect and require it of us ...”—we may recast it: “We have been schooled to resent more from a sense of the propriety of resentment, from a sense that mankind expect and require it of us ...” Figure 3 provides samples recasting “should” as “have been schooled to.”

**Figure 3: Recasting “should” as “have been schooled to”**

You should capitalize the first word of a sentence.	You have been schooled to capitalize the first word of a sentence.
You should keep your promises.	You have been schooled to keep your promises.
You should help your neighbor.	You have been schooled to help your neighbor.
You should be honest with yourself.	You have been schooled to be honest with yourself.

All of the “schooled to” sentences are *is* sentence. They may be loose, vague, and indeterminate, they be sound or unsound, but they are *is* sentences.

## Conclusion

I have treated the positive-normative distinction in terms of the is-ought distinction. I have taken three approaches to diminishing the claim that there is a necessary or important difference between the set of *is* sentences and the set of *ought* sentences. The first approach was to suggest that it is easy to recast any *ought* sentence as an *is* sentence, and vice versa. The second approach was to argue that every *is* sentence, in fact, in the discourse situation, conveys tacit “oughts.” The third approach is that we can understand “ought” and “should” generally as a form of “owe,” and “should” also as a form of “to be schooled to,” and thus as not different in any necessary or essential way from *is*.

The diminishment of the is-ought distinction has been offered as part of a broader suggestion, namely, that, perhaps, for you, as for me, positive-normative talk is always and everywhere a dominated alternative. Such diminishment forms only a part of the case for the suggestion. A large part untreated here is the unhappy consequences of positive-normative talk. Also untreated here is explanation for commitments to positive-normative talk.

## Coda

From the standpoint offered here, proceeding from *is* to *ought* strikes one as no more troubling than proceeding from *is* to *is*. I love David Hume, perhaps too much (though, still, not as much as I love Smith). But I am dissatisfied with the famed is-ought paragraph in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume 1740: 469-470). My dissatisfaction is a mix of two feelings. The first is a feeling that the interpretation that Hume is condemning proceeding from *is* to *ought* has, alas, some grounds. The second is the feeling that the paragraph is unclear, oblique, impish, capricious, especially in light of Hume’s whole corpus. The text is treated by Alasdair C. MacIntyre, R.F. Atkinson, Antony Flew, Geoffrey Hunter, and W.D. Hudson, in essays contained in the *Hume* anthology edited by Vere C. Chappell (1966); none there introduce a consideration that ought perhaps be kept in mind whenever Hume is cited in this connection. Surely others raise it, but I take this opportunity to make it more widely known. In 1775, Hume wrote a brief Advertisement, which, after his death in 1776, was placed at the start of the 1777 volume containing the two enquiries, the dissertation on the passions, and the natural history of religion (Hume 1777). Here is the Advertisement in full:

Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called A TREATISE OF

HUMAN NATURE: A work which the Author had projected before he left College, and which he wrote and published not long after. But not finding it successful, he was sensible of his error in going to the press too early, and he cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected. Yet several writers who have honoured the Author's Philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against that juvenile work, which the author never acknowledged, and have affected to triumph in any advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it: A practice very contrary to all rules of candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices which a bigotted zeal thinks itself authorized to employ. Henceforth, the Author desires, that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles. (Hume 1777, in front matter)

I have confirmed that it is only in the *Treatise* that Hume remarks on proceeding from *is* to *ought*. Ernest C. Mossner (1954: 584) says, "Happily, few philosophers have taken the 'Advertisement' seriously; and the *Treatise of Human Nature*, so needlessly and so unsuccessfully maligned by its own author, is generally and properly regarded as his masterpiece." I do not see any great incompatibility between regarding the *Treatise* as a masterpiece and taking the Advertisement seriously. Tom Beauchamp (2000: xvi) writes, "The full set of Hume's reasons for the disavowal of *THN* may not be recoverable, but it is probably that his 'repenting' of his early work was unfeigned ..."

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The Keynes quotations, including the brackets within the first one, are here exactly as reproduced in Friedman, who, in the last one, Americanized "recognising" and dropped italics; the quotations appear in Keynes (1904: 34-35, 46).

<sup>3</sup> Such dichotomizing is pervasive in J.N. Keynes's book and Friedman's writing. As for Stein (2014), one example is when he writes of "the distinction between the descriptive and the moral project" as "two distinct levels of analysis" (48).



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