

THE NORMALITY OF THE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE NORMALITY OF THE BODY. HUSSERL'S VIEW ON NORMALITY*

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ABSTRACT. In the following paper, I'll try to summarize Husserl's view on normality. I will claim that there is a contradiction between his early, transcendental conception, which claims the absolute normality of the transcendental consciousness, and his late genetic-generative analyzes that lead back the normality of experience to the normality of the psychophysical body. I will argue that his contradiction can be resolved from the perspective of the embodied consciousness which, according to Anthony Steinbock is also present in the late writings of Husserl.

Keywords: normality, abnormality, transcendental phenomenology, genetic phenomenology

The Problem of Normality

How may mental disorders arise within phenomenology, a non-reductionist theory that insists on treating mental phenomena as pieces of conscious experience? Does it make any sense to speak of normal vs. abnormal experience within the context of phenomenology? And if so, what would be the appropriate concepts, categories in terms of which we may articulate this difference?

Normality, as was pointed out by such thinkers as Michel Foucault, George Canghuillem and others, is a normative, not a descriptive concept. Far from being a natural determination or a given psychic feature, it is a regulative idea informed by cultural values and rules shaping social consciousness of a particular era. Phenomenology, however, makes it its methodological principle to get rid of any form of normativity. The epoché introduced by Husserl aimed at suspending, if only temporarily, all our cultural scientific beliefs. Accordingly, we should take experience

* The author would like to thank Ádám Lovász for his help in the translation of the originally Hungarian text..

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as it would reveal itself to an unprejudiced, unbiased gaze. The phenomenological approach demands that we suspend all our judgements. If we do so then any distinction to the effect of normality as opposed to abnormality will lose all their relevance. We are supposed to contemplate our inner stream of experience revealing itself to the unbiased observer as if we had no preconceived knowledge of what normal perception, normal behaviour or a normal psyche should be like.

However, the question of the normal state of consciousness or normal experience cannot be eliminated in the mental attitude of reduction. We have experiences in which we feel, so to speak, from the inside, that something is wrong, that our perception, thinking, emotional life is not taking place in the usual manner. Experience seems to have an inherent normality, a self-regulating mechanism that immediately indicates when things are not going in the right way.

The Transcendental Perspective

The question of normality is contained in the entire Husserlian oeuvre, from *Ideen* – which elaborates transcendental phenomenology – to the later texts dealing with intersubjectivity. Because it deals primarily with the constitution of meaning by the transcendental subject, the transcendental stage of Husserl's work does not really contain much about normality, but it becomes an indispensable operational concept in explaining the phenomenological problems of intersubjective reality and the constitution of objectivity.¹

Husserl's comments regarding the topic in §55 of *Cartesian Meditations* are especially pertinent in this regard:

“But abnormality must first be constituted as such; and the constituting of abnormality is possible only on the basis of an intrinsically antecedent normality (...) The objective world has existence by virtue of a harmonious confirmation of the apperceptive constitution, once this has succeeded: a confirmation thereof by the continuance of experiencing life with a consistent harmoniousness, which always becomes re-established as extending through any corrections that may be required to that end.”²

The meaning of the world, including its anomalous elements, can only be articulated in comparison with a normality. The former – anomaly – must be considered

¹ Drawing on Eugen Fink's article (*Les concepts opératoires dans la phénoménologie de Edmund Husserl*) Tamás Ullmann states that the concept of normality is one of the most important operative notions in Husserl's philosophy. (Tamás Ullmann, *Az értelem dimenziói*. L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2012. 152-153.)

² Husserl, Edmund: *Cartesian Meditations*. Springer Science, Nijhoff den Haag, 1960, 124-125.

as a deformation of a prior normality. As Husserl declares in another text, *"normality is the form of constitution"*³. A world can only come into being thanks to the normality of the constitutive ego and this normality manifests itself in the harmonious nature of the experience. In other words, the transcendental subject is absolutely normal, for normality is the very foundation and condition of world-constitution. If we find ourselves in a world, this is thanks to a normality which has already formed our world.

The experiencing-constituting subject proceeds from an absolute normality, but viewed from the transcendental-solipsistic perspective, it seems that every other human and non-human subject represents a lesser degree of normality. It is always our ego which has the primary constitutive capacity. As Husserl explains,

*"Among the problems of abnormality the problem of non-human animality and that of the levels of "higher and lower" brutes are included. Relative to the brute, man is, constitutionally speaking, the normal case just as I myself am the primal norm constitutionally for all other men."*⁴

This logic of constitution extends not only to the animals, but children and the insane also represent examples of anomaly, because in Husserl's view they do not reach the ideal type of normality, so to speak, the normality of the adult capable of calculation, perception and movement. What matters here is who is capable of constructing the world as a more complete, coherent and harmonic whole.

However paradoxical and even problematic it may appear, this process is phenomenologically legitimate inasmuch as it furnishes us with a first-person perspective and a direct experience relating to normality, attempting to illuminate the inner laws of experience by introspection. Husserl expands his analysis to a number of concrete examples. During the course of these investigations, three or, according to other interpreters, four different criteria relating to normality can be uncovered: concordance, optimality, typicality, and familiarity.

In a text dating from between 1915-1917 dedicated to giving an explanation about the optimal givenness of experience, Husserl writes the following:

*"...the optimal system has an advantage, namely that it reveals the most of the real thing, it brings about the greatest riches concerning the differences pertaining to the thing."*⁵

³ Hua XIV. 68.

⁴ Husserl, Edmund: *Cartesian Meditations*. Springer Science, Nijhoff den Haag, 1960, 125.

⁵ Hua XIII. 379. (My translation, I. R.)

Under „optimality”, we must understand the ideal preconditions of perception. In other words, the sum of circumstances which afford the richest, most complete knowledge relating to the object of perception. In a 1921 text, the criteria of optimality is articulated in relation to the topic of the body. On this view, „normal” corporeality connects with a well-functioning or, alternately, hampered or limited system of representation, and also with a system that “that in a certain manner represents the truth”.⁶

Under corporeal normality Husserl understands the normal bio-physical functioning of the body. The normal experience of the world depends upon a biophysical optimum, as well as having a healthy body.⁷ Husserl also claims that biophysical normality can be brought into adequation with a constitutive normality, while biophysical anomaly also corresponds to the sum of abnormal „worldviews.”⁸

On the basis of our everyday experience, we can easily verify what Husserl is speaking of, for the loss of sight or hearing, even for a transitory period of time, leads to a weakening of the perception of the world, impairing the traversal of the environment. But connecting representation to the normality of corporeal experience (the latter being the normality of phenomenological experience in general), and also collapsing these two levels into one another, all this strikes us as a problematic approach. The apparent psychophysical reductionism here contradicts, after all, the spirit of the transcendental method.⁹ Other everyday intuitions tell us that physical or sensorial impairments need not necessarily lead to a deformation of the experience of the world, just as the presence of bodily health does not automatically guarantee a completely normal subjective experience of the world.

Biophysical optimality does not, in itself, guarantee the normality of experience, for the preconditions of an optimal representational system in Husserl’s case are inherently intersubjective. Differently put, we can only know that our perceptions do actually result in optimal experience if we are somehow capable of comparing these experiences with those of others, in the context of an intersubjectively constituted world. Our individual experience must be in accordance with the individual and collective experiences of others, and also connect with the objectivity of a common

⁶ Hua XIV. 121.

⁷ Hua XIV. 122-123.

⁸ Hua XIV. 123.

⁹ Husserl apparently takes a few times this paradoxical step, for example at HUA XIV, 85. On the other hand, authors like Anthony Steinbock hold that on bio-physical body Husserl always means the lived body, which constitutes it’s own norms while orienting itself in the surrounding world. (Steinbock: *Home and Beyond. Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*, Indiana University Press, Illinois, 1995, 138-139.)

life world. The criterion of concordance must apply within the individual life world as well, for new sensations and perceptions can only gain meaning inside an experiential horizon. In this manner, we experience constant objectivities, and in connection with these, we constitute a world.

“What else could normal experience be than the experience which seamlessly and concordantly fits the context in question, and which maintains the identity of the object throughout the experience.”

writes Husserl, emphasizing that concordance is an unavoidable criterion of normality.¹⁰ Cases of anomalous perception, such as false perception, delusions, hallucinations, are all characterized by the agent falling out of the common flow of experience. The anomaly is the outlier, standing in contradiction with the rest of the intersubjective world. However, these cases can also be viewed as immanent modulations, deformations or diversions of normality.

To return briefly to the intersubjective dimension of concordance, it must also be emphasized that for Husserl, the objectivity of any experience is basically guaranteed by nothing more than this dimension. However, as Ullmann explains, the intersubjectivity of experience should not be viewed so much as the sum of individual experiences, but rather a network of mutual interpenetration in which intersubjectively constructed meaning is embedded into our own experience, informing it in turn. Not only do we construct meaning together with others, but even our perception is formed by our community. This common world, which creates the domain of normality, will be called the „life world“ in Husserl’s later work.¹¹

In the life world, everything is at once subjective and relative, for it denotes a cultural-historical community, a concrete world, which contrasts with the universes of other cultural communities. In the broader context of interculturality, we find the third and fourth criteria, namely typicality and familiarity. The analysis of these specific properties of the life world will take us in the genetic and generative phase of transcendental phenomenology. That is, we must deal with the issue of historicity in the phenomenological analysis. Before proceeding, it must be stressed that at this point, the normal is considered as that which is familiar in our own world. Everything which diverges from this category, the unfamiliar, the alien, is, from the Husserlain perspective, abnormal.

¹⁰ HUA XIII. 364.

¹¹ Ullmann 158.

The Genetic-Generative View of Normality

There are some interpreters who hold that Husserl's views on normality are not entirely articulated within a static-transcendental context. In other words, we should not view the normal as the achievement of a solipsistic ego, but rather as something intersubjectively constituted, from a genetic-generative perspective¹² On this account, concordance, optimality, typicality and familiarity are not so much different forms of normality, but instead various levels of the same phenomenon. We can view them as modes of constitution, which allow experience to harmonize and normalize itself. One of the most important characteristics of experience is self-normalization and self-stabilization. Husserl's ideas contain an implicit teleology, namely the view that meaning can eventually be stabilized and harmonized.¹³

In the genetic view, the disharmonies, complexities, breaks and anomalies in perception are held to be constitutive preconditions of new meanings. A certain chaos is required for the emergence of order. The anomaly can be viewed as a precondition for richer certainties, more complex truths, and new experiential norms.

Let us take an everyday case. In a familiar city, I am trying to get to a destination, let's say the university building. But it's night time, so the usual points of reference are a little different in my plane of consciousness, showing different aspects. The street is recognizable, but it also resists my gaze. Despite the fact that it diverges from my expectations, I go in the direction I believe to be the correct one. The building I am trying to find fails to present itself. I become uncertain, I stop and look around. Then I realize I must have gone up the wrong metro overpass in the opposite direction. At this moment, however, the right way becomes apparent because overall, despite the surprises it holds in store, the city as a whole is generally familiar to me. The mistake and the recognition of this mistake both enriched my consciousness with an experience of the night, which can be usefully recalled in later situations.

Here we have an example of the teleological and self-normalizing functioning of experience. The levels of familiarity permeate and build upon one another. Ever higher degrees of normality accumulate in our consciousness, leading to an ever more concrete articulation of the body-environment and a richer constitution of the world. On the most fundamental level, normality is grounded upon the spontaneous concordance of subconscious perceptual contents. This level should be imagined as a state in which there are not any concretized intellectual contents or objective

¹² Anthony Steinbock: *Home and Beyond. Generative Phenomenology after Husserl*, Indiana University Press, Illinois, 1995, Marosán Bence: *Kontextus és fenomén II*, L'Harmattan, 2020.

¹³ Marosán Bence: *Kontextus és fenomén II*, L'Harmattan, 2020. 293.

meanings, but only loosely connected nascent elements of meaning. A critical element of objective meaning is whether these patterns, which are partially sensual and partially intellectual, can arrive at this meaning or fulfil an expectation¹⁴

Concordance manifests not only on the level of contents of consciousness, but also in the sensual elements of the lived body (*Leib Körper*), and also pertains to the relationship of the lived body with its environment. The synthetic unity of the object of consciousness (or any other empirical fact) is unavoidably tied to the circumstance that in every case the cooperation of the senses is required. Sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, all of these transmit sense data which together build a representation of the world. Without the cooperation of the senses, we would have an example of anomalous experience, the highest intensity of which is dissociative chaos. Borrowing an example from Minkowski the famed psychiatrist, Steinbock gives a phenomenological description of schizophrenia, in which a state of personality dissociation may be observed:

"...and then sometimes everything is so fragmented, when it should be so unified. A bird in the garden chirps, for example. I hear the bird and I know that he chirps, but that it is a bird and that he chirps, these two things are separated from each other. There is an abyss. Here I am afraid because I cannot put them back together again."¹⁵

Referring to the consistency between body and environment, Steinbock, referencing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, argues that already in Husserl's case we find many descriptions where the body is more than an optimal sensory system, operating also as a mode of optimization which activates experience as a function. When Husserl speaks of the biophysical body, he is referring to the lived body, which itself selects the most optimal, coherent modes of experience in a self-organizing way.¹⁶ Describing the lived body, Husserl prefers to use the phrase „anomalous” rather than „abnormal”, and in Steinbock's view there is a very important reason for this, namely that the anomalous is more than the mere negative polar opposite of the „normal.” The anomalous or injured, disabled body is restricted in exercising its capacities, but it is certainly not abnormal. Perceptual anomalies are necessary components of perception in general, for it is thanks to such elements that concordance can develop. To take another typical example, we can imagine ourselves driving at night. The lights of the car illuminate a certain section of road, but this circumstance is punctuated by the fact that cars coming from the other

¹⁴ Marosán 296.

¹⁵ Steinbock 143.

¹⁶ Steinbock 144-145.

direction blind us momentarily. This momentary anomaly in visual perception breaks our normal perception, while training our vision, keeping us alert. Despite the darkness, we can succeed in steering our vehicle safely at night, without suffering a car accident. Normality, understood in the sense of optimality, is not therefore the constant functioning of sensual organs, but rather the cooperative normality of the senses.

If we think of all this in temporal terms, we must note that after a while the optimal functioning of sense organs and their characteristics tend to habituate after a while, normalizing experience in the process. That which we call normal is the product of an optimization. This latter is an open category, making it possible to find elements even more optimal than the natural functions, such as in the case of artificial prostheses and other body enhancements. In such cases, the added component can become a normalizing force in perception. New glasses, for instance, and the optimized vision they make possible, can become a new norm in a matter of days, making us view the previous experience of vision in a new light. Steinbock mentions that the lived body is only normal to the extent that it proves capable of transgressing its own norms.¹⁷ While creating new optimums and rules, the body also transforms the criteria of its own normality. Corporeal functioning is nothing if not the self-renewing process of optimization and normalization. At the same time though, we must also recognize that there is no completely concordant or harmonic experience. Rather, these are only quasi-teleological tendencies instead of states.

The next level of perceptual normality is typicality. Our environment is full of phenomena which we call normal, insofar as they fulfil our expectations regarding typicality. A corporeality, an object, a situation or a behaviour that can be called typical allows us to create expectations in advance. We expect the object of consciousness to behave as it should. The typicality of experience in Steinbock's interpretation is created by the interpenetration of various optima, and composes the level where our individual experience steps into the intersubjective dimension of the life world.¹⁸

From the genetic view, we proceed to the generative. Typicality necessitates communication within and among various generations. A very important characteristic of its manifestation is that it applies not only to objects of consciousness and the relations between these objects, but also to the constitution of the world itself. As Marosán shows, constitution undergoes a qualitative expansion at this point. Viewing experience as a flow, we can see a series of various optimums and collections of optimality, repeating, until a typicality of elements, territories and regions emerges, aggregating into a complex network.¹⁹ Following Steinbock, we may call the forms

¹⁷ Steinbock 146.

¹⁸ Steinbock 160.

¹⁹ Marosán 301.

of this typicalized world-experience the „territories.“ A territory is not so much the objective environment but rather the way in which we inhabit this ecology, making it a home, a place of inhabitation. It is not an exaggeration to call it the system of typicalized modes of perception and behaviour.

The next level of normality is the most complex, encompassing the familiar/unfamiliar binary. Along with the previous levels we have described above, the territory becomes the highest and most concrete level of normality once it is recognized as a culturally coded life world. On this generative level, the cultural aspect is more pronounced than in the case of typicality, where it remains abstract. The life world's familiar and unfamiliar aspects are eminently cultural phenomena.

The life world is full of familiar forms and systems: meanings, norms, gestures, phrases, modes of behaviour, social roles, bodies, animals, and humans. All these aspects are characterized by their familiarity, including inanimate objects. These can be interpreted in turn as showing opportunities or affordances for action. At this point, it should be stressed that in Husserl's view, individual human bodies and the sum of corporealities alike form a single cultural-corporeal community. The life world's concrete mode of givenness is a culturally and traditionally given world, which stands opposed to the alien, the other. In this context that is normal which is familiar inside of our own world, while the alien, the unknown, the strange is endowed with the character of the abnormal. Steinbock emphasizes that the familiar and the unfamiliar are constituted according to one another. We can only articulate our own if there is an opposite we can compare this category with.²⁰

In summary, it can be said that from the Husserlian oeuvre we can reconstruct a genetic-generative concept of normality. The latter is a structural component of experience, emerging through corporeal experience, becoming in its turn a controlling and organizing force. This self-regulative movement of experience is not absolutely stable, because traumatic or cataclysmic events can destabilize it. But even these, if they do not result in a shattering of the body, can contribute to normalization. In a crisis, the stable meanings and elements are disarticulated, dashing expectations. That being said, the crisis is always already part of individual and social life. This fact was not lost on Husserl:

“Cannot we, however, conceive of a such a shift of fate - writes Husserl at one point - that shatters normality to the point that I find myself completely lost and I can no longer envisage how life may continue, how it may once again assume the form of a fruitful stable normal human life.”²¹

²⁰ Steinbock 221.

²¹ HUA XV. 213-214 (Translated to English by me I. R.)

The traumatic event which Husserl references here, can completely untether the web of normality, leading to a condition wherein the environment fails to remain uncontroversial for me: everyday activities lose their meaning, while expectations and hopes fail to be fulfilled. The trauma can so utterly destabilize our lives that “I never again find my bearings”. The shattering of normality can result in the destruction of the world, or at the very least, an alienation from the world, making the continuation of our previous life impossible.