



# Modality Matters: Imagination as Consciousness of Possibilities and Husserl's Transcendental-Historical Eidetics

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## Abstract

The paper contends that transcendental phenomenology is a form of radical immanent critique able to explicate the necessary structures of meaning-constitution as well as evaluate our present situation through the historically traditionalized layers of concrete, lived experience. In order to make this case, the paper examines the critical dimension of phenomenology through the lens of one of its core conditions for possibility: the imagination. Building on—yet also departing from—Husserl's own analyses, the paper contends that the imagination is both self- and lifeworld-constituting. The imagination is anchored in our everyday senses of self and world as well as able to distance itself from being naively moored in normalized and deeply sedimented commitments. It is precisely this 'anchored distance,' rather than a sweeping doxic and ontic neutrality and negative freedom, that reveals the critical dimension of the imagination.

The critical dimension of transcendental phenomenology is multifaceted. Phenomenology's resonance with Kantian critique is straightforward enough<sup>1</sup>—both philosophical projects focus on necessary conditions for the possibility of experience. Beyond this, Husserl's *Crisis* investigations exhibit distinctive, historical-critical features, such as his examination of the historicity and traditionality of theoretical thought. Yet neither of these facets exhaust phenomenology's critical power. In gesturing toward phenomenology's critical depths, Husserl stresses that our task is very much a task 'from within' (Hua VI, p. 72).<sup>2</sup> Phenomenological critique is *immanent*

<sup>1</sup> For rich discussions of the points of resonance and dissonance between Kantian and Husserlian projects, see Carr (1974), Dodd (2004) and Jansen (2015).

<sup>2</sup> For full references to the *Husserliana* volumes (Hua hereafter), please see the shared bibliography for the *Husserl Studies* special issue this paper is part of.

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critique: its work unfolds through the sedimented thickness of our lived experience and present situation (Hua VI, p. 71). It involves a distinctive kind of reflection (*Besinnung*), oriented toward pre-given, obvious, covert grounds and goals, including its own. Phenomenological reflection is thus self-reflection (*Selbstbesinnung*), original and ever renewed, holding itself in tension (Hua VI, p. 185)—an infinite task (Hua VI, pp. 19, 122, 319) that takes its starting point from the lived historical situation in which the phenomenologically reflecting subject finds herself and examines the philosophical (and scientific) tasks that this history presents. Phenomenology is thus also a *radical* critique, given its distinct transcendental-eidetic orientation toward *its own* necessary and contingent conditions for possibility.

At its core, *transcendental phenomenology understood as radical immanent critique is a modal affair* (Hua V, p. 56): its pursuit of transcendental necessities unfolds through a careful noetic-noematic mapping of possibilities and impossibilities. In its historical-eidetic guise, transcendental phenomenology studies what sustains and articulates our efforts of ‘rendering intelligible’ in the broadest sense of the term. It is my contention, building on Husserl’s late synthetic-genetic and generative work, that phenomenology accomplishes this task of delineating transcendental necessities through a careful mapping of lived possibilities and impossibilities.

As such, all phenomenological analyses are *diagnostic*: in working toward the transcendently necessary, these analyses shed light on sedimented, traditionalized, and communalized contingences parading as metaphysically, epistemically, practically, axiologically, normatively necessary. Thus, not only are phenomenology’s transcendental-eidetic method and orientation *not obstacles* to studying contingency (Oksala 2016), but it is precisely *in virtue of this very method and task* that phenomenology can perform incisive analyses of the normalized and naturalized. Furthermore, given their *diagnostic* power, phenomenological analyses are also *prescriptive*: they hold the critical potential of opening and motivating new, less violent, less oppressive manners and styles of meaning constitution.

To study lifeworld-constitution is to study what orders, undergirds, and sustains all endeavors, including theoretical ones. This is our starting point, according to Husserl. His challenge seems *prima facie* an ineffable, paradoxical task: we must *study order within order*<sup>3</sup> in a radically self-reflective manner. The radical re-orientation we perform must remain moored in this order, faithful to it and to its evidence. Yet it must also *distance* itself from it by performing what Merleau-Ponty (2012) so aptly described in his Preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception* as a ‘loosening the threads’ of the fabric of our reality. What kind of ‘distancing’ is at play here—at once *within* this very thicket and *without* it, unwinding of its tightly-woven binds? What makes such *critical distance* possible?

Unsurprisingly, it was Husserl himself who proffered an answer to this question. The imagination (Hua III/1, §70).<sup>4</sup> And yet despite making this case as both

<sup>3</sup> Husserl’s emphatic position regarding the immanent dimension of phenomenology is directly opposed to a (still) widely circulating misconception that Husserl advocated for a ‘disinterested’ and ‘detached’ spectator who, as it were, puts herself ‘outside’ matters (rather than in the midst of them).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of how this distancing work differs from the shift in attitude at work in the reductions, see Aldea (2020).

his methods and his studies evolved, the paradoxical matter of this radical distance remained. An examination of phenomenology as radical immanent critique requires a close analysis of the imagination, and of the latter's methodological and critical import, especially as condition for the possibility of the radical *Besinnung* Husserl tasks us with. What follows seeks to vindicate Husserl's haunting thought, which, while ever-present in the background of his life's work, nevertheless most phantomlike of all. Yet my analyses also depart from how he came to explicate this distance—one indeed pertaining to the imagination.

Ultimately, through the study of the imagination as that which fuels phenomenology's modal core, the paper raises an important methodological question: *do our historically conditioned accomplishments* (e.g., styles of being, doing, knowing) *shape the noetic structures conditioning our experiences and if so, how?* If not all transcendently necessary, meaning-constituting structures are ahistorical and invariant—*eidetic* in Husserl's narrow sense of the term—then we must decouple *transcendental necessity* from *ahistorical invariance*. It is my contention that the former may involve the latter but need not. As we shall see, it is precisely through imagining possibilization<sup>5</sup> that we, as phenomenologists, can raise and engage such questions.

## 1 Departing from Husserl on the Imagination

Despite his own doubts regarding the results of the methods he employed in his study of the imagination well into the mid-1920s (Hua XXIII, pp. 341, 509, 552, 578-9), despite courting the view that the imagination and positional consciousness are intricately intertwined (Hua XXIII, pp. 509, 575ff.), and despite gradually leaving the language of irreality behind, replacing it with the language of possibilities (Hua XXIII, pp. 548-9), Husserl's binary approach to the study of the imagination unnecessarily limits our understanding of this form of consciousness, including its crucial, critical import. On Husserl's model, the imagination both seems to lack a hand in lifeworld-constitution and, as a detached mode of experiencing, it appears to hold little/no traction in our positional everyday experiences and our evaluation of them. I have argued elsewhere against what I refer to as Husserl's 'binary' and 'negative' manner of analyzing the imagination—namely, by *comparing* and, importantly, *contrasting* it to perception (Aldea 2019); I have also sought to clarify this manner's problematic implications (Aldea 2020). For the purposes of my discussions here, let me briefly note what I deem the most problematic aspects and implications of Husserl's binary account:

- (a) Imagining consciousness is coextensive with the 'as if' form of consciousness, which Husserl describes as ontically and doxically 'impotent' (*kraftlos*). Unlike

<sup>5</sup> I use 'possibilization' and 'possibility constitution' interchangeably.

- perception, the imagination is thus ‘emasculated’ (*entmannt*) (Hua XXIII, p. 505).
- (b) The imagination is *a kind of neutral consciousness*, without doxic commitments.<sup>6</sup> As such, it does not relate to any thematic sphere (Hua XXIII, pp. 577); thus, imagining consciousness is marked by *disinterestedness* in any position taking (Hua XXIII, p. 560).
  - (c) The *negative freedom* (freedom from positions) of the imagination appears absolute. Its arbitrariness, unconditioned. Its engagement of irreal objects, optional (*beliebig*) through and through.
  - (d) The imagination also *lacks all teleology and motivation of its own* (Hua XXIII, pp. 238, 435-6, 577). It can only ‘borrow’ motivational orientations (Hua XXIII, p. 577/695).
  - (e) Given their self-transparency (Hua XXIII, pp. 509-14, 517), due in part to what Husserl refers to as ‘consciousness of difference’ (Hua XXIII, pp. 20, 41, 156), imagining experiences *also do not sustain processes of modality modification*, such as doubt.
  - (f) *There is a qualitative incompatibility between perception and imagination* (and their respective correlates; Hua XXIII, pp. 48-9, 376, 557-60; Husserl 1973, §§8, 40): there is a concrete rift between them (not solely a structural one) that neatly separates them *without contamination* (Hua XXIII, 451ff.).<sup>7</sup>
  - (g) In its ‘purity’ (Hua XXIII, pp. 443, 534, 548-550, 561-3, 578) and negative freedom (Hua XXIII, pp. 253-4, 379, 443, 451ff., 513-4, 550-1, 561-2, 579, 585), the imagination is *dis-connected from the lifeworld* (Husserl 1973, §§39, 65, 74, 89, 91; Hua I, §34; Hua XXIII, p. 514). As such, *the imagination is not lifeworld-constituting*. Its arbitrary, playful, optional business lies elsewhere (Hua XXIII, p. 514).<sup>8</sup>

In order to explicate the imagination with an eye for its self- and lifeworld-constituting role as well as its critical potential, I depart from Husserl’s model and introduce a new noetic dimension—what I refer to as ‘stance’ (*Stellung*).<sup>9</sup> I contend that

<sup>6</sup> It is unclear throughout Husserl’s analyses what other forms of neutral consciousness there are in the natural attitude. For more on this point, see Aldea (2019). Husserl describes the neutrality pertaining to the imagination in broad terms, which is what the ‘doxa’ refers to here. Willing, emotions, judgements, memories and all acts founded on imagining acts likewise exhibit this neutrality. *Phantasiemodifikation* and neutrality modification share this sweeping neutralizing feature.

<sup>7</sup> Acts involving both positional and non-positional apprehensions, such as *Bildbewusstsein*, retain this conflict at their core (see Aldea 2013).

<sup>8</sup> If we acknowledge, with Husserl, the interconnectedness of all noetic-noematic correlations in the life of consciousness as a whole, we can at most deem the imagination indirectly and passively as lifeworld-constituting.

<sup>9</sup> While Husserl uses ‘*Stellung*,’ the term refers narrowly to various acts’ (e.g., memory) orientation (‘positioning’) toward determinate objects (the accomplishment of what, in his *Fifth Logical Investigation* (Hua XIX/1, LU V, §20), Husserl refers to as ‘*Materie*’). Often Husserl uses *Stellung* and *Einstellung* interchangeably. I opt here for *Stellung* rather than *Einstellung* in the attempt to stress the difference between ‘stance’ as I understand it and Husserl’s notion of ‘attitude.’

the imagination is one of two basic stances pertaining to the natural attitude (*Einstellung*), along with the *normalizing stance*.<sup>10</sup> While primarily pertaining to the natural attitude, whose correlate is the lifeworld understood as the overarching ‘order’ sustaining all systems of possibilities (Hua VI, pp. 163, 166–7, 459–460; Husserl 1973, §8; Hua I, §60), these two stances also cut across personalistic, naturalistic, objective, and phenomenological attitudes. By introducing ‘stance’ in the sense above, the model I propose uncovers the imagination’s critical dimension. In my view, it is necessary to distinguish between these two basic stances, something Husserl did not do, in order to explicate the dynamic character of the lifeworld, which so clearly comes to light precisely in the methodological sections of the *Crisis*.<sup>11</sup> *The dynamic temporal structure of the lifeworld is understandable only if the imagination has such a constitutive function.*

In contrast to his static analyses of the imagination, in his investigations of perceptual consciousness, Husserl drew extensively on his synthetic-genetic and historical-generative methods. Perception—and, by extension, positional consciousness—retained primacy for him as the founding mode of experience undergirding all self- and lifeworld-constitution. There are, in my view, two interconnected reasons for this: first, Husserl deemed perceptual consciousness positional through and through; second, he had a rather ‘thin’ understanding of positionality (*Setzung*; Hua XXIII, pp. 217, 239ff., 443) understood as the basic doxic (*protodoxic*) commitment to the reality and actuality of the correlates of experience (Hua III/1, §15; Hua XXIII, pp. 548, 567–70).

We begin here with two important notes: 1) what I refer to as the ‘normalizing stance’ is not coextensive with Husserl’s positional consciousness. The former may be positional but can also be non-positional. Likewise, what I propose as the ‘imagining stance’ is not coextensive with Husserl’s non-positional consciousness; in fact, one of my main points of departure from Husserl’s analyses lies precisely here: *I propose that the imagination is positional (setzend) in a distinctive sense.* And 2), my notion of ‘normalization’ differs from Husserl’s. For Husserl, normalization either pertains to optimality and structures of concordance/discordance (Hua XIV, No.16 and Appx. XIII, XIV, LXVI) or it refers to our negotiation of interests in his generative analyses of communalization, historicity, and culture-constitution (Hua IV, §18b; Hua VI, §§9, 28, 32–33, 35–37, 40–44, 51–52).

## 2 Normalized Modalities

Drawing on Husserl’s synthetic-genetic as well as later historical-generative methods and analyses, we can identify multiple articulators and delineators of our systems of possibilities—I will refer to these as ‘modality organizers.’ Modality organizers are transcendently necessary structures that condition meaning-constitution

<sup>10</sup> I use ‘imagination’ and ‘imagining stance’ interchangeably.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., Hua VI, §§9, 15. Heinämaa (2019) convincingly explicates the kind of unity pertaining to the lifeworld in terms of a distinctive transformative openness as opposed to a mere infinity.

(systemically so): from time consciousness, structures of synthesis, our body schema, to different kinds of passive and/or active modification, structures of motivation, valuation, affectivity, typification, communalization, renewal... These noetic structures' noematic correlates likewise play a key constitutive role. They, too, undergird the manners in which we come to deem our lifeworld intelligible and negotiable (or not). Thus, types (Husserl 1973, §§8–9; Hua XI, p. 186; Hua VI, p. 49), sedimented and communalized styles of being, doing, and knowing (Hua VI, pp. 22–3; Hua IV, §18b), traditionalized accomplishments and establishments (*Stiftungen*)—including normative, axiological, and praxiological (passive or active) commitments—all delineate our systems of lived possibilities (Hua XXIII, p. 548).

Modality organizers also articulate how these possibilities are interconnected and what the limits of the accepted, normal, and optimal order are—beyond which the extra-ordinary (*ausgezeichnet*) lies. What makes these possibilities and impossibilities 'lived' are the manners in which they are given: how we relate to them in the context of our life projects and endeavors. These 'manners' are our senses of 'I can' and 'I cannot,' which color our experiences of possibilities in natural and theoretical attitudes alike. 'I can' and 'I cannot' are noetic moments pertaining to all forms of experience. Thus, on my model, these terms do not refer solely or primarily to (practical) capacities; they cover passive and active volitional and normative dimensions as well.<sup>12</sup> Broadening the concept of 'I can' beyond Husserl's original kinaesthetic sense (Hua IV, pp. 258ff.) will help us analyze the interconnected ways in which we experience lived possibilities and impossibilities in both the normalizing and imagining stances.

In the normalizing stance, possibilities are expectationally given in an assumptive manner (Hua VI, pp. 49, 138, 145, 170, 176; Hua VII, p. 271; Hua VIII, p. 148; Husserl 1973, §8, 40); they are delineated in advance (Hua VII, p. 275; Hua I, §27). Thus, what I experience as *conceivable* (experience-able, possible), *realizable* (Hua IV, pp. 258ff, Hua XV, pp. 328, 621, Hua XXVIII, pp. 220–1), *probable* (*vermütlich*, Hua XV, p. 94), *potentiable*—what 'I could' accomplish (*vermöglich*, Hua XV, pp. 203ff.) are all conditioned by my senses of 'I can/I cannot.'<sup>13</sup>

For example, my sense of 'I cannot seamlessly inhabit a certain space'—say, as a woman, walking at night, alone, in a foreign (or familiar) city—colors certain possibilities as *inconceivable for me*. These inconceivable possibilities are given as *lived impossibilities*. To say that a possibility is inconceivable<sup>14</sup> for me—to say that I experience it as a lived impossibility—amounts to its givenness to me *as limit, as loss, or as foreclosure*. Its indelible finality orients and delineates my holistic style of being in the world. *It is precisely this 'givenness as limit, loss, or foreclosure,' along with the finality that colors it, that the imagination can interrupt.*

<sup>12</sup> For an insightful account of our sense of 'I cannot' through the lens of 'affective closure,' see Al-Saji (2014).

<sup>13</sup> In fact, these modal qualifiers are all noematic layers corresponding to 'I can' and 'I cannot' understood as noetic layers of all experiences.

<sup>14</sup> While it is true that the German term for 'conceivability' (*Denkbarkeit*) Husserl opted for does suggest a predicative reading, we should avoid an intellectualist interpretation, see Aldea (2019, 2020).

Keeping these possibility-articulating structures in mind, we can sketch the key features of *normalizing possibilization*. In the normalizing stance, which is largely positional in Husserl's sense, possibility constitution unfolds in three distinctive ways. Here possibilities are given as: 1) *real or actual*—they are 'enticing' (Hua XI, pp. 40ff.), expectationally charged, given that something speaks in favor of them (Hua XXIII, p. 582; Hua VIII, pp. 53, 148); 2) *problematic*, departing from the expectational range; as Husserl shows, when our expectations are disappointed (Hua XI, §§22, 46; Husserl 1973, §21b), we passively and/or actively seek to reinstate the pre-given systemic order by re-inscribing 'deviant' modalities into familiar articulations; and, 3) *open possibilities*—'indifferent,' 'equally possible' or 'not eliciting interest'...this is a sense of 'neutrality' that Husserl largely reserves for non-positional possibilities (Hua VIII, pp. 45–55).

What thus transpires about the normalizing stance is, first, that it is *resistant to change* given its *adversity to conflict* and given its orientation toward stability and harmony.<sup>15</sup> The normalizing stance is also *forgetting*, given its tendency to sediment and passively reinforce the principles articulating the system of possibilities 'in advance.' The overarching thematic interest of the normalizing stance is 'pinning down once and for all' (Husserl 1973, §47) our lifeworld understood as a system of (pre-given) meanings, values, and possibilities. It is for this reason that unproblematic possibilities exhibit a strong allure (*Reiz*; Hua XI, §§32–35), drawing us in, passively affecting us (Hua XI, p. 149) in associative manners (Hua XI, §§33–35).

Second, re-inscribing that which is extra-ordinary (the different, the unfamiliar, the strange, the anomalous, the discordant, the deviant...) back into the ordinary also renders the normalizing stance *naturalizing*.<sup>16</sup> As such, the normalizing attitude establishes *hierarchies of concepts, principles, and values* by following an exclusionary logic of acceptable vs. unacceptable (e.g., the epistemic, normative, and axiological layers conditioning my style of being as a gendered street walker). As such, naturalization—the process of ossifying the contingent 'into' the necessary—not only covers over the contingent character of these hierarchies, giving them the patina of unquestionable necessity; the very systems of lived possibilities and impossibilities they govern also borrow this indelible character. The normalizing stance has a heavy hand in what we deem 'possible' or 'impossible,' 'realizable' or 'unrealizable,' 'valuable,' 'of interest' in our everyday and theoretical endeavors alike.

All of these features of the normalizing stance constitute our styles of being, which in turn condition our 'grip on our lifeworld' (Heinämaa 2003, p. 44). They anchor us in our situatedness.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, all *evaluative* dimensions pertaining to normalizing experiences are similarly oriented toward re-instating familiar orders.

<sup>15</sup> See Husserl's synthetic-genetic analyses of positional constitution (Hua XI), communalization and intersubjectivity (Hua XIII–XV), his historical and genetic *Crisis* discussions of lifeworld-constitution, and concordance (*Übereinstimmung*; cf., Hua IV, §18c–d).

<sup>16</sup> The notion of naturalization I rely on here should not be confused with Husserl's usage of the term 'naturalistic,' which refers to the attitude largely pertaining to the natural sciences and to their objectivistic methods (cf., Hua IV, §§ 34, 49).

<sup>17</sup> Husserl captures the complexity of such processes in his analyses of modality modification, especially his analyses of doubt (Hua XI, pp. 229–30, Husserl 1973, §67).



What this means is that the normalizing stance is also inherently *uncritical*: there is a sense of *endorsed, accepted finality* coating our experience of possibilities. In this stance, even second order evaluative experiences fall in line with established articulating principles. Here, self-reflection, too, is normalizing and naturalizing.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever plasticity (Husserl 1973, §67a) the normalizing stance might exhibit at most extends to this stance's ability to adapt, with the minimal required effort, when facing conflict. Any sense that things 'could be otherwise' does not depart from this fairly rigid plasticity. Put differently, *the emergence of new possibilities strictly unfolds within the established normalizing articulation*.

Finally, the teleological orientation toward stability the normalizing stance exhibits also cuts across generational communalizing practices, as Husserl's sophisticated generative accounts show—especially in his studies of intersubjectivity, normativity and norm constitution (Hua XIV, pp. 34–38), renewal as constant historical transformation (Hua XV, pp. 181, 391), culture-constitution (Hua XXVII, pp. 4f., 21, 33), traditionality, and historicity (Hua VI, pp. 13–14).<sup>19</sup> This is also what Husserl captures through the 'seduction' and 'entelechy' of *styles of being* in his *Crisis* analyses of the lifeworld (Hua VI, pp. 28–9).

### 3 The Imagining Stance: Re-Articulating Systems of Possibilities

My analysis of the imagining stance questions Husserl's claims that the imagination is fully free, neutral, and arbitrary in its engagement of possibilities—*especially the view that the imagination deems all possibilities equal without prioritization*, which is what Husserl's language of 'any whatsoever' or 'free play' entails.<sup>20</sup> Neutrality modification (Hua III/1, §§109–112) does not govern the modification at work in imagining consciousness. Nor is the imagination 'disconnected from' and 'disinterested in'—without motivation and teleology—our everyday endeavors; furthermore, the imagination is not merely a singular, solipsistic affair (Hua XXIII, pp. 550, 567), but deeply intersubjective in its own right.<sup>21</sup> *What emerges on the synthetic-genetic and generative model I propose is that the imagination as basic stance (Stellung) of the natural attitude is positional and motivated in distinctive—not merely borrowed—ways, and that as such, it is both self- and lifeworld-constituting*, which Husserl's static analyses failed to capture. This, in turn, sheds light on the transformative and critical import of the imagination, including the methodological role it plays in phenomenological analyses themselves.

First, let us note that Husserl laterally addressed the epistemic, normative, and axiological complexities of the imagination. According to him, imagining

<sup>18</sup> Recall here Husserl's own description of the 'small sphere of freedom' pertaining to positional consciousness (Hua XXIII, pp. 535/641–42).

<sup>19</sup> For an insightful discussion of renewal and culture-constitution, see Steinbock (1994).

<sup>20</sup> For a careful account of possibility kinds, see Zhok (2016). Elsewhere, I delve deeper into these issues, see Aldea (2019).

<sup>21</sup> Take, for instance, the power of regulative and teleological fictions, esp. in socio-cultural and political contexts.



experiences can involve commitments (Hua XXIII, pp. 557–8), which are largely conceptual (Hua XXIII, p. 434; Hua III/1, §§ 65–6; Husserl 1973, §80; Hua VI, pp. 111, 166, 366), governing predicative and typifying processes oriented toward irreal objects (Hua XXIII, pp. 501, 570, 580). These concepts and commitments in principle make possible experiences of conflict and incompatibility with respect to these objects' predicates and relations (Hua XXIII, pp. 549, 568). Despite these explications, Husserl consistently emphasized that all of these epistemic, axiological, and normative processes unfold under the aegis of the 'quasi' and the 'as if.' In other words, none of these experiences involve actual conflicts, which suggests that imagining experiences are ultimately 'all bark and no bite' when it comes to their relevance for self- and lifeworld-constitution.

Departing from this view and its implications, I contend that like the normalizing stance, the imagining stance, too, involves modality organizers, which articulate systems of possibilities in a *positional* rather than neutral, 'quasi' manner. Imagining consciousness is neither a type of neutral, 'impotent,' 'as if' consciousness nor is it coextensive with it. *What emerges is a qualitatively distinct sense of imagining positionality (Setzung), driven by a distinctive kind of modification (Modifikation)*—not to be confused either with neutrality modification or with Husserl's *Phantasiemodifikation* understood as a type of neutrality modification. In turn, this new look at imagining positionality and modification clarifies the multifaceted ways in which the imagination is anchored in, constitutive of, and relevant to the lifeworld and our negotiation of it.

The systems of imagining possibilities are not completely divorced from, nor are they 'arbitrary,' 'optional, or 'unconditioned by' our lifeworld (Hua XXIII, p. 535), but very much anchored in and sustaining of it. My senses of 'I can' and 'I cannot' also condition how I experience *imagining possibilities*: these possibilities, too, are *conceivable* or *inconceivable* for me given the parameters of my epistemic, normative, axiological, praxiological, and teleological commitments (passive and active).<sup>22</sup> Thus, these commitments do not solely pertain, 'by decision,' to my 'phantasized self/ego' (Hua XXIII, pp. 560, 566–7, 576, 583–4)—say a version of myself in a daydream where I am a fearless *flâneuse* and skilled fighter able to defend herself against predators lurking in the shadows of dark alleys. These commitments also pertain to me as the imagining self, rooted in my everyday sense of myself, others, and the lifeworld. Imagining possibilities of being, of doing, of knowing, or of feeling necessarily involves self-imagining—even if the focus is not on imagining the self, as in the case of an active process of self-variation (Hua IV, §34), but on the modalities themselves. *All imagining is, passively or actively, directly or indirectly, self-imagining. In other words, imagining entails—at some level—both action and identity: what I, as a person, can do and who I am.* It is for this reason that processes of self-imagining are crucial for critique and self-critique.

We should also stress here that on a synthetic-genetic model, these two intentional spheres—the imagining self and the imagined self—are not as neatly delineated as

<sup>22</sup> Husserl did touch on *imagining conceivability*—my sense of 'I can' in imagining consciousness (Hua IX, p. 205; Hua I, §§27, 55). However, here, too, the sense is of quasi-conceivability.

Husserl's analyses might suggest. They are porous, given deeply sedimented and communalized accomplishments (*Stiftungen*) and modal articulators. Thus, what Husserl describes as the 'splitting of the ego' (*Ichspaltung*, Hua I, §§33–34; Hua XXIII, pp. 467–78; Hua XLII, pp. 468, 520–22, 560; Hua XIII, pp. 314ff.) into 'imagined' and 'imagining' must reckon with the anchorage of *any* imagining possibilization in the lifeworld, which sustains both of these senses of self, along with their respective systems of capacities (Hua IV, 268) as well as motivational, teleological, and normative orientations. *Imagining possibilization draws its sustenance in a non-duplicative, non-parasitic manner from this very anchorage.*<sup>23</sup>

To understand the dynamic between normalizing possibilization and imagining possibilization, we must explicate the imagination's *anchorage* in our everyday life and lifeworld as a '*distanced*' one. Given its distinctive orientation, the imagining stance is at once *within* the normalized articulations of possibilities, sustained by our lifeworld, and *without them*—*relevantly* so. In the imagining stance, we engage conceivable and inconceivable possibilities and impossibilities in a *provisional manner*. This stems both from the *exploratory motivation* that drives imagining experiences and from an *inherent suspicion* that 'things could be otherwise,' which, though may likewise color normalizing experiences, is in the latter stance oriented toward stability and reinstating the *status quo*.

The imagining stance suspicion that 'things could be otherwise' is not conflict free. Here, the normalizing motivation toward stability is replaced by an exploratory motivation whose openness toward the otherwise is qualitatively different. In giving access to ontic, practical, epistemic, or valuational possibilities as *provisional* rather than *final*, *the imagining stance also places in question the principles of our normalized order*. The imagination defangs the entrenched indelibility of normalized conflict. We thus experience tension and discomfort when faced with the extra-ordinary—the different, the strange, the novel, the abnormal... In the imagining stance, however, we are able to sustain this tension in an *exploratory* and *transformative* manner, rather than one oriented toward confirming the expected. The openness of the imagination is not arbitrary, absolutely unconditioned; nor is the imagination fully free of epistemic, normative, praxiological, and axiological commitments. In a broader sense, the imagination is motivated by a suspicious-exploratory orientation; in a narrower sense, pertaining to its *critical mode*, which the normalizing stance lacks, the imagination is motivated by self- and world-transformation.

Thus, the imagination 'modifies' normalized experiences and their respective modal correlates by rendering them provisional. This *imagining modification* is qualitatively different from merely neutralizing basic ontic-doxic commitments. On a synthetic-genetic and generative model, the modifying reach of the imagination covers all sedimented conceptual, discursive, traditionalized, and communalized layers of normalized possibilities and impossibilities. The imagination deals primarily in *contingency* understood as 'what could be otherwise.' *As such, the imagination,*

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of *Ichspaltung* as rift, see Cavallaro 2017. I examine this important notion of *Ichspaltung* in a forthcoming piece on self-variation, which further stresses the claim that all imagining is self-imagining..

given its unique modification, is positional in a distinctive sense: the modal correlates of the various experiences it sustains (e.g., memories, judgments, desires, expectations, etc.) across different attitudes are posited as provisional.

It is in this sense that the imagination's anchorage in the (largely) normalized order of the lifeworld is 'at a distance.' But this is not all imagining possibilization amounts to. The correlates of the imagination are not solely modified normalized modalities; the imagination's 'openness toward the otherwise' also makes room for possibilities that radically depart from what normalized and naturalized order dictates—these possibilities can be precisely what this order suppresses, excludes, and marginalizes. By loosening the threads of the finality of naturalized commitments (what conditions our deeply seated sense of 'I cannot'), the emergence (*Ermöglichkeit*) of possibilities in the imagining stance can thus amount to a 'reawakening' of suppressed, corseted, seemingly unrealizable and inconceivable possibilities—in short, of lived impossibilities, pre-given as limits or as lost or foreclosed possibilities. Let us refer to this as *subversive emergence*.

Finally, imagining possibilization can also engage possibilities previously unsustainable by the normalized order. I refer to this as *innovative emergence*.<sup>24</sup> Thus, imagining conceivability—the correlate of the imagining 'I can'—often motivates the re-articulation of our systems of ontic, practical, epistemic, normative and axiological possibilities and of the lifeworld that sustains them. *It is in and through engaging such modified and emergent possibilities that the imagining stance is both self- and lifeworld-constituting—even when the imagining process is not actively a self-imagining process.*

We can thus identify three modes of imagining possibilization: 1) *modifying* (rendering provisional—imagining possibilization narrowly construed), 2) *subversive*, and 3) *innovative*. These three modes of possibilization are interconnected, co-constituting, and co-motivating. Given this taxonomy, *the language of 'modification'—even in the qualified sense above—only goes so far in capturing the modal range of the imagination.* Only the first mode of imagining possibilization is strictly speaking 'modifying.' Thus, this model challenges us to carefully revisit Husserl's *Phantasiemodifikation*.<sup>25</sup>

These three modes of imagining possibilization capture both the imagination's distanced anchorage in our lifeworld and its ability to re-articulate this very order in a systemic manner. Through its distinctive way of giving access to lived possibilities, *the imagination is thus also indexical.* It does not solely engage individual correlate possibilities, but in and through provisionally engaging *these, here, now possibilities*, the imagination brings into relief their context: their systemic articulation. What's more, especially in its *subversive* mode, whose correlates are precisely lived impossibilities now no longer given as insuperable limits or as irretrievably

<sup>24</sup> For the distinction between the emergence of possibilities and instantiation, see (de Warren 2009, p. 199 and Zhok 2016, p. 231).

<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that in the case of objects such as Husserl's ubiquitous centaur, the modification at work in the imagining experience does not involve ontic and doxic neutrality. My point is, rather, that even in the case of quasi-spatial, irreal objects, much more is at work than what Husserl's analyses of *Phantasie* as *Vergegenwärtigung* allow.

lost or foreclosed possibilities, the imagination can also reveal the very commitments undergirding systems of normalized and naturalized possibilities. From this, it should be clear that imagining modification, which renders normalized modalities provisional, is not a type of or coextensive with doubt as a form of modality modification. Furthermore, while we can experience something as ‘provisional’ in the normalizing stance, the overall orientation of this normalized experience is toward resolving provisionality in unproblematic manners. *In the normalizing stance, the provisional is ultimately bound to finality.* Things could not be more different in the imagining stance, where possibilities are given as provisional in a manner systematically and indexically interested in the extra-ordinary as well as in looming re-articulations of the very principles sustaining the ‘given’ sense of order. Imaginative re-articulations of our lived systems of possibilities are not to be settled ‘once and for all’ nor are they determined ‘in advance’—at most, mere alternatives on the same theme. As a result, the ‘being-probable’ or ‘being-unlikely’ of imagining possibilities—what Husserl so emphatically rejected as noematic layers pertaining to the correlates of the imagination (Hua XXIII, pp. 583–584)—hold a critical potential unique to imagining possibilization and its distinctive kind of positionality. They point to the fact that the imagination deals, if anything, in *critical alternatives* in the modified, subversive, and innovative senses above. Importantly, these critical alternatives are refractory multiplicities redrawing the very map whose fissures generated them.

The holistic orientation toward systems of possibilities is what also grants imagining possibilization its *unforgetting* character. Holding the whole in tension—not just single modal correlates—involves a distinctive way of *re-collection* (*Wiederholung*).<sup>26</sup> What is thus rendered provisional are not solely specific normalized possibilities and impossibilities, but the very modality organizers conditioning them. Thus, imagining possibilization also levels the playing field of ‘order,’ namely, the hierarchical commitments delineating what is *central, marginal, deviant, outside*. We should thus qualify our previous claim: the imagining stance deals in contingency understood as the otherwise, but it especially deals in *naturalized contingency*—or contingency parading as necessity, as lived impossibility.

Let us revisit the lived impossibility of assumed, embodied safety for many a woman walking new or familiar streets, alone, at night (it is not surprising, for instance, that there is no feminine for the French *flâneur*, since ‘aimless,’ ‘free’ city wanderers have always been men; see Elkin 2017; also Tseng 2006). In the imagining stance, the lived impossibility of myself as *flâneuse*—the impossibility of freedom to be ‘at home anywhere,’ ‘unseen’ (ibid.)—loses its indelible character. This impossibility and its finality become provisional, *indeterminate* in a distinctive way. The fissure, the opening toward another *style of being* emerges as having been there, waiting in the shadows of our established order. The imagination gives this *possibility* under the aegis of *frustrated, impatient, and desirous absence*. This subversive, previously ‘unrealizable’ possibility—this possibility pre-given as limit,

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of the dynamic between imagination and memory see Hua XXIII, No.12 and Appx. 33; see also Bernet (2002).

as foreclosed—*this, here, now possibility I desire as potentially mine*. “‘I love walking in London,’ said Mrs. Dalloway.” And in Virginia Woolf’s doubtlessly autobiographical words: “We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one’s own room” (*Street Haunting*).

The imagination does not give access to unreal, ontically neutral, absent possibilities ‘as if’ they were present, from a safe and arguably artificial distance, but from an anchored—ever at risk—distance instead. The layer of *absence* that characterizes our experience of imagining possibilities and cloaks the latter pertains to a *relevant otherwise*—a difference that could matter; a *self-and world-transformative possibility*.

Thus, beyond naturalized contingency, the imagination also deals in *potentiability* (*Vermöglichkeit*)—*what could become realizable for me/us, not just in principle, but concretely so*. In engaging the potential relevance of the otherwise, the imagination goes beyond what is possible ‘as things stand’ toward what *could* become possible if ‘things were to change.’ Naturalized contingency (the correlate of the imagination’s suspicion) and potentiability (the correlate of its desire) are two sides of the same coin. The imagination’s motivation is hence not solely experimental and exploratory. It is also—and not merely in ‘borrowed’ terms—self- and world-transformative *in and through* the imagination’s distinctive positionality and manners of possibilization. As such, the imagination is *inherently evaluative*, not solely in a second order sense of self-reflection, which is structurally possible for any experience (though, as we have seen, severely limited in the normalizing stance whose ‘sphere of freedom’ is tightly bound). The imagination is evaluative in a primary sense, pertaining to its distinct manners of possibility constitution. This critical orientation does not stem from the imagination’s neutrality, arbitrariness, dis-interestedness in and disconnectedness from everyday life. No. It stems from within my life’s and our life-world’s sedimented, largely anonymous and ambiguous, intersubjectively co-constituted and traditionalized complexity. *All critique—be it in the natural or theoretical attitude—is necessarily immanent critique: a loosening of threads*. The imagination, especially in its critical mode, which actively *endorses* and *motivates* self-and world-transformation, is a necessary condition for the possibility of all critical endeavors, irrespective of attitude and register, including transcendental phenomenology.

We might ask at this point: what motivates the imagination to become critical? The answers are many: from experiencing something radically other that takes us by surprise (e.g., world-travelling in María Lugones’s sense (1987); to witnessing the pain of another (e.g., watching videos of police brutality against black and brown bodies); to aesthetic experiences, such as reading Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, which starkly contrasts free wandering and domestic life, as well as Woolf’s accounts of her own days of *flânerie*. What all of these experiences share in common is that they are revelatory of our deeply rooted senses of lost and/or foreclosed possibilities as well as of possibilities that we now no longer need relegate to the fringes, to the unrealizable, to the impossible. Thus, in the imagining stance, my orientation toward the past is one probing of the depths grounding my senses of self and world, while my orientation toward the future is not merely expectational, not overwhelmingly

delineated ‘in advance,’ but open to and desirous of transformation, even radically so. In the imagining stance, I do not overwhelmingly experience absence ‘as if it were presence’ (Hua XXIII, pp. 47, 58–9, 78, 102, 182–3, 265–6, 268). Nor are the presents I experience ‘mere possible presents’ (Hua XXIII, p. 552). *In experiencing the absence of possibilities as loss, as foreclosure, or as limit in the imagining stance, what comes to light are the cracks and fissures marking these impossibilities’ otherwise polished finality.* Their naturalized contingency is revealed. Absence here is no longer merely endured (as is largely the case in the normalizing stance). It is a restless absence. The heretofore foreclosed is now in question for me; the door to potentiability, ajar. This holds both for modified as well as for subversive and innovative modalities. Both lived impossibilities and my sense of ‘I cannot’ are thus modified.

Furthermore, the imagination’s *self-generated, unborrowed teleological, motivational, and normative interests* are neither ‘all too easily satisfied’ (they structurally involve a penchant for a certain kind of uncertainty),<sup>27</sup> nor are they oriented toward ‘pinning down reality once and for all’ (Husserl 1973, §47). The imagination ‘generates’ these interests both through its structural openness toward the extra-ordinary and through concrete experiences that hold concrete transformative power. This strongly suggests that the imagining stance, especially in its critical mode, involves sedimentation and habituation—the constitution of new styles of being. Perhaps this is what, to a large extent, ‘cultivating one’s imagination’ amounts to. In other words, imagining experiences are not free-floating, aleatory, unconditioned, arbitrary processes, but *relevant processes* at the heart of both self- and lifeworld-constitution instead.

#### 4 Concluding Thoughts—Phenomenology as Radical Immanent Critique

The imagination’s ability to loosen apparently insuperable corsets, in virtue of its distanced anchorage in our lifeworld and life projects, brings into holistic relief the very principles articulating our systems of lived possibilities and impossibilities. As such, the imagination emerges as a necessary condition for phenomenology understood as immanent critique: it makes possible phenomenology’s eidetic work of mapping transcendentally necessary structures of meaning-constitution *from within the traditionalized, historical becoming of our lived experiences, in our present situation.* This mapping work relies on the inherently critical and evaluative dimensions of the imagination, on its suspicious-desirous orientation, which grants both diagnostic and prescriptive resources. The radical reflection (*Besinnung*) that Husserl calls for in the *Crisis*—the kind of reflection capable of breaking with deeply-rooted styles of being, however seductive—itself draws its sustenance from the *evaluative possibilization* of the imagining stance. It is in and through the critical resources

<sup>27</sup> Husserl recognized our ability to orient ourselves in this ‘uncertain’ manner in his discussions of valuation and renewal (Hua XXVII, p. 29).



that the imagination grants us that we can study ‘order within order.’ ‘Breaking with styles’ and ‘striking through the crust of historical facts’ involves *diagnosing* naturalized contingencies parading as necessities; it is in this sense that transcendental-eidetic phenomenology is a ‘modal affair.’ Furthermore, what makes this modal mapping an even more radical critical exercise is its work of self-evaluation with respect to *its own theoretical and methodological commitments and accomplishments*.<sup>28</sup> This includes *decoupling transcendental necessity and ahistorical invariance*.

Husserl’s accounts of eidetic variation suggest the method’s single-minded orientation toward identifying invariant noetic-noematic structures: what could not be otherwise, supratemporal (*überzeitlich*), and inviolable (Hua XVIII, p. 134.). However, phenomenology’s critical orientation toward uncovering transcendently necessary conditions for the possibility of meaning-constitution is not reducible to the task of transcendental eidetic variation narrowly construed as invariance-seeking. Transcendently necessary structures could be otherwise. Take, for example, the co-constitutive dynamic among body, sexual, and gendered schemas as they condition my sense of ‘I cannot’ as a gendered street walker. This dynamic is transcendently necessary; it conditions a vast array of particular experiences. Yet it is also open to structural transformation. *This transcendently necessary dynamic is variant in a historically qualified sense* (not on par with the contingency pertaining to particulars or with naturalized contingency).<sup>29</sup>

Needless to say, much work lies ahead if we are to explicate the distinctions and intricate relations between variant and invariant transcendently necessary structures. Yet it is precisely here that phenomenology’s most radical critical task lies, not only because what it uncovers reflects on its own efforts and commitments, but also because *this radical critical work opens possibilities of self- and lifeworld-transformation at a structural rather than merely contingent level*. Phenomenology—in and through its eidetic work and not in spite of it—is always already a form of radical immanent critique, exposing not only contingency as the opposite of invariance, but naturalized contingencies parading as pre-given necessities as well as *prima facie* invariant transcendental structures very much open to transformation (and transformative investigation). This powerfully *diagnostic* modal mapping work is thus also *prescriptive*: opening of potentially less violent styles of being, doing, and knowing *from within* and *through* the historical thickness of our present situation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I argue in Aldea (2021) that all transcendental-eidetic work necessarily involves transcendental self-variation.

<sup>29</sup> Husserl entertains this very idea through his paradoxical concept of the *historical* a priori in the *Crisis* and related manuscripts. Unfortunately, as David Carr right points out (Carr 1970, p. xxxv), Husserl’s unpacking of this concept, which lies at the crux of his most sophisticated critical method, remains wanting.

<sup>30</sup> For references to primary resources (Husserl texts and materials), see the shared bibliography for the *Husserl Studies* special issue this paper is part of.



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