Resource sheet

Changing societal landmarks by grading the concepts of normality and ethics
Section of the module /R

Is it enough to be identified as normal to be happy?

This question deserves being asked as the notion of normality seems to impose itself in our minds in order to have a feeling of "good life" that every one of us is seeking.

And it has a special meaning for teachers who welcome pupils with special educational needs (SEN) into their classes, since the attention of the rest of the class will be drawn from the start by the "different" aspect of these children.

As for the latter will they not have a reflex of self-exclusion by noting their "deviant" nature compared to the norm?

Including these pupils in ordinary classes will therefore require an important work on the group by organizing a philosophical reflection on the concept of normality, in order to relativize its importance and replace it with a more stable and deeper notion: the concept of ethics.

1/ Normality: a fluctuating and subjective concept

A standard is a benchmark for comparing and therefore evaluating.
It can be defined from a statistical point of view by what is found most frequently. But it may also be what is in conformity with a referent from a higher order. The standard therefore refers to both quantitative and qualitative notions.

But are these notions stable and universal?

There are many examples that show their inconstancy in time and space:

- The astronomer Copernicus objected at the time to the certainties of his time according to which the Universe would turn around the Earth. His ideas were condemned by the pope in 1616. He was considered then "abnormal". And yet the future gave him reason.

- The Nazi doctrine targeted homosexuals and exterminated them for their deviance, whereas in Ancient Greece, this type of relationship was normal between the teacher and the pupil. It was even seen as an ideal educational relationship.

- Around the world, some countries consider polygamy as quite normal and in conformity with social order. In Europe, this practice is forbidden because considered abnormal.

- Still in Europe, one must go back only a few decades to remember that physical punishments on pupils at school were considered normal. Today, these practices are constitutive of violence punishable by criminal penalties. And it is not filing a complaint that would appear abnormal.

And isn't the very norm a vague notion by itself, eminently subjective and variable from one person to another?

Something called "normal" because statistically common can be perceived differently depending on everyone's sensitivity, mind openness and intellect.

The notion of normality is therefore above all a question of point of view. It varies according to a filter, a model that can be different from one individual to another or by the same individual depending on his age and level of education.

Thus the notion of normality is not uniform. Each one has his own conception of normality according to his relationship with the outside world.

Moving away from the norm is therefore not always the symptom of a pathology or isolation from the social group.

Geniuses and specially gifted people are often misunderstood and mocked.

In the same way, artists, poets and thinkers, revolutionaries are out of norm because of their original behaviors.

In the sphere of human relations, norm is therefore a dogma, a preconceived notion that it would be unjust and dangerous to use as a reference value.

2/ Ethics' universal dimension

So what to link oneself with?

In the quest for "good life" that inhabits every one of us, the only thing that should catch our attention is the pain that people can feel as they move away from a line supposed to be normality.

But considering the fact that norms and their relativity are inconsistent, should we not rethink this concept from their construction process, so as to favor the constitution of alternative norms?

And the very image one can have of a "good life" varies from one individual to another. In a society of relational beings, it cannot be reduced to the criteria of performance and normality, and relies much more on the ability to be and to build relationships.

Rather than comparing oneself to norms whose emptiness has been emphasized, it is better to reflect on the ends, on the existence's values, on the conditions for a happy life, on notions of good and evil, or on questions of customs or morals which constitute the foundation of human relations.

This philosophy has a name: ethics.

This word of Greek origin is synonymous with morality, but can also be defined in the contemporary sense by a reflection on the behaviors to be adopted to combine the conditions necessary for living together that founds the harmony of society. In this, ethics becomes a concept that seeks an ideal of conduct of existence.

The notion of ethics can vary in time and space depending on the human community it is linked with.

However, it is a much more stable, less questionable and more widespread reference frame than one based on a supposed normality.

Based on the contemporary values of the social group, the notion of ethics takes on a universal dimension in this space.

In fact, the rules of ethics supersede, precede or modify the notion of normality. They often inspire legal rules: the time of ethics allows the creation of the social consensus necessary for the establishment of the rule of law.

In this, they are placed at a higher level in the scale of values which must mark the conduct of our existence.

We can therefore abandon without regret the notion of normality, a stigmatization factor, to replace it by the notion of ethics that promotes inclusion in the social group.