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NORM AND NORMALITY, STARTING FROM MERLEAU-PONTY

abstract

The present work pursues two main objectives. The first is to pinpoint, by means of a series of philosophical arguments, the meaning of the word “norm” and, specifically, to explain the tension between normality and normativity in detail. The second, closely related to the former, hinges on Merleau-Ponty’s personality, and aims at putting the “space” of the norm and the key notion of normality in a new form, starting from some essential elements of his writing. This effort is particularly significant in The structure of Behavior, Phenomenology of Perception and in The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences.

keywords

Merleau-Ponty, normality, normativity, origin and structure of norm, judgement on normality

1. Meeting the Problem

1.1 Normality and Normativity

The starting point for our dissections is an essay entitled *Normalité et normativité. Entre phénoménologie et structuralisme*, written by Bernhard Waldenfels, one of the most important living exponents of phenomenology. In this essay Waldenfels discusses the question of the norm on the basis of the pair normal/normativity:

le terme “norme” originarialement destiné à dénoter un instrument de mesure, un cordeau ou une équerre dont se sert l’architecte, se divise en “normalité” et “normativité”. Les deux termes se ressemblent fortement, comment peut-on alors expliquer leur différence? Depuis Hume ou Kant, on tend à concevoir la normalité comme un complexe de règles descriptives, et la normativité comme un complexe de règles prescriptives. Les unes portent sur des questions de fait, les autres sur des questions de droit. Le comportement humain est soumis aux deux dimensions: normalité et normativité (Waldenfels 2005)¹.

In Waldenfels’s opinion, such an alleged antinomy between normality and normativity succumbs to two serious failings. The first concerns the incarnation of the norms, the second concerns their genesis. On the one hand, what is omitted is the entrenchment of each norm in the world of life: the norms become incarnated as habits, usages, and customs. What comes out is consequently not assessed as right or wrong, good or bad, functional or not functional, but as convenient or inconvenient. On the other hand, what is left out is the fact that norms cannot exist unless they have been learned and appropriated, and that they therefore originate through a genesis revealing itself, to some extent, as an event of *Stiftung* (foundation), even if the latter settles into a pre-history of which no trace can be found anymore.

A similar position is presented by Norberto Bobbio, notably in his formulation of the entry *Judicial Norm* in Bompiani Encyclopedia of 1964, where the Italian philosopher of law describes the relationship between the categories of judicial normativity and of normality as follows:

Del significato comune di “norma”, come del resto di “regola”, sono elementi

1 “The term ‘norm’ originally denotes a measuring instrument, such as the cord or the square that is used by architects. The ‘norm’ is divided in both ‘normality’ and ‘normativity’. These two are very similar. So what are the differences between them? Following Hume and Kant, normality is conceived as a plethora of descriptive rules, and normativity as a complex of prescriptive rules. The descriptive rules lead to questions of fact, whereas the prescribed ones lead to questions of law. Human behavior is subject to two dimensions: normality and normativity”.

caratteristici, rispetto alla funzione, il fine prescrittivo (dove viene l'aggettivo "normativo"); rispetto al contenuto, la tipicità del comportamento (dove viene l'aggettivo "normale"). Una norma è, si potrebbe dire, una proposizione normativa che tende a riconoscere e stabilire un comportamento normale: il carattere della normatività riguarda il fine, quello della normalità il risultato (Bobbio 1994)².

Even if a distinction is made between normative--all that relates to the purpose of the norm--and normal--all that concerns the content and the effect of the norm--in Bobbio's definition the relationship between the categories of normal and of normative is manifest: every judicial norm "tends to identify and establish a normal behaviour". Therefore, every norm seems to imply a normality, pre-existing and giving legitimacy to the same norm: the normativity of the normal. Likewise, every norm sets the conditions of normality, "normalizing" the receivers' behaviours: the normality of the normative. Nonetheless, a problem arises from this context.

Normality is one of the most difficult-to-define and most polyhedric of concepts, and certainly one among those which have given rise to the most heated debates. It is a tricky and ambiguous notion, surrounded by an aura of social dangerousness, because it can easily spread pressures, inhibitions, and discrimination within a community. The fact that in the deconstructionist and post-modern ambit the pluralistic perspectivism of "discursive formation" and language games has prevailed over "meta-narratives" and over the establishments made of universal and eternal truths, has progressively led to condemnations and attempts at total elimination of the concept of *normality*, meant as an instrument of power and of oppression, of the institutional and established power - the ruling class - and as the different, the dissident, the Other (Foucault 1970; Lyotard 1984).

On the contrary, everyday language has continued to resort to substantives and adjectives referring to *normality*, being evidently legitimated by the existence in the common view of the world of something matching the notion of *normality*, beyond any theorization and ideology.

Referring to language as the legitimating foundation of *normality* may

2 "The common understanding of 'norm' and 'rule' is characterized by prescription regarding its function (from where the adjective 'normative' derives), and by the typicality of the behavior regarding its content (from where the adjective 'normal' derives). One could say that 'norm' must be intended as a normative proposition that tends to recognize and establish a normal behavior: normativity is linked to its aim; normality pertains to its result".

seem quite risky because of the imprecision and ambiguities its use reveals. The adjective *normal* and the substantive *norm*, from which the former comes, have, in different contexts and perspectives, completely different meanings. In Italian, for instance, the word *norm* shifts from the most settled use, namely the ethical and juridical one as *rule*, to the medical one as physiological standard meaning, e.g., “to be up to/below standard”, to the social one as *usage* and *custom*. The adjective *normal* wavers in a wide semantic range, according to the context in which it is used, as synonymous with *clear*, *logical*, *right*, *habitual*, *coherent*, *customary*, *usual*, *common*, and *natural*. Nonetheless, beneath this multivalence it is possible to trace a common characteristic of the different meanings, all together describing an attitude clearly based on a mutual and shared logic, which occurs almost regularly.

The concept of normality concerns the behavioural relationship between the subject and the environment, or rather between the subject and the world, and in the subject-world polarity the norm that determines normality takes shape.

Therefore, it can be supposed that the problem of normality and of its elusiveness lies concealed in the subject-world dualism that derives from the dualism of the Cartesian subject. As a consequence, it is necessary to reconsider the concept of normality on the basis of the supersession of the Cartesian dualism and on the basis of a notion that reintegrates the subject and the world into an organic whole and redefines them in relation to one another. In considering all of this, light will be cast on some themes of Merleau-Ponty’s thought, pointing out their salient characteristics, to find the necessary elements to answer to the question we have hereby raised: what is a *norm*? What is *normality*? In what way can we talk about it?

1.2 Where is the Norm?

Leaving aside for the moment the observations made by Merleau-Ponty in *The Structure of Behaviour* and *Phenomenology of Perception*, it is important to focus in the first place on another crucial passage of his work, thus making the questions we are discussing come out even more drastically.

On November 23, 1946, Merleau-Ponty gave a lecture at the *Société française de Philosophie*, wherein he illustrated the outcomes described in *Phenomenology of Perception*, which he had published the year before. The text of this report, together with the transcript of the heated debate it sparked, was later published under the title *The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences* (Merleau-Ponty 1964).

The thesis of Merleau-Ponty is firm: “The perceived world is always the presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value, and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 13).

It is a thesis which is even more relevant now than it was at that time. What is at stake is a kind of philosophy which is able to relate that which is human without relinquishing what makes him human, namely “rationality and the absolute”. This really is a current matter for at least two reasons.

On the one hand, because the naturalism of cognitive science and biotechnology has really tried to “bring” the human being “down to earth”, but at the price of stripping him of everything that makes him human. According to classical cognitive science, in fact, thought is an immaterial and abstract calculation, while according to biotechnologies it is some kind of effect resulting from the human genome. In both the cases, it is manifest that no space is left for the human, at least as it has been conceived from the Greek age until now.

On the other hand, the lecture of Merleau-Ponty is useful since it perfectly depicts the problems each materialism has posed: its formulation, in and of itself, shows it clearly when taking on the strange task of “bringing” the human world “down to earth”. Now, such a demand can be put forward only if it is believed that that world, itself, would float and be unrelated to real life. In Merleau-Ponty’s opinion it is precisely so: the human world needs a foundation and this foundation cannot be other than “the perceived world”, the world of body and of its senses. “We can only think the world because we have already experienced it; it is through this experience that we have the idea of being, and it is through this experience that the words ‘rational’ and ‘real’ receive a sense simultaneously” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 17).

The statements by Merleau-Ponty, anyway, face an apparently insuperable problem: if my body is the basis and the unit of measurement of my experiences, and contrariwise your body is the basis and the unit of measurement of your experiences, how can we succeed in creating a common world where we can meet, discuss, produce science, etc., if science, ethics and everyday experience assume the existence of a common and collective world, the existence of an objective world?

It is exactly what one of the participants in Merleau-Ponty’s lecture, Bréhier, commented on from an ethical point of view: “the other is ‘reciprocable to me’ by reason of a universal norm. Where is your norm?” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 31). To be able to consider the other as

someone having his own rights, as someone whose point of view is as valid as mine, I have to manage to detach myself from my body and to think of my perspective as equal to his within a universal and objective norm, which is neither mine nor his. How does Merleau-Ponty reply to this criticism? Depreciating the universality of the norm in the relativism of the norms: “there is no given universality; there is only a presumptive universality” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 31).

The fact that the norm can change and sometimes indeed has to change does not mean that a norm cannot be objective; a subjective norm is no more a norm. But if it is objective, how can it find its foundation in a subjective body?

From this question, you can get to the bottom of Merleau-Ponty’s works.

2. Norm and Normality, Starting from Merleau-Ponty
2.1 The Structure of the Norm

The definition of the subject and of his relation with the world is gradually developed in Merleau-Ponty’s works, through many phases which follow each other, overlap, and merge into one other.

The first phase is closely related to the influence of K. Goldstein. Goldstein’s studies on subjects affected by neuromotor disorders highlight a unitary system of distinction with progressive levels of disintegration of the behaviour within an organism conceived as a living totality (structure) inseparable from its environment. In this perspective, disease is defined as loss of liberty with respect to the environment, impotence in escaping from fortuitous circumstances and from their drives, and, consequently, in projecting oneself into the future.

In *The Structure of Behaviour* Goldstein’s themes cross with Husserl’s phenomenology and with Gestaltpsychologie. The criticism of Husserl’s pure consciousness and absolute subjectivity, based on the irreducibility of body, leads Merleau-Ponty to reformulate the consciousness-world relation starting from corporeality and perception, meant as the initial relationship between consciousness and the world, beyond the antithesis between idealism and empiricism. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis goes beyond the subject-world couple to consider behaviour as the initial unitary phenomenon where the subject and the world are continuously grasped one after the other. The Gestalt influence allows him to formulate a definition of behaviour as structure; in other words, as a totality equipped with an internal principle of diversification.

Behaviour as structure varies according to its belonging to the organic or the inorganic world, on the basis of a different normative structure which is somehow its essence. In such an ambit, Merleau-Ponty enunciates two definitions of norm, both referring to the *organic structure*. The first one reads the norm

as the essence of the species, namely as a system of personal constants, which express the ideal conditions of relationship to the environment and of activity: an experienced norm which corresponds to one's own being. The second one reads the norm as the biological *a priori* of an individual: "by 'norm' here one does not mean a 'should be' which *world make* it be, it is the simple observation of a preferred attitude statistically more frequent, which gives a new kind of unity to behavior" (Merleau-Ponty 1963, 159).

In *The Structure of Behaviour* the concept of *norm* is meant as the structure by means of which the behavioural constants of an organism appear to an observer. Or, in Goldstein's words, the *norm* is the *structure*; in Husserl's words, the norm is the *style* of behaviour. As a result, it can be asserted that the perception and the observation of a subject "X" have to reveal the structure of his behaviour, that is, his norm. In phenomenological terms, it may be defined as some kind of eidetic reduction: in this sense it can be maintained that the norm of behaviour of "X" is the essence of "X", caught through perception and based on the certainty of the cognitive act, whose actuality is direct. Anyway, it is important to specify that it is not only defining the norm of "X" but the norm of his behaviour, according to a course already followed by Jaspers, Binswanger and Minkowsky.

This means that the norm, far from being an abstract, fixed and immutable behavioural parameter, takes on its sense only in connection with a "ground", that is to say, with an environmental condition, and defines the best adaptation possible of man to the environment and, consequently, his ideal living conditions. Then, the fulfilment of the norm should lead to a satisfying relationship with the environment and to the adoption of the so-called--by Goldstein--"privileged behaviours".

To the extent that human behaviour is characterized by the supremacy of the symbolic form--which organizes and involves the other forms in its dialectic, thus giving them peculiar sense and significance--its particular way of being in the world is essentially marked by transcendence. The norm of human behaviour, in fact, does not consist in merely searching for a stable equilibrium with the environment. Rather it is, indeed, seeking for something which still is not, for some kind of striving for the virtual, for an effort which is at the same time power of denial and transformation of the real, and which is vehiculated by a symbolizing and conceptualising power, going hand-in-hand with the integration of spiritual activity with corporal activity.

2.2 The Temporality of the Norm

This initial structural definition of norm, transpiring from the pages of the first work of Merleau-Ponty, finds a better and more extensive elaboration in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962). The phenomenological

analysis of perception puts the pre-reflective aspect of the existence into the foreground, thus localizing the latter in a broader behavioural norm including both the dialectic of forms, so the body-soul integration, and the world-consciousness-work dialectic, which, in *The Structure of Behaviour*, is considered as a privileged behaviour of man. As a result, the norm, far from disregarding its structural characteristic, starts out to become the essential structure appropriate to embrace the whole variety of the *Erlebnisse*, on the general ground of *being-in-the-world*. Let us have a look at this more closely. The common feature of the pathological behaviours examined by Merleau-Ponty is the loss of the categorial function, namely, in a few words, the loss of the symbolic-virtual openness to the world. In this case the subject has shrunk away and positioned himself on a private behavioural norm of a “minority” kind, where the structure of transcendence is blocked or invalidated. This means that the whole “capability of disposing of a past, a present, and a future” is nullified, that is to say, that the transcendence of the empirical subject to the world is stricken, together with all the essential structures relating to it: intentionality, perception, cogito, its own pre-history as open and retrievable control over body workability. Basically, next to the temporality-transcendence, the very essence of the subject has been hit, which leads us to conclude that temporality is the fundamental norm of human behaviour and is defined as *temporal style*, and that normality consists in human behaviour taking place according to the structure of temporality.

The “normal” disposal of temporality means offers of chances, multiplicity of worlds and of horizons, and fluent integration of the past with the future in a present which is the operational grip of a body exactly on the world. The block of temporality thus signifies the destructuring of the present, not a pure and simple blockage of the future, as suggested by Minkowsky, but the sticking of existence to a behavioural arrangement which cannot be defined as normal in any way and whose most essential feature is being apraxic. The normal subject in his deep structure is, as we are attempting to demonstrate, an *I can*, namely an active subject, mainly defined by a working intentionality and a pragmatic openness. In this sense a behaviour being chronically apraxic must be considered far from the style of the normal behaviour. Moreover, further to the disgregation of temporality, a destructuring of personality and a fragmentation of the subject occur. Assuming the temporal style of existence as norm generates a structural notion of norm, which does not determine the content of the behaviour but its *how*. Set down like so, the norm can govern the individual-environment relationship, in each variation in its own terms, without having a specific

content, and can express the sense organising at the same time the life of a species, of a collectivity or of a single man, all of them being structures. Through this perspective, the question of the temporality of the norm has to be coped with, wondering if it is eternal and immutable or historic.

2.3 Experience and Judgment of the Normality

The norm, devoid of content, invariable in its expressions of the temporality of the subject, on each occasion takes on the content required by the situation. So it is what changes, even though always remaining the same. What varies is the way in which behaviour expresses the norm, this relation defining the normality. The norm is therefore atemporal, it being structure. Nevertheless, since it also conveys the sense of a behaviour, the norm cannot dodge the reference to the fortuitous situation in which this sense expresses itself and the relation such a sense has with the general sense of the world. Normality in this meaning is outlined according to the ambiguous aspect of temporality, as intersection of what is historic and what is atemporal, thus defining two axes of normality: the first (atemporal) is one of individual disposal of temporality; the second (historic) is one of articulation of the sense of the individual behaviour within the general sense of the world, one of the gears of individual time in collective time. The latter makes us refer to the inter-subjective dimension and to the central question of normality. Every subjective paradigm of normality has to find confirmation in the intersubjective dimension, as in the same way the individual norm cannot be flattened into the environmental norm. The judgement of normality is at the same time judgement of the individual on himself and judgement of the other on the individual, articulated synchronically and diachronically. Particularly on this last topic we can observe that as a matter of fact, following the pathway of Merleau-Ponty more closely, it can be noticed that the supersession of the Cartesian subject based on the notion of body precisely opens at once, according to the author, an intersubjective dimension which leaves out any sort of solipsism. Man finds himself, among other men, as already given in the world, and his perception discovers *typicalities* similar to his ones. Subjects set up, with one another, a working knowledge, where a common way of experiencing the world is expressed. Communication is behavioural and is immediately understood by the perception of the others.

The body of the other, by virtue of its symbolizing power, is significant and reveals itself as a *cultural object*, and it is just for this reason that perception can perform an *intentional transgression* with regard to it, thus avoiding intellectual mediation and thereby winning access to the sphere of the other. The intersubjective relationship has always lain in an interworld, it being the

place of meeting of two ipseities that disclose themselves in a reciprocity of styles, rhythms, and time. Said reciprocity is not an absolute transparency, but an initial possibility of communication and immediate understanding, on which the possibility of speech and dialogue itself is based.

The relation between ego and alter-ego bursts on the scene of the common world, where both have always been involved and have always met, and demands a necessary character. This is a physical and social world, full of collective cultural meanings in which anyone can cooperate in creating and destroying. In this socio-cultural world, which is man's "natural" world, non-material beings can be found. Said beings originate in the interworld as world validities having a universal value and which, belonging to the *they*, go beyond the individual in space and time and preconsciously live with him as *modes of (co)existence*.

In this ground of settled and experienced validities, the subject's evaluative and interpretative approach, from which he derives his parameters and his legitimacy of judgement, has put down its roots. And it is right on this ground that the question of normality has to be brought back and placed, if the ambiguities that usually characterize it are to be extirpated. Every objective definition of normality is given as ambiguous and paradoxical, due to the fact that its parameter is the world's pre-logical *logos*, materialized in the *they* and not in the commensurate evaluations of any science.

The normal is the pre-reflective and normality, thought as pre-reflectivity, cannot be caught by means of the scientific objectifying instruments of thought, but it manifests itself surrounded by an aura of ambiguity in the first step of perception. This perception is not an arbitrary intuition. One's own personal history as experience, the history of the other as behaviour, and the social history as *typical* of the human behaviour converge in the perception of normality and are grafted onto the validity of the normality as an intersubjectively-determined value.

Perception throws open for us the door onto the existence of the other through his body; what the abnormal individual expresses through his behaviour is his constraint in a private world and his impossibility of communication, whereas his body openly communicates what he would rather not reveal. Who stands in front of us is not the inhabitant of an unknown world, but an exile from our world. His own existence is globally connoted by a kind of suffering which has nothing in common with the ordinary trials we are used to feeling, even thought in their worst forms; it is a radical and incommunicable suffering. Such suffering is incommunicable, but not totally incomprehensible from the outside.

The possibility of understanding an abnormal form of existence is left open by the common world foundation, which binds individuals together, and by the willingness to “get in the game” and take on the “centrifugal” norm of the abnormal behaviour. This possibility of getting in the game does not disconcert my being in the world. An abnormal form of existence cannot put our world at stake completely, since it represents but a minority form. Rather, when we get in the game to understand this form of passing existence, we reassert our possibility of transcending its constraint.

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