

Overriding Immanence: Normativity and the Sick Body

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Abstract

Phenomenologists have given considerable attention to questions of human embodiment and the experience of being enmeshed within the immanent world, most notably in the thought of Merleau-Ponty. This focus on incarnation has, in turn, heavily influenced contemporary philosophy of religion and post-theological turn phenomenology. Yet when speaking of the human experience of embodiment, philosophers run the risk of adopting a normative perspective that universalizes a particular type of human body while excluding or marginalizing different forms as deviant, defective, or deficient. This paper considers numerous critiques against the perceived normativity in Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (feminist, gender studies, post-colonial critiques) before positing disability studies as an even more radical – and privileged – means to dispense with phenomenological normativity. In doing so, this paper attempts to open a space for multiple phenomenological perspectives for experiencing the world as a body, yet without lapsing into an entirely relativistic individualism that precludes phenomenology from making meaningful claims about the experience of human embodiment as such.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, Gayle Salamon, Disability Studies, normativity, defective embodiment, handicap, pluralistic perspectives, incarnation

ALTHOUGH MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY'S ACCOUNT OF embodiment provides a valuable means of reframing human subjectivity and leads us to a more authentic understanding of our being-in-the-world, his account nonetheless proves problematic by assuming a normative phenomenological perspective. Despite being freed from the seemingly inescapable dilemma between either mechanistic determinacy or transcendental psychologism, the embodied subjectivity he articulates adopts a very particular, limited perspective according to a masculine, heterosexual, white and able-bodied being-in-the-world. Notwithstanding the valuable insights and contributions of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and its emphasis on embodied human subjectivity, his account fails to recognize the reality of non-normative embodiment and consequently requires emendation and expansion.

Contemporary critiques note that the perspective adopted by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception* advocates (perhaps unintentionally) a “normative” account of embodiment that ignores disparate experiences of the body along the lines of race, sexuality, gender, and physical infirmity. In using the terms of “normalcy” and “normativity,” I intend to criticize the underlying assumption that embodiment exists as an overarching, singular category of incarnate existence in which a normal, healthy, or “perfect” form is implicitly understood, and against which all other embodiments are subsequently measured. Such a model leaves no room for variability in the types or modes of embodiment – rather, it establishes a spectrum ranging from “normal” and “healthy” embodiment to the somehow deviant, defective, or deficient.

I contend that Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment can benefit from expansive and supplementary critiques provided by the perspectives of non-normative modes of embodiment – especially those of racial differences, feminist perspectives, and gender/sexuality studies. Yet beyond the very necessary and fruitful critiques provided through these perspectives, I see in disability studies a privileged mode of upending normative embodiment at an even more fundamental level. I shall consider Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodiment before considering the various critiques and interventions staged by non-normative perspectives. Ultimately, I wager that through the vantage point of disabled persons we stand to gain the possibility for *multiple* phenomenological categories of embodiment, free from the constraints and limitations of a singular, normative perspective.

I. The Embodied Self: Merleau-Ponty on Incarnation and the Body Schema

Before embarking on a presentation and assessment of critiques presented against Merleau-Ponty’s normative account of embodiment, let us review (albeit briefly) the central contributions of his account of embodied subjectivity – especially those of the Body Schema, of embodiment as a felt sense of capacities and powers, and the reframing of intentionality that his account implies.

Merleau-Ponty upends the dualistic notions of the human subject that predominate the history of philosophy, rejecting both mechanistic determinacy and psychological transcendentalism. Furthermore, he posits the human subject as a body fully enmeshed within the world – an embodied subjectivity who arises as the body passes through the world in its specific context, relations, and situations. The *Phenomenology of Perception* offers us a new way of conceiving the body, grounded in a “radical proposition that attention to the felt sense of the body need not require the assertion of a

body that stands behind, or exists prior to, our perception.”¹ For Merleau-Ponty, there is no pre-embodied or super-embodied “subjectivity,” for the felt sense of the body is primary:

I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather *I am my body*...I do not simply contemplate the relations between the segments of my body and the correlations between my visual body and my tactile body; rather, I am myself the one who holds these arms and these legs together, the one who simultaneously sees and touches them.²

Human subjectivity arises in the lived experience of the body itself, it does not transcend or precede embodiment “from without,” but rather it understands, perceives, and experiences itself.

“If one can still speak of an interpretation in the perception of one’s own body, then it would be necessary to say that it interprets itself,” Merleau-Ponty claims, once again asserting the primacy and priority of embodied being in discussions of human subjectivity.

Yet despite his emphasis on incarnate, embodied being, materiality alone cannot provide an adequate means of understanding this embodiment. The body cannot be contained purely by its physical boundaries, nor is it understood as a collection of disparate parts synthesized by a pre-existing subject. He consequently articulates a felt sense of embodiment in an expressive space, enmeshed in the world, through the lens of the body’s felt capacities and powers. Merleau-Ponty articulates this as the body schema, “not merely an experience of my body, but rather an experience of my body in the world,” one which is characterized by its possibilities and capacities as acting, expressing, and engaged through motor intentionality.³ This body is, itself, the “very movement of expression,” and is “eminently an expressive space.”⁴ The original intentionality of the embodied subject arises then according to this notion of a body in the world with reference to its capacities for engagement and expression in that world. Consequently, we no longer posit a “thinking subject” before or above the embodied, living subject. Rather, our consciousness feels itself primarily and originarily according to its capacities (or, as Merleau-Ponty describes, “consciousness is originarily not an ‘I think that,’ but rather an ‘I can’”).⁵ Human subjectivity thus emerges as an embodied being-in-the-world that apprehends itself through its living and acting in its particular situation.

¹ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and the Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 4.

² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 151. Emphasis added.

³ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 139.

Yet this emphasis on embodiment through the lens of potentialities and capacity proves problematic on some levels, seemingly asserting a “normative” view of embodiment. This perspective disregards and suppresses other forms of non-normative embodiment for whom the body becomes a site of *limitation* rather than possibility. Most strikingly, and specifically with regard to disability and physical handicap, Merleau-Ponty’s writings are colored by an implicit assumption that disabled persons represent an inferior version of embodiment.⁶ In subsequent critical readings, any other alternative modes of embodiment take on a similarly deficient or defective character when measured against the norm assumed by his account of embodiment.

In the pages that follow, I highlight several critiques and problems posed by such normative embodiment, as well as offer an attempt at emendation and expansion of Merleau-Ponty’s thought. Rather than rejecting his phenomenological project, I contend that by challenging normative embodiment at its most fundamental level (the notion of an able-bodied individual defined by his or her capacities in the world), we stand to gain valuable insight into the possibility for various modes or types of embodiment without recourse to a normative view. Thus, alternative modes of living embodiment *differently* emerge, allowing a space for phenomenological assessment of these kinds of embodiment on their own terms – not simply as pathological, defective, or somehow deficient variants of a supposed normal.

II. Contemporary Critiques of Normative Embodiment in Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*

Critics abound to note the inadequacy of Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment – privileging (or exclusively adopting) the masculinist, patriarchal perspective of a healthy, white, heterosexual male. Despite his particular insight with respect to the role of the body in offering a genuinely phenomenological account of human subjectivity, a striking dearth of engagement with different modes of embodiment along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, and disability persists throughout his work. Numerous non-normative embodied experiences find his account both insufficient

⁶ See, for example, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 81, wherein Merleau-Ponty describes the loss of one’s vital connection to the world (or the loss of a world) using images of disability. He notes that some patients can “lose their world as soon as the contents begin to slip away. They renounce their usual life even before it becomes impossible, *they become crippled before literally being so*, and they break their vital contact with the world before having lost sensory contact with it” (Emphasis added, 81-82). Merleau-Ponty’s reliance upon the pathological studies of the patient Schneider throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception* similarly raise concerns – seemingly deriving a view of the “normal” through negative definition against Schneider’s psychological impairments and observations of his pathology in a clinical setting.

and incongruent with their experience. Throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty either willfully ignores or seemingly glosses over the possibility for different or alternative modes of embodiment – modes of embodiment which his account cannot articulate commensurately or in an adequate way.

In response, four valuable critiques arise through feminist perspectives, queer/transgender theory critiques, post-colonial racialized phenomenology, and disability studies. I argue that while each of these provides valuable insights and potential emendations to Merleau-Ponty's account, the vantage point of disability studies offers the most privileged and strongest means of dispensing with phenomenological notions of normative embodiment in a definitive way. Let us briefly consider the contributions and critiques of each before attempting to salvage and expand Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as open to the possibility for non-normative, alternative types of embodiment that need not be characterized as "defective" and "deficient," measured as inferior and pathological subsets of an overarching (and fantastical) norm.

Some of the most notable and valuable critiques of normative embodiment and the phenomenological perspectives it implies come from feminism and gender studies. Feminist critiques of Merleau-Ponty, as well as readings put forward by gender studies and queer theory, share in a general rejection of Merleau-Ponty's assumption of a normative, heterosexual male depiction of embodied living. Although they adopt variable assessments of his thought, they nonetheless expose the incongruity of his accounts for women as well as non-normative embodiments of gender and sexuality.

Iris Marion Young stands out in this regard, noting the insufficiency of Merleau-Ponty's account of the body schema and motor intentionality when characterized by its capacities and powers (engaging with the world through the perspective of an "I can"). Drawing from her examination of feminine body comportment and styles of motricity, Young argues that women – socialized in a sexist society – exhibit a sense of limitation, burden, and general lack of capacity in both their bodily expressions and their self-perception. The notion of possibility in the "I can" that proves central to Merleau-Ponty's account of the body schema and intentionality becomes limited and constrained for the female, oftentimes characterized by timidity, restraint, and a general reticence more so than possibilities, capacities, and powers. She notes that from a young age, girls are socially and culturally inculcated with a sense of timidity and physical limitation, a sense which in turn denies her the full range of possibilities and freedom characteristic of subjectivity. Such a reality renders the woman a "living contradiction" as both subject and object:

Woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied by the subjectivity, autonomy, and creativity which are definitive of being human and

which in patriarchal society are accorded the man...the female person who enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society must therefore live a contradiction: as human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence.⁷

Young proceeds to argue that the particular modes or styles of feminine bodily motility, action, and “comportment” incarnate this sense of living contradiction in expressive form – she is thus a body that lives between subjectivity and objectivity, transcendence and immanence, and who never fully arrives at the sense of capacity and possibility characteristic of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body schema and motor intentionality. In patriarchal culture, the sense of freedom, autonomy, and creativity of full subjectivity is defined in relation to the male and afforded to him primarily, subsequently available to the female mode of embodiment only partially and secondarily.

Young proceeds to examine how female body movements incarnate this sense of burden and limitation, and that this in turn translates into self-experience, perception and understanding. She notes, “Women often do not perceive themselves as capable of lifting and carrying heavy things, pushing and shoving with significant force, pulling, squeezing, grasping, or twisting with force,” a reality ultimately undergirded by the sense that a woman “frequently does not trust the capacity of her body to engage itself in physical relation to things. Consequently, she often lives her body as a burden, which must be dragged and prodded along, and at the same time protected.”⁸ This expressive and incarnate reality of feminine comportment – female *embodiment* – does not match up commensurately with Merleau-Ponty’s account of bodily intentionality and embodied being. His account presumes and articulates the stance of the male in a patriarchal cultural milieu, whereby he “locates intentionality in motility; the possibilities which are opened up in the world depend on the mode and limits of the bodily ‘I can.’ Feminine existence, however, often does not enter bodily relation to possibilities by its own comportment toward its surroundings in an unambiguous and confident ‘I can.’”⁹ Merleau-Ponty’s normative phenomenological perspective consequently fails to give an accurate or applicable accounting of female embodiment. Perhaps unintentionally through ignorance or as a consequence of the necessarily first person singular nature that the phenomenological perspective employs as its initial point of departure, his account fails to note the discrepancy between male and female embodiment with respect to the powers and capacities of motor intentionality.

⁷ Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl,” in *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33; 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

Young reads this as a major blind spot in Merleau-Ponty's thought, an ignorance that renders female embodiment as somehow deficient or defective when measured against the "norm" of the capable male. She reads this in terms of physical disability and handicap – an incredibly charged rhetorical term, yet a useful distinction that we shall return to later. She notes:

Women in sexist society are *physically handicapped*. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to us, a world constituted by our own intentions and projections.¹⁰

The relationship that female embodiment has to the world emerges in stark contrast to that of the account put forward by Merleau-Ponty (see above, Section I). Young's assessment portrays female embodiment in terms of limitation and burden – quite the opposite of Merleau-Ponty's articulation of the body schema and motor intentionality through the lens of possibility and power. Her account demonstrates an essential discontinuity, an insufficiency, and an incongruity between Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment (presumed "normative" or as an overarching perspective for all embodiment) and that of women in patriarchal society.

Beyond the incongruity of the Merleau-Ponty's normative (masculine) account with respect to female embodiment, his phenomenological lens proves normative to the exclusion of other modes of embodiment as well. In her now-famous 1989 essay, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description," Judith Butler assesses certain normative aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, in particular his account of the body as a sexed being. Her criticism of the normative masculine account of sexuality and affectivity prove convincing and have far-reaching implications. Beyond his exclusive use of heterosexual examples, Merleau-Ponty's account becomes most problematic when he grounds his account of sexuality in the person of (the male) Schneider, articulating sexuality through the lens of masculine patterns of arousal and eroticization.

Butler notes that while there appears an "openness" in Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality as a "modality of existence, the 'place' in which possibilities are realized and dramatized" rather than a merely "static or univocal fact of existence," such an openness is nonetheless deceptive.¹¹ Even though he draws from the experience of a young girl suffering from aphonia and insomnia when her affective desires and expressions are disrupted by exter-

¹⁰ Ibid., 42-3. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Judith Butler, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*," in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, eds. Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 86.

nal circumstances, Butler nonetheless reads Merleau-Ponty as decidedly masculinist in his approach to sexuality.¹² She notes that his descriptions of sexuality, “turn out to contain tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality,” a statement that proves true when considering his examples of the types of lovers or methods of arousal described.¹³ Yet Butler presses further, noting that Merleau-Ponty not only assumes that sexual relations are heterosexual, but “that the masculine sexuality is characterized by a disembodied gaze that subsequently defines its object as mere body.”¹⁴ Indeed, Merleau-Ponty does seemingly assume a masculinist perspective as an objectifying viewer when, without even questioning the “objectifying” and depersonalized nature of his example, he demonstrates Schneider’s abnormality by claiming that he no longer achieves arousal when confronted with the “perception of a body” or “obscene pictures.”¹⁵ For his part, however, Merleau-Ponty seems to assume that such a relationship between sexual patterns of arousal and an objectifying gaze is purely “normal” and “natural.” While Butler’s critiques prove helpful in unmasking certain presumptions that guide Merleau-Ponty’s assessment of sexuality in a decidedly masculinist, heterosexual manner, I nonetheless find that his account remains open to further exploration and expansion.

Against Butler, however, I would side more with a reading put forward by Gayle Salamon in her recent treatment of transgendered embodiment, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*. For her part, Salamon adopts a more sympathetic and constructive reading of Merleau-Ponty, mining his thought for potential resources and insights through which to articulate alternative modes of embodiment. She thus endeavors to expand his account of embodiment to include the non-normative – salvaging his work for wider phenomenological appropriation and applicability.

Salamon adopts a more sympathetic reading of Merleau-Ponty, and one which I find more commensurate with his writings on sexuality than Butler’s. While it is true, as Butler contends, that Merleau-Ponty adopts a decidedly masculine approach to sexuality (in particular) and embodiment

¹² See, for example, Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 163-5. Merleau-Ponty draws from this example of a girl who subsequently develops aphonia and insomnia upon being banned by her mother from seeing her lover. He uses this example to demonstrate how the body expresses “total existence” in a way that does not separate the signification or meaning from its incarnate manifestation (as if the bodily expression were merely an external accompaniment to the reality being expressed), but rather that the state being expressed – the real existing state – “accomplishes itself in the body. This embodied sense is the central phenomenon of which body and mind, or sign and signification are abstract moments” (169).

¹³ See Butler, 86.

¹⁴ Idem.

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 157. Butler similarly notes that the evidence given for such “sexual inertia” raises the question of what deeper “cultural presumptions would make arousal in such contexts seem utterly normal,” if not presumably the normalcy of an objectifying masculine gaze (Butler, 92).

(more broadly), his lack of engagement with the other types of embodiment does not preclude his thought from offering us valuable resources and readings for articulating non-normative gender and sexual identities. Salamon contends that Merleau-Ponty's masculine perspective does not constitute an exclusive commitment to a singular "normal," but rather that he displays an ignorance to other types of embodiment. His writings do not preclude the inclusion of alternative or non-normative styles of embodiment; he simply remains unaware of their qualitatively different perspectives. She outlines her project as one that, even despite the normative presumptions evident in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, nonetheless embraces the conceptual resources, insights, and possibilities latent within his project. For Salamon, "even given the dearth of attention to non-normative genders in this text, the phenomenological approach to the body that Merleau-Ponty offers... can be uniquely useful for understanding trans embodiment."¹⁶ Salamon undertakes a similar approach in her assessment of Merleau-Ponty's work along the lines of disability studies and crippled embodiment (as we shall later consider), showing a predilection for constructive emendation and revision, rather than leveling destructive critique and dispensing with his phenomenological framework entirely. Indeed, Salamon seeks out the avenues through which his work can be expanded without contradicting his project as a whole. She notes:

Perhaps the most vital aspect of phenomenology is its insistence that the body is crucial for understanding subjectivity, rather than incidental to or a distraction from it. And one of the most important aspects of the body is its manifestation and apprehension of sexuality. Though Merleau-Ponty has been criticized for his masculinist approach, his insistence that sexuality is vital for understanding both the human body and subjectivity *offers at least the promise of new ways of conceptualizing each that would seem to be aligned with feminism and trans studies.*¹⁷

Salamon highlights the value of Merleau-Ponty's insight into the link between sexuality as an affective and expressive dimension to corporeal human existence. She affirms the continued centrality of the body and goes on to embrace the essentially "ambiguous" nature of sexuality – something that can further assist in articulating non-normative gender identities and sexualities as a "more purposeful confounding" of rigid categories of sexual difference.¹⁸

Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality – while construed primarily according to the masculinist, objectifying gaze that Butler critiques – nonetheless includes a valuable insight and potential means of articulating the phenomenological reality of trans embodiment and queer sexuality. He also

¹⁶ Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 44

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44. Emphasis added

¹⁸ *Idem.*

underscores its overall centrality to the body as the affective dimension and expressive power which permeates and diffuses throughout my embodied existence. He observes, “sexuality can motivate privileged forms of my experience without being the object of an explicit act of consciousness. Thus understood as an ambiguous atmosphere, sexuality is coextensive with life.”¹⁹ This all-pervasive yet non-schematizable nature of sexuality reveals its essential coextensiveness with my embodied being yet in an ambiguous and indeterminate way – providing an avenue through which to critique and to question the presumption of rigidly fixed, purely heteronormative accounts of gender and sexuality. Salamon’s work thus sees resources and potential value to Merleau-Ponty’s nonetheless normative and masculinist approach – salvaging it for emendation and expansion without dispensing with or rejecting his work entirely.

Beyond critiques offered by feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology proves insufficient across racial differences, as well – a claim made clear in the rise of post-colonial critiques and philosophies of race. A truly exhaustive accounting of such critiques exceed the size and scope of this paper, although they are worth noting as prominent other strands of critique in amending or criticizing the normative account of embodiment put forward by the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Frantz Fanon notably supplements Merleau-Ponty’s perspective along the lines of race in his *Black Skin, White Masks*, noting the insufficiency of Merleau-Ponty’s all-encompassing account of embodiment to account for the clear difference in experience of an oppressed race in a racially-charged and oppressive milieu.²⁰

Fanon argues for the insufficiency of an all-inclusive, overarching account of embodiment – one that does not provide room for different types or modes of embodiment and so it consequently whitewashes any racial differences

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 172.

²⁰ See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008). For critical appropriations of Fanon’s thought with respect to Merleau-Ponty and modes of embodiment, see Cynthia R. Nielsen, “Resistance through re-narration: Fanon on de-constructing radicalized subjectivities,” in *African Identities*, Vol.9, No.4 (November 2011), 363-85. Nielsen observes that, “although appreciative of Merleau-Ponty’s emphasis on our embodied being-in-the-world, [Fanon] is ultimately unsatisfied with what he takes as the latter’s overly generic schema and thus introduces his notion of an historico-racial schema as that which is imposed by the white other. For Fanon, Merleau-Ponty’s inclusive, universal rendering of the corporeal schema does not account for the disparity of experience between white and blacks in a colonized and racially oppressive context” (367). Kristin Zeiler similarly situates Fanon as a helpful amendment to Merleau-Ponty’s thought, noting that despite its normative perspective, Fanon nonetheless “situates himself in a phenomenological tradition *and* shows how insufficient it is to examine the role of the body for human meaning-making without also examining how particular bodily features such as one’s skin-color can open the world in different ways in different contexts.” See Zeiler, K., “A Phenomenology of Excorporation, Bodily Alienation, and Resistance: Rethinking Sexed and Racialized Embodiment,” in *Hypatia* vol.28, no.1 (Winter 2013), 76.

to perspective and the felt sense of the body, its capacities, and its situation. And yet, rather than dismissing the overall project of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, he seeks to work from within the tradition and expand its frame of reference – amending Merleau-Ponty's account with a means to consider another means of embodiment.

Despite the wide-ranging and highly critical nature of the above critiques, I do not believe that Merleau-Ponty's failure to account for these alternative modes of embodiment necessitates a dismissal of his phenomenological project as such. His ignorance of non-normative perspectives of embodiment in the *Phenomenology of Perception* does not preclude their inclusion into the framework provided by his philosophy (as, for example, Fanon demonstrates and Salamon advocates). Nothing that Merleau-Ponty says explicitly forbids these non-normative modes of embodiment from phenomenological assessment on their own terms, and critical engagement with his thought enables us to fill in the lacunae left by his ignorance on these points – to flesh out his philosophy further and to give it a new dimension of appropriation and extension.

III. A More Radical Critique of Normativity: Reclaiming Alternative Embodiment through the Disabled Body

While post-colonial racial critiques, non-normative gender identities, queer theory, sexuality studies, and feminist perspectives all stand to offer valuable amendments and expansions to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, I find that accounts of normative embodiment can and must be challenged on a more primordial, originary level – that of physical disability and handicap of the embodied self.

I contend that the alternative perspectives provided by disabled embodiment lived differently stand to provide an invaluable corrective to Merleau-Ponty's otherwise normative account. I also claim that physical disability stands as the grounding and paradigmatic example of non-normativity – what I consider to be a “limit case” of non-normative embodiment at its most radical mode of incarnation. Through disability studies, we stand capable of articulating a genuinely alternative mode of embodiment that will overcome Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological normativity and open the door for the existence of multiple “modes” or “kinds” of embodiment. In doing so, I believe that we can similarly articulate other phenomenologically valid modes of embodiment without recourse to a normal.

Before progressing to consider narratives of disabled embodiment, I pause briefly to justify such a method. Above I make the rather startling claim that physical disability and handicap represent privileged cases and extreme examples that constitute a limit situation of non-normative

embodiment (more so than even race, gender, and sexuality). One may easily object that, aside from being yet another example of non-normative embodiment, how does physical handicap relate in any way to differences in gender, race, and sexuality – and how can we claim it to be a privileged case of non-normativity? I contend that physical disability offers us such a privilege way of articulating non-normative types of embodiment in two primary ways:

First and foremost, physical disability historically has been – and remains – the primary means of expressing any notion of “defective” or “deficient” embodiment against the norm (so much to the point that it has previously served as the overall category by which to construe the feminine, the queer, and the black).²¹ While in the biological and medical community almost no one would currently argue that women, divergent sexual orientations, and non-white races constitute a “defect” or disability of the human body, such arguments have prevailed as medical consensus and were advocated by some of philosophy’s greatest figures. In both the history of philosophy, theological discourse, and medical/biological explanations, the existence of different races, the female sex, and “deviant” sexual orientations/identities have been classified as forms of disability or handicap – a biological deficit when measured against the norm, made manifest in an uncontrollable and unwilling (yet unchangeable) mode of embodiment.²² Contemporary construals of physical disability and handicap, however, continue to be viewed in such terms – considered merely as disfiguration and deficit, and on a physical level this labeling continues to imply a deeper sense of biological, essential deficiency in its very nature. Even other non-normative embodied critiques, such as Iris Marion Young’s account as noted above, employ the incredibly broad and polemically charged term of “physical handicap” to describe the situation of women who experience their non-normative mode of embodiment as a burden, a pain, or limitation.²³ Far from a mere rhetor-

²¹ Again, one could similarly construe varying types of critiques – along the lines of class, socio-economic standing, religion, language, etc. – as those against which we should similarly challenge a normative perspective. My concern here, however, applies solely to those modes of *embodiment* for whom their very incarnate mode of existence, their body, becomes the site of such disruption, violence, and relegation as “defective.”

²² Notably, Aristotle, Galen, and Soranus considered women in such terms, noting them to be “defective” and “incomplete” men by virtue of inadequate heat during the gestational period. See Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals* 2.2-5, 4.1-3 and Soranus’ *Gynecology* 3.1-6. Similarly, philosophical treatments of non-normative sexualities labeled them as “intrinsically disordered” and “unnatural” in both Thomistic and natural law perspectives. Such arguments continue to hold sway in many theological articulations of human sexuality. Medically, such a position prevailed until 1974 when homosexuality remained a psychiatric disability in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 2nd edition (DSM-II)*. Similar means of labeling the racially different (specifically black individuals) as inferior or sub-human drove many of the pro-slavery positions throughout the Enlightenment and post-colonial period, even through the civil rights era.

²³ Young, “Throwing Like a Girl,” 42-3. Also see above, Section II, page 8.

ical device, physical handicap has served – and continues to function – as an overarching category and paradigmatic example of defect, deficit, and non-normativity. Attacking the last truly acceptable mode of “defective” embodiment would definitively liberate our phenomenological lenses from the normativity implied by the able-bodied. Further, once opening the path for genuinely alternative modes of embodiment at such a radical level, the possibility for the existence of multiple modes of non-normative embodiment in other ways similarly unfolds.

The second, and more methodological reason for adopting disability studies as a privileged mode of critiquing Merleau-Ponty, stems from the nature of his own case studies in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Unlike questions of race, gender, and sexuality, Merleau-Ponty himself recognizes disability and the pathological in his own writings and engages explicitly with them. As such, they provide not only a means of critiquing Merleau-Ponty’s account of normativity, but a direct avenue of entry into his thought itself for expansion and amendment from within.

Claiming the realm of physical handicap and disability as a privileged means of encountering non-normative modes of embodiment from within Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology itself, I turn to yet another constructive and nuanced account offered by Gayle Salamon vis-à-vis disabled embodiment. Salamon engages with Merleau-Ponty and more normative readings of his work on this front – further challenging normative accounts of embodiment through the perspective of two very different, extreme cases of physical disability.²⁴ Against his more normative perspectives, she posits narratives drawn from the embodied experience of two disabled women – one who acquires the disabling condition of Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA), the other crippled from birth with a progressive muscular degenerative disease. Salamon ultimately demonstrates how their narratives provide alternative accounts of living their embodiment *differently* – an alternative yet equally valid mode of embodiment. Salamon sets her discussion up not only against Merleau-Ponty’s account of normativity, but interpretations of his thought that continue to presume a patriarchal and normative reading of embodiment (such as that set forward by Hubert Dreyfus, arguing for a strong, able-bodied, “patriarchal” subject poised to “grip” and control the world).²⁵ Salamon proceeds to challenge both Merleau-Ponty and his

²⁴ Gayle Salamon, “The Phenomenology of Rheumatology: Disability, Merleau-Ponty, and the Fallacy of Maximal Grip,” in *Hypatia* (27/2), pp.245-6.

²⁵ It is worth noting at the outset of this conversation that Dreyfus’ article, “Intelligence without representation – Merleau-Ponty’s critique of mental representation,” in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* (2002), deals primarily with epistemological implications of Merleau-Ponty’s notions of maximal grip and the intentional arc. He situates these in the situation of skills known and acquired through instruction – as well as the ability to “know” such skills without objective representation. Nonetheless, he does assert that such motifs of absolute “control of my movements” and causation of said movements by the “gestalt formed by me and my situation” are the hallmarks of all intelligent human agents (380).

normative interpreters through the “disabled particularity” of an embodied life “lived differently.”²⁶

Salamon initially seems to set up Mary Felstiner’s narrative of disabling Rheumatoid Arthritis and Harriet McBryde Johnson’s account of crippled embodiment in contrast to Merleau-Ponty’s normative phenomenological perspective. Felstiner’s embodiment is characterized by pain and limitation, “a kind of dispossession, a loss of that proprioceptive privilege enjoyed or merely taken for granted by those who are not ill or infirm,” seemingly divorced from the “normal” perspective taken for granted by Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.²⁷ Yet as Salamon progresses in her assessment, she identifies not Merleau-Ponty’s account *per se* as problematic, but rather appropriations of his thought that characterize his “philosophy of embodiment as one of *maximal grip*,” a metaphor that proves inept and ill-suited when faced with the account of RA and disability.²⁸ The metaphorical use of *grip* as an expression of our “enmeshment” with the world, as well as its epistemological and subjective consequences, posit a strongly subjective, patriarchal and controlling embodied self – one which leaves no room for the comparatively weak, defective, and limited disabled body (a body that is “short-circuited by arthritis” and defined with respect to its limitations rather than its capabilities).

Much like her assessment of Merleau-Ponty vis-à-vis transgender studies, Salamon refuses to dispense with Merleau-Ponty *tout court*. She rather adopts an approach to preserve and to salvage his phenomenology, offering instead a friendly amendment to his thought through a more sympathetic reading. Consequently, Salamon rejects Dreyfus’ reading as misguided and unfaithful to the actual text of Merleau-Ponty. In the face of a self which “grips the world” and draws it closer to myself as I shape it, Salamon asserts that such a reading “ignores the aspects of relation and reversibility that are such vital components of the phenomenological world,” and her return to Merleau-Ponty’s accounts through the eyes of disabled embodiment conveys this quite strongly.²⁹ For both Salamon and Merleau-Ponty, I am not the sole agent who “grips” the world – but rather in my enmeshment with the world, the world ‘grips me’ in my embodied situation. She cites examples from Merleau-Ponty about being ‘invaded’ by a word and feeling it in the body, or of the patient Schneider needing to ‘take a grip’ in the face of a future unknown, in order to undermine the sense that “maximal grip” equates with epistemic and subjective mastery of a situation. Salamon ultimately ties this reading of Merleau-Ponty back to the situation of Felstiner suffering from RA, one who can no longer “grip” the world and yet is constantly gripped by her embodied situation of pain and limitation

²⁶ Salamon, “Phenomenology of Rheumatology,” 250.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 245.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 244.

within the world. This reading thus reverses Dreyfus' account of grip as control – instead viewing grip as a response to the impending *lack* of control vis-à-vis the world.

Salamon examines “grip” through the lens of disabled bodies as that which fundamentally changes the subject's interaction with the world. She reads the idea of maximal grip as both a bodily action “and a description of a style of being in the world,” and that such a life is “lived differently.”³⁰ In this way, she reclaims Merleau-Ponty as a potential resource for disability studies against more normative interpretations promoted by Dreyfus. Her reading salvages Merleau-Ponty's text from a normative interpretation of embodied being along the lines of patriarchy, epistemological mastery, and a unidirectional subjectivity by reasserting the “reversibility” of the world's grip and the experience of disabled/crippled women. Thus a space emerges through which alternative accounts of embodiment and the experience of living differently (even in pain, limitation, and reliance upon others) can be phenomenologically described – not purely one characterized by powers, capacities, and potential.

Although Merleau-Ponty employs disabled or pathological examples throughout the phenomenology of perception, he nonetheless fails to offer a robust phenomenological account of disabled embodied existence on its own terms.³¹ Disabled embodiment occupies a curious position in Merleau-Ponty's thought for, unlike the seeming ignorance of non-normative modes of embodiment along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality, Merleau-Ponty explicitly engages with examples of disabled individuals, the physically handicapped, and pathological patients. Their example holds open a window within the *Phenomenology of Perception* itself for articulating a genuinely alternative mode of embodiment that need not stand in relation to the norm as simply “defective,” “pathological,” or “deficient.”

In the wake of Salamon's reading, if Dreyfus' interpretation of maximal grip is no longer the defining characteristic of embodiment, disabled embodiment can stand as a valid form or type of embodiment *in itself*. It can emerge as its own kind of embodiment, open to assessment and consideration on its own terms, rather than simply as a marred subset of a singular type of embodiment that is able-bodied, healthy, and normative.

Merleau-Ponty himself even seems to recognize this at several points throughout the *Phenomenology of Perception*, although he fails to pursue it further and articulate non-normative embodiment on its own terms. Even when he employs examples from the experiences of a child or a patient, he refuses to subsume them under a singular, overarching mode of embodiment characterized as “the normal,” to which these experiences would then

³⁰ Ibid., 247.

³¹ See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 144-5 for his discussion of a blind man using a cane in order to demonstrate the essential malleability and expansive powers of the body schema. His recourse to the case of Schneider throughout the work is evident.

relate in a somehow deficient way. Faced with the apparent deficits of the patient or the child in relation to a healthy adult, he observes, "it cannot be a question of simply transferring to the normal person what is missing in the patient and what he is trying to recover. Illness, like childhood or like the 'primitive' state, is a complete form of existence...."³² The normal does not stand as the sole, complete and perfect mode of embodiment to which everything else must somehow relate or from which they derive, but rather we must treat these variants "as modalities and variations of the subject's total being."³³ These alternative modes of embodiment (be it childhood, the pathological, or disability) are, in themselves, complete and total modes of being on their own terms that cannot be schematized merely in relation to a singular "normal" as deficits or defects.

Merleau-Ponty similarly contends elsewhere that we cannot employ the "normal" to measure the perceptions and experiences of the child or the patient as a lower state of a more proper, normal perspective. With respect to the perception and experience of colors, a real change in the structure of consciousness must be accounted for instead of attempting to situate these experiences along a spectrum experienced by the healthy adult. Merleau-Ponty notes this in his criticism of psychologism, writing, "We cannot compare these phenomena occupying the place of color for the child to any determinate quality, and likewise the patient's 'strange' colors cannot be identified with any colors of the spectrum. The first perception of colors, properly so called, is thus a change in the structure of consciousness, the institution of a new dimension of experience...."³⁴ Merleau-Ponty recognizes that these experiences and perceptions differ in a more radical, qualitative way than simply being a lower gradation on a spectrum (in which the healthy adult represents the highest, most perfect, and normative form against which all others are measured). Merleau-Ponty thus seems to recognize these alternative types of embodiment which open onto their own uniquely-conditioned worlds.

Similarly, disabled embodiment does not stand as a lower rung on the ladder of normalcy defined by the healthy adult body. If, as Merleau-Ponty claims, the body truly stands "as the mediator of a world," by which the individual "is his [*sic*] body and his body is the power for a certain world," then these alternative types of embodiment open onto their own experiences of the world in an alternative livability – not merely a defective or deficient one.³⁵ Rather than stripping the disabled (or the child, or the patient) of a world, we can posit an alternative type of world in which they inhabit. Returning to Felstiner's narrative, Salamon notes that, if we adopt a normative reading, "Felstiner should be utterly de-worlded by this loss of her

³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 110.

³³ *Idem*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 109, 146.

hands...without the capacity for maximal grip, does she then have no world at all?"³⁶ Such a fate would also befall Johnson, not having the use of her legs and thus relegated to a position of immobility. Yet Merleau-Ponty's account of even the pathological and the childlike does not allow for such a "de-worlding" of these alternative embodiments – they rather emerge as their own forms of "total being," an embodiment lived differently which opens onto a world of alternative livability.

Even in asserting disabled embodiment as an alternative phenomenological perspective, Salamon argues with a great deal of nuance by presenting two accounts of disability in dialogue with normalcy *as well as* with each other. Johnson's experience cannot merely be equated with Felstiner's as simply "disabled," for clear differences persist which prevent our glossing over any particularities in their accounts. She contrasts Felstiner's account of an acquired RA disability with Johnson's radically different narrative (crippled from birth by a progressive degenerative illness) to demonstrate that a phenomenology of disabled embodiment need not imply a homogenization of differences.³⁷ Cautious against slipping into a universalizing or normative account, she posits a phenomenological category without homogenizing the variety it contains.

Similarly, other critics recognize the inability to universalize and homogenize other "non-normative" perspectives while nonetheless offering a useful (and valid) phenomenological category to describe real experiences. Returning to Iris Marion Young's feminist critiques, she recognizes that any perspective of a non-normative body can only assert itself as a "mode" of embodiment if it simultaneously recognizes that it cannot simply "become" a new norm. A level of variability and difference must continue to exist, and yet the category nonetheless proves useful in articulating some similarity without homogenizing all individuality and the particular nature of one's experience. Young, recognizing this paradoxical limitation, notes:

I speak from my own experience, which...is particular and limited, and it is possible that it most resonate among white, middle-class, heterosexual professional women in late capitalist society. I believe that some of the experience I express resonates with that of other women, but that is for them to say. *The differences among women do not circumscribe us within exclusive categories, but the only way we can know our similarities and differences is by each of us expressing our particular experience.*³⁸

Young articulates the reality of a larger phenomenological category that nonetheless must (and does) preserve heterogeneity within the group. While very real differences in situation, embodiment and experience do

³⁶ Salamon, "Phenomenology of Rheumatology," 246.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

³⁸ See Iris Marion Young, "Women Recovering Our Clothes," in *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 69.

exist, they do not lapse into entirely relativistic and independent perspectives by virtue of being “outside” the norm. Clear similarities exist even in the face of such differences – the reality of which enables an overarching phenomenological category to apply without effacing individuality and uniqueness of situation. Or, as Young observes elsewhere, “The situation of women within a given socio-historical set of circumstances, despite the individual variation in each woman’s experience, opportunities, and possibilities, *has a unity which can be described and made intelligible.*”³⁹ This unity enables a real and valid phenomenological category to apply without superficially glossing over differences.

In a similar way for Salamon, bringing Felstiner and Johnson as counter-examples to Dreyfus’ reading show that disabled embodiment may exist as an alternative type of embodiment, and yet by highlighting the differences between Felstiner and Johnson she equally prevents us from superficially labeling all disabled embodiment as a singular, uniform experience in itself.⁴⁰ The variability within the category allows for different phenomenological perspectives and experiences, though the larger category as a type of embodiment enables us to consider central aspects that are shared by its particular incarnations. We thus avoid an unwarranted whitewashing of all individuality and variants within a category (or setting it up as a normative paradigm against which the individuals will be measured) without simultaneously slipping into an entirely individualized, relativistic view of embodiment.

By viewing disabled individuals as embodied human subjectivity lived *differently* rather than *deficiently*, we gain the ability to consider the possibility for “types” or “kinds” of embodiment in a separate (yet equally valid) phenomenological category. This consequently opens a space through which to articulate new perspectives on *different* embodiment without homogenizing individuals and indiscriminately lumping them all together, but also without ignoring similarities that distinguish larger classes, types, or modes of embodiment.

When pressed to its most radical reading, the accounts of disabled embodiment undermine the notion of normative human embodiment at its root – glimpsing the possibility for distinct “types” or “kinds” of

³⁹ Young, “Throwing Like a Girl,” 29.

⁴⁰ The divergent experiences of the two women are striking, as Salamon observes. Despite the seemingly shared experience of ‘disabled embodiment,’ they encounter and view the world in opposite terms. Felstiner defines her bodily enmeshment in the world according to its *limitations* vis-à-vis her disability, while Johnson views her body as a horizon of capability. They even view their relationship with their own bodies in different ways. Salamon contrasts the two, noting, “Johnson insists that she is not separable from her body, that she *is* her body. The different is that for Felstiner, this condition of being her body replaces a previous condition of having had the luxury of ignoring it, the privilege of the normate body. For Felstiner, that body both is her life and is a hindrance to it. By contrast, Johnson’s body and her life have never been separable” (259).

embodiment that are not simply subsets of what one considers the normative perspective. Indeed, differing kinds of embodiment seem possible in the wake of such a critique – types of embodiment that can similarly be employed constructively to consider non-normative gender, sexuality and race. Through the perspective of disability studies and other incarnations of non-normative embodiment, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy lends itself to such a constructive intervention. Valid and fruitful phenomenological categories thus emerge to challenge the monopolizing, totalizing scope of the phantasmal "normal," enabling us to articulate the embodied experiences of these alternative modes on their own terms – and thereby offering a more authentic means of articulating the lived experience of embodied human subjectivities.

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