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**THE NORMATE: ON DISABILITY,
CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY,
AND MERLEAU-PONTY'S CÉZANNE**

Regarding the painter Cézanne, one could have said that he pursued his motive. The mountain he paints is not the cause of his picture [ist nicht die Ursache seines Gemäldes]. Rather, what he saw determined the way and manner of his action of his procedure in painting [Sondern das Gesehene als solches bestimmt die Art und Weise des Handlehns, seines Vorgehens beim Malen].

– Martin Heidegger¹

I'm inviting us to think about what diagnosis does, because this system not only describes those of us deemed defective, deficient, or disordered in a million different ways but also helps shape how the world treats us.

– Eli Clare²

Still today, Merleau-Ponty's essay "Cézanne's Doubt" marks one of the more important interpretations of Cézanne's oeuvre.³ The problematic presented at the outset charts a course between the life of Cézanne the person vs. that of Cézanne the painter. "Painting was his world and his mode of existence," Merleau-Ponty writes, "and still he had moments of doubt about this vocation. As he grew old, he wondered whether the novelty of his painting might not come from trouble with his eyes, whether his whole life had not been based upon an accident of his body"⁴ (69). As the essay proceeds, Merleau-Ponty lists a number of psychological and physiological diagnoses Cézanne might have had. He deploys Cézanne's own doubts about himself as well as the doubts of his appreciators concerning the relationship between painterly abilities and normality/abnormality – which is to say, between the meaning of ability and disability and the judgments we deliver upon artists and works of art in the light of such *sens*. Merleau-Ponty does this in a manner that turns the inquiry back upon oneself, for after beginning with, "Was Cézanne normal?", the essay opens onto the far more intimate, "Am I normal"?

Although "Cézanne's Doubt" isn't intended to be phenomenological, the line of questioning it explores is as much about lived experience as it is about art, art history, and aesthetics.⁵ In this paper, I argue that the essay can be read – perhaps should be read – as an investigation into one of the more

fundamental issues for phenomenological methodology: the relationship between normality and the normate.⁶ I first defend this phenomenological and disability-centric or *crip* reading of the essay. I then contend that insofar as one takes oneself to be “normal” and insofar as doing so underwrites phenomenological inquiry, the problematic of the normate, not just that of normality, is central to phenomenology – whether transcendental, generative, hermeneutic, or otherwise in approach, though especially with respect to critical phenomenology.⁷

A proviso is in order. There is large body of phenomenological research investigating the concept of normality.⁸ Even if one were to limit oneself to, say, Husserl scholarship, one will find that many have noted how his analysis of the “I can” is integral to the formation of social and cultural normativity.⁹ Furthermore, multiple sophisticated phenomenological accounts of normality have been developed that enrich or go beyond Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Schütz, and other dominant figures in the tradition, and these accounts have done so both with respect to normality’s role relative to putatively “regional” and differential experiences, such as illness or gender, and also for existence as a whole. My aim in this paper, however, is distinct in multiple ways from such scholarship. I take up the question of normality in light of disability history and more specifically the work of disability activists since the 1950s and ‘60s and disability studies’ scholars since the late 1970s and ‘80s. This is my hermeneutic lodestar. It is ultimately in light of such practice, theory, and praxis that I will argue for the import of distinguishing between the role of normality and that of the normate. Put simply, what follows will not be a straightforward reading of Merleau-Ponty, but instead a *crip* reading, a reading that foregrounds the lived experiences of disabled people and the large body of work spanning the humanities and social sciences built upon such experience. Thus, what follows is a very different sort of conversation than past analyses of “Cézanne’s Doubt”, and one that calls such readings into doubt in more than one way.¹⁰

Experiencing Cézanne’s Doubt

Merleau-Ponty discusses Cézanne’s “ill-health”, “temper”, and “depression” (69), going so far as to describe him as “basically anxious”, suffering from a “morbid constitution” and “schizothymia” (70). Which of these and whether one, all, or none are in the end determinate for Merleau-Ponty is hard to decide because of the moments he refuses the meaning of each: “all of these would then only represent a flight from the human world, the alienation of his humanity”, an alienation Merleau-Ponty decidedly rejects (70). As one works through the essay, the question of Cézanne’s embodiment, of what one should or should not make of his ability/disability state, continually appears and reappears. Shortly after the apex of each

moment valorizing the way in which the meaning of Cézanne's work exceeds any facts concerning his body and shortly after assailing the reductionism of so-called "conditions", the patho-biographical returns, turning the tide of interpretation back.

At one juncture Merleau-Ponty explicitly claims that "the meaning of his [Cézanne's] work *cannot* be determined from his life (*déterminé par sa vie*)" (69, my emphasis). At another: "although it is certain that a man's life does not explain his work, it is equally certain that the two are connected (*communiquent*)" (71). So, the conditions of life are determinate, but not determining? They commune, connect, communicate...but to what specific effect for the purposes of this inquiry? At yet another moment, Merleau-Ponty writes, "thus, the 'hereditary traits,' the 'influences' – the accidents in Cézanne's life – are the text which nature and history gave him to decipher. They give *only the literal sense (le sens littéral)* of his work" (81, my emphasis). Taken out of the context of the flow of the essay, it is tempting to interpret Merleau-Ponty as contradicting himself or at least vacillating between opposing poles of emphasis, between freedom and determinism relative to how one finds oneself – ever embodied and interrelated – in the world.

I find, to the contrary, that one can only understand such claims in the context of the temporality of the *act* of reading the essay, an essay the ultimate aim of which is to enact Cézanne's own doubt (and others' doubt about him) in the reader.¹¹ This doubt is the hermeneutic vehicle for Merleau-Ponty's ultimate point: that Cézanne's art harbors one of its unique powers *in causing doubt*. It engenders the viewer's doubt concerning *their* ability to see, to interpret in the confident light of judging oneself as conditioned in ways that render one not merely "normal", but a *normate*.

Consider the following passage:

If the givens for Cézanne which we have been enumerating, and *which we spoke of as pressing conditions (conditions pressantes)*, were to figure in the web of projects which he was, they could have done so only by proposing themselves to him as what he had to live, and *by leaving the way of living it indeterminate*. An imposed theme at the start, they become, when placed back in the existence which embraces them, only the monogram and the emblem of a life which freely interprets itself. But let us really understand this freedom. Let us not imagine some abstract force which would superimpose its effects on life's 'givens' or would insert breaches in life's development. It is certain that life does not *explain* the work; but it is equally certain that they communicate. The truth is that *that work to be done required that life (cette œuvre à faire exigeait cette vie)*...There is a relationship between Cézanne's schizoid temperament and his work because the work reveals a metaphysical sense of the illness (schizothymia as the reduction of the world to the totality of frozen appearances and the suspension of expressive values). *The illness then stops being an absurd fact and destiny in order to become a general possibility of human existence (une possibilité générale de l'existence humaine) when the illness confronts consistently one of its paradoxes – the phenomenon of expression*" (81, my emphases).

There is a lot to unpack in this dense passage, but I want to begin by focusing upon what Merleau-Ponty calls “pressing conditions.” Is the living-out of schizothymia or abnormal eyesight merely and simply open in the exact same way as a life without them? How would they become so and in what ways are they a general possibility? What, more precisely, are the ways in which such conditions condition experience?

There are differences between a condition that presents itself as determinate, yet normal (such as the inevitability of certain passing illnesses, from common colds to a flu) and one that presents itself as determinate and abnormal (such as acquiring a mobility-based impairment in one’s late twenties, whether due to an accident or genes, whether due to being hit by a bus or having certain allelic variations express themselves in a particular manner). And even in the case of the latter, the new forms of normality a person might discover can still be held as *abnormal* in the light of an ableist mythic norm that takes itself to simply be *how humans ought to function* – for example, ambulation as upright and on two legs, ocular sight, auditory hearing, etc.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty famously discusses the body as a work of art. “The body is to be compared, not to a physical object, but rather to a work of art. In a picture or a piece of music the idea is incommunicable by means other than the display of colours and sounds. Any analysis of Cézanne’s work, if I have not seen his pictures, leaves me with a choice between several possible Cézannes, and it is the sight of the pictures which provides me with the only existing Cézanne, and therein the analyses find their full meaning.”¹² Placing this quote in conversation with the essay (it is worth noting that both texts were published in the same year) leads one to the following question: how can a work of art express itself if its conditions are judged to be outside the realm of the proper (*le propre*), judged as the product of someone “ill” mentally and/or physically? Could one imagine a great work of art that critics nevertheless admit has been made *because someone couldn’t see or think clearly*? Which is to say, as they should see and think? To place this point in finer relief, could one imagine a great work of art that critics nevertheless admit has been made from *damaged, lacking* materials? What would such a claim about an artwork mean?

To answer this, one must, I think, distinguish between normality and the normate. The concept of normality, albeit under different terms and methodological frameworks, has been investigated since the beginning of the phenomenological tradition. Although there is significant discussion over the precise meaning and scope of the term, I gloss “normality” as a concept that picks out regularities of experience either in general or relative to some domain X and with respect to some specified set of conditions. For example, what is “normal” relative to the lived experience of one in ancient Greece will, relative to at least a few domains, be distinct for one living in Greece today given differing conditions both general and particular.¹³ Having said this, one can distinguish between *lived or existential* and *represented or genealogical* normality.¹⁴ “Lived normality” refers to an act,

process, or state of being that is experienced either as concordant, “going-with-the-flow”, and at-home-like or as instead optimal, as going beyond concordance to an ideal or near-ideal fit relative to some set of specific actions or intentions of the individual. “Represented normality”, on the other hand, refers to an act, process, or other aspect of experience that is judged as “normal”, as fitting with some socially salient standard for a given set of actions or intentions.¹⁵

The normate is distinct from both lived/existential and also represented/genealogical normality. The normate is a product of and functions through *mythic* norms.¹⁶ What’s more, the normate educes an overriding *ought*. Historically, the function of normality in phenomenology does not necessarily provide an ought; to be sure, while represented normality produces norms in the narrow sense of evaluation and judgment relative to some sort of standard, the normative bind or weight it carries might be trivial or vary relative to the role of the normate at play. As Garland-Thomson defines 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.”¹⁷ There is, by definition, not merely an evaluative aspect to the concept of the normate, but one which has significant social *force*.

For example and at the risk of oversimplification, there is a substantive difference, phenomenological and otherwise, between “this is how I usually feel” and “this is how I ought to feel.” For example, one might typically feel attraction to various partners such that one identifies as heterosexual. A situation or two arises where one is instead attracted to people of the same gender. This will certainly be experienced as “abnormal” in the sense of being out of the ordinary relative to the prior lived experiences of sexual attraction one has had. It also, depending upon one’s historical context, might be experienced as abnormal insofar as the dominant social representations of desire and sexual attraction at play in one’s larger socio-political context are constituted through a given episteme that holds heterosexuality to be default.

But such lived and/or represented abnormality is distinct from experiencing such desire or attraction as abnormal in the sense of the imperative: “I *ought* not feel this way.” And, more specifically, “I ought not to feel this way because this is not how *I should be*.” The latter recognition is a product of a mythic norm of sexuality, namely, a heterosexual one in which attraction is only to occur relative to certain sorts of people and that other forms of attraction are *wrong*, are something which *must-be-fixed*. Put summarily, one can discern and demarcate norms of experience – at the levels of both lived experience and representation – without thereby generating or applying an ought and mythically so in the sense of “how things are and must be.”

The concept of the “normate” thus picks out the way that mythic norms – such as those constitutive of and resulting from heterosexism, cissexism, racism, ableism, and classism, et al. – can play a role in phenomenological inquiry even when one is explicitly attempting (through “bracketing the natural attitude” or whatever version of the *epoche* one prefers) to set them to the side and even when one is attending to questions of lived and represented normality.¹⁸ To get a better sense of the distinction between normality and the normate, consider a different example: limb-lengthening surgery.¹⁹ In a given socio-cultural context, one can pick out certain height ranges as affording experiences of concordance and optimality. For example, I am five feet, ten inches (one hundred and seventy-eight centimeters) tall, and I, living in the USA in 2022, experience my height as “normal” in the sense of allowing me to move very easily through the world (lived normality) and as being within the range people judge as typical height (represented normality). If, however, I walk around the court of an NBA game or mingle with horserace jockeys, the “normality” at play in both senses will become conspicuous.

But, as the latter two contrasts make clear, my experience of being five feet, ten inches as normal is relative not just to experiential, social, and/or cultural factors, but also to the ideal of height operating in the background as a compulsory, existentially overriding ideal, as a *mythic norm*, that generates an ought and a desire that feels and appears as if from oneself. In fifth grade, I was shorter than nearly every other boy in my class by at least four inches. My height was, point of fact, not *that* far from statistically “normal” for my age – it just was noticeably shorter relative to my classmates. I was bullied constantly and became extremely insecure (my parents actually pulled me from the school I had attended since pre-K mid-year because of how poorly the teachers dealt with the bullying and because of the daily effect it was having on me). What I was up against was not merely the feeling of being-“abnormal”-height, but against an ideal where the height of “boys” was taken to mean much more: a sign of masculinity, desirability, and maturity, among a host of other things. Experientially, height became a synecdoche for being a valued, “full” person, a definitive human being. I was up against a mythic norm which equates “normal” to “tall” height with *how one ought to be as a person*. I didn’t feel as though I was being treated as of abnormal height, but instead as an abnormal person.

What’s more, I fully internalized this – it seemed as if the “I ought to be different” came not from without, not from mythic norms or any senses of normality, but from the depths of my soul, from the very desires and hopes that defined me. Unlike others who have found themselves in a similar situation, my parents and I never ended up discussing limb-lengthening surgeries because during my freshman year in high school, I had a significant growth spurt – so significant in fact that from the next year or so forward I never heard the word “short” again (I still heard other insults, but that involves different stories).

The argument I am defending here goes further than the particular examples of sexuality or height: the normate, the mythic norm of able-bodiedness, is at play for everyone with respect to multiple domains of lived experience. In short, there is an *mythic norm underwriting the “normal subject” of experience* that goes deeper and further than lived or represented normality. Insofar as this is so, it presents a problem that confronts every phenomenologist and phenomenological methodology more generally.

Who’s “I Can”?

The primary question so far has been whether or not one’s inquiry and work can be judged as one would judge any other *if* one is disabled or impaired in some way. I’ve suggested that Merleau-Ponty’s essay on Cézanne offers a potent route to explore this question not simply with respect to artistic production, but also phenomenological inquiry. Can one carry out the epoché – or carry out whatever methodological procedure(s) one finds necessary to move from description to reconstruction²⁰ – if one takes oneself to be *disabled*? The answer to this question, it will turn out, depends heavily on what precisely one means by “disability”: disability as opposed to impairment? Disability in the sense of “abnormality” or “atypicality”? Disability as “non-normate”?²¹

Consider the basic distinction between medical and social models of disability. On the former, Cézanne’s work is great *despite* his disabilities. Cézanne’s work may be great as a result of the uniqueness of his embodiment, but on a medical model, it is great only insofar as this uniqueness leads to, expresses, or otherwise results in something universal. He sees (and paints) as “only a human being can do” (*comme seul un homme sait le faire*) can see (and paint) *despite* being disabled.²² This is one way to read Merleau-Ponty’s claim about the “general possibility of human existence.” On a social model, however, Cézanne’s work is neither a mere product of his disabilities, nor separate from them, but is *shaped* by them. Shaped not merely in the sense that they shape his bodymind but shaped also in the sense that he invariably learned to navigate and live in a world not made for, and often actively hostile to, those with “abnormal” bodyminds such as his.²³ On social models, disability shapes one’s life not merely through difference, but also through the constant disturbances of ableism, disturbances which function not merely via reference to lived or represented normality, but also to the normate as a persistent, compulsory mythic norm.²⁴

Consider an example from the film *Sound of Metal* that focuses upon the question of disability with respect to a primary sensory-modality.²⁵ The protagonist, Ruben, played by Riz Ahmed, is a drummer for a duo metal band, the lead of singer of which is his partner. From the opening scene, it becomes clear that he is in the process of losing his hearing and quickly. The film chronicles Ruben’s difficulty, as inflected by drug recovery, in moving from a

hearing to non-hearing state as a product of not simply intrinsic “loss”, but also his refusal to *accept Deaf culture*.

Given the analysis provided so far in this paper, it is uncontroversial to state that Ruben experiences a profound sense of lived and represented abnormality thanks to the comparative loss of a sense-modality through which he has not simply always experienced his life and core interpersonal relations up to that point, but through which he finds his primary purpose and one of the greater joys of his life, namely, experiencing and playing music through dominantly auditory processes. But what this film displays so powerfully is that issues of abnormality, whether lived or represented, are not his most fundamental existential plight. It is instead his resistance to giving up the *mythic norm* of able-bodied hearing – a specific modulation of the normate – as the only way to hear music, the only way to play music, and the only way to make and listen to music (all such things are possible, in their own ways, if deaf). That is to say, the problem is his resistance to give up the idea that one must be part of the hearing world, as opposed to the signing world, in order for life to go well and, more specifically, for one to engage in and enjoy music. That he could live a great, rich, and music-filled life through Deaf culture is demonstrated to him through his engagements with Deaf people, but he actively fights against that path, preferring to cling to a past that robs him of the very thing he thinks he cannot let go: his ability “to hear.”²⁶ He chooses instead to engage in surgery to get cochlear implants, and he does so both naively and defiantly – acting contrary to a host of evidence presented to him, thinking this will “return” his previous hearing abilities to him. What this decision does, instead, is alienate him both from his Deaf community and also from the hearing world and from each in multiple ways. Why would he do this? Why make this decision? The power of the normate for how people conceive of and interpret their lived experience holds the answer.

Returning to the animating question of this paper: if Cézanne’s art is not the result of “I cans” and “I dos” of one who fits the mythic norm of the normate, but instead that of an “abnormal”, “disabled” painter, then the very *actions*, *possibilities*, and *beliefs* at stake in the meaning of his works are thrown into question. Is he a great painter? Or a painter whose work is a *result* of disability? If Cezanne had approached things as the character of Ruben did, *mutatis mutandis vis-à-vis* the normalizing interventions in question, he would have altered his body to a more “normal” state – even if that might have resulted in a future where we don’t talk about his work. The normality doubt cuts to the very heart of what it means to take oneself *to be able*, full stop. Note, however, that the distinction makes no sense except insofar as it relies upon the normate. For what is truly at stake in the debates over the meaning of Cézanne’s disability is not whether or not he is normal at the level of lived experience or representation, but whether or not he is seen as partaking in *ideals*, the mythic norms, of able-bodiedness, norms against which it seems we cannot but judge things like “great art.”

Disability Exceptionalism

There is one level at which I am making a large claim about the relationship between action, possibility, belief, and the task as well as method of phenomenological inquiry. There is another level at which I am making a very simple and obvious claim about how the question of normality/ abnormality impacts a life. Narratives focused upon people with disabilities who display exceptional prowess at a socially valued activity abound: Steven Hawking, Temple Grandin, Stevie Wonder...the list goes on and on. Call the question whether one is really or truly normal – and the presumption that insofar as one isn't, one cannot see or fill-in-the-blank “as a human does” – *the normality doubt*. This doubt is one side of a Janus coin, the other face of which is *disability exceptionalism*. If one assumes what Elizabeth Barnes calls a “bad-difference view” of disability, then it is a small step to the idea that whatever laudable action or activity one does is carried out *despite* one's disability.²⁷ In this sense, disability categorically *excepts* one from the normate. It is only a bit further of a step to start thinking that nearly *anything* a disabled person does is laudable, even if entirely “normal.” Disability studies scholars and disability rights activists have pointed to this habit of thought for decades and describe it as *inspiration porn*. Inspiration porn refers to tropes whose logic is based upon taking joy, inspiration, or a similarly uplifting emotion from reports of a disabled person engaging in some activity. Whether it be a person with Down syndrome going to prom, a double amputee rock climbing, or an Autistic person finding love, inspiration porn is a widespread narrative framework underwriting the function of the normate for thought, action, and praxis.

Following the footsteps of numerous disability studies scholars and activists, Cary Wolfe demonstrates how pushing the logic of inspiration porn to its end in fact deconstructs it. After citing a passage from Temple Grandin's *Thinking in Pictures* where she describes the process of redesigning an extremely cruel system used for the kosher slaughter of cattle in relationship to her unique position as an Autistic person, he writes,

Disability becomes the positive, indeed enabling, condition for a powerful experience by Grandin that crosses the lines not only of species difference but also of the organic and inorganic, the biological and mechanical. In a kind of dramatization of the category meltdowns identified canonically in Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto,' disability here positively makes a mess of the conceptual and ontological coordinates that Grandin's rendering of the passage surely reinstates rhetorically on another level.²⁸

Treating disability as an exception to how people fundamentally are creates a categorical chasm in how we value what people do. If you do X and are considered able-bodied, there is one evaluative scale. If you do X (the very same X) and are considered disabled, there is another scale. Yet, that second scale functions in very strange manners. At times, doing the same thing an

able-bodied person can do elicits praise; at other times, it evokes pity; at other times, it is taken as a superpower.²⁹

The thread that ties together the logics of the normality doubt, inspiration porn, and disability exceptionalism is ableism. By ‘ableism,’ I mean the definition articulated by Talila A. Lewis:

A system of assigning value to people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normalcy, productivity, desirability, intelligence, excellence, and fitness. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism. This systemic oppression leads to people and society determining people’s value based on their culture, age, language, appearance, religion, birth or living place, “health/wellness”, and/or their ability to satisfactorily re/produce, “excel” and “behave.” You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.³⁰

By conceiving of *doubt* about oneself and others in this way, it becomes clear that judgments concerning one’s *abilities* – whether tied to painterly skills, running a race, going to Prom, feeding oneself, or what have you – are never neutral. They always involve not just norms, by mythic norms. And, thereby, they always involve aspirations, desires, and expectations. To say that Cézanne’s painterly brilliance was a result of his disabilities is to excise him from the standard social judgments in the privileged circles of the able-bodied at the very same time that it is to shore up the confidence of able-bodied people: “you couldn’t have done this if you tried – for you aren’t disabled.”³¹

In that light, then, does Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Cézanne ‘s Doubt” trade in inspiration porn? That is a question that no scholar, to my knowledge, has taken seriously. My argument here does not answer that question because I read the essay as a performance, and I take the propositional and affective contents that result from that performance to be as much a question of the audience as I do of its orchestrator. Having said that, since its publication, a large body of research concerning disability has emerged that allows the modern reader to see the many ways in which Merleau-Ponty’s analysis lacks certain concepts and frameworks. It is not just the concept of ableism that is lacking. It is also that of the normate.

After I gave a paper on the problem of ableism at a conference dedicated to a famous figure in the phenomenological tradition, a well-respected scholar shot his hand up in the air. “But, surely, I’d rather have both of my hands than lose one of them”, he exclaimed. My explanation of the problem of ableism that day had focused on a very particular feature: the conceptual linkage of disability with pain, suffering, disadvantage, and loss.³² In short, my argument turned on that all-too-human move from lived and represented normality to the normate, from “how I experience/represent things” to “how I should/would like to be.” And this person’s response unwittingly demonstrated my point: the idea that something that would be automatically and necessarily bad (relative to this person’s current ways of being-in-the-world, viz., in this case, as two-handed) was not animated by a careful phenomenological consideration of the relationship between normality and the normate. If it had been, this person would have realized that

while the loss of a hand (which will likely be traumatic in various ways no matter the circumstances) will surely make for a difficult ability transition and disrupt both lived and represented normality, both phenomenological and also social scientific evidence suggests that one will find new normals (though those new normals might be oft interrupted by living in a world designed for the two-handed). But one will not find such new normals if one imagines oneself as *necessarily two-handed*, as constitutively lacking if one-handed, which is all to say, if one imagines oneself vis-à-vis the normate.³³

Indeed, that research, whatever one takes from its insights, cannot make one stop *wishing* for two hands, cannot make one stop imagining two hands as what one should have, as desirable, and as what marks being from lack. That is to say, this person's response cannot merely be explained by a lack of understanding of lived or represented normality, but also must be explained as a result of thinking and judging in terms of the normate.

On the Normate and Phenomenology

Reading "Cézanne's Doubt" is a process of vacillating between doubting and being certain of Cézanne as a great painter. It is a process one *undergoes through the act of reading* the essay, through accepting and rejecting, back and forth, the pathologico-symptomological diagnostics of modern medicine about his embodiment as conferring a fundamental lack – or "super-ability" – in the form of a fate. It is a dance between reading Cézanne's work as symptom *or* as symbol.

We simply do not know how Cézanne would today be psychologically or physiologically diagnosed and also – and more importantly – how he might or might not describe his own experiences with the tools of contemporary medical and phenomenological discourse. Yes, Merleau-Ponty states that Cézanne "was able to look at nature as only a human being can", but the journey of the essay does not support that claim except as a moment in a reflexive, self-doubting dialectic. On the contrary, the essay asks us to think about "nature" and "human being" through doubting whether or not Cézanne's "I can" and "I do" was normal, was simply not like "the rest of us." It asks us to participate in the *μῦθος* of the normate. And, as I have argued, that is a doubt that more often than not arises through problematic ableist assumptions about oneself, one's relationship to society, and of society itself. Lived and represented normality does not deliver the verdict that, e.g., depression (assuming schizothymia is a form of it) might keep one from being judged and valued as a painter among painters; lived and represented normality does not deliver the verdict that significantly lacking 20/20 vision might keep one from being counted as a painter among painters. On the contrary, the normate delivers such verdicts.

While I argued that Merleau-Ponty inventively performs his thesis through the act of reading "Cezanne's Doubt", I also argued that his account deemphasizes the ways in which the normate determines the normative binds at play in lived

experience. On my reading, the essay should leave one wondering, genuinely I think, whether one can understand Cézanne's work without one oneself having undergone radical self-doubt about the meaning of ability and the role of the normate. "It is true both that the life of an author can teach us nothing and that – if we know how to read it – we can find everything in it, since it opens onto the artwork."³⁴ How are we to read Cézanne's life in light of what we know from disability studies? What would it mean to understand Cézanne as looking "at nature as only a human being can" relative to how disability experiences opens up and opens onto art? Would it mean one must disabuse oneself of the force of the normate?

Among other things, I think it would require one to fully *put to rest one's doubt* that his genius might have been precipitated by an "abnormality" in the medical model's sense of the term. It would mean accepting that it is not just the weight of normality that can get in the way of experiencing and judging things as they appear to one, but also the desire to participate in the figure of the normate. "It is certain that life does not *explain* the work; but it is equally certain that they communicate. The truth is that *that work to be done required that life (cette œuvre à faire exigeait cette vie)*." If that work to be done required that life, then one can neither think the work, nor the life, outside of the norms shaping life's forms and expressions.

Perhaps Cézanne's doubt – heard in both the subjective and objective genitive – is a doubt of what it is to have an ability in the first place. It is a questioning of the meaning of ability. Cézanne's "greatness", then, turns neither on humanistic universality, nor medical pathology, but on the extent to which his singularity and the singularity of his work both *particularizes* and *collectivizes* each to whom it speaks.³⁵

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NOTES:

- 1 Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols, Conversations, Letters*, ed. Medard Boss (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 209; Martin Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare: Protokolle, Gespräche, Briefe Herausgegeben von Medard Boss* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1987), 262.
- 2 Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 42.
- 3 Susannah Rutherglen writes, "'Cezanne's Doubt,' the essay of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, is the philosophical wellspring of Cézanne interpretation, the first and most penetrating study of the deep perceptual significance of the artist's paintings. Art historians today regularly speak of Cézanne in terms that Merleau-Ponty first made explicit: the primordial quality of the artist's vision, his attempt to get to the core truths of perceptual experience, his quest for the 'lived perspective' which precedes the traditions and systems of academic painting. The essay, along

- with Merleau-Ponty's later work on Cézanne's phenomenology, 'Eye and Mind,' has figured in almost every subsequent account we have of the artist and it has served also as a concise illustration of the tenets of Merleau-Ponty's own philosophy, as a persuasive instance of his arguments about the nature of human visual experience." Susannah Rutherglen, "Merleau-Ponty's Doubt: Cézanne And The Problem Of Artistic Biography," *Word & Image* 20, no. 3 (2004): 219–27, <https://doi.org/10/gf9f8c>. With regards to earlier scholarship, see footnote 3 of Theodore A. Toadvine Jr., "The Art Of Doubting: Merleau-Ponty And Cezanne," *Philosophy Today* 41, no. 4 (1997): 545–53, <https://doi.org/10/f2pn97>.
- 4 "Cézanne's Doubt" in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 69–84. References to this essay will appear in text hereafter. "Le doute de Cézanne" was first published in *Fontaine: Revue mensuelle de la poésie et des lettres françaises* 6 (1945): 80–100 and then reprinted in *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).
 - 5 An anonymous reviewer wondered why I seem in this essay to read "Cézanne's Doubt" in isolation from Merleau-Ponty's overall thought and especially from his other writings in aesthetics. Two responses. First, I do not find my claims to ultimately turn upon their relationship to Merleau-Ponty's overall work on aesthetics (or, even, necessarily, his oeuvre). Second, my aims are modest with respect to Merleau-Ponty but less so with respect to phenomenology: I hope to develop a crisp reading of this specific essay in light of what it portends for phenomenological methodology writ large, namely, vis-à-vis the role of the normate.
 - 6 I will discuss the concept of the normate in detail below, but for an initial set of references, see Joel Michael Reynolds, "Normate", in *50 Concepts for an Intersectional Phenomenology*, ed. Ann Murphy, Gayle Salamon, and Gail Weiss (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability In American Culture And Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
 - 7 On the contested meaning of "critical phenomenology", see Gail Weiss, Gayle Salamon, and Ann V. Murphy, *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Northwestern University Press, 2019); Lisa Guenther, "Six Senses of Critique for Critical Phenomenology", *Journal of Critical Phenomenology* 4, no. 2 (2021): 5–23.
 - 8 See, e.g., Anthony J. Steinbock, "Phenomenological Concepts of Normality and Abnormality", *Man and World* 28, no. 3 (1995): 241–60, <https://doi.org/10/dw5442>; Anthony J. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995); Sara Heinämaa, "Transcendental Intersubjectivity and Normality: Constitution by Mortals", in *The Phenomenology of Embodied Subjectivity*, ed. Dermot Moran and Rasmus Thybo Jensen (New York: Springer, 2013), 83–103, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-01616-0_5; Joonas Taipale, "Twofold Normality: Husserl and the Normative Relevance of Primordial Constitution", *Husserl Studies* 28 (2012): 49–60; Heinämaa & Taipale, "Normality" in Anthony Fernandez and et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Phenomenological Psychopathology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Bernhard Waldenfels, *Order in the Twilight* (Ohio University Press, 1996); Bernhard Waldenfels, "Normalité et Normativité.: Entre Phénoménologie et Structuralisme", *Revue De Métaphysique Et De Morale* 45 (2005), <https://doi.org/10/cgn5nb>; Julia Jansen and Maren Wehrle, "The Normal Body: Female Bodies in Changing Contexts of Normalization and Optimization", 2018, 37–55, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72353-2_3; Maren Wehrle, "Normality and Normativity in Experience", in *Normativity in Perception: New Directions in Philosophy and Cognitive Science*, ed. Maxime Doyon and Thiemo Breyer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 128–39, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137377920_8; Maren Wehrle, "'There Is a Crack in Everything' – Fragile Normality: Husserl's Account of Normality Re-Visited", *Phainomenon* 28 (2018): 49–75; Gail Weiss, "The Normal, The Natural, And The Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy To Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, And Disability Studies", *Continental Philosophy Review* 48, no. 1 (2015): 77–93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-015-9377-7>.

- doi.org/10/gf9f8p; Gail Weiss, “De-Naturalizing the Natural Attitude: A Husserlian Legacy to Social Phenomenology”, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 47, no. 1 (2016): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691624-12341302>; Gail Weiss, “The ‘Normal Abnormalities’ of Disability and Aging: Merleau-Ponty and Behaviour”, in *Feminist Phenomenology Futures*, ed. Helen Fielding and Dorothea Olkowski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 203–17.
- 9 Cf. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*; Steinbock, “Phenomenological Concepts of Normality and Abnormality”; Waldenfels, “Normalité et Normativité”; Waldenfels, *Order in the Twilight*; Wehrle, “‘There Is a Crack in Everything’ – Fragile Normality: Husserl’s Account of Normality Re-Visited”; Dan Zahavi, “Husserl’s Intersubjective Transformation of Transcendental Philosophy”, *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 27, no. 3 (1996): 228–45, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071773.1996.11007165>, esp. 239ff.
 - 10 Thanks specifically to Lisa Guenther for wisely suggesting that I make this methodological point clear. In terms of past readings, consider one author who confidently argues that that Cézanne “had repeated bouts of depression” and “revealed his depressed mood in a number of canvases.” Terry A. Rustin, “Using Artwork To Understand The Experience Of Mental Illness: Mainstream Artists And Outsider Artists”, *GMS Psycho-Social Medicine* 5, no. 7 (08 2008). Partially due to the aims at hand, I will not follow those who distinguish between disease and illness, such as Havi Carel. See Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016). Chapter 4 of that text has an insightful discussion of the role of bodily doubt in illness. She writes, “Bodily doubt is not just a disruption of belief, but a disturbance on a bodily level. It is a disruption of one’s most fundamental sense of being in the world” (92). Although I agree, my discussion here is meant to highlight how such doubt is shaped by assumptions about normality and, in a word, ableism.
 - 11 In this respect, I read this essay of Merleau-Ponty’s by following an interpretive thread he himself lays out: “if a work is successful, it has the strange power of being self-teaching” (79).
 - 12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2011), 174; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de La Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 152.
 - 13 Experiences in which normality play a role are distinct from more general structures – for example, what Heidegger terms “being-towards-death” is presumably no different (with respect to its role as an existential structure) for Aristotle than it is for me, for both of us have the sort of being of Dasein.
 - 14 I am thankful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this distinction and prodding me to better articulate the difference between normality and the normate more generally.
 - 15 Lived and represented normality could be part of the same experience, assuming one thinks it possible for a reflective judgment about the character of one’s action to be part of the flow of carrying out/undergoing that action. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s use of the concept of “misfitting” involves – at minimum – both represented and lived normality. I think it also involves the normate, but I do not have space to give a careful reading of her on that point here. See Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept”, *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 591–609, <https://doi.org/10/ctsfpw>.
 - 16 Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984). I thank Shiloh Whitney for suggesting this term of Lorde’s to describe the primary function – the essence, even – of the normate. For a while, I spoke of “imagination” and although I still think that captures some aspects of what’s at play in the normate, that concept raises all sorts of thorny problems, not least of which about what precisely constitutes the imagination and/or the imaginative, problems that distract from the argument I am developing here. In “Normate”, I deployed the concept of “hegemonic phantasm” from Reiner Schürmann.

- Cf. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly, Studies in Continental Thought (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003). I still think that is the most accurate descriptor; yet, most aren't familiar with his work, and it is formidable to sufficiently get into. I could have instead turned to Castoriadis' notion of the "social imaginary", but that would have created its own issues. With Shiloh, I think Lorde's phrasing is, all things considered, the best hermeneutic path. Cf. Reynolds, "Normate".
- 17 Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8.
- 18 See Christine Wieseler, "Challenging Conceptions of the 'Normal' Subject in Phenomenology", in *Race as Phenomena: Between Phenomenology and Philosophy of Race* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 69–85.
- 19 Erik Parens, *Surgically Shaping Children* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2008); Erik Parens, *Shaping Our Selves: On Technology, Flourishing, and a Habit of Thinking* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 20 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems Of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, Studies In Phenomenology And Existential Philosophy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).
- 21 An earlier version of this paper involved a long reading of sections of Husserl's *Ideas II* that aimed to demonstrate how recognizing the role of the normate troubles his discussions of the "I can". In short, my argument is that one can't imagine/represent oneself into a different body schema (no matter how skilled at eidetic variation). The section was in part motivated by the following comment from an anonymous reviewer: "Husserl assumes that in principle everyone can neutralize/abstract/vary from their actual experience or abilities, and intuit merely logical possibilities that refer to possible human embodiment or consciousness. The method of eidetic variation should enable everyone (normal or not) to free themselves from their actual conditions of perception and to take the object/experience as mere example for a variation. This, then, should lead to general and basic invariants that can no longer be varied and that are valid for all (actual and possible) objects of this kind or experiences of this kind (e.g., perception). However, this applies not to mental disabilities, as this could impair one's ability to switch from (or differentiate between) the actual to the potential, indeed, from the concrete to the possible". I cannot here take on the specific challenges (methodological and otherwise) that cognitive disabilities raise for eidetic variation, but this qualification in fact supports my point: an unstated mythic norm is at play here, one in which certain cognitive abilities are assumed to be conditions of the possibility of eidetic variation, which is to say, they are treated as necessities, not contingencies, of the *abilities* of the phenomenologist. And on such a view, any and all phenomenologists must assume *they are normal in those ways*. That *assumption* is explained neither by represented or lived normality, but by the normate. Instead of turning this piece into a stealth disagreement with Husserl, I am instead currently working on my reading of *Ideas II* in relationship to disability and the normate as a stand-alone article.
- 22 Translation modified.
- 23 I borrow the term "bodymind" from Margaret Price as a way to avoid any untoward dualisms concerning embodiment. Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain", *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2015.1>.
- 24 Cf. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs Of Queerness And Disability*, Cultural Front (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
- 25 Darius Marder, *Sound of Metal*, Drama, Music (Caviar, 2020).
- 26 Burke rightly notes that "this is a movie about deafness made for Hearing people". Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, "Sound of Metal: A Review – The Philosophers' Magazine", accessed May 12, 2022, <https://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/233-sound-of-metal-a-review>. In this vein, she asks: do the sound engineering choices "reflect a hearing person's imaginings of what it is like to become deaf or an experience of becoming deaf?" While an important question, to be sure, it seems to me that one of the central themes of the movie is an existential critique of the focus upon *what things are really like* (e.g., what it is *really like* to "hear" music, etc.) If Ruben had moved

- beyond (or, rather, stopped actively clinging to) such rationalistic questions of truth and representation to experiences of belonging and community, he would have been able to find new forms of happiness, joy, and, to belabor the point, even music.
- 27 Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 28 Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2009); Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: New York, NY: Longman, 1998).
- 29 Cf. what Elizabeth Barnes calls the “Magneto-view” of disability. Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 69ff.
- 30 Talila A. Lewis, “Working Definition of Ableism – January 2022 Update”, Personal Blog, Talila A. Lewis, 2022, <https://www.talilalewis.com/blog.html>. Lewis asks that the following be added to citations of the definition: “working definition by @TalilaLewis, updated January 2022, developed in community with disabled Black/negatively racialized folk, especially @NotThreeFifths. Read more: bit.ly/ableism2022”.
- 31 In earlier versions of this piece, I included a few paragraphs on how this discussion relates to the concept of genius. In short, it seems my analysis demonstrates the curious power of the (lay sense) of the cult of genius – the idea that there are some people who have innate abilities that make them, all on their own, special. Becca Longtin thankfully advised me that such a sense of genius flattens its actual historical complexity (and, for that matter, its labyrinthian relationship to ableism writ large). Cf. Rebecca A. Longtin, “Is the Concept of Genius Ableist?”, *The Journal of Philosophy of Disability*, Forthcoming.
- 32 The core argument of which appears here: Joel Michael Reynolds, *The Life Worth Living: Disability, Pain, and Morality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).
- 33 An audience member at Boston University pointed out that there are various “disability normates” as well. They meant this in the sense of the well-known “hierarchies” of disability, wherein wheelchair users are usually on top, deaf people are above blind-deaf people, etc. There is something to this important point, but I will have to think about it more.
- 34 “Il est donc vrai à la fois que la vie d’un auteur ne nous apprend rien et que, si nous savions la lire, nous y trouverions tout, puisqu’elle est ouverte sur l’œuvre.”
- 35 Acknowledgements: firstly, my thanks to Randy Johnson for adamantly suggesting in 2016 that I take on the project of a philosophy of disability reading of “Cézanne’s Doubt”. My gratitude also goes out to all the participants of the 2017 meeting of the *International Merleau-Ponty Circle* for helpful feedback on an early version of this paper, especially Christine Wieseler, Gail Weiss, David Morris, Gayle Salamon, Talia Welsh, Shiloh Whitney, and Amie Leigh Zimmer; audiences at Queen’s University in 2021 and at the Boston Phenomenology Circle in 2022 who heard later versions of the piece, especially Adam Schipper, Alisha Sharma, Lisa Guenther, Rebecca Sinclair, Helen Fielding, Magnus Ferguson, Kris Sealy, Shiloh Whitney, Becca Longtin, Naomi Scheman, and Dan Dahlstrom; and, at the latter event, especially Eugenia Stefanello, who graciously and insightfully commented on the paper and raised many helpful concerns that made this piece stronger. Finally, thanks to two anonymous reviewers at *Chiasmi* – one of whom deserves special praise for going above and beyond in offering exceptionally pivotal, useful feedback – as well as to conversations on these topics over the years with the inimitable Ryan Fics.

The Normate: On Disability, Critical Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne

In the essay “Cézanne’s Doubt”, Merleau-Ponty explores the relationship between Paul Cézanne’s art and his embodiment. The doubt in question is ultimately about the meaning of Cézanne’s art in light of his disabilities. Should his disabilities or impairments shape how we interpret his art or should they instead be treated as incidental, as mere biographical data? Although Merleau-Ponty’s essay isn’t intended to be phenomenological, its line of questioning is as much about lived experience as it is about art, art history, and aesthetics. I here offer a reading of “Cézanne’s Doubt” as an exploration of one of the more fundamental issues for phenomenological methodology: the relationship between normality and the normate. I first defend this phenomenological and disability-centric or crip reading of the essay. I then argue that insofar as one takes oneself to be “normal” and insofar as doing so underwrites phenomenological inquiry, the problematic of the normate, not just that of normality, is central to phenomenology.

Le normé: sur l’invalidité, la phénoménologie critique et le Cézanne de Merleau-Ponty

Dans *Le doute de Cézanne*, Merleau-Ponty explore la relation entre l’art de Paul Cézanne et son incarnation. Le doute en question concerne la signification de l’art de Cézanne à la lumière de ses handicaps. Ses handicaps ou ses troubles doivent-ils déterminer l’interprétation que nous faisons de son art ou doivent-ils plutôt être considérés comme accessoires, comme une simple donnée biographique ? Bien que l’essai de Merleau-Ponty n’ait pas l’intention d’être strictement phénoménologique, son questionnement porte autant sur l’expérience vécue que sur l’art, l’histoire de l’art et l’esthétique. Je proposerai ici une lecture du *Doute de Cézanne* comme une exploration de l’une des questions les plus fondamentales pour la méthodologie phénoménologique: la relation entre la normalité et le normé. Je défendrai tout d’abord cette lecture phénoménologique de l’essai, centrée sur le handicap ou les théories *crip*. Je soutiendrai ensuite que, dans la mesure où l’on considère quelque chose comme « normal » tout en souscrivant l’enquête phénoménologique, la problématique du normé, et non seulement celle de la normalité, résulte centrale dans la phénoménologie.

Il normato: sulla disabilità, la fenomenologia critica e il Cézanne di Merleau-Ponty

Ne *Il dubbio di Cézanne*, Merleau-Ponty esplora la relazione tra l’arte di Paul Cézanne e la sua esistenza incarnata. Il dubbio in questione riguarda, in definitiva, il significato dell’arte di Cézanne in relazione alle sue disabilità. Le disabilità o i disturbi di Cézanne dovrebbero orientare il modo in cui interpretiamo la sua arte, o dovrebbero essere intese come occidentali, come meri dati biografici? Anche se il saggio di Merleau-Ponty non vuole essere fenomenologico in senso stretto, la sua linea di indagine si rivolge tanto all’esperienza vissuta quanto all’arte, alla storia

dell'arte, e all'estetica. Propongo qui una lettura de *Il dubbio di Cézanne* come esplorazione di una delle più fondamentali questioni del metodo fenomenologico: la relazione tra normalità e normato. Sostengo anzitutto una tale lettura del saggio, incentrata sulla disabilità e le teorie *crip*. Sostengo poi che, nella misura in cui si considera qualcuno "normale" e nel fare ciò si aderisce all'indagine fenomenologica, il problema del normato, e non solo quello della normalità, si rivela centrale per la fenomenologia.