

Book Review

Maxime Doyon, *Phenomenology and the Norms of Perception*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024, Pp. xix + 266, ISBN: 9780198884224 (hbk) \$105.00

Reviewed by **Panos Theodorou**, University of Crete, Rethymno, Greece, E-mail: theodorou@uoc.gr

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Recently, the topic of normativity has been extensively and multifariously debated in phenomenology. And yet, a general skepticism is expressed in the relevant bibliography.¹ Set against this background, Maxime Doyon's recent rewarding monograph is especially welcome. It endeavors to make clear that, in phenomenology, mainly that of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, perception itself is in fact an intentional act regulated by its own pertinent normativity.

The book is composed of seven chapters arranged in three Parts. In the two chapters of Part I, Doyon offers an interpretative reconstruction of the conceptual and historical context in which he unfolds his main argument. For both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty perception is neither a mere receptive process nor one that works with rules known from other mental phenomena and, more specifically, from that of thought or argumentation. Perception, thus, is an intentional act defined by its own norms, the "norms of perception" – basically: *coherence* or *concordance* and *optimality*. These act in a bottom-up fashion, since they are "constituted through repeated action and habitualized behaviours" (p. xviii). Failure to meet the first – *constitutive* – norm dissolves perception into either illusion or hallucination. Apparently, failure to meet the second norm results in an evidentially privated perception and potentially in illusion and hallucination.

Especially in Chapter 2, Doyon maintains that, in Merleau-Ponty, coherence and optimality are expressed in the tendency toward a maximal grip on the world. This motif has been developed in Dreyfus's analyses of "absorbed coping" and in Kelly's account of perceptual horizons. However, as Doyon rightly argues, Dreyfus makes the un-phenomenological claim that absorbed coping lacks appearance and connection with pre-reflective bodily self-awareness, while Kelly posits an unreachable "view from everywhere" as norm of perception, instead of recognizing the contextuality and temporality connected to the finite embodied possibilities.

Part II comprises three chapters in which the author delves deeper into the *embodied* nature of the mentioned norms. Drawing on Husserl, in Chapter 3, Doyon

¹ For a quick but informative overview, see pp. xiii–xiv in the book here reviewed; also, Theodorou et al. 2024, pp. 2–9, where references show that similar is the situation in the analytic philosophy.

highlights the motivational role of kinaesthesia as guidance for perceptual fulfillment. Merleau-Ponty radicalizes this account by conceiving body-schematic attunement as the tacit normativity that orients perceptual exploration. Perceptual agency, thus, is governed by norms of self-assessment, wherein the subject monitors and adjusts its perceptual comportment. Against this backdrop, Doyon rightly critiques McDowell's account of perception for emphasizing conceptual capacities in grounding perceptual normativity, while overlooking the pre-conceptual, bodily dimension of agency.

Further, in Chapter 4, Doyon shows that successful multisensory integration (e.g., seeing and touching a glass) achieves concordance when the various sensory modalities reinforce and align with each other. Husserl himself remarks that the object is more fully given when all senses "accord" in a systematic continuity. Thus, bodily self-awareness, proprioception, and intermodal coordination are actually constitutively necessary for perception. Against this framework, Doyon correctly criticizes Nagel's "what it is like" view as too restricted, since it ignores intersensory communicability. Also, Dennett's reductivism dissolves phenomenality into cognitive mechanisms while ignoring perception's lived-through normative force.

In Chapter 5, Doyon examines perception through *perceptual learning* and *cognitive-affective plasticity*. In Husserl's early non-conceptualism, perception operates through pre-predicative structures rather than conceptual articulation. With the latter's theory of *typification*, traces of past experiences are granted a normative function insofar as they sediment and form an anticipatory framework that guides new perceptions. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty, Doyon emphasizes in the concluding sections of this chapter the *bodily plasticity* of perception, articulated in the habitual style of the perceiving ego and the plasticity of the body schema. Thus, the body appears as both a locus of historical sedimentation and a medium for adaptive transformation.

In Part III, the author examines the presence and validity of perceptual "sociocultural" norms that have a top-down impact on perception, as is the case with "perceptual biases" (pp. xviii, 230). Chapter 6 analyzes our perception of others and empathy as a *sui generis* act structured by its own norms. Drawing on Husserl, Stein, and Merleau-Ponty, Doyon argues that empathy is grounded in the lived body as *Urnorm* (p. 179), complemented by eidetic norms of behavioral *harmony*, *continuity*, and *unity* (pp. 176, 181–3). Reciprocal empathy also requires norms of *attunement* and *responsiveness* regulating interaction. Yet section 6.4 pinpoints that these eidetic norms presuppose the normal body and obscure historical biases. Critical phenomenology, though, emphasizes how race, gender, ability, and power disrupt eideticity. Doyon, nonetheless, maintains that while norms' concretizations vary, their transcendental operativeness in perception remains intact.

Chapter 7 analyzes perceiving together as a distinctive intersubjective mode shaped by bodily normativity. Doyon shows that joint perception depends on sharing space and agency through *intercorporeal coordination* in aligned attention toward a common object. Exemplifying embodied norm-following, this coordination rests on tacit bodily adjustments rather than explicit rules. It presupposes an *interbodily temporality* in which bodily rhythms synchronize. Thus, perceiving together is irreducible to individual acts added up via communication. It is rather constituted through bodily attunement, in which pre-reflective norms of shared agency structure the phenomenology of intersubjective experience.

As is evident, the book is well-informed and extensive, offering rich analyses, discussions, and references that both enrich the phenomenological bibliography and productively bring phenomenology and analytic philosophy into dialogue – even if in a somewhat ‘unilateral’ manner, bravely and earnestly undertaken for both sides by Doyon.

But even works deserving of study and critical engagement, as the one under review here, are not free from flaws. I will focus on a certain unexamined, inherited assumption and a debatable claim.

As I see it, Doyon’s central argument in the book says: perception is – not merely epistemically, but also – *constitutively* normative (pp. xv–xvi) in that it is expected to come up to a “standard or measure”, a task that it achieves (or fails to achieve) to be what it is (ibid.). As he argues, constitutively, perception ought to be getting formed and developing concordantly and optimally, in which case perception achieves to present us with a perceptual object in the pertinent *Leibhaftigkeit* and *Glaubhaftigkeit* (pp. 40–3), i.e., offer us the right/actual object (pp. 5, 13, 25).

Tricky as the notion of normativity is, Crowell, and Doyon (following him), have tried to raise a stable, reference understanding of “norm” as “anything that serves as a standard of success or failure of any kind” (pp. xiii).² But, what this “anything” might be? Anything that can have the role of a standard. But, what such a “standard” is now? A measure owed to be reached, to which some-thing/one ought to come up to or stay away from. Doyon calls this “normative polarity” (p. 4). Given examples of such “standards”/“measures” are: truth–falsity, beauty–ugliness (pp. xviii–xiv, 20, 28, 48, 64). Notice that talk already shifted to *values*.³

For Doyon, then, his norms of perception, concordance and optimality, are suggested as norms that ought to be (successfully) *achieved*, if perception is to be perception.

² See also Crowell 2013, p. 2.

³ To the possible objection on whether truth is indeed a value, here I can only state that truth, especially as evidence, may present us with mere “being” or facts, but having facts is something axiologically positive. See also what follows.

However, in terms of polarity, i.e., positivity (+) and negativity (–), we basically understand *axiological* phenomena. It is *values* that are said to be positive and negative. Even more pertinently, values have *valence*: positivity or negativity *of some degree* – qualitatively or, under some conditions, also quantitatively (e.g., + 1, + 2, ... + n vs. – 1, – 2, ... – n). And, as I see it, it is *they* that most fundamentally succeed or fail to be *achieved* or be realized or held. Someone struggles to achieve beauty in a painting or goodness in her actions.⁴

So, if both norms are standards characterized by polarity (failure–success) and are described in terms of value examples, is there any chance that norms are, finally, values? Are norms at least something *like* values? After all, it is said that they share the same kind of being. Both have *Geltung*. Norms and values “are” not! They just hold (or do not hold); are valid (or not valid). I maintain that norms and values are intimately related, yet clearly two distinct kinds of things. It is only values that are allowed to be understood as standard or measures that ought to be *reached* or *achieved*. And what about norms?

To make sense of the whole thematic, I propose the following path of consideration. Generally speaking, norms are some kind of *rules* that ought to be *followed*. In fact, *when norms are followed, values can be achieved*! Values have originally valence. Norms *may* be said to have ‘polarity’ and, perhaps, ‘valence’. However, when this is the manner in which we speak, norms actually ‘*borrow*’ their ‘polarity’ and ‘valence’ from those of their correlative value results. A norm may (catachrestically) be said to ‘fail’ (totally or partially), when its correlative positive value is not achieved (accordingly otherwise). In case there were no such value connection, ‘norms’/‘rules’ would be reducible to mere natural processes/phenomena; possible development courses of psychic or physical natural events.

In the *Prolegomena* (1900), Husserl presents his view regarding the phenomenological grounding of logic in its normativity (i.e., of its fundamental normatively understood principles). In a simplified form, the general scheme goes like this:

1. Every domain of intentionality-related affairs is defined by a ground value (*Grundwert*).
2. The therein pertinent affairs ‘run’ as determined by corresponding norms.
3. These norms are grounded in *a priori* truths of essence, which affirm the necessary conditions for the *possibility (not actuality)* of achieving that ground value – the actual achievement of the value also depends on additional factors (contingent or not) that may or may not obtain.

⁴ Of course, for these points, only a minimal and dense argumentation can be offered on the present occasion. Additional support is offered in Theodorou 2014, 2022, and 2024, while further work is in progress.

Thus, as I read this project of the *Prolegomena*,⁵ applied to logic as a domain of normative affairs, i.e., basically to judgments, the example of such a scheme for grounding goes as follows. When judging, the norm says that we ought not to contradict, because it lies in the essence of judgments that only non-contradictory ones *can* be proven true. Whether this or that non-contradictory judgment will *actually* be proven true or not is a matter of (a) what we mean by “true judgment” and (b) of the availability/obtainment of other *a priori* and contingent factors that will satisfy the conditions for “true judgments”. And, Husserl’s Pure Logic says: only non-contradictory judicative syntheses build up meaning unities that have the *possibility* of being true/correct.

Phenomenologically, like judgments, perception itself has two phases (even if *fused* in one): (a) empty noetic aiming and (b) fulfilled noematic givenness. Husserl, however, notices that perception is *always already* a – somewhat and somehow – fulfilled act, always already presenting us with some object. This creates understandable difficulties. We would rather say: perception plain and simple is ‘truth-ful’ (*wahr-haftig*) (not deceitful); it gives its whatever object as evidently appearing, as being (in the sixth LI’s sense of “being as truth”). But, perception’s being ‘truthful’ is not the same as perception’s being true (*wahr*) qua *veridical*.

This means perception *can* be proven false; is *fallible*. Straightforward perceptual intentionality is truth-seeking; not truth-having. However false perception is *not* not-perception! It is illusion or hallucination; which themselves are *not* not-perceptions, since these too offer – or, better, were offering – us their (perceptual) objects. Illusion and hallucination are only *pragmatically* failing perceptions.

If this is so, then what is the normative in (fallible, truth-ful) perception? To answer the question, we need to make clear what is the key or dominant value that defines the affairs of interest in perception. Another way Husserl (1900) puts it is to ask: what is good in/for it? In Aristotelian terms, we would ask: what is perception’s work? If we knew that, we would easily discern what its ought ‘virtue’ might be! I take it that perception’s work is, first and foremost, “evident making-appear of its object” – not achieving veridical perception, but establishing its *possibility*.

So, the ‘owed virtue’ of the perceptual system is that it should be in a position to bring about evidence, to guarantee *truthfulness*. Otherwise put: normative in perception is the *deep-going set of the rules of synthesis* that guarantee perception’s *possibility* of being true qua veridical. It is these rules that make sensory perception an interpretative synthesis of merging/fusing (*verschmelzen*) and interweaving (*verflechten*) *compatible* (not necessarily coherent or concordant) sensory contents, which has always already done its work: the making-appear of its object.⁶

⁵ On this and how it applies to the legal normativity, see Theodorou 2024.

⁶ For more on this, see Theodorou 2015, esp. chs 4–6.

Can we, then, count concord-*ance* and optimal-*ity* as conditions that render a sensory intentional act *perception* plain and simple? The issue is subtle and elusive. If perception is constitutionally always already fulfilled, i.e., (fallibly) truthful, then concordance and optimality are not conditions that make it be perception plain and simple. They seem to be conditions that contribute to checking whether perception is *true* or rather *correct*, veridical. Better, concord-*ability* and optimiz-*ability* belong not to perception's inherent rules but to its external epistemic possibilities.

Be that as it may, Maxime Doyon's book stands as a major contribution to both phenomenological and analytic perspectives on perception. It offers a penetrating treatment that enriches phenomenology's grasp of normative phenomena. In this clearly written and thoroughly argued volume, impressive in scope, Doyon engages with issues in a way that is multifaceted, rigorous, and highly illuminating. The specialist in these fields will gain considerably, finding in it a reliable guide for exploring the question of perceptual normativity. At the same time, the committed undergraduate and the postgraduate student will encounter here not only a valuable reservoir of background knowledge but also fresh ideas that creatively extend it.

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