

## Natural vs. Normal

In a few earlier articles I had touched upon the distinction between natural and the normal and here wish to flesh out both ideas further. This had been done more or less in passing but with a desire to explore the two more thoroughly. What gave impetus to pursuing this subject was a recent occasion when I had come across the term “normalize.” It was either in a book or article; I can't recall the exact source, but that's irrelevant. Nevertheless, it was sufficient to have grabbed my attention, for I realized more clearly that the two words just may point to two distinct realities. The verb “to normalize” is not an infrequent one for describing a desire for stabilization as we find in politics. Once normalization between two countries has occurred, for example, there's great relief and realization in having resolved that which had upset the balance of affairs. Usually effort not to repeat this imbalance is ratified in some kind of agreement or treaty.

Apart from this geopolitical application both the verb and noun triggered a desire to expand upon a few ideas related to how they might apply to the adjective “natural” which we banter around a lot and with barely giving it a thought. The real question turned out to be whether or not the natural and the normal were the same, more or less interchangeable, or belonging to two wholly different orders. Right away there came to mind the verbal counterpart to “normalize” which is “to naturalize.” To naturalize someone or something means to make it native. In other words, what isn't naturalized had been alien, even threatening. However, this verb didn't quite fit in with where I was going, so I decided to drop it.

Discovering an idea as the one presented in this article is a delightful experience even though I'm fully aware of the amateurish quality of the contents as well as the brevity of expression. Both reveal an incomplete understanding as well as an inability to bring to fruition what was begun. While true, worrying about it can detract from the enjoyment of exploration and make you overly self-conscious. Should you allow it to rummage around in your head, you'd get nothing done. Every word would paralyze your mind, let alone the sequence of sentences. Even more importantly, this heightened self-consciousness would stymie the pleasure gotten in pondering such matters, and taking pleasure is where the action's at.

Often in conversation we banter around the two adjectives natural and normal while failing to give them the attention they deserve. In our casualness we treat them pretty much as the same or at least as interchangeable. However, beneath our unintended disregard lay two very different orders. And by “order” I mean the way we organize our lives and given them meaning, chiefly in both a philosophical

and theological context. Taking this a bit further, I'm more comfortable situating these terms against the backdrop of ancient Greek philosophy and the spiritual tradition we find within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Such an approach is in line with the overall theme of this home page devoted to the practice of *lectio divina*.

Perhaps the chief characteristic of the natural is that it is self-contained and has nothing external to it. Usually we think of the natural as just hanging around out there and not in need of an external guiding principle. In fact, such a question never arises. "Mother Nature" may be a stab at how we feel about this in an attempt to humanize the natural world, but ultimately that won't do it. Nature is too all-encompassing for us to attach any label and hence reflection, either as maternal, hostile or just plain neutral. The apparent universality of what is natural precludes the need for comparison with any other type of reality and in fact sees no need to entertain such a possibility. That which is natural appears spontaneously, evolves (à la Darwin) and adapts well to its environment...in fact *is* its environment...while feeling every right to do so. We convey this fittingness without giving it a thought by using the adverb "naturally" in almost indiscriminate fashion. Also, the natural has neither need nor desire to question its existence as well as where it happens to find itself. Because the natural is so obvious we don't question it but accept it as is. Such acceptance seems to be behind the most common way of defining "nature" as in the phenomenal world as well as human nature and so forth.

A slight digression, if you will. Everything natural has an oval shape (not square, round or otherwise). It applies to eggs, drops of water, planets, clouds stones and the shape of trees. This suggests a center of gravity not located in the object's precise center but slightly off to the side, if you will, or the left of the object's gravitational center. I had touched upon this idea in an earlier article and couldn't help but think of it in the context of discussing that which is natural. As for the normal, it seems to have a guiding principle not so much exterior to itself as a puppeteer but as a transcendent reality. We'll get into that a bit later.

As for what is normal, especially vis-à-vis the natural, it belongs to a higher order and has a certain inbuilt authority to which everything else is subordinate. This isn't in the form of a law imposed from without or from above but as a principle which draws that subject to a higher plane, having the best intent in mind. In other words, the nature of the normal is to draw things outside themselves so as to loose awareness of their lesser participation in reality and thus their self-awareness. Does this sound intrusive, even imperious? Yes to someone acquainted only with the natural and expecting that plane to be the by-all and end-all of everything. We

may get away with acting like this for some time but eventually reality catches up. Our unfamiliarity with the possibility of an alternative or being closed to such a proposition can devolve to an interior or personal form of anarchy that rattles round and round without allowing for resolution. That slightly off-center center of rotation won't cut it for us humans.

The English word “normal” is more consistent with the Greek *nomos* which applies to habitual practice, custom as well as law. Thus “normal” conforms to an external order or one held in common to which each person gives assent. When it becomes recognized as communal, we have the basis for forming a society. Such commonality is of a higher order or one beyond that which belongs to the natural order by reason of being endowed with the ability for reflection it whereas the natural lacks this capacity. Since what is normal follows an order according to an external standard, it is not subject to the variance we see in the natural realm which sometimes we call blind fate. It may take some time, if you will, for a person to become subject to a norm and hence work his way into becoming normal because of his innate, mistaken association of freedom with the natural order. But when this happens, the result is much finer than acting naturally, if you will. In other words, this person has shed an ab-normal way of life for one that is normal.

It may be asked, who sets the standard or the norm? Someone or something has to do this which brings up the matter of a source. That's the real rub nowadays between the natural and the normal. We feel the natural is sufficient unto itself and doesn't need to be dependent on any source. It reflects our desire to shun responsibility of conforming to a norm and hence becoming normal. In fact, this form of rebellion is praised and unfortunately can be held up as an example. In addition to all this talk about rebellion, it's just plain tiring. The whole enterprise turns out to be rather childish, a distortion of the natural order of things.

Both the natural and the normal work hand-in-hand in our lives without us averting to the fact. We may not know it, but the natural always has been subject to the normal, and that means it is answerable to a transcendent element. This is true even though it doesn't know its source but is governed by a norm higher than its own reality. Hence never could the natural objectify the normative, for this is completely beyond its capacity. Somehow a blindness with respect to this higher realm is worked into the natural world through no fault of its own, a fact which affects our perception as well. It's a blindness which prevents us from objectively knowing its source though by no means is this a defect. It would be thus if the natural tried to set itself up as normative, something which we as human are familiar, for never is the natural able to comprehend its inherent subordination to

the normal or to the transcendent.

If left to its own devices, the natural world becomes brutalized as we know from personal experience. Nature...the physical world...can be excused because it lacks rationality. However, it's a different story with us. For a while, living naturally, if you will, allows us freedom from constraints both personal and derived from society but soon turn into a dead end. That's why never can we escape a desire for the normal. We need norms to govern our behavior and appetites, an inescapable reality which our consciences impart to us. Without this governance we'd devolve into chaos in no time flat. So it turns out that the natural needs the normal. We can't have any type of society or organization if one alone is emphasized. History is full of examples where one dominates: bedlam or a dictatorship.

I'm full aware that these remarks are of an abstract, general nature. Nevertheless, allow this to pass by the wayside in order to move on to consider how both have special import when it comes to things that fall under the domain of spirituality. Use of the natural and normal just may clarify how we approach this realm and preclude us from imposing unwarranted personal ideas, etc. And so in the spiritual realm the spirit (i.e., Holy Spirit) sets the norm for governing our lives so that we don't live exclusively according to the natural. Traditionally this has been put as living according to the flesh. Even the slightest exposure to the Spirit-as-normal or even entertaining the possibility that it may exist, has a direct way of impacting how we view the vastness of the natural realm or what we refer to simply as nature. Strange to say, this immensity which is so familiar to us as by popular presentations of science turns out to be smaller and more confining than we had anticipated. Just about everyone is aware of this fact even if they don't delve into things spiritual as presented traditionally. They have the insight yet have a kind of veil over their eyes not from lack of good will but from an updated form of spirituality which nevertheless rests upon tradition. Actually this problem in many ways has given impetus to the current article. We're dealing with a need and situation that's awkward to express and if done so (as here, perhaps), is subject to criticism as being syncretic out outside the pale of Christian orthodoxy.

The chief impulse leading to this remarkable insight can be expressed another way, that is, as seeing everything out there as being begotten. Stuff comes into existence, hangs around for a greater or lesser degree, and then passes off the scene. Reducing everything to that-which-is-begotten is an enlightening discovery which uncovers our presumption as well as proud, natural ignorance. In this way you can handle the incredible multiplicity and complexity of things without being overwhelmed by them. This focus, then, upon everything as begotten is set off

against its opposite, that which is non-begotten. For the moment we could align the non-begotten as that which is normal or normative, for it's an overarching principle that embraces yet transcends what is begotten. Maybe this could be put on the same plane or as a kind of update to the way some traditional ways of speaking about cultivating God's presence while going about one's business. Anyway, there doesn't seem to be a conflict between the two.

We can wander around for a considerable period of time not being able to define better the distinction between the natural and the normal. This is a hard to pin down malaise where we find ourselves looking for guidance. Without knowing it, we're in search for a principle external to nature...an external norm...and hence a desire to become normal. Yet the path from the natural to normal (never does it work the other way) can be misconstrued. One of the obstacles we run across is to view the natural as the normal while not making any changes in our perception. Making the normative natural is a way of objectifying it and thereby bringing it under our control or better, manipulation. The natural can be manipulated but not the normative. If so, objective norms would be subject to our whims and fancies. Once we've do this, it's quick and easy step to say that the normative is not transcendent and going a bit further, that life has no meaning and can be destroyed if we so desire.

Let's examine our so-called natural state in light of potential spiritual development, and by spiritual is meant that which doesn't fall under natural laws but rather is external to them. In other words, it is "normal" or to use a parallel term noted above, non-begotten. We have an inbuilt desire to survive physically, no question there. Should we look at this more closely, we discover it is less a concern compared with the survival of the mental images we've constructed of ourselves. Strange to say in this scenario, first the images and then the body. Over the years we've assembled images consciously and unconsciously allowing them to form a reality all their own until they have become our world, the one in which we inhabit. When things go wrong in the extreme, these images compound themselves to such an intolerable degree that the person contemplates the possibility of suicide. It turns out that this intent on self-destruction is misdirected; the person doesn't wish to kill himself but the images he has of himself. That's how intertwined the two have become with the images having taken complete control. Perhaps at the very last minute of life a person has terrible regrets at realizing this distinction that had been hidden from him. However, it's too late to turn back the clock.

We struggles with these images unceasingly but on a far less dramatic plane than being crushed by them and wishing to destroy their source which unmistakably we

take as the body. Suicide is killing the body while allowing the mental images to triumph, that is, an inversion of the affliction where the “cure” turns out to be fatal. The lawsuit between the images and we who have them continues without resolution which after some time, makes us wonder about the meaning of life. We've become too caught up in the symptoms but haven't a clue as to getting at the source of our woes. In the meanwhile, life goes its merry natural way in mechanical fashion, a phenomenon which had been discussed in an earlier article.

Strange to say, images arising from the natural plane turn out to embody something other than their source or that which is natural. Instead, they turn out to be fabricated and of a lesser significance in the larger scale of things. They have been cranked out by our imagination...our image making machine...and essentially are devoid of reality. Yet we live there, preferring the fruits of our imagination to an alternative which to many of us, does not exist. It's all we have even if it's the source of fears as well as our joys. Yet if we were pressed to identify these images, the only natural thing we could posit about them, if you will, is not whether they are natural or otherwise but their irrepressible spontaneity which is part and parcel of their insubstantiality. This ghost-like quality of images is proof that never can they stabilize us. So if we stop and reflect on this, we wonder at how we ever could attribute the word “normal” to the images that have captured our minds and have thus set the stage for governing our lives. Nevertheless, we hang on to them as we'd hand on to life.

Most of our discontent arises from the wearying parade of images marching before our eyes over which we have no control. Therefore we wish to escape them but not sure how to go about it. They advance before our eyes and evolve into several patterns which get established over the years and once having taken root, vary little, a fact which really tires us out. But as pointed out just above, there doesn't seem to be an alternative. We wrestle with the possibility of an alternative, usually on the subconscious plane, but never are able to resolve it. Yet the way out is right before our eyes. It consists of taking an active stance toward these images saying something like “Let them come, come what may. Not only that but issue an invitation to them to stay as long as they wish. As soon as we issue this invitation they dissolve quite miraculously. Of course they'll be back but will return as unwanted guests. At least we've put them on notice that they're not welcome. We need to get into the habit of establishing such a gesture, so easy yet one we forget continuously, so that no longer are we left at their mercy. Even if we got no further than this all our lives on our death bed we can look back and say that that life was worth living. We know at this final point we'll pass over into the realm of the normal which had sustained us in our struggle and strange to say, will live

forever. It's a fact one can go out and prove for himself and get the evidence although it may be difficult for him to convey it to other persons.

This ability to take an active stance instead of being passive to the parade of images is one of the best ways to deal with our sense of dread, even desperation. We could put it in another way, in the form of a question. Is it possible to exist without the parade of images which holds us captive? The immediate response is a flat out “no,” and we abandon the idea. At this time we should stop and take a deep breath. We may recall a few situations when we had been freed of this parade of images and cherish the memories as among the most peaceful and wonderful ones of our lives. They had come upon us without our asking, usually in an instance of despair or astonishment. Once we get by the images that have arisen spontaneously, we realize that we've hit upon a pure gift. Reflecting a bit further, we'd attribute this state as one which is normal, not natural, knowing full well that something larger than the natural world and our image-making machine has effected this insight. However, what stands out among them all is that the experience is short and sweet, never enduring despite their lasting impact upon our memory. What we want more than anything is to extend the experience throughout our lives...if not continuously then pretty close to it. Examples from the lives of the saints back this up though they may couch it in pious terminology. Every one of them has been lifted from the natural plane to the normal one and is marked permanently by a longing for shedding the former for the latter.

Memory of those occasions when we experienced suspension of our memories, brief as they may be, not only have a lasting impact but point to the bridge between what we consider natural and the normal. The passage is hidden in plain sight, if you will, but only becomes revealed under certain circumstances. As noted in the last paragraph, desperate situations are the best agents to reveal this passage. A sign that we've ended up in such a predicament is that we've exhausted all our resources and are reduced to crying out for help. Once it comes—and we can be sure it will come in one form or another—we pick ourselves up and go on our (natural) way. Rarely if ever do we establish the remembrance of our recent desperation as a focal point. It isn't helpful to do this out of a desire for something aberrant but as a point of reference to keep us in a special place we're not used to inhabiting. If we did, our lives would be quite different instead of the usual transitory insights we get about the bridge between the natural and normal. In sum, those brief memories of special peace would be extended and occur more often.

One way of expressing the transition from the natural to the normal realm consists

in exchanging our natural passivity to events which is marked by a parade of images to a form of active attention. The images themselves are not natural but literally abnormal...apart from the normal...by reason of their secondary nature as representations of a reality which is already out there. Although we reside in this paradox of living in the real world yet governed by images of it, rarely are we aware of how absurd is the situation. It's multi-tasking run wild. On one hand we feel the tug of the natural one more vigorously when we encounter the normal one because we perceive it as alien, other than what we're comfortable with, a sentiment which presents us with a few practical questions. Chief among them is how do we handle thoughts and emotions which arise spontaneously and have a life of their own? This happens all the time, of course, but is intensified when we find ourselves in a desperate situation. We start off by finding ourselves stifled, almost struggling for breath. Despite the unpleasantness, it's an excellent take-off point, really, because it's marked by a suspension of our intellectual and imaginative faculties.

It might be better to say we realize that all our thoughts are useless to save us, so abandoning them then and there is an important first step. We might as well go for it since our options are limited. Even if we end up dead, no problem. Death turns out to be a better option than to continue in desperation. Realizing this becomes one of our greatest assets because suddenly we've seen that both physical death and mental desperation, trying as they may be, are not the ultimate realities we have made them out to be. From here we can appreciate that the complex world which we inhabit demands plenty of thought and imagination. Not a new insight by any accounts, but it comes from this new perspective of our being beyond death and desperation while still in the body. If we stick with our new discovery, this new form of liberation where we return to the world allows us to see better the inescapable reality of intelligence and imagination. No longer do they present an obstacle to perceiving the world in an either-or situation: either we use these faculties or opt for suspending them.

Actually a kind of alteration exists between the two. Whether we pick one and reject the other had bothered us for some time. But now that we've reached that state of desperation, have learned to distill its essence and put it at the service of our inquiry, we learn to live with the alternation of using our mental faculties here and suspending them there. This is putting it awkwardly, but the main point is to show that any decision between the two isn't up to us. The alternation intensifies because it's a sign we're moving more towards the normal realm. And because that is ultimately in charge, the choice is made for us. All we do is give our consent and go along for the ride. At last we've surmounted a truly nagging issue because



inherently we've doubted the superiority of the normal plane over the natural one, that it has our best interests in mind. Finally we relinquish all this back and forth, take the plunge and go from there not just blindly trusting all will work out well but knowing it will do so.

A considerable amount of give and take between the natural and the normal is to be expected. Through it all we retain an intuition that something better lies in store for us, and that is the normal realm. Though shrouded in mystery just beyond our reach, at the same time we know it's possible to dwell there. If not now, we'll take up our residence later, no question about it. This longing is important because it points the way. If we look at our longing...and everyone has it...we discover it is devoid of thought or exists beyond thought. More accurately, it straddles the natural world just described and the one where everything is present to us immediately pretty much like it is to a small child. And this is the normal one which requires further exploration.

The ancient Greeks had a word for this longing or desire, *epithumia*, which consists of the root *thumos* or heart or seat of emotions as well as thought. The preposition *epi* or "upon" prefaced to it makes this *thumos* set or intent upon getting the object of its desire. To have a desire-upon...a *thumos epi* (reversing the sequence to make it more consistent in English)...with regard to what we instinctively know and crave as our birthright is the agent which propels us from the natural world to one which is normal. And this normal one is the norm...the standard or touchstone...for our lives. In other words, our new discovery addresses our preconceived ideas by bringing to the fore this *epithumia*. Actually it isn't a new discovery because always it had been present to us, a fact that dawns on us gradually.

What are the ways in which *epithumia* or this desire-upon operate? Don't forget, the goal is to solve the issue of living life without entertaining mental images or at least being dominated by them. The issue centers around how intense and how sustained this domination can get. *Epithumia* turns out to be quite flexible in this regard, adapting itself to each person's capacity, more intense here and less intense in other circumstances. The main goal is to establish it as the axis of rotation throughout life. We could put it in another way, as allowing *epithumia* to make our lives normal...living according to a norm...instead of the conventional natural way.

We call this a norm because it is a transcendent principle which governs everything else in our lives. It isn't imposed on us. We chose it by reason of its excellence

over anything from the natural realm. We maintain this governing principle through the faculty of remembrance which in Greek is *anamnesis*, a term used frequently throughout articles on this home page. When we stray...in this instance as reverting to the natural way of life...we have recollection (*anamnesis*) of our *epithumia*. This will restore us even if we forget and recall many times during the course of a given day and repeat the whole process again the next. So that's the real task at hand, dealing with these two fundamental alterations in life, the natural vs. the normal.

Whenever we hit upon something special in life—and here the normal is the best of all specials, if we could put it like that—invariably there comes to mind the prospect that the well will run dry. We may have a fruitful run but know instinctively it can't last. Such is a very “natural” way of viewing things, and we shouldn't be surprised at this attitude. Yet exposure to what we have discovered as normal or as being that norm which governs our lives, has something else in store for us. And we shouldn't forget that it had effected suspension of our thought processes, interfering, if you will, with what is natural within us. Our heart's desire or *epithumia* doesn't cease working. Although the normal is our birthright, the place we call home, nevertheless it doesn't seem within our reach to establish it as fully present. That means we're subject to alteration between what is natural and what is normal. At first the experience is daunting in that we perceive the alteration as a rather violent shift from one mode of perceiving reality to another. That's why *epithumia* is so important. It keeps on working through thick and thin.

We have tended to view the normal in a negative way as something imposed from without. The task at hand is to recognize this fallacy and give it our full allegiance. The natural way of viewing things would see this normal as boring. Yet because we're dealing with a governing principle set above all things, it rules over the natural as well even if the natural isn't aware of this domination. The way it “governs” the natural is to let things run...well...according to their nature or naturally. No interference nor anything special is expected which can go against the grain of our expectations.

This talk about the natural and normal is simply one way of dealing with things spiritual, of getting out of the habitual way of thinking about this realm which leans either to the devotional or to the intellectual. When we look at the bulk of Christian literature on spirituality, it had presumed a Christian culture to a greater or lesser degree. Now that such a culture is a thing of the past, modern folks might have a hard time related to this literature...not so much that the writings are out of date but that the two cultures are so different. Still, this doesn't preclude

our obligation to find a middle ground or a norm which we hope will guide us throughout life.

In conclusion, earlier I had said this essay is on the amateurish side and perhaps not as well thought out as it could be. I had written it without references which might have been incorporated but decided against that route. Instead, what is put down here come from personal reflection. Perhaps at some future point I can expand it or abandon any such thought altogether.

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