

35 The Normate

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Phenomena appear in relation to one's approach and method. The slogan of phenomenology, "Back to the things themselves" (*Zurück zu den Sachen selbst*), is in part a call to unlearn and unknow, to carry out a suspension, a bracketing (*epochē*), that brings things to awareness not as they appear by habit, custom, or caprice, but from themselves.¹ This means that insofar as one holds cognition, consciousness, perception, and awareness to be irremediably embodied, one cannot bracket the body.² Critical disability studies scholars have argued that a central and ongoing misstep in phenomenological investigations of embodiment is the privileging of a particular type of body: the *normate* body.

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

Ableism, Meaning, and Experience

At the outset of her seminal *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson notes the way in which disability functions as an "attribution of corporeal deviance."³ She writes, "The narrative of deviance surrounding bodies considered different is paralleled by a narrative of universality surrounding bodies that correspond to notions of the ordinary or the superlative. . . . The meanings attached to physical form and appearance constitute 'limits' for many people."⁴ I wish to tease out and expand upon three aspects of this passage as they relate to the role of the normate in Garland-Thomson's oeuvre. First,

as a question of attribution and narrative, disability is constituted by and through the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves in general and our “bodyminds,” to follow Margaret Price, in particular.⁵ Disability cannot be understood outside of the centrality of its narrative role for the lived experience of selfhood, social identity, and, in a word, our being-in-the-world.⁶

Second, disability is a question of form, mode, and matter, all of which are cast as *deviant*—not just malformed or aberrant, but a de-variation, the loss or absence of way and of being. “Deviance” emerges in an *épistème* charged with both economic and moral facets: being wrong or lost in the world is taken to be blameworthy, and as such, it is a way of being that both represents and incurs a debt. This debt, in lockstep with nearly every religious tradition, is most often conceived as one borne through suffering. The ableist conflation of disability with pain, suffering, and disadvantage is at the core of deviance as a description of non-normate ways of being in the world.⁷

Third, disability cannot be thought outside of the triumvirate of the normal, natural, and normative, to follow Gail Weiss’s apt formulation.⁸ Albeit often vaguely defined and problematically deployed across multiple domains of knowledge production, these terms form an intricate tapestry of ideas and assumptions that underwrite common-sense notions of *how things ought to be*. That which is normal is that which is typical. That which is typical is natural, regular, common, and even universal. For example, this explains in part how it could be that homosexuality was medically pathologized and heterosexuality normalized until just a few decades ago and how it could be that the bodies of intersex children were mutilated as a matter of course in the name of “correcting” them until just a few years ago. The historically negative inertia of the *dis-* in disability constructs a tale of psychophysiological lack and loss that, in a perfect world, should not be. It is the fallacy and immorality of this inertia that Garland-Thomson lays bare.

Garland-Thomson’s analysis of disability thus involves three central components: self- and social narratives, ontological deviance, and biopsychosocial typology. The concept of the normate threads the hermeneutic needle between nature and culture by broadly defining human difference in terms of a figure, an archetypal representation, of ability that serves to ground and orient people’s sense of self. As she puts it, the normate is “the veiled subject position of the cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries. The term *normate* usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them.”⁹ The normate is the tain of the mirror of ableism. It is the invisible mechanism that allows slippage from being to being-able, buttressing forces from toxic individualism to social eugenics.

The normate thus emerges in relief against both imaginary and concrete, perceived and real bodily difference. An able-bodied person talks loudly to someone in a wheelchair, spontaneously conflating nonambulation with hearing loss.¹⁰ One job candidate is picked over another because they are perceived to be more attractive, conflating cultural ideals of beauty with labor-related abilities.¹¹ A majority of the Supreme Court argues that states have a right to forcibly sterilize the “feeble-minded” in institutions, conflating feeble-mindedness with both moral deviance and social flotsam.¹² In each

case, though in differing ways, the judgment in question results from a confluence of natural and sociocultural determinates—both surreptitiously linking and taking as given the categories of the normal, natural, and normative. Neither found, nor created, but founded, the normate shapes how things are and ought to be from *behind the scenes*.

Phenomenology and the Normate

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

The normate can be understood as the *ultimate* ability exemplar, the exemplarity of which is shaped by and anchored in ableist assumptions that tell us how bodies are and should be. I here define ableism as the assumption that the “normal” or “typical” body is better than the abnormal body *because* it is normal. Ableism assumes the normal body to be the regulative paradigm of human corporeal form and behavior. In claiming that the normate is the hegemonic phantasm ableism carves out of the flesh, I am arguing that the normate is more than just a paradigmatic figure of normality. Following Schürmann’s usage, a *hegemonic phantasm* functions as an ontological principle in the sense of a ground and origin: “In order to constitute the phenomenality of phenomena, in order to universalize them, a representational order must organize itself around a principle, a phantasmic referent measuring all representations. A hegemonic phantasm [*fantasme hégémonic*] so conceived not only directs us to refer everything to it, but has, furthermore, an endless supply of significations, that is to say, normative measures.”¹³ The normate is hegemonic in that it establishes a horizon of meaning that founds and organizes experience absolutely. It is a phantasm in that it appears absolute, while in fact being a construct, continually at risk of capitulation to the powers that be. As a hegemonic phantasm, the normate offers an endless supply of normative measures against which non-normate bodies will prove to be worth less or even worthless.

While it is tempting to index the ample experiences of ability, those of the “I can,” to one’s particular body, the “I can” is necessarily constituted by one’s environment and the futures it affords. Ability expectations are culled not just from one’s proprioceptive-kinesthetic experience of one’s body, but from one’s environment and social milieu. Insofar as the normate, ever furnishing normative measures, reigns over the scale, scope, and content of ability expectations, it shapes everyone’s experience of embodiment. If, as Merleau-Ponty writes, the “body is the power for a certain world,” then the

normate orders and measures the interpretation and values of one's body and its powers or, more accurately, one's flesh.¹⁴ The flesh, for Merleau-Ponty, names the thickness of embodiment, the enfolding of one within the folds of the world.¹⁵ "Every relation between me and Being, even vision, even speech, is . . . a carnal relation with the flesh of the world [*un rapport charnel, avec la chair du monde*]."¹⁶ To think through the problematic of the normate is to think through how this thickness and enfolding is always already shaped by a hegemonic phantasm of able-bodiedness, shaped by unjust ability expectations determining how bodies should be in the very recesses of how they are. As such, the normate is constitutive of the fleshly possibilities of experience.

To see how the concept of the normate can aid phenomenological inquiry, take the example of blindness. To the phenomenologist under the sway of the normate, blindness is experienced as a lack of sight. Speaking of Charles-Antoine Coypel's studies of blind men, Derrida writes, "Like all blind men, they must *ad-vance*, advance or commit themselves, that is, expose themselves, run through space as if running a risk. . . . These blind men explore—and seek to foresee there where they do not see, *no longer* see, or do *not yet* see."¹⁷ Blindness is phenomenologically revelatory in unique respects, but it is often taken to be so primarily or solely in virtue of its relationship to sight—not as it is experienced in and of itself. Blindness reveals "human" lived experience through absence or lack of sight. That a lack, cessation, or breaking of a thing reveals its phenomenality is a commonplace in the phenomenological tradition. One need only think of Heidegger's famous discussion of the hammer in *Being and Time*, the existential and ontological meaning of which is revealed precisely through an analysis of its breakdown. Yet, does the experience of blindness in fact demonstrate itself through the "lack" of sight?

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

First I believed that blindness was when you couldn't see because something had gone wrong with your eyes. Then I understood that blindness was a deprivation of knowledge for which alternative sources and kinds of knowledge would compensate. Gradually I came to see that blindness is a whole-body condition. It is not simply that your eyes have ceased to function; your whole body undergoes a profound transformation in its relationship to the world. Finally, I came to believe that *blindness is a world-creating condition*.¹⁸

Hull's description moves from an understanding of blindness cast in the logic of the ableist conflation—blindness as lack and suffering, as something "gone wrong"—all the way to a positive, generative, and rich form of life. To experience blindness as it appears from itself, Hull had to undermine the effect of the normate; he had to expel the hegemonic phantasm already figuring sight-as-ability/blindness-as-disability. Only then did he experience blindness as world-creating.¹⁹ For Hull, the light of the normate blinded his experience of blindness. It is with such in-sights in mind that one can "see" how heeding and critically interrogating the role of the normate in lived experience would deepen and improve phenomenologies of embodiment of every sort.

Non-Normate Futures

Garland-Thomson's work, in concert with thinkers across the field of critical disability studies and philosophy of disability, exposes and rebuffs the exclusions and injustices that situated and continue to situate the non-normate as second-class citizens or even subhuman.²⁰ For Garland-Thomson, disability is both the limit of *and* opening to understanding ability as an ever-present vector of lived experience and also sociopolitical power. "The experience of my flesh [*chair*]," Merleau-Ponty writes, shows that "perception does not come to birth just anywhere. . . . It emerges in the recess of a body [*le recès d'un corps*]."²¹ The concept of the normate suggests that even the recesses of the body can harbor prejudicial assumptions. One's body assumes and installs itself as a standard for experience in a manner obstinate to reflection, as sighted assumptions about blindness so well exemplify. Insofar as phenomenological inquiry is irremediably embodied, the normate is a concept without which phenomenology risks the errors of ableism at every turn. By countering the toxic universality of the typical or standard body, the concept of the normate is indispensable for phenomenological inquiry committed to the call to behold phenomena as they appear from themselves.

Notes

1. My gratitude to David M. Peña-Guzmán, Rebecca Longtin, and Gayle Salamon for feedback on earlier versions of this piece.

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (Oxford: Routledge, 2011); Mark Johnson, *Embodied Mind, Meaning, and Reason: How Our Bodies Give Rise to Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

3. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 6.

4. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 7.

5. Margaret Price, "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain," *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84.

6. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse, Corporealities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

7. Joel Michael Reynolds, "'I'd Rather Be Dead Than Disabled'—The Ableist Conflation and the Meanings of Disability," *Review of Communication* 17, no. 3 (2017): 149–63. doi: 10.1080/15358593.2017.1331255.

8. 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 (2015): 77–93.

9. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 7.

10. S. Kay Toombs, "The Lived Experience of Disability," *Human Studies* 18 (1995): 9–23.

11. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics, Corporealities: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

12. *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927), written by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

13. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly, Studies in Continental Thought series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 11.
14. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 109, 137.
15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Claude Lefort (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 136–42, 248ff.
16. See Donald Landes's entry, "The Flesh of the World," in this volume. Also Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 83–84.
17. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 5–6.
18. John Hull, *On Sight and Insight: A Journey into the World of Blindness* (London: One-world, 1997), xii, my emphasis.
19. Joel Michael Reynolds, "Merleau-Ponty, World-Creating Blindness, and the Phenomenology of Non-Normate Bodies," *Chiasmi International* 19 (2018): 419–34
20. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 591–609, doi: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01206.x; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Disability Bioethics: From Theory to Practice," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27, no. 2 (2017): 323–39, doi: 10.1353/ken.2017.0020.
21. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 9.