

The Normate

Joel Michael Reynolds

Phenomena appear in relation to one's approach and method. The slogan of phenomenology, "back to the things themselves (*zurück zu den Sachen selbst*)," is in part a call to unlearn and unknow, to carry out a suspension, a bracketing (*epokhē*), that brings things to awareness not as they appear by habit, custom, or caprice, but from themselves.¹ This means that insofar as one holds cognition, consciousness, perception, and awareness to be irremediably embodied, one cannot bracket the body (Merleau-Ponty 2011, Johnson 2017). Critical disability studies scholars have argued that a central and ongoing misstep in phenomenological investigations of embodiment is the privileging of a particular type of body: the *normate* body.

I begin by situating the term 'normate' within critical disability studies and the work of its coiner, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Reiner Schürmann, I argue that *the normate is the hegemonic phantasm ableism carves out of the flesh*. The concept of the normate functions as a corrective and a call: a corrective relative to the "normal science" of phenomenology and a call for phenomenologies of non-normate embodiment. The normate attunes phenomenology to the lived experiences of disability and being in an ableist world.

Ableism, Meaning, and Experience

At the outset of her seminal *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes the way in which disability functions as an "attribution of corporeal deviance" (1997, 6). She writes, "the narrative of deviance surrounding bodies considered different is paralleled by a narrative of universality surrounding bodies that correspond to notions of the ordinary or the superlative...the meanings attached to physical form and appearance constitute 'limits' for many

25 people” (7). I wish to tease out and expand upon three aspects of this passage as they relate to the
26 role of the normate in Garland-Thomson’s oeuvre. First, as a question of attribution and
27 narrative, disability is constituted by and through the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves in
28 general and our “bodyminds,” to follow Margaret Price, in particular (2015). Disability cannot be
29 understood outside of the centrality of its narrative role for the lived experience of selfhood,
30 social identity, and, in a word, our being-in-the-world (Mitchell and Snyder 2001).

31 Second, disability is a question of form, mode, and matter, all of which are cast as
32 *deviant*—not just malformed or aberrant, but a de- viation, the loss or absence of way and of
33 being. ‘Deviance’ emerges in an *épistème* charged with both economic and moral facets: being
34 wrong or lost in the world is taken to be blameworthy, and as such, it is a way of being that both
35 represents and incurs a debt. This debt, in lockstep with nearly every religious tradition, is most
36 often conceived as one borne through suffering. The ableist conflation of disability with pain,
37 suffering, and disadvantage is at the core of deviance as a description of non-normate ways of
38 being in the world (Reynolds 2017).

39 Third, disability cannot be thought outside of the triumvirate of the normal, natural, and
40 normative, to follow Gail Weiss’ apt formulation (2015). Albeit often vaguely defined and
41 problematically deployed across multiple domains of knowledge production, these terms form an
42 intricate tapestry of ideas and assumptions that underwrite common sense notions of *how things*
43 *ought to be*. That which is normal is that which is typical. That which is typical is natural,
44 regular, common, and even universal. For example, this explains in part how it could be that
45 homosexuality was medically pathologized and heterosexuality normalized until just a few
46 decades ago and how it could be that the bodies of intersex children were mutilated as a matter of
47 course in the name of “correcting” them until just a few years ago. The historically negative
48 inertia of the ‘dis-’ in disability constructs a tale of psycho-physiological lack and loss that, in a

49 perfect world, should not be. It is the fallacy and immorality of this inertia that Garland-
50 Thompson lays bare.

51 Garland-Thompson's analysis of disability thus involves three central components: self-
52 and social narratives, ontological deviance, and biopsychosocial typology. The concept of the
53 normate threads the hermeneutic needle between nature and culture by broadly defining human
54 difference in terms of a figure, an archetypal representation, of ability that serves to ground and
55 orient people's sense of self. As she puts it, the normate is:

the veiled subject position of the cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant
others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries. The term *normate*
usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as
definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way
of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of
authority and wield the power it grants them (1997, 8).

56 The normate is the tain of the mirror of ableism. It is the invisible mechanism that allows
57 slippage from being to being-able, buttressing forces from toxic individualism to social eugenics.

58 The normate thus emerges in relief against both imaginary and concrete, perceived and
59 real bodily difference. An able-bodied person talks loudly to someone in a wheelchair,
60 spontaneously conflating non-ambulation with hearing loss (Toombs 1995). A job candidate is
61 picked over another because they are perceived to be more attractive, conflating cultural ideals of
62 beauty with labor-related abilities (Siebers 2010). A majority of Supreme Court justices argue
63 states have a right to forcibly sterilize the "feeble-minded" in institutions, conflating feeble-
64 mindedness with both moral deviance and social flotsam (1927). In each case, though in
65 differing ways, the judgment in question results from a confluence of natural and socio-cultural
66 determinates—both surreptitiously linking and taking as given the categories of the normal,

67 natural, and normative. Neither found, nor created, but founded, the normate shapes how things
68 are and ought to be from *behind the scenes*.

69 Phenomenology & The Normate

70 We narrate our lives through horizons of ability. “I used to be able to hike that mountain.” “I am
71 much better at writing these days.” “I’m learning how to cope with my past.” Despite their
72 diversity in form, content, and social significance, abilities are constituted *as* abilities through
73 assumptions and fantasies concerning normality. For example, in considering myself a good
74 friend, I likely never made explicit to myself the many abilities friendship requires: patience,
75 discernment, loyalty, trust, flexibility, forgiveness, etc. I also may not have reflected upon the
76 exemplar of friendship (the ideal friend) whose character or *ēthos*, to invoke Aristotle,
77 harmoniously bears out these many abilities, acting in the right way at the right time toward the
78 right people. Yet it is all of these abilities, their complex interaction, and their melding in real or
79 imagined exemplars that carve the horizon of my lived experience of myself as a friend as well
80 as my ability to coherently narrate that experience to myself and others.

81 The normate can be understood as the *ultimate* ability-exemplar, the exemplarity of
82 which is shaped by and anchored in ableist assumptions that tell us how bodies are and should
83 be. I here define ableism as the assumption that the “normal” or “typical” body is better than the
84 abnormal body *because* it is normal. Ableism assumes the normal body to be the regulative
85 paradigm of human corporeal form and behavior. In claiming that the normate is the hegemonic
86 phantasm ableism carves out of the flesh, I am arguing that the normate is more than just a
87 paradigmatic figure of normality. Following Reiner Schürmann’s usage, a *hegemonic phantasm*
88 functions as an ontological principle in the sense of a ground and origin. “In order to constitute
89 the phenomenality of phenomena, in order to universalize them, a representational order must
90 organize itself around a principle, a phantasmic referent measuring all representations. A

91 hegemonic phantasm (*fantasme hégémonic*) so conceived not only directs us to refer everything
92 to it, but has, furthermore, an endless supply of significations, that is to say, normative measures”
93 (Schürmann 2003, 11). The normate is hegemonic in that it establishes a horizon of meaning that
94 founds and organizes experience absolutely. It is a phantasm in that it appears absolute, whilst in
95 fact being a construct, continually at risk of capitulation to the powers that be. As a hegemonic
96 phantasm, the normate offers an endless supply of normative measures against which non-
97 normate bodies will prove worth less or even worthless.

98 While it is tempting to index the ample experiences of ability, those of the “I can,” to
99 one’s particular body, the “I can” is necessarily constituted by one’s environment and the futures
100 it affords. Ability expectations are culled not just from one’s proprioceptive-kinesthetic
101 experience of one’s body, but from one’s environment and social milieu. Insofar as the normate,
102 ever furnishing normative measures, reigns over the scale, scope, and content of ability
103 expectations, it shapes everyone’s experience of embodiment. If, as Merleau-Ponty writes, the
104 “body is the power for a certain world,” then the normate orders and measures the interpretation
105 and values of one’s bodies and its powers or, more accurately, one’s flesh (2011, 109/137). The
106 flesh, for Merleau-Ponty, names the thickness of embodiment, the enfolding of one within the
107 folds of the world (1968, 136-142, 248ff). “Every relation between me and Being, even vision,
108 even speech, is...a carnal relation with the flesh of the world (*un rapport charnel, avec la chair*
109 *du monde*)” (1968, 83-84). To think through the problematic of the normate is to think through
110 how this thickness and enfolding is always already shaped by a hegemonic phantasm of able-
111 bodiedness, shaped by unjust ability expectations determining how bodies should be in the very
112 recesses of how they are. As such, the normate is constitutive of the fleshly possibilities of
113 experience.

114 To see how the concept of the normate can aid phenomenological inquiry, take the
115 example of blindness. To the phenomenologist under the sway of the normate, blindness is
116 experienced as a lack of sight. Speaking of Charles-Antoine Coypel’s studies of blind men,
117 Derrida writes, “like all blind men, they must *ad-vance*, advance or commit themselves, that is,
118 expose themselves, run through space as if running a risk...these blind men explore—and seek to
119 foresee there where they do not see, *no longer* see, or do *not yet* see” (1993, 5-6). Blindness is
120 phenomenologically revelatory in unique respects, but it is often taken to be so primarily or
121 solely in virtue of its relationship to sight—not as it is experienced in and of itself. Blindness
122 reveals “human” lived experience through absence or lack of sight. That a lack, cessation, or
123 breaking of a thing reveals its phenomenality is a commonplace in the phenomenological
124 tradition. One need only think of Heidegger’s famous discussion of the hammer in *Being and*
125 *Time*, the existential meaning of which is revealed precisely through an analysis of its break
126 down. Yet, is this what the experience of blindness in fact demonstrates?

127 Take the account of John Hull, who writes about his experiences of late-onset blindness:

128 First I believed that blindness was when you couldn’t see because something had
129 gone wrong with your eyes. Then I understood that blindness was a deprivation of
130 knowledge for which alternative sources and kinds of knowledge would
131 compensate. Gradually I came to see that blindness is a whole-body condition. It
132 is not simply that your eyes have ceased to function; your whole body undergoes
133 a profound transformation in its relationship to the world. Finally, I came to
134 believe that *blindness is a world-creating condition* (1997, xii, my italics).

135 Hull’s description moves from an understanding of blindness cast in the logic of the ableist
136 conflation—blindness as lack and suffering, as something “gone wrong”—all the way to a
137 positive, generative, and rich form of life. To experience blindness as it appears from itself, Hull

138 had to undermine the effect of the normate, had to expel the hegemonic phantasm that had
139 already figured sight-as-ability/blindness-as-disability. Only then did he experience blindness as
140 worldcreating (Reynolds 2018). For Hull, the light of the normate blinded his experience of
141 blindness. Heeding and critically interrogating the role of the normate in lived experience will
142 deepen and improve phenomenologies of embodiment of every sort.

143 Non-Normate Futures

144 Garland-Thomson’s work, in concert with thinkers across the field of critical disability
145 studies, exposes and rebuffs the exclusions and injustices that situated and continue to situate the
146 non-normate as second-class citizens or even sub-human (2011, 2017). For Garland-Thompson,
147 disability is both the limit of *and* opening to understanding ability as an ever-present vector of
148 both lived experience and also socio-political power. “The experience of my flesh (*chair*),”
149 Merleau-Ponty writes, shows that “perception does not come to birth just anywhere...it emerges
150 in the recess of a body (*le recès d’un corps*)” (1968, 9). The concept of the normate suggests that
151 even the recesses of the body can harbor prejudicial assumptions. One’s body assumes and
152 installs itself as a standard for experience in a manner obstinate to reflection, as sighted
153 assumptions about blindness so well exemplify. Insofar as phenomenological inquiry is
154 irremediably embodied, the normate is a concept without which phenomenology risks the errors
155 of ableism at every turn. By countering the toxic universality of the typical or standard body, the
156 concept of the normate is indispensable for phenomenological inquiry committed to the call to
157 behold phenomena as they appear from themselves.

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