

Situating Normality: The Interrelation of Lived and Represented Normality

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In this paper, I will investigate the potential of what I term Merleau-Ponty's 'situated phenomenology' for an investigation of normality from within and from without. First, I will argue that the concept of situation in the Phenomenology of Perception demarcates Merleau-Ponty's turn from a mere epistemological to a concrete critical phenomenology. Second, I will apply Merleau-Ponty's concept of situation as being situated and as being in situation to an investigation of normality. In doing so, I endeavor to differentiate between lived and represented normality, a difference which in turn corresponds to an operative (immanent) and established (external) normativity. A situated account of normality thereby combines a phenomenological and a genealogical perspective. My aim is to provide a toolkit to investigate the intertwining of represented and lived normality, that is, of being situated and being in situation.

1. Situated Phenomenology: A critical investigation of experience

Phenomenology is known for its call to the things themselves. However popular this exclamation may be, or whether it has been interpreted in the affirmative or in the negative, it opened up a lot of space for (mis)interpretations. At first glance this imperative seems clear: doing phenomenology means to describe what appears to us, not to (rationally) analyze or (causally) explain. But, what are these things one should return to? Surely, they are not mere physical things, nor things in themselves, but rather 'things' refers to everything (transcendent or ideal) that is and can be (the) subject of/to our experiences. The main epistemological assumption beneath this is precisely that experience and, primarily, perception is the only access we have to the world, others and ourselves. Everything we know, we know from experience, all judgements (of what is immanent or transcendent, real or an illusion) or reflections, whether scientific or philosophical, are motivated and grounded in this pre-reflective experience.

In this sense, as Merleau-Ponty emphasizes in his preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, phenomenology is the formulation of a problem and a promise (2012 [1945],

Ixxi/8). The problem is how can we give a philosophically rigorous account of something pre-reflective and, therefore, of something as self-evident as our experiences of the world? The world is there prior to all analysis (Ixxiii/10), to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Husserl's insight of the lifeworld. The promise of phenomenology is thus to provide us with tools of a critical investigation of experience. And, this promise is twofold. First, phenomenology aims to describe how this world (and all its things) actually appears to us, but only within the limits in which they can appear; this is the task of a static phenomenology. Secondly, we need to ask how this self-evidence of the world is able to come about at all; this is the task of a genetic phenomenology. In this sense, a genetic investigation goes beyond a mere description of what appears to us in the present (Husserl CW VI [Hua IX], 167/286; Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], Ixxxii/19). Rather, it asks for the conditions of this self-evident and thereby *normal* experience of the world. Genetic phenomenology is thus a transcendental inquiry in the broadest sense of the term.

This comes as no surprise to Merleau-Ponty himself who explicitly prefaces his *Phenomenology of Perception* as a transcendental endeavor, summarizing its transcendental results regarding the cogito, temporality and freedom in the third part of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. However, while Husserl mostly defines the conditions of the possibility for experience in a classical Kantian way – that is, ‘within the subject’ – albeit that Husserl's transcendental subject is necessarily embodied and singular, and thus a transcendental person or life (cf. Heinämaa, Hartimo, Miettinen 2014; Luft 2005), Merleau-Ponty redefines the transcendental in a radical way. For the latter, the constitution of sense and coherent experience happens not within the subject but in-between the bodily subject and the world. “A philosophy becomes transcendental, that is radical, by considering itself as a problem,” as he would later put it (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], 64/90).

With this in mind, I seek to argue that the term *situation* is what actually defines the innovative and critical turn of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. Here, in his methodological reflections that can be found in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty raises the idea of situatedness towards a transcendental status. While this idea was operative (if not slumbering) beneath the surface of Husserl's late genetic phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty takes this insight to the heart of his phenomenology with all its consequences: namely, the condition of the possibility of experience is *being* embodied and *being* concretely situated (temporally and spatially) in a (life)world. I propose that this switch, whereby an embodied transcendental person is transformed into situatedness as an a priori condition, changes the methodological praxis and focus of phenomenology.

Firstly, it means that the *phenomenological reduction*, which is necessary to "rupture our familiarity" with the world, is also never complete (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], Ixxvii/14). Making this 'being situated' a condition for meaningful experience means that it is impossible to describe experience as a disengaged observer or to bracket *all* of one's beliefs, interest and habits when doing so. However, it is possible and, indeed, necessary for a phenomenological approach to take a step back from them and make them thematic. Therefore, while the epoché as the act of putting out of play or abstaining might not be complete, the transcendental reduction or focus on the sources and on conditions of sense and experience is still relevant.

This leads, secondly, to the attempt of a more direct *phenomenological description*, where one tries to describe the world not from above but in its "nascent state" (ibid. Ixxxv, 40/21, 64); that is, where the sense is happening and norms are born (ibid. 62/88). Here, it becomes clear that situation not merely means 'being situated' in an already established world, but also 'being-in-situation', that is, actively involved in the constitution or better 'institution' of sense (Merleau-Ponty 2010 [1955]).

Thirdly, an emphasis on situatedness means that every description of subjects and their experience of the world has to take their concrete situation into account. In this sense, the concrete *existence* (of individuals) must be put before *essence*, as the famous existentialist paradigm goes. However, this does not mean that Merleau-Ponty abandons all *eidetic phenomenology* or the search for essential and general structures of all (bodily) experience. Far from it: he emphasizes that this is needed so as to organize, to ‘know’ or to ‘conquer’ facticity, which refers to the sticky and ambivalent realm of concrete experience (ibid. Ixxviii/15). But these essences should not be the goal of a phenomenological description, but rather the means. Intentionality, for example, defined as essential for all possible consciousness or directedness to the world, can be used as a provisional model or scheme that helps one to orientate, organize, compare one’s concrete descriptions of the ‘intentionality’ of, say, throwing girls (Young 1980). Using this general structure as point of departure one can then further differentiate, complement, revise or even falsify the supposed ‘generality or necessity’ in question. The description of concrete situated subjects is thus not meant to function as mere example that grounds the possible. Instead, one must try to ground the possible in the factual (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], Ixxxi/17).

The concept of situation in Merleau-Ponty thus expresses and encompasses everything that is relevant to exist or to be-in-the-world; not only as a formal or ontological definition but in its concrete sense, which is to say how respective subjects are situated and how they take up this situation. This concept thereby consists of two aspects, which stand in a ‘hyperdialectical’ relation: *being situated* and *being in situation*. First, as embodied we are temporally and spatially located in a world; which means that we are passively thrown into a pre-given world. One’s *situation* is characterised by material and economic as well as cultural and historical conditions, which shape the everyday activities and doings of people, thereby defining the latter’s possibilities and limits. Secondly, we have to take up this situation, inhabit and position

ourselves within in. In this second sense, we are not merely in the world, but towards the world. This ‘being towards a world’ is primarily expressed through a continuous practical or operative bodily intentionality; we appropriate, shape, affirm, negate or transform our situation through our repeated actions or inter-actions with other subjects. Another expression for this dynamic process can be found in Merleau-Ponty’s definition of the body-schema (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], 100ff./127ff), which is at once the permanent embodied expression of our (past) situation (the acquired motoric skills) and constantly actualized, updated and transformed through current actions. The same holds true for the idea of the intentional arc, in which the temporal dimensions of past, present and future are synthesized within one’s current interactions with the environment (ibid. 137ff, 160/169ff, 195).

Beyond the body-schema and the intentional arc, however, being situated, including discursive and material conditions, is what concretely determines our daily performances (i.e. what we do and what we can do) and thereby shapes what we are (our character), as famously noted by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir 2011 [1949], cf. vol.2/p. II/ch.10). A similar idea of becoming as in-between determinism and freedom can be found in Judith Butler’s theory of performativity although with a focus on discursive signification: one is first signified or acted upon by a set of norms before one is able to enact those very norms (cf. Butler 1986, 2015, 63; Folkmarson Käll 2015).

In making situatedness central to his descriptive, eidetic and transcendental phenomenology, the investigation of experience becomes critical. *Critical* not only in the epistemological *transcendental* sense of a ‘critique of reason’ insofar as it defines the general possibilities and limits of our knowing, but also *critical* in the *concrete (transcendental) sense*, which centres investigations into the specific material, historical and social situations of specific subjects. In this sense, it is only consequent that a *genetic phenomenology*, which describes this being in situation from a first-person-perspective, is accompanied by a *genealogical*

investigation, which analyses in turn the historical conditions of our being situated: the specific historical, material, and social conditions that enable and limit this concrete experience, behavior and meaning. Such a genealogical critique thereby problematizes the limiting and excluding function of specific material conditions or historical orders (cf. Foucault 1994 [1966]; 1998 [1971], 1995 [1975]; Butler 1993). In doing this, it shows *that* and *the ways in which* each constitution of subjects and their experience simultaneously make specific other discourses, experiences, and modes of existence impossible.

Critical phenomenology (as defined by Weiss et al. 2019) must therefore combine both phenomenological and genealogical perspectives. It should investigate the inter-relations between experience and discourse, the (inter-)subjective and the social, the lived and the represented, and the instituting and instituted domains of sense. This task has been successfully taken up by a lot of scholars who combine phenomenology with genealogical approaches (cf. Heyes 2020, Oksala 2016, Alia Al Saji 2010). Seeing it in this way, Foucault and the phenomenologists have a common methodological and even ‘ethical’ aim, namely a critique of the certainties of our world and ourselves (cf. Heyes 2020, 15). Both phenomenology and genealogy share the imperative of being a self-critique and self-responsibility praxis, “a movement of thought that turns back, again and again, to investigate its own conditions and origins” (Oksala 2016, 71). As rigorous phenomenologists, one should thereby try to create a distance from the familiar, while staying engaged in the task of (situated) critique. In this sense, the phenomenological epoché has the same methodological aim as archeology or genealogy in Foucault (1972 [1969], 111/123; 1998 [1971]), namely, a rupture with our familiarity. Genealogy, defined as a historical detour to other times, ways of lives and normative understandings, can thereby help one to create such a distance. A distance from our *being situated, our present normality*. As situated, phenomenology reveals the contingency of normal experience (cf. Al Saji 2010, 16 n. 9).

In this sense, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of situation as being situated and being in situation provides us with a framework to understand normality. Normality in this case is not to be understood as a statistical average, but as the lived and represented self-evidence of our life-worldly situations. In the following I will develop such an account of situated normality. By doing this I endeavor to differentiate between (2.1) a lived and (2.2.) a represented normality, and to ultimately discuss their interrelation. My aim is to provide a toolkit to investigate the extent to which being situated expresses itself in the intertwinement of a bodily experienced (individual) and a represented normality (social norms).

2. Situated Normality: Normality from within and without

Phenomenological accounts of normality that refer to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, but also to Heidegger, Ludwig Binswanger or Karl Jaspers, as can be seen for instance in phenomenological psychopathology (cf. Stanghellini et al. 2019), primarily investigate normality from a first or second person perspective. In this regard, normality or abnormality is understood *from within*, which is to say that these accounts investigate how and why subjects experience the world, themselves, and others in a 'normal' (i.e. continuous and coherent) way. Such a *lived normality*, as I would like to define it with Husserlⁱ and Merleau-Pontyⁱⁱ, is characterized as concordant with regard to its contents (concordant in relation to former experience of the same individual or between different individuals) and as optimal with regard to its aims (optimal in relation to the needs, interests, projects of the individual or an intersubjective collective). If we focus on embodiment, lived normality is thereby defined as the normal or abnormal experience one has *through one's body* (and thus related to Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the body-schema).

In contrast, historical or discursive approaches investigate normality *from without*, whereby the consideration is how bodies and subjects are normalized or judged according to preexistent dominant societal norms (cf. Foucault, 1990 [1976] 1995 [1975]; Butler 1993). Such norms could be heterosexuality/binary gender norms, or the norm of being white, male, healthy, thin, young, sexy and/or able-bodied ('ableism'). Normality is hereby understood not as lived but primarily as *represented normality*. The focus lies not on the way or manner of experiencing, but on the represented content of experience that is then evaluated 'as normal'. In represented normality, one thereby perceives one's own body (i.e. the body-image) *as ab/normal* which is upheld in accordance with the respective norms or the normate. The "normate" thereby presents itself archetypical representation of the human or natural, hiding the fact that it is a historically contingent cultural construction or even mythical, for example, the myth of the "eternal feminine" (De Beauvoir 2011, 19). Represented normality, expressed as the 'normate', relies on a demarcation from deviant others; it is "outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries" (Garland-Thompson 1997, 9; Reynolds 2019, 244).

While represented normality is thus the expression of an already established external normativity to make or judge subjects (as) normal, lived normality refers to an immanent and operative normativity: 'immanent' because one experiences something as 'concordant' or 'optimal' in relation to one's former experience and one's overall needs, interests and projects, while 'operative' because these rule-like structures are not thematic as such and so for the respective experiencing subject. Such an operative normativity expressed by rule-like structures of perception or typical behavioral patterns are established through repeated individual practices or intersubjective interactions. In Merleau-Ponty's words, represented normality is normality as already instituted sense, while lived normality refers to the very constitution of this sense. This means that to understand normality as something merely represented would be

to overlook an important aspect of it, because it cannot explain how norms are established in the first place or changed in and through intersubjective practices.

However, every concrete *lived normality* is already *being situated*, which is to say that the respective subjects are embedded in an already established normative framework (and thus confronted with a represented normality) before they even take up this situation (*being in situation*). Therefore, a situated approach to normality has to take into account both perspectives: the phenomenological and the genealogical. In applying Merleau-Ponty's insight, one could summarize it by saying that normality is prior to all analysis. This is true in a transcendental way, because at least a minimal temporal and associative concordance within our appearances is the condition for the possibility of having a world (or objects) as meaningful wholes. But it is also true in a situated way, because every concrete experience is shaped by a historical and culturally specific and represented normality. That said, such a situated normality is never complete, fixed or finally instituted: we change it as we experience, describe and criticize it, indeed, while being in situation.

2.1 Normality experienced from within (lived normality)

To approach normality through a phenomenological lens is to ask why and how it is possible that the things and the world appear to us self-evidently and, therefore, as continuous, permanent, meaningful wholes. The question of normality is thus neatly tied into the question of normativity and objectivity. Normality is not just an indicator of usual or habitual behavior, but, in its most general and formal sense, a necessary criterion for every possible experience. In this respect, Husserl defines two criteria for lived normality: (1) the *concordance* of the contents of experience (Husserl Hua XIII, 364–366; Hua XV, 165; CW XI (Hua XXIII), 584f./490; Hua XXV, 83) and (2) the inherent relation of every ongoing experience to an ideal

or relative *optimum* (Husserl XIII, 379; Hua XXXVIII, 53, 55, cf. Heinämaa and Taipale 2018, 289, Steinbock 1995a). In this regard, Husserl differentiates between normality on an individual level and normality on an *intersubjective* level, which maps onto the distinction between concordance (and optimality) with respect to the course of *individual* experiences and concordance between the experiences of an individual and those of the whole intersubjective community. Thus normality, defined as that which is shared by all, is only possible when the latter criterion is fulfilled. On an individual level normality permits a coherent and familiar experience while, on an intersubjective level, normality establishes a common ground or ‘world’ as the basis for all social interaction and communication.

Normality is at the heart of what Husserl, followed then by Merleau-Ponty, terms a genetic phenomenology. Here, the constituting processes and achievements of or within subjectivity become central. Moreover, this means that the subject itself needs to be temporally and bodily situated in order to have a normal experience. Whereas, within a static phenomenology, an object is either given or not given, from a genetic point of view, one has to ask what exactly accounts for the stable and enduring appearance of this object? One reason given as to why we take this object to be ‘real’ or ‘true’ is that it unfolds itself concordantly over time in a rule-like and normal way. In this sense, normality is understood by Husserl as a form of primordial constitution (Steinbock 2018, 226)ⁱⁱⁱ or as a general condition of coherent experience. And yet, the genetic perspective also points to the necessity of every experience to be situated and embodied, and thereby concretely individualized. Only within such a genetic framework the question can arise over why and how an experience is felt as concordant or optimal with respect to the experiencing individual and its concrete inter-sensory position in the world.

Normality, as concordant and optimal experience, is therefore the felt quality or expression of an underlying normativity that is operative. The notion of such an immanent

normativity refers to the ability of living organisms to be already and internally normative themselves, that is, to react differently to different situation or even to create norms (regularities) and values (preferences) through their own activities. Immanent normativity is as such characterized by habituality: the ability to inhabit or appropriate the respective environment and to develop lasting abilities in relation to it. This happens *inter alia* through repeated interactions with the environment, with perceptions and movements, in which regular and expected sequences are implicitly generated. These sequences can in turn become habits, practices and assets.

Such an underlying operative normativity is experienced as normality in the sense of a unanimous and optimal experience that facilitates or enables orientation and familiarity, along with the individual and intersubjective interactions. However, if the underlying rules and their generated anticipations fail, one can experience an irritation, deviation, rupture or surprise in turn. Depending on whether this dis-concordance is lasting or merely temporary, it can be either re-integrated in an overall normal experience or one might have to change one's behavior and generate new norms in order to achieve a new lived normality. From a first person-perspective then, individual concordance must be taken as primary and thus cannot be equated with a represented or statistically defined normality. This is because an experienced deviation from a previously unanimous experience is partly independent from a calculated average or explicit representation of normality. That is to say, *I* can experience my body as dis-concordant with what I am used to or with previous experiences, but from the third-person perspective this 'new' experience actually corresponds to the calculated and known average of the normal body. Conversely, an experience may feel 'not normal', or we may experience our body as 'abnormal', even though the experience or our body statistically corresponds to the social mean.

To explain this point, Husserl gives the following example (which is admittedly typical for an armchair philosopher): if I touch my beloved and often touched desk with a burnt finger,

it feels different, which leads to a temporary irritation within my experience; the perceived deviation of the tactile experience through the burned finger is an example of a temporary exception to the (immanent) norm (Husserl Hua XXXIX, 640; CW IX [Hua XI], 267/215). After the finger has recovered, the object in question is experienced ‘normally’ again. However, if my body or environment changes permanently, a new norm must be established and/or the previous condition considered abnormal. For example, following an accident that causes permanent transformation or ‘handicap’ to the body, a unanimous experience must be painstakingly restored by adapting to the new body and circumstances, and gradually a ‘new’ normality is generated.

However, concordance is not a sufficient criterion for experience to be considered normal. Experience must not only be a coherent and continuous mode of experience (i.e. concordant with regard to previous content), but it is also directed towards a (relative) optimum in terms of future content. This reference to optimality allows us to precisely understand “how through experience norms are instituted and can take on a normative sense” (Steinbock 1995a, 2). Merleau-Ponty speaks of an optimal condition of a perceived object: the spatial distance and position, light and sound conditions, perspective, etc., in which the respective object can best be seen (or heard, felt, smelled, etc.). While Husserl still holds on to the epistemological ideal of an objective optimum (the most clear and differentiated ways of perceiving the world), optimal experience in Merleau-Ponty is defined practically, which is to say in terms of practical equilibrium of the organism with its environment. This means that one cannot get a maximum grip on things, but only an optimal grip in relation to one’s current situation. Merleau-Ponty thereby criticizes the empiricist and rationalist ‘view from everywhere’ for they perpetuate an unquestioned belief in the objective world (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], 7; Lajoie 2020).

With regard to concrete experience, both Merleau-Ponty and Husserl emphasize the person and action-related relativity of such optima, where the optimal perception of a building,

for instance, significantly differs for a passer-by as it does for an architect, since both associate different interests and intentions with the respective building (cf. Husserl CW IX [Hua XI], 61/23f.). The same is true if we merely observe something or want to do something with it, such as picking an apple from a tree or climbing a mountain. Here, in addition to interests, intentions and previous perceptions, the concrete physical abilities and skills of a subject also play a role. So, not only whether this apple can be picked in principle or this mountain can be climbed, but also whether it is concretely or practically possible for me to do so in my current situation of relative height and fitness. If we integrate the factor of optimality into our approach of normality it also becomes clear why a long or chronic illness or an unbearable condition can never become completely ‘normal’ (or optimal) for the experienced subject, although a certain concordance may still be established with regards to habituation, orientation and familiarity.^{iv}

While the criterion of concordance is temporally aimed at the conformity of the present with past experience, the criterion of optimality is directed at the immediate future-orientation of every perception and action. If normality were characterized by concordance alone, it would be limited to the preservation of what has already been experienced, learned and established, pure habit or tradition. This would be the case in Merleau-Ponty’s most cited case of the patient, Schneider, who, when blindfolded, is perfectly able to grasp his nose in a concrete situation (*Greifen*), but not to point to it at request (*Zeigen*). A similar problem arises when Schneider was asked to show where his doctor lives: here, again, he could not indicate the location on cue, although he had visited the place several times. Schneider can function very well in concrete situations, but is not able to carry out mere abstract movements. Schneider is conscious of his own body and of its surroundings as the mere “envelope of his habitual action but not as an objective milieu”, which is why he is only able to act habitually and not spontaneously (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], 106/133). Schneider is still situated, one could say, but has lost his ability to actively be-in situation, which implies imagining his nose or the respective house

as potential objects or aims for a possible action or future movements. He thus lacks a sense of possibility (Slatman 2020). As Merleau-Ponty puts it, the intentional arc has lost its tension; there is no temporal link between the habitual past and future-oriented movements.

Normality, for Merleau-Ponty (as for Husserl), is thus not a static state but a dynamic and fragile (almost hyper-dialectic) process that mediates between the old and the new in terms of time and content; it is one that maintains, anticipates, interrupts and renews so as to maintain concordance and optimality in the course of events. In order to make normality sustainable and future-proof, breaks in concordance might even be necessary otherwise the experience, or the experienced/ing subject, may be closed off to new things or unable to adapt to changing circumstances.

But, of course, it does not suffice to address normality as a purely individual matter. Husserl, for example, emphasizes that any normality must be an *intersubjective normality* in the full sense of the term, which is to say that my experience must also correspond to that of other subjects, and must continue to correspond to the intersubjective (cultural and social) optima. If I alone see a certain phenomenon and cannot find any witnesses for it, it can hardly be an objective reality. If only I feel myself or my body as normal, I literally stand alone. Therefore, it can be problematic when one's perception of the world radically differs from that of another's or from one's intersubjective lifeworld, whether this difference is incurred due to a sudden, temporarily change or because one is born with a bodily or sensory constitution different from that of the majority of subjects in one's lifeworld. Here, an individual concordance or even optimality may be intact, but deviate from an intersubjective concordance and, indeed, from an intersubjectively-defined optimality. While, from an individual level, the experience of a person without (clear) vision is as concordant and as stable as that of a person with 20/20 vision, it remains discordant with the average perception of a community of subjects with vision. Depending on the respective environment (i.e. matches the bodily conditions of a

blind subject) the blind subject also might have a perfectly optimal experience. However, this individual optimality might deviate from the intersubjective optimum of a predominantly visually oriented and structured society. Therefore, with regard to intersubjective optimality, one always has to ask carefully which subjects decide what counts as the objective optimal perception or adequate behavior? Optimality, again, is a relative term which cannot be defined without the context of a concrete environment, certain aims, practices, interests or values.

In short, there can be several reasons why deviations and ruptures occur within one's individual normality or between an individual normality and the respective intersubjective normality in terms of both concordance and optimality. Starting from the experiencing subject, *normalization* is continuously taking place, implying a dynamic process of generating and restoring concordance and optimization. The experiencing subject thereby tries to maintain its (old) normality to the best of its ability up to the point this is no longer possible due to changed circumstances.

In this context, it becomes apparent why immanent norms (rule-like patterns of behavior) and external (social) norms are concretely interrelated. These social norms can have an implicit impact on what and how much something irritates me, surprises me, or has the potential to interrupt the self-evidence of my experience. However, by being concretely confronted with other subjects who experience the world differently from me, I also become aware of the inherent norms or 'rules' of my normalized experience. Moreover, if I learn that my experience and my bodily constitution pertain to lasting deviations from intersubjective normality, I cannot anymore self-evidently experience through my body but become more and more aware of my 'being different' or my 'deviantbody'. Intersubjective normality can in this sense not be equated with 'represented normality' or the 'normate'. While the latter is an already instituted, sedimented, conserved and fixed normality, intersubjective normality still remains a certain dynamic, a plurality of subjects that are 'inter'-related. This means that through this

repeated interrelations also new norms or optima's can be generated and thus a more inclusive normality established, where more subjects can actually *live this intersubjective normality*.

2.2 Normalized from without: the impact of social norms

A phenomenological approach to *lived normality* can show why normality is necessary for every possible experience and the definition of objectivity, and why normality is concretely needed and even longed for by subjects. That said, it also shows that individual and intersubjective normality is a continuous attempt to achieve an equilibrium between subjects or between the subject and its environment. In this sense, normality is never a fixed state but always a provisional and fragile result, that is, a process of *becoming normal*. Normality is the result of a successful match or inhabitation or adaptations of oneself or one's situation. Merleau-Ponty, in this regards, places emphasis on the creative role of bodily habit in appropriating and taking up one's situation or, better yet, *being in situation*. Habit is thereby understood not merely a passive embodiment of structures or an internalization of norms, but also as the acquisition and institution of sense or even the 'birth' of a norm (Merleau-Ponty 2012[1945], 62/88). In the very process of acquisition, habits are individualized and hence they acquire the potential to change the same structures it embodies. Moreover, the movement, sense or skill that is acquired through this process is not absolutely bound to the conditions of its acquisition. In fact, they can be applied to different circumstances, and thereby have the potential to change and develop the underlying structures, as Merleau-Ponty shows with his examples of skills (acquisition of motoric meanings), such as like typing or playing an instrument (ibid. 143ff/177).

However, the extent of such a dynamic habit appropriation is strongly dependent on its specific situation and its structural limitations. If a situation is primarily characterized by

domination, oppression or limitation, should the body not be better conceived of as a 'prison' than an anchor or an 'I-can'? Every concrete lived normality is thus already being situated, that is, embedded in a world with already established social norms, which define what or who counts as normal or abnormal. Such a represented normality - that is an image, discourse or idea of normality - has an impact on how one can or cannot live and experience normally, that is concordant and optimal. Instead of a harmonious, orientated and familiar experience and smooth interactions with others, subjects who deviate from represented normality are then confronted with a painful mismatch, disorientation (cf. Garland-Thompson 2011, Ahmed 2006) a 'normalization' (disciplining, see Foucault 1995 [1975]), negation of exclusion. Here, a *genealogy of our being situated* is needed and by this critically point out to what extent this normality enables some subjects (or discursive aspects) and hinders or excludes others. In combining a phenomenological with such a genealogical account, we are better able to investigate how social norms not only determine (self-)perceptions and (self-)evaluations of our body as something with is either normal or abnormal, thereby constituting the body image, but also how we experience the world through our body, thereby elaborating on the body-schema (cf. Merleau-Ponty 2012, 102/129; Gallagher 2015, 234). An account of situated normality that combines phenomenology and genealogical investigations thus also attempts to render visible the practically experienced and perceptible reality of normalization, social categorization, exclusion and discrimination in everyday lived experience and, more to the point, how this is reflected in our bodies, habits and living environments.

To be able to phenomenologically examine the influence of social norms on our body, Merleau-Ponty offers a descriptive distinction related to the 'Leib-Körper' distinction of Husserl: between (a) the body-schema, as the living or operative body with its proprioception, immediate knowledge of its position as well as its habitual layer of acquired abilities and sedimented history of experience, and (b) the body-image, as the perceived, thematized or

evaluated body as object. While in the subject position, the operative body is not aware of its objectivity being instead engaged with the things of its surrounding environment, the body-image represents the object position and thus the thematic object of our experience. In the first case, social norms influence the way we move, sit, become, eat; how we implicitly focus on our surroundings and others (our specific style of perception or action). In the second case, norms have an influence on how we experience, perceive and judge ourselves, but also on how strongly we are concerned with our daily actions, how we carry them out and how they affect others.

In her well-known essay, *Throwing Like a Girl*' (1980), Iris Marion Young describes so-called feminine patterns of movement within a patriarchal society as a form of inhibited intentionality, which is expressed by a lack of use of physical strength and of space, along with an increase of attention paid to the body. Such a movement style manifests itself in the hesitant way girls (and so-called 'girlish' boys) would throw a ball. Young shows why this cannot be attributed to a different female nature or essence, as was assumed at the time, nor reduced to any purely physiological difference. Instead, it extends from the specific socio-cultural situation with its externally imposed normativity: such feminine movement style might therefore be traced to a lack of practice because risky, sporting activities are less expected and encouraged in girls or to other habitualized female norms. Social gender norms are thus literally incorporated and become part of what the individual in question is about, how he or she behaves, experiences the world and themselves.

Young emphasizes the role of this external normativity, which, depending on the time and situation, can certainly be understood as disciplining and normalizing in Foucault's sense of the term (cf. Bartky 1988). She thus argues that the body as an expression of kinaesthetic possibilities, as the Merleau-Pontian 'I-can' does not apply to everyone in the same way. However, in concrete situations of bodily experience, 'I-can' can quickly turn out to be a 'one (possibly) can' but 'I cannot'. Concretely situated bodies are always an expression of "gender,

race, class, ability, and other social and spatial privileges that some bodies enjoy more than others” (Weiss 2015, 84). In its concrete form, embodied agency is therefore always also a cultural agency and thus perceived as either (social) capital or an obstacle depending on the circumstances. After Young, female behavior shaped by a patriarchally organized situation is thus characterized by the following three features: an inhibited intentionality, an ambiguous transcendence, and a discontinuous unity. The ‘I-can’ of the body does not disappear completely but it is constantly interrupted by an excessive attention to the body as an ‘object of concern’. As Gail Weiss aptly summarizes: confronted with tasks that are actually feasible, a constant insecurity can come to gnaw at young girls, whispering to them quietly that they might not be able to complete the task successfully after all (Weiss 2015, 79).

In this example, and one could give many others, it becomes clear that social norms influence not only the way in which subjects perceive and judge themselves and their own bodies, but also the operative body, the body schema: movement styles, abilities and the immediate knowledge of their (here uncertain) position in a patriarchal, heteronormative, white supremacist, or ableist world. Social norms are thus directly incorporated (successfully or not) through repeated imitation and social practices with female connotations, which give form to experience and movement from within. Directly linked to this is an internalized image of represented normality, consisting of myths and discourses about the ideal nature of women (in contrast to that of men), according to which girls then judge their own bodies from the outside. The knowledge of an inability to align one’s body image with the (often contradictory) ideals of femininity or represented normality – understood, here, as the ‘normate’ (Reynolds 2019) – leads to a constant conscious preoccupation with one’s body as an object. The constant and critical examination of one’s own body as something in/sufficiently ‘normal’ leads in turn to a loss of the self-evidence of bodily experience and movement, which itself implies that a concordant and optimal experience (lived normality) is impossible for the subjects of concern.

In Young's example, the pattern of behavior described (i.e. throwing a ball) lacks concordance and optimality. On the one hand, it is characterized by a certain discontinuity and interruption within the movement, while the body and the environment are not optimally aligned with the respective goal, on the other. It is not the case that there is no concordance or directionality towards an optimum within this experience, but, given the situation, this can be severely limited. Critically, one could note that the goal itself (i.e. the throwing of the ball) is already shaped by external norms and ideals that are connoted as masculine (i.e. the ball should be thrown as far as possible). Phenomenologically, however, a lack of optimality on the part of the girls can be observed here, namely, the 'hindered' joy partaken in the sporting activity due to her hesitation. It could also be assumed that another aspect of gender norms (as optimum) is gaining the upper hand, one that calls on girls to control their movements and their bodies, to not stand out too much and to perhaps look as attractive as possible, while they participate in sports. Here a well-known dilemma of a represented heterosexual normality arises: should a girl throw like a girl, her throwing is judged as inferior; should a girl throw like a boy, the throwing is considered as positive, but she in turn is no longer considered to be a 'normal' girl.

Twenty years after the publication of her essay, Young notes that despite an increased participation of girls and women in sporting competitions (in the USA) as well as in positions of public and political service the phenomenon of inhibited intentionality still persists (Young 1998). The incorporation of these gender norms is not something that girls consciously think about, but something they simply do. This dynamic shows that a change of the current situation and the represented normality (as result of changed norms) takes time to actually bring about a change in the lived and embodied normality of gender. The way we are *being situated* remains within our bodies and characterizes the body-schema, even though the circumstances of the situation might have changed. Here, the ambivalence of lived normality becomes painfully obvious: lived bodily normality bears not only the possibility of instituting or changing norms

(and thereby future represented normality), but it also helps conserving old norms (the normality one is used to), even while these norms and represented normality undergo change.

Although equality may be represented as ‘normal’ in theory, we see here that this supposed ‘new normality’ is far from being achieved in practice. So, although Young's students reflect on their own gender behavior, in light of the progress in gender thinking, they will continue to demonstrate ‘old’ habits and styles of experience. These hated or cherished habits are not only part of our daily routines, but also of our corporeal identities, desires, and wishes. This is made clear through a phenomenological approach that takes into account the experience of specific subjects. Intellectually, we might be able to establish critical distance and reflect on the relativity, contextuality, and historicity of our experience. At the same time, the incorporated habits of our situatedness persist and only slowly change as we commit to doing things differently and, by *being in situation*, transform the very norms one has once inhabited.

Upon this reading, being successfully situated, which is to say that one can live normality and conform to the represented normality is both a privilege and a curse. The privilege may be apparent, but the effect tends to prevent one from ‘*being-in-situation*’ and therefore from being open and responsive to what actually happens in the here and now such that they can recognize and listen to other people, their various and differing needs, lives and perspectives. In this regard, it is only when habit fails that normality is rendered thematic. This happens when one’s acquired habits no longer work, which can be due to illness or to physical changes in and of our body, or because one’s living environment and situation has changed (e.g. moving country, culture or social milieu). Here, at the “edges of (normal) experience”, as Cressida Heyes describes them in her recent book on *Anaesthetics of Existence* (2020), the relation or tension felt between lived and represented experience, between experience and discourse, becomes apparent: imagine such situations where one’s individually lived normality temporally deviates from the effective and progressive, means-end oriented rhythms of capitalist society, such that

one literally feels like they are always ‘lagging behind’; or, radical changes to one’s situation as in the current Corona pandemic, where the “repetition of experiences abruptly breaks down” and “embodied habits and sensations are torn from everyday experience” (Heyes 2020, 44, 46). Here, my being situated no longer enables me to ‘self-evidently’ engage in my projects or to smoothly interact with others. Such a temporary or durable rupture of familiarity in times of radical change or crisis renders a former sense of normality thematic, while at the same time it might transform the subject, including how a society lives together and represents normality in the future.

3. Conclusion: situated normality and critical phenomenology

If everything is normal for us, then this state is the result of a successful inhabitation or situatedness: how we do something is optimally adapted to the respective environment and corresponds to the expectations of our fellow subjects. However, if someone exceeds the usual norms in one way or another, or remains excluded from them, the self-evidence associated with normality disappears. Many and a variety of cases arise: transgender, queer or non-hetero persons in a heterosexually organized society; recently-arrived foreigners to another country or culture; women who within a patriarchal society see themselves as objects for the gaze of the male other. Social norms can influence both the lived body (body schema) and the objectified body (body image), and determine to what extent in degree and frequency we make our body a subject of discussion.

However, in the same way that our lived normality is determined by a statistically and socially constituted representation of normality, this image of the normal body is in turn also shaped by our individual ‘I-can’: what we do (and can do) and how we take up our situation. Although every individual experience is social (and so, *being situated*), the bodily subject can

never completely coincide with the social situation in which they are embedded. As Heyes puts it, there is a “distinctive individuality that puts each of us in different relation to the situations we share—without being reducible to it” (Heyes 2020, 43). Norms and discourses shape bodily experience and thereby determine the respective experience of an ‘I-can’ or ‘I- cannot’ – that said, these norms invite their own deviation and contain possibilities of resistance. From the perspective of a situated phenomenology like that of Merleau-Ponty, individuals are not simply the products of certain historical or social situations that come to realize themselves within them, nor could they be independent of their situatedness. Situated freedom means exactly that, that we can never get rid of our past and the pre-given lifeworld to start anew, but only ever try to find a renewed relation to it. We are condemned to make sense, as Merleau-Ponty put it. We must inevitably take on the pre-given meanings and try to develop them further – in the end, we need to work with what there is. Freely adapted from Sartre: it is about what we make of what we have been made (Sartre 1952). In this regard, subjects who are not successfully situated and are therefore unable to inhabit the social situation without discomfort play a crucial role in motivating a ‘reworking’ of the norms that shape one’s situation – not only for oneself but also for others (Ahmed 2014, 152). Whoever is represented as ‘abnormal’ has the potential to hold the mirror up to ‘the normals’, as it were, and enable the latter to see and ideally question the grounds of their purported normality. This critical social reflection can go further with political demands to rework and establish a real intersubjective normality that is more optimal for all.

Situated normality seen from both sides, as lived and represented, shows that normality is not negative per se or a concept or state to be avoided, abolished or simply ignored. On the contrary, it is a necessary aspect of meaningful, shared and objective experience, and an existential need for most subjects. However, a normality that tries to conserve an old status of concordance is not a sustainable normality. Even more problematic, such a normality is not a proper intersubjective normality as it is preserved at the costs of other (groups of) subjects. In

demarcating and excluding subjects from the represented version of normality, one takes away their possibility of a lived normality. Here, a phenomenological epoché, which helps to make the self-evidence of our normality thematic, becomes relevant again, not merely because such a critique is epistemologically necessary but because it is ethically necessary. Even though such a reduction can never be complete, the involved rupture with familiarity is needed, even if the result is simply that ‘the normals’ come to experience the world from an alternative perspective and therefore begin to understand how their normality comes about and, ideally, at what and whose cost. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty (and Husserl) would agree with Helen Ngo who argues in her analysis of racist habits, that we are responsible not only for our voluntary judgements and actions, but also for our habitual experiences (Ngo 2016). Indeed, we are responsible for whether we continue to practice them in the future. Inaction represents, in this sense, a silent confirmation and a preservation of our privileged position within this system. Therefore, the imperative of a critical phenomenology in its concrete sense must be activist; as long as one is responsible for actively changing one’s habits, rejecting and rendering privileges visible, and practicing openness and empathy towards all others, which is arguably always the case.

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ⁱ Husserl’s reflections on normality as concordance and/or optimality can be found most prominently in the D-Manuscripts (Ms. D-13, IX-XIV)D13 IX (1921); and the following Husserliana volumes, translations added when available: Hua Hua XIII (364–366); XIV (Nr. 3, 16, 36, Beilage XIII, XIV, XXIX, LXV), Hua XV (Nr. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 11, 14, 27, 30, 35 Beilagen I, II, IV, VII, XIII, XXIV, XXVI, XLVII), Hua XXXVIII (204ff., Text Nr. 55/56/57/58, 637-673); Husserl 1970 [Hua VI], 143ff, 161ff., 306ff, 343ff./146ff., 163ff., 284ff, 487ff.); Husserl 1960 [Hua I], 125/154), Hua IX (128-130, 198-200, 431, 499); see also Steinbock 1995a; 1995b: 123-148; Taipale 2012; Taipale, 2014: 121-169; Heinämaa 2013; Heinämaa & Taipale 2018; Ferencz-Flatz 2018, Wehrle 2010, 2015, 2019)

ⁱⁱ Merleau-Ponty has a less explicit but more operative usage of the term normal, he defines abnormality in the negative as a formal lack of temporal integration, which is expressed in bodily subjects as a lack of engagement towards the world, lack of practical or imaginative or abstract possibilities (Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945], 83, 105ff, 306, 358/110, 133ff, 346, 400); see also Spina 2016). As in Husserl normal experience in Merleau-Ponty is defined through concordant and optimal experience, that is, from a first-person-perspective. However, he also addresses the ‘normal or abnormal subject’ from a third person perspective, that is, as identified patient, pathology or statistically ‘normal adult’.

ⁱⁱⁱ Primordial constitution refers to passive processes or synthesis in consciousness that account for the minimal coherence and meaning, which is necessary to call something an experience of something. In such a ‘passive synthesis’, the formal and temporal continuity of perception is guaranteed by the automatic integration of new sensations in the temporal horizon of consciousness. Normality on this passive-receptive level is thus characterized by the formal aspect of temporal continuity and the qualitative aspect of a typical style of associations of sensual input.

^{iv} Hereby one must carefully differentiate between a congenital and not-congenital ‘disability’ or disease. Whereas in the former, the tension between individual and intersubjective (represented) normality seems more problematic, in the latter the contrast with former bodily experience is more central (cf. Martiny 2015).