

Penultimate draft. To appear in: *Critique in German Philosophy*, Eds. Colin McQuillan & María del Rosario Acosta, SUNY Press.

Transcendental Phenomenology as Radical Immanent Critique – Subversions and Matrices of Intelligibility¹

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Claims of neutrality, eidetic insight, and ahistoricity have squarely placed transcendental phenomenology in the camp of philosophical approaches unwilling and/or unable to engage in social critique. Take, for instance, the skepticism surrounding Husserlian methods as resources for feminist inquiry. Concerns here range from phenomenology's inability to do critical justice to the normalized and the contingent, or to the normatively complex dynamic between knowledge and power, or further still, to the radically other/different/novel/strange.² And while some sought to defend the import of Husserlian resources for feminist philosophy,³ the view remains marginal at best. Contrary to this, I argue that Husserlian phenomenology grants us powerful tools for critically investigating the historical forces shaping our present reality, doing justice not solely to their epistemic weight, but their normative weight also.

The distinctive critical dimension of Husserlian phenomenology lies in its ability to *work through* the modally productive tension between its eidetic and historical interests. This tension, seemingly crippling (see Aldea, 2017), opens a modal platform of analysis – one dealing in questions regarding conceivability, possibility, necessity, and impossibility – capable of shedding diagnostic as well as prescriptive light both on the experiences under investigation and on phenomenology's own methods of inquiry. In what follows, I will examine this method of 'modal-intentional analysis' and explicate its diagnostic (*possibility-mapping*) and prescriptive (*possibility-opening*) abilities. My goal will be to show that what makes phenomenology an

immanent, radical, subversive critique of the present – a valuable resource to all forms of social critique, including feminist inquiry – is its unique historical-eidetic and teleological approach.

I. Matters of Distance

In his 1930s work, Husserl stressed the important issue of the traditionality of theoretical thought, including philosophy, and proposed a critical stance and method able to expose the principles, long-forgotten decisions and commitments – the very grounds for our validity findings (*Geltungsfundierungen*; Hua VI, 191; cf., also 372-3)⁴ – that systemically orient our knowledge acquisition. He referred to this mode of inquiry as ‘teleological-historical reflection’ (Hua VI, xiv), hermeneutical and ever-at-work: what the ‘autonomous thinker’ (Hua VI, 72-3) must engage in. Through the reductions, we bracket the general thesis of the world, we focus on how we experience (as opposed to the reality of the objects themselves), we zero-in on the meaning-constitutive processes qualitatively distinguishing whatever noetic-noematic correlation under investigation (say imagination and its objects), and we seek to identify the necessary structures all instances of the correlation share in common (if they are to count as such); as a result, we attain a *methodological distance afforded by a shift in attitude*, whereby nothing is lost, but rather all is renewed from a different perspective. The focus of teleological-historical reflection lies elsewhere. The critical distance it grants stems from a different kind of inquiring effort.

While this historical method appears *prima facie* at odds with Husserl’s established methods, such as eidetic variation, in what follows, I will argue that only through these disparate methods’ collaboration can phenomenology succeed as radical transcendental critique – one able to tackle our orientation toward intelligibility, toward coherent articulations of meanings and possibilities in everyday experience as well as in our theoretical endeavors. This orientation is, according to

Husserl, a potent normative force that structures all our epistemic efforts (Hua VI, 115). It is precisely this orientation, along with the sedimentation of epistemic accomplishments and of normative commitments, that phenomenology as critique must engage if it is to be an ‘autonomous’ philosophical endeavor. This historical inquiry – what Husserl refers to as ‘teleological-historical reflection’ – begins, as it must, in *medias res*. It is, for Husserl, a critique of present systems of knowledge (Hua VI, 58) – namely, those pertaining to whatever noetic-noematic correlation under investigation. The method seeks to strike through the ‘crust of historical facts’ in order to shed light on the flow (*Gedankenbewegung*, Hua VI, 60) of these systems or matrices of intelligibility, on how they are articulated, on how they have come to hold the epistemic and normative sway that they do.

Such a critical effort, is, needless to say, a hermeneutical, self-transformative task: what comes to light – diagnostically and prescriptively – about *our situation* does not leave the philosopher unchanged.

In a constant critique, which always regards the total historical complex as a personal one, we are attempting to ultimately discern the historical task which we can acknowledge as the only one which is personally our own. *This we seek to discern not from the outside, from facts, as if the temporal becoming in which we ourselves have evolved were merely an external causal series. Rather, we seek to discern it from the inside.* Only in this way can we, who not only have a spiritual heritage but have become what we are thoroughly and exclusively in a historical-spiritual manner, have a task which truly our own (Crisis 70-1/Hua VI, 72; italics mine).

Like all theoretical endeavors, phenomenology, too, begins with and through our experience of the *lifeworld* – the intersubjectively, communalized correlate of all of our meaning-constituting efforts. The lifeworld itself, as Husserl shows in the *Origin of Geometry*, is permeated by theoretical accomplishments that have seeped back (streamed), sedimented. In short, the experiential evidence that phenomenology as transcendental critique works with is

layered, historically volatile, touched by many epistemic and normative commitments. The fact that as phenomenologists, we must work to analyze and explicate the intricate, historical, socio-cultural layers of this present evidence – what our experience of the lifeworld grants us – does not undermine the legitimacy of this evidence. In other words, shedding light on, contesting, and subverting the normalized layers of this evidence is a critical distancing that gradually secures and guards itself as it unfolds; thus, like the theoretical distance of the phenomenological reductions (understood as shift in attitude, not loss or exclusion!), the critical distance teleological-historical reflection secures remains very much within the purview of going ‘back to the things themselves!’ However, unlike theoretical distance *as shift in attitude*, critical distance remains at risk, precarious, given the epistemically and normatively sedimented layers of the evidence it works with and given the very traditionality of the phenomenological methods themselves, such that the investigation as a whole, in its eidetic-historical complex, if in methodological good faith, cannot but unfold *as immanent critique*.

This manner of clarifying history by inquiring back into the primal establishment of the goals which bind together the chain of future generations, insofar as these goals live on in sedimented forms yet can be reawakened again and again and, in their new vitality, be criticized; this manner of inquiring back into the ways in which surviving goals repeatedly bring with them ever new attempts to reach new goals whose unsatisfactory character again and again necessitates their clarification, their improvement, their more or less radical reshaping – this, I say, is nothing other than the philosopher’s genuine self-reflection on what they are *truly seeking*, on what is in them as a will coming *from* the will and *as* the will of their spiritual forefathers (*Crisis*, 71/Hua VI, 72-3; Husserl’s italics, translation modified).

By way of introduction into this examination of the radical and critical dimension of phenomenology, let us begin with *the conceivable*, which constitutes a rich and little explored dimension of phenomenological evidence. Its import for our purposes lies in its relationship, on the one hand, to sedimented norms and concepts and to possibility and impossibility on the other.

II. Conceivability, Inconceivability, Difference as Conflict

Our everyday lived possibilities – the possibilities we negotiate for ourselves, the possibilities we share with others – are conditioned, both in their kind and in their systemic articulation (i.e., how they relate to each other), by what we deem conceivable. The conceivable, as Husserl has shown in his synthetic-genetic work on meaning-constitution, is for the most part the correlate of passive, embodied, perceptual, and perceptual-based experiences; they shape what we deem conceivable (*denkbar*) by constantly molding, in an ever-sedimenting, receding manner, the concepts and norms that help us map our *lifeworld*, render it intelligible, make choices, and orient ourselves toward goals. What we deem conceivable depends on these concepts and norms, which play existentially and ethically heavy roles, not just epistemic ones (Hua XI, 40-51; cf., also EU, §§8-9).⁵

While our everyday experiences are primarily interested in individual objects, the habituated and historically sedimenting manners in which experiences relate to each other – what Husserl refers to as associational and memorial modifications and syntheses of likeness (Hua XI, §§26-27, 36-40; EU, 385, 395-396 – generate a well-delineated projective understanding of ourselves and of our *lifeworld*. They do so by constituting concepts understood as empirical generalities (EU, §§80, 87d), which organize entire systems of possibilities pertaining to the individual objects falling under the category the concept (or type, in the case of passively constituted generalities) seeks to capture. In short, we expect real possibilities in specific ways given our epistemic and normative backgrounds. These possibilities, ‘lived’ insofar as they are intimately intertwined with our daily lives and projects, are conceivable in the manner that they are given these very backgrounds. What we deem meaningful (intelligible), what we deem valuable and worthy of pursuit is thus necessarily part of our system of conceivable possibilities.

By generating and (re)affirming certain concepts and norms, we are continuously, in for the most part covert ways (Hua VI, 71ff.), delineating and articulating stylistically coherent systems of lived possibilities: veritable, self-reinforcing general styles (Hua VI, 28-9) exhibiting their own lively teleology (*lebendige Fortarbeit*, Hua VI, 366) (Hua VI, 103-4), which keeps us under the spell of our situation (Hua VI, 59; cf., also Aldea 2016, 2017). Our styles, both in their epistemic and in their normative aspects, help us navigate the matrices of intelligibility, possibility, and value we share with others. Therein lies, according to Husserl, their seductive character (Hua VI, 372). Since they orient us in well-delineated manners toward certain possibilities, they have more than epistemic expectational import. They inform our expectations (Hua XXIII, 548), but they also guide (Hua VI, 22-3) us when carving courses of knowledge and action for ourselves.

Both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty provided nuanced analyses of this structure of everyday, positional intentionality; they further deepened its modal facets and reach through their analyses of our ‘I can’ understood as a structural moment of all experiences. In its most basic form, my ‘I can’ pertains to embodied experiences: how I inhabit a lived space, how I negotiate the kinaesthetic possibilities it affords me, how I just ‘know’ what is possible for me (Hua IV, 139-142; cf., Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 169ff.). Beyond this basic level, however, my ‘I can’ – and, importantly, its inverse my ‘I cannot’ – refers to that which I deem, passively or actively, covertly or overtly, inconceivable for me in any experience, given any endeavor or project, in any register (cf., Al-Saji, 2014). Challenging and shedding light on what I deem conceivable and inconceivable is no easy feat, precisely because it must involve a re-articulation of my possibilities and of the possibilities I share with others.

The stylistic orientation types, concepts, and norms provide is driven by a distinctive teleology – a harmonizing, resolution-seeking, totalizing kind of teleology (cf., Aldea 2017). We see this, as Husserl shows in his synthetic-genetic analyses of the 1920s, especially in our everyday, *personalistic* attitude (Hua IV, §34), which, given its orientation toward epistemic and normative harmony, stubbornly seeks to reinscribe the unfamiliar into the familiar (Hua XI, §20). There is no active decision to do so. According to Husserl, this motivation is a structural feature of our experiences. And while this harmonizing feature pertains primarily to the everyday, non-theoretical attitude, it also marks theoretical endeavors, which are no strangers to similar harmonizing forces. In what follows, I will refer to this feature of meaning and possibility-constitution, irrespective of whether theoretically/methodologically or non-theoretically driven, as the ‘normalizing stance’ and argue that while pervasive, *this stance and its orientation are not impossible to resist*. That in fact, if phenomenology is to be a radical critique, it must expose both the normalizing tendencies of the meaning-constituting process under investigation and the normalizing forces at work in its own critical work. As such, phenomenological analysis must be at once diagnostic and subversive with respect to its subject-matter as well as self-reflective with respect to its own methods of investigation and theoretical goals. To accomplish this, I contend, phenomenology *must work through the tension between its eidetic interest* in the universal structures of meaning-constitution – i.e., its motivation toward grasping the necessary features of the *a priori* of correlation under investigation – *and its historical interest* in the epistemic and normative sedimentations and layers pertaining to the meaning-constituting process, along with its corresponding field of conceivable possibilities, together functioning as its inquiring starting point. Thus, this latter historical interest guides the former eidetic interest toward the complex articulations/matrices of intelligibility and possibility the meaning-constituting process in

question sustains in stylistically homogenous ways. *In short: seeking the transcendently necessary involves working through the historically conceivable.* The possibility of working through this tension lies in assuming a stance that resists normalization; phenomenology must work with a sense of difference – of the otherwise – that does not amount to epistemic and normative conflict to be swiftly resolved.

In the normalizing stance, the most pervasive form that conflict takes is our experience of what Husserl refers to as ‘problematic possibilities’ (Hua XI, §§5-13; EU, §79). We experience something unexpected. And we deem the unexpected – that which is out of the ordinary (*augezeichnet*) – as problematic: something to be dealt with and resolved. This could either be something that defies the immediate modal scope of our expectations (e.g., I teach in manner I have successfully and repeatedly employed before and in today’s class my pedagogical method fails me). It could also be something that radically departs even from the extended scope or horizon of our respective experiences’ conceivable possibilities (e.g., my students’ reading Butler and learning that biological sex, not just gender, could be considered a discursive/social construct without metaphysical grounding in ‘factual reality’). Our responses to these immediate or extended modal departures, which defy or fall outside of the scope of our conceivability, involve processes that seek to make sense of the interruption in our expectational flow: we experience doubt, uncertainty, vacillation, engagement of alternatives – all processes of doxic and epistemic unease (Hua XI, 83-84), all processes meant to terminate in some form of satisfactory resolution that would reinstate the stability of the familiar (EU, §67). Depending on our commitment to how things ‘ought to be’ in the given circumstances, our experience of difference may exhibit higher or lower levels of normative and ethical conflict, not just epistemic conflict.

These processes of modality modification (cf., Hua III/1, § 105; Hua XI, 30), which seek the reinstatement of epistemic and normative stability, play the all-important role of maintaining a unity of sense/unity of articulation with respect to our lives and our *lifeworld* (what I refer to as a ‘matrix of intelligibility’).⁶ They enrich our holistic understanding; they aid us in adapting and responding to our environment. As such, they necessarily exhibit some degree of modal elasticity. However, they also fuel a high degree of resistance to novelty, to that which is out of the ordinary – a resistance that marks the normalizing stance in non-theoretical and theoretical endeavors alike. These processes are behind our stubborn, at times unshakeable sense of ‘I cannot,’ especially when our normative and ethical commitments are strong, especially when the difference we experience pushes the limits of the scope of what we conceive as possible, valuable, meaningful. In such cases, we struggle to fold that which is ‘out of the ordinary’ back into our totalizing unity of sense. We experience that which is different as defying and resisting the very harmonizing forces fueling our normalizing stance. These forces are nothing other than the types, concepts, norms, and styles we constitute in sedimented, habituated ways. While in the normalizing stance, resisting these forces is all but impossible; however, this is not the only stance we are able to adopt – and this holds, once more, both in our everyday, non-theoretical life and in our theoretical endeavors. In both of these spheres, we can assume what I refer to as the imagining-critical stance.

III. The Imagining Stance: From Substantial to Modal Concepts and Norms

Unlike the normalizing stance, the imagining stance not only relates to its systems of possibilities in a qualitatively different manner; its possibilities are also of a qualitatively different kind than expected and problematic possibilities (cf., Aldea, 2016). Husserl recognized

this about the imagination and sought to analyze it through the lenses of distinctive forms of ontic and doxic freedom and neutrality. According to his analyses, imaginative possibilities are ‘pure’ and ‘open’ (Hua XXIII, 553), entirely free of the epistemic and normative bonds of our perceptual-everyday attitude (Hua XXIII, Nos. 1, 8, 15, 18-20). They are arbitrary, unmotivated, lacking teleological orientation (Hua XXIII, 535, 561-562; Hua III/1, §4). I argue elsewhere that while Husserl was right to focus on freedom and neutrality as key features of imagining consciousness, his overemphasis of the purity, arbitrariness, and lack of teleological orientation of imagining possibilities sought to grasp the structures of the imagination primarily negatively, by comparing them to those of perception; the result: he generated what I would refer to as a ‘minimal’ descriptive account of a kind of consciousness whose intentional scope is not only wider than what this binary framework can afford, but also qualitatively different and therefore not fully lending itself to this negative comparative framework (Aldea, 2016; see also Aldea & Jansen, forthcoming).

Furthermore, if we follow Husserl’s late 1930s synthetic-genetic and historical-critical methods of phenomenological analysis, we see that what marks the imagination cannot be purity understood as ‘freedom from’ our previous epistemic and normative commitments; such a purity would require not only an ambiguity and anonymity-defying self-transparency, which, as Merleau-Ponty later shows (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 403-411), is not possible for us; it would also require a neat and well-delineated separation between different dimensions of consciousness, different attitudes, difference stances. This, too, is not feasible, since our experiential attitudes – attitudes such as the personalistic, the practical, the everyday – are porous, permeable, every-morphing in light of epistemic and normative accomplishments pertaining to other attitudes, such as the naturalistic-scientific one. In the *Crisis*, Husserl referred

to this process as ‘streaming-in’ (*einströmen*; Hua VI, 112-115). Thus, the radical-critical potential of the imagination does not lie in its epistemic and normative purity and arbitrariness, in its minimally defined, negative freedom; it lies, among other things, in its stance toward novelty and difference – in how it articulates and re-articulates systems of possibilities.

Husserl was right to claim that the imagination does not exhibit the motivation and teleology pertaining to perceptual, and perceptual-founded forms of consciousness – namely, the orientation toward harmony, stability, and unity of sense. He was wrong, however, to hold that the imagination was therefore without motivation and without teleology (Hua XXIII, No.1, also Appx. 1). The imagination exhibits a distinctive kind of teleological orientation, irrespective of its domain of interest and correlate system of possibilities (e.g., the possibilities pertaining to engaging an alternative pedagogical method). Its *orientation* is toward exploration and experimentation, rather than epistemic and normative stability. Indeed, as Husserl shows, the imagination *is not necessarily* interested in harmony, finality, and the resolving of epistemic conflicts (Hua XXIII, 533-4, 581-2, 589); *but it is* interested in the productive creativity stemming from tension, from holding something in suspense, from experiencing something differently, even radically so. While in the normalizing stance, difference is a site of epistemic and normative conflict, a conflict to be swiftly resolved through an ossified ‘I can/I cannot’ distinction; the imagining stance engages difference not just ‘with more epistemic and normative tolerance,’ but also with an eye for opening new possibilities, which may very well depart from what the respective expectational and conceivable horizons dictate. As such, the imaginative stance can – and often does – involve epistemic and normative *discomfort* or *tension* (not to be confused with conflict in the sense above). But it relates to this discomfort, even passively (i.e.,

not solely in its active/willed guise), in a manner the normalizing stance never could: it grasps, whether implicitly or explicitly, this discomfort's critical and transformative potential.⁷

This is not to say that the imagination is immune to normalization. But even when normalizing habits seep into our imagining endeavors, the suspicion that things 'could be otherwise' colors our epistemic and normative commitments. In other words, the imagination is not 'all too easily seduced' by the safety-promising lures of naturalization. Its correlate systems of conceivable possibilities are *not necessarily metaphysically loaded*. Nor are they arbitrary and fluid – veritable 'free plays' as Husserl would have it (cf., Aldea 2016). The concepts and norms passively and/or actively organizing these systems of imagined possibilities are not motivated toward stability; they are not structurally bound to resist radical difference. As such, they harbor a critical potential we could tap into and develop. In short: the imagining dimension is not necessarily critical, but it does lend itself to such a stance, even a radical one.

Thus, a necessary condition for the possibility of a critical phenomenological stance is uncovering *not only what kinds of concepts, styles, norms we rely on, but also how we relate to them*. I would like to propose, building on a distinction Merleau-Ponty makes in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, namely, that in what I refer to as the 'normalizing stance,' we view the types and concepts we rely upon (e.g., identity, race, gender, sexuality) as *substantial* (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 377-378; cf., also Heinämaa, 41ff.). They are meant to capture the essential predicates and relations that all individuals falling under the class in question must exhibit. On this conceptual model, *difference* – that which falls outside of the scope the concepts/types in question cover – *is a violation of essential determinations*. To use the language of conceivability and possibility here: for the most part, in the normalizing stance, *difference is*

an inconceivable possibility that points to a metaphysical impossibility. Thus, through a commitment to the substantiality of concepts, the normalizing stance is also naturalizing.

However, a careful phenomenological investigation of how concepts, styles, and norms shape our normalizing meaning-constituting processes reveals them as *modal* rather than substantial. To reiterate: *while in the naïve normalizing stance, we deem them substantial, phenomenological investigation reveals these concepts and norms as modal.* Following this insight, *difference* is not a violation of (supposed) metaphysically necessary determinations, but *a contingent stylistic variation that could be otherwise.* This revealed plasticity of apparently inviolable concepts, styles, norms, however, also sheds light on the possibility of experiencing difference on terms *other than* conflict. Phenomenology, drawing on our ability to engage a critical imagining stance, through its diagnostic-descriptive work could thus also sustain a ‘breaking with a style’ (Hua VI, 71ff.). This not only opens otherwise inconceivable articulations of meanings and possibilities; it also grants us resources to relate to these meanings and possibilities in ways better equipped to resist the lure of the normalizing and naturalizing forces, which, if Husserl is right, are bound to infiltrate non-theoretical and theoretical endeavors alike. To see how phenomenology sheds light on the *modality* rather than *substantiality* of norms and concepts, let us return to its work as variation through the tension between its eidetic and historical interests, especially given the reliance of this work on the imagining stance.

IV. Working through the Tension: Transcendental Impossibility & Normalized

Inconceivability

The eidetic interest of phenomenology focuses on *transcendental necessity*: the structures of experience and meaning-constitution that could not be otherwise for us. So, while the historical

instantiation or expression of this transcendental necessity is contingent (cf., Husserl's *historical a priori*), many features of human experience and reality-constitution are not historically volatile. Take for example the kinaesthetic sense of 'I can' expressed through our body schema. This structure of experience is transcendently necessary and as such, it is, for Husserl, an essence. However, unlike logical or metaphysical necessity, transcendental necessity refers to what could not be otherwise for us as embodied, meaning-constituting beings oriented toward epistemic, normative, and modal articulations (i.e., articulations of possibilities). Other structures of experience exhibit transcendental necessity in a historical manner – for instance the deep structures of co-constitution binding the body, gender, and epidermal-racial schemas. Exposing the intricate ways in which these schemas affect each other sheds light on fissures where 'the otherwise' might emerge; that these schemas are co-constitutive is transcendently necessary. Whether or not their necessity is ahistorical, i.e., not subject to historical transformation, is something phenomenology can investigate.

In my view, phenomenology is uniquely positioned to ask such questions and investigate the historical volatility of certain structures of meaning and reality constitution precisely in virtue of its commitment to a robust understanding of transcendental necessity. *If we are to do justice to our experience of the otherwise, of the unexpected, of the foreign, of the radically contingent – what a diligent critique from within the very matrices it investigates requires –, we must look to the complex relationship between different kinds of possibilities* (normalized, imagining, theoretical, transcendental-ideal) *and different kinds of necessity* (transcendental ahistorical, transcendental historical, logical, historical-normalized). Unlike a study of experience focusing entirely on the contingent (what most contemporary feminist projects drawing on poststructuralist resources focus on), phenomenology can accomplish this. It is my contention

that the distinctive value of phenomenology understood as *radical transcendental critique from within* lies precisely in this modalities-mapping/modalities-opening work – a work that, if it is to succeed, must unfold through the critically productive tension between two guiding limits: *transcendental necessity* on the one hand and *normalized inconceivability* on the other. The former refers to what is structurally binding in meaning-constituting processes; it is neither metaphysical, nor epistemic, nor logical. The latter parades as *metaphysical impossibility* (one with hefty epistemic and normative implications), referring *either* to how the process under investigation constitutes its correlate *or* both to how the process under investigation constitutes its object and how empirical/scientific investigations study the process itself.

It is important to note that as far as *transcendental necessity* is concerned, its opposite is *transcendental impossibility* (i.e., what necessarily violates the structures of meaning-constitution); this may or may not overlap with *transcendental inconceivability* (i.e., what we, as phenomenologists, cannot conceive regarding the structures of meaning-constitution). Uncovering the differences and/or overlap between *transcendental impossibility* and *transcendental inconceivability* requires extensive self-reflective work on the part of the phenomenologist (as they engage in their investigations). This necessary work constitutes yet another core dimension of phenomenology as *immanent critique*, one that complements its diagnostic and prescriptive analyses of the historically and teleologically sedimented layers of evidence.

So how does the process of transcendental, historically-informed eidetic variation work? The first point I should stress is that on this understanding of the process, while the invariant remains its eidetic focal point, the process is also motivated by the historical interest in shedding light on normalized conceivable and inconceivable possibilities that parade as necessary – as that which

could not be otherwise, in whatever matrix/articulation under investigation. By generating and engaging imagining rather than normalized possibilities, the process accomplishes several things:

1) It overrides the need to deem the different/the otherwise through the lens of conflict to be swiftly resolved, resorbed back into the fold of the familiar/expected, thus *making room for heterogeneity* and a stance that resists normalization; this stance can very well spill from the phenomenological attitude into other theoretical endeavors as well as the everyday attitude.

2) It pushes the limits of normalized conceivability by challenging the supposedly inevitable ‘I cannot’ pertaining to meaning-constituting process under investigation – in other words, *it reveals the contingency of normalized inconceivability*.

3) As it maps the meaning and possibility articulations that span the gap between transcendental necessity and normalized inconceivability, *it not only attempts to zero-in on the necessary structures of meaning-constitution, but it also enriches our understanding of the intentional range the process under investigation can sustain*.

In other words, the eidetic orientation of phenomenology does not entail the closure and ossification of the modal horizon pertaining to the experience under investigation. The focus on transcendental necessity, on modally mapping how various experiences constitute distinct kinds of possibilities in the manner that they do, *does not (pre)determine which possibilities pertain to these experiences*. What phenomenology maps here, through this oft dreaded eidetic variation, are not exhaustive fields of possibilities. What it maps are the modes of possibility-constitution pertaining to experiences (visual perception, for example) and the sedimented manners in which these, for the most part covertly, unfold. The focus on transcendental necessity smokes out, so to speak, vast arrays of normalized contingencies. The reason why this process does not fall prey to a *petitio principii* fallacy lies in its ever-guarded tension between transcendental impossibility

and transcendental inconceivability – a self-reflective tension that drives the inquiring process itself. The eidetic goal of the mapping process remains in question. Yet without this eidetic orientation toward transcendental necessity, the standard of impossibility – what most normalized inconceivabilities claim yet fail to meet – would be neither binding nor high.

These accomplishments are at once diagnostically powerful, subversive, and capable of opening and re-articulating the matrices of meanings and possibilities. They have the ability to undermine otherwise ossified epistemic and normative commitments pertaining to the styles of meaning-constitution of the process under investigation. They constitute a productive/creative breaking with the established style of the respective process of meaning, value, reality constitution. To go back to the intricate co-constituting dynamic among the body/gender/epidermal-racial schemas, using this method of variation in our study of visual meaning-constitution, we can expose ways in which what otherwise presents itself as *metaphysically impossible* – beyond the reach of our lived possibilities – is actually merely inconceivable in the normalized sense, hence, surpassable and replaceable.

Varying through the tension between the eidetic and historical interests maps fields of conceivable possibilities in this diagnostic manner, yet in doing so, it also suggests ways of transforming these fields of possibilities, whether they pertain to our lifeworld or the world of our theoretical investigations. Thus, the diagnostic dimension of phenomenology as immanent critique also lends itself to robust prescriptive endeavors.

Working through the tension of its eidetic and historical interests as discussed above (i.e., maintaining the tension in the mapping process) safeguards phenomenology from binding itself to predelineated, predetermined fields of possibilities, driven by similarity rather than difference. This is a danger that feminist philosophers have deemed pervasive in phenomenological

transcendental-eidetic work (Al-Saji, 2012; Oksala, 2016). And for this reason, they have been deeply suspicious of Husserlian phenomenological tools. However, given the above explication of the eidetic process, worries about the essentializing tendencies of the process of variation or worries about the inability of the process to engage unexpected, free possibilities emerge as unfounded. If we develop Husserl's *Crisis* insight regarding the need for both the eidetic and the historical dimensions of transcendental phenomenology, if we understand the tension between these two dimensions not as entailing their mutual exclusion but as being critically productive, then we recognize not only phenomenology's ability to speak to pressing, everyday issues of socio-cultural injustice, but also its ability to generate new possibilities and venues for surpassing the apparently unavoidable circumstances of our situation, including our theoretical, traditional situation *as phenomenologists*. And while the possibilities it generates and proposes do not violate the standards of ahistorical transcendental necessity – standards such as the structure of the body schema pertaining to kinaesthetic experiences, for example –, neither are they predetermined in a manner that forecloses our openness to the unexpected; they do not even preclude challenging the ahistorical status of some transcendental necessary structures.

Transcendental necessity, while intentionally binding, need not entail ahistoricity. Thus, given its reliance on the critical imagining stance, phenomenology has a very different relation to novelty and the unexpected than any normalized non-theoretical or theoretical process. And given its self-reflective character, very much informed by its recognition of its own traditionality as a philosophical method of investigation, the risk of normalization is something it is willing and able to assume and negotiate for itself.

V. Conclusion

Through the collaboration of the methods of reductions, transcendental-eidetic variation, and teleological-historical reflection, phenomenology is able to assume the role of *critique of present systems of knowledge* (Hua VI, 72) in order to expose the conditions for the possibility of these systems' flow, their *Gedankenbewegung* (Hua VI, 60), their influence on our current situation (Hua VI, 58), which it, like all theoretical endeavors, must draw on. Phenomenology can engage this present situation (Hua VI, 73); in fact, it must. To be successful, it must treat its own situation 'genealogically,' involving a generational chain of thinkers (Hua VI, 73) committed to more or less the same principles and norms. As such, this inquiry occurs through the critical philosopher's 'knowing life' (Hua VI, 101) as it challenges the very grounds for its own validities and accomplishments. Critical 'inquiring back' into traditional commitments is self-reflective in this manner (Hua VI, 103; Hua XXIX, 373-375), leaving us 'without a ground yet not groundless.' It demands that our investigations unfold in virtue of their risks and precarious evidence.

It is tempting, if inclined to endorse the critical value of transcendental phenomenology, to deem its efforts mostly – if not solely – oriented toward the epistemic dimension of experience. By acknowledging, however, its primarily modal framework, we cannot but recognize its normative import also. Its close examinations of conceivability/inconceivability interplays would not succeed but for their focus on the intricate relations between knowledge and power. We would deem sedimentations understood as normalizing and naturalizing processes as 'solely epistemic' only in the most minimal and artificial of senses. That phenomenology is not reductionistic in this way is hopefully abundantly clear by now. Nevertheless, much remains to be said about the normative, socio-cultural, ethical, and political import of transcendental

phenomenological diagnostic and prescriptive work. For now, suffice to say, given the propaedeutic purposes of this essay, *that phenomenology as radical transcendental critique must occur from a position of historical privilege: our own living present in all of its depth and unfolding*.⁸ This is no easy feat, especially given that the impact of a tradition's primal establishments (*Urstiftungen*) becomes more 'obviously' mirrored, through its sedimenting re-establishments (*Nachstiftungen*) (Hua VI, 72-3).

This obviousness of both grounds and goals makes them all the more obscure, illusory even, to use Husserl's words (Hua VI, 50), given their epistemic and normative weight: yet it is precisely this lure as 'necessary' we can and must question, we can and must resist as we do the work of phenomenology. It is in this vein that we engage questions surrounding the historical vs. ahistorical status of certain transcendently necessary structures of meaning constitution. The resources and commitments we, as theoreticians working within a methodologically robust tradition of inquiry, rely upon in our work inform not only how we modally map the field of possibilities spanning *transcendental necessity and normalized inconceivability*; they also inform our willingness and ability to critically examine our stance toward and the relation between *transcendental impossibility and transcendental inconceivability*; this latter modal pair regards the transcendental method itself, while the former focuses primarily on the modal range of the experience under investigation. The dynamic between the two pairs likewise does not leave us unchanged. Thus, what matters here for our critical purposes, is not solely the transformative potential of phenomenology as far as its object of investigation is concerned – for example, the co-constitutive relations among the racial/gender/sexual schemas. What matters is also its self-transformative potential, which further deepens its ability to function as *radical, subversive critique from within*.

Husserl saw the import of ‘self-variation’ in the context of his transcendental-eidetic method (Hua I, 105-6). In our phenomenological endeavors, the most radical form of critical stance we could assume necessarily involves ‘self-variation’ – that is, ‘imagining myself as if I were otherwise,’ to use Husserl’s words (ibid.). In this active orientation toward self-transformation, what comes to light is not solely what we, as theoreticians, have come to deem conceivable, knowable, worthy of pursuit, but also the guiding concepts and norms we rely upon *in the manner that we do*. The grounds fueling our projects and endeavors become the focus of our inquiring exercise. At the heart of this call to self-transformation lies the lesson of the imagining-critical stance, the lesson of opening to experiencing difference, of risking the comforts of our I cannot/normalized inconceivability in a manner other than conflict, for whom instability, ambiguities, tensions, incomprehensibilities, the unexpected – what phenomenology is bound to delve into according to Husserl (Hua VI, 185) – do not pose threats and dangers to our projects, but creatively enhance them instead.

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¹ I would like to thank Amy Allen, Alia Al-Saji, and David Carr for feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

² See, for instance, J. Scott (1991), F. Dastur (2000), A. Al-Saji (2012), J. Oksala (2016)

³ Cf., L. Fisher (2000a-b), S. Heinämaa (2003), A. Al-Saji (2010). Most feminist approaches open to drawing on phenomenological resources, for the most part turn to Merleau-Ponty; the reason for this remains, largely, the perceived danger of essentialism stemming from Husserl's transcendental-eidetic approach. I argue elsewhere (Aldea in Aldea & Jansen (ed.), forthcoming) that this perceived danger, while indeed non-negligible were it the case, stems from a misunderstanding of the eidetic character and import of transcendental-phenomenological investigations.

⁴ I will refer to Husserliana volumes as 'Hua' throughout

⁵ Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, EU hereafter

⁶ This orientation toward homogeneity and harmony also marks the scientific/naturalistic attitude, not just the everyday/personalistic stance.

⁷ In his extensive work on the imagination, his 1904/05 lecture and onward (Hua XXIII, No.1), Husserl emphatically stresses the self-consciousness of the imagination (*Phantasie*): when imagining, even when immersed in the world of irreality, we do not lose the consciousness of difference between reality and irreality (if we were to lose this sense of difference, the experience in question would be/become a hallucination). I would add in the context of this discussion of critical imagination that the imagination exhibits a consciousness of difference – however vague – between the normalized/the familiar and the otherwise/unfamiliar.

⁸ For a rich discussion of what our experience of history entails, esp. in its relation to memory and communalization, see Carr 2014. Carr argues convincingly that historicity is a feature of transcendental consciousness itself (cf., p.162 *et passim*). For more on the relation between historical reflection and memory, see also Hua XXIX, No.30.