What is the "Normal"? A Commentary based on the Islamic Tradition and Psychology

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Abstract

This article is a commentary on the understanding of what is the "normal" from the viewpoints of tradition (as rooted in the Transcendent), using Islam as an example and modern psychology. This comparison is warranted because tradition and psychology have at its core the understanding of the person. While tradition has maintained its stance on what is the "normal," this is not so in the case of psychology for the very conception of man has changed from the sacred to the secular with the acceptance of modern physical science that began in the 17th century. For psychology, this is the backdrop against which the self has to be understood. In contrast, for Islam, to understand man, one needs to go back in origin to the Source, i.e., to the knowledge of the soul and of God.

Keywords: *Normal, Psychology, Islam, Soul, Self, Transcendent*

In an ever-changing world, nothing remains the same. So, what is normal today may not be so tomorrow. Hence, what is the "normal," and how is the "normal" decided. This commentary is meant to provide some thoughts on the normal from the Islamic traditional view and that of modern psychology.

The *"Normal"* in the Islamic Tradition

In the Islamic traditions, the *nafs* (soul or self) results when God "breathes of His Spirit into man." This is God's greatest gift to man - the divine gift

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of life and consciousness or of a soul. The nafs, in that moment of creation, is man's original nature and is also known as fiṭrah.This is his normal or natural nature. And, that natural nature knows itself and its Creator. It is the standard or norm according to which God created man. The nafs is in-between, wavering between the spirit and body, being more or less subtle or dense depending on where it might be between the two poles.

In this traditional view, the man is a sacred being. But this view of what is normal is not the view of the masses because they have lost touch with their *fiṭrah* or the perfection mirrored within them. As the typical and commonplace have been conflated, normalcy then is no longer measured by an inner sense of norm that is universal, but projected outwards in the universality of consensus (or standards set by the masses in society), with the average becoming the norm. In contemporary modern society, this practice has become accepted for knowledge no longer has its mooring in the metaphysical. Over time, this is what is acknowledged as the "normal." But there is a problem with this external criterion of normalcy—it is contrived and dependent on many outside influences like motives, interests, among others. (Lakhani, 2006). In this case, the real quest of normalcy—the aim for transcendence or perfection—is lost.

In other words, this aspiration to perfection has been veiled by the very act of creation, so instead of focusing on the Centre (inward heart) that is the "normal," man gets enticed by the peripheral. Thus, to be completely normal is to be spiritually awake, to see things as they are, i.e., meaning beyond form. Though such awakened souls should be the "normal," they are rare. This is so because what is uncommon, though unnatural, has become the common or the normal.

We live in a world of modernism, but modernism denies the transcendence. As such, it opposes a normativity based on divine existence, the principles of which are stamped onto our hearts. As a result, this "new normal" (or "ab-normal") will always be subjected to the whims and fancies of time. Put differently, the ethos of modernism with its three entwined trends—materialism or the reduction of reality to only the sensory or the immeasurable to only the measurable, secularization or the desacralisation of the public sphere or the erosion of conscience as reflected in the reduction of morality to the pragmatic as well as the marginalization of religion, and scientism that reduces all epistemology to empirical rationalism—has estranged man from his innermost self or Centre (Al-Attas, 1995).

Henceforth, the "new normal/ab-normal" is the loss of one's Centre and as a result, of order itself. This is so because order and harmony originate from the Centre, and the loss of centrality generates disorder and disharmony (and inwardly, virtue). Thus, modernism in severing man from his Centre has disconnected or given rise to disorder within man and consequently in his outward self (Lakhani, 2006).

Put differently, the *fiṭrah*, the primordial nature (or the standard upon which that God created man) is the essence of what is normal. This norm that we carry within ourselves is a transcendent "faculty of discernment by which humanity is able to perceive its spiritual origin and to recognize the pervasive radiance of the spiritual presence within itself and in all things…" (Lakhani, 2006, 35). The loss of transcendence is at root, basically a spiritual disorder, for without a Centre no person can remain normal. To compensate for this loss, the self or ego takes over as the Centre. But the ego cannot be the Centre because it lies only within the psyche and thus cannot transcend itself. Its reality is only at the psycho-physical.

Thus, what it means to be truly human is to transcend oneself and ascend to the norm that lies within us, back to our primordial nature, when "God breathes of His Spirit into us." To be "normal" then is to be spiritually sound, to be awake and conscious of God for the soul of every human being is the spirit of God (Razi 1982).

The "Normal" in Psychology

So, what does this mean for psychology? In other words, how is the "normal" construed? To respond, we need to go back in time to the ancient Greeks' depiction of man. This is important because the Church fathers were trained in Greek philosophy, and they became acquainted with the ideas of Stoicism, Platonism and Aristotelianism. These ideas, directly or indirectly, entered into the Christian theology and through Christianity the mind-set of Western civilization, both secular and religious (Martin and Barresi 2006). Man, in their understanding, consists of the spirit (*pneuma*), psyche (*psyche*) and body (*soma*). Similarly, in other traditional psychologies (here, we also include religious and indigenous psychologies), the tripartite divisions exist. Often times, psyche and body are considered as the lesser "self." In this case, man is seen to comprise of two selves; an inner self or sacred core that is his very being, and an outer psycho–physical personality. Because of its constantly changing character,

this outer aspect of man is conceived to be unstable, and is often described as multiple. This is the self that is the focus of psychological endeavour and of much clinical work.

The two selves, the lesser unstable self with its fleeting desires, and the other higher self, however, seldom see eye-to-eye with each other. Thus, man is always seen to be in conflict with himself; unless he is able to properly order these two selves with the higher governing the lower (the "normal" as described earlier). That is why some forms of mental illness is also seen as a "dis-order;" they are perceived to have deviated from this normal or proper order.

As stated earlier, because modernism has denied the transcendent spirit in its rejection of all religious and moral principles as well as systems of beliefs, the so-called "spirituality" now can only be located or situated in the psyche. In other words, by locating the psyche as the Centre, man attributes to himself the responsibility of discerning what is true and false as well as right and wrong. Thus, the human mind is free to decide all things for itself. Put in other words, there is no need for a differentiation between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, terms used earlier by Spinoza (1632-1677, Lermond 1988, 6), to refer to God as a free cause or *nature naturing* and everything that flows from God or *nature natured* respectively, because the former has been cast out.

While modernism made its presence felt most strongly within the early twentieth century, it was a culmination of the earlier Renaissance and Enlightenment movements that aimed to liberate man from the shackles of convention. Natural philosophy was distinguished from metaphysics and cosmology and came to encompass only the physical sciences. Much progress was seen in this respect, and by the seventeenth century, natural objects were regarded as machines, and efforts made to study how they work. Galileo (1564–1642) for example, distinguished between primary and secondary qualities of objects and claimed that the former is objective while the latter subjective. And, natural philosophy could only progress by focusing on objects' primary qualities and ignoring secondary ones. Modern science, according to him, would focus not on the macroscopic objects but on the tiny atoms that make up the objects, expressed mathematically.

Descartes (1596–1650) continued with this new vision of reality and provided the groundwork for a mechanical science based on mathematical

principles. Because qualities inherent in things could not be measured, he separated the mechanical world/*res extensa* (extended thing/corporeal substance or basically what can be measured) from the *res cogitans* (the thinking substance), resulting in the well-known Cartesian mind-body dualism. As he was the one doing the doubting in the first place, he could not doubt that he himself existed. In other words, Descartes was convinced of his existence precisely *because* he could think; thus, *res extensa* was a logical consequence of his existence. It is Descartes' mind-body dualism that has influenced the psychoanalytic concept of the self. Kirshner's (1991) article on the concept of the self in psychoanalytic theory retraces the paths taken by Western philosophy beginning with Hume and Descartes, and the problems that issue from a rejection of the transcendent spirit and the acknowledgment that man is constituted only of this lesser self. In reducing man from spirit to mind, mind to brain, and brain to anatomical structures, thinking (*res cogitans*), which is what defines man becomes merely a "neuro–chemical" process, or as Wilson (1978) puts it, "…an epiphenomenon of the neuronal machinery of the brain" (195). Similarly, in the medical field where the biomedical model privileges the "body" as more real than the subjective narrative and emotions of the suffering person, is still the dominant approach (see critiques by Engel 1977, 1980 on this model and his development of the biopsychosocial model).

This influence is pervasive and is found in nearly all aspects of life. For example, Mill (1806-1873), while arguing against this incomplete conception of man, nevertheless pointed out that this is an important aspect of man that could be separated out and analysed. And, despite critiques on his *homo economicus* or economic man (see Essays on some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy, 1848), many still continue to rely on this segmented, contested conception of man that is constituted of instrumental rationality and material self-interest, very much echoing Adam Smith's earlier work on the nature and causes of the wealth of nations (Smith 2003). This economic view has also influenced education, in the sense that that it emphasizes primarily on the engineering issues of teaching. In other words, the aim of education is no longer the development of reason, character and morals (Postman 1995), but to produce *homo economicus*—man whose "faith" is self-interest, whose goal is material wealth and whose ethos is vogue. Thus, the higher aim of education is side-lined for the economic return on this investment is less tangible. This reduction of man to only his psycho-physical self is indeed persistent.

This is precisely the point raised by Wolfgang Pauli, one of the pantheons of quantum physics. He argued that the mechanical world conceived in 17th century was made possible only because it focused on the world of matter which could be subjected to the deterministic laws of causality, thus, describable by science. To Pauli, this is only half the picture. For to him, reality has two sides, the rational-critical and the mystical-irrational. The former, better known as science "seeks to understand," while the latter "looks for the redeeming experience of oneness" (Laurikainen, 1999; 173). He believed both to reside in the human soul and "…each will always carry the other…within itself as the germ of its contrary" (Laurikainen, 1999; 173). This is akin to the black dot in the white *yang* that represents the male in the Chinese *yin-yang* symbol of life, and the white dot in the black *yin*. In other words, life consists of balancing between two opposing forces—of *yin* and *yang*, of the feminine and masculine, of the irrational and the rational, of body and soul—which in reality are complementary, interconnected and interdependent. Both were present earlier in Western thought, but the onslaught of modern science in the 17th century severed that relationship. For science to be rational and objective, the irrational-mystical element of reality had to be suppressed and excluded. Thus, reality is made up of only the rational-critical. Put in other words, in a mechanical world reality is void of any spiritual life, for no life can be reducible to the sum of its parts. Thus, while in the past knowledge of the world was integrated; modern science has severed this up and since then has struggled to restore the unity. While physics has abandoned the idea of deterministic causality, many doing research, psychologists included, still adhere to the old view.

Currently in psychology, the soul no longer has a place. Its descendent, the self, however is ever-present. But, this self is seen as an entity that lacks unity with psychologists still searching for explanations. Put differently, in the past, what used to do the explanatory work was the perfect unity of an incomposite immaterial soul, now it is the imperfect unity of a composite material body. While in the past also theories of the self were seen as parts of a larger all-inclusive worldview, this is no longer the case. In addition, while previously theory was integrated and the self one, now not only are there multiple theories but the self also has become fragmented. These changes have been accompanied with another related change—the soul that started as unquestioningly real has now ended in a self that seems to be imaginary (Martin and Barresi 2006; 4-5).

To Return to the Normal

This is indeed our human task, to return to the normal, to go back to our natural nature. In the traditional Islamic view and other religious psychologies as well as traditions, this involves aligning the lower self to the spirit so that there is order within, which then results in transforming the man in his outer aspect or outward character. Here, we present two perspectives from the Islamic tradition. The first is on Ibn Sina's (or Avicenna, 980-1037) psychology while the second is a Sufi approach, using Al-Ghazali's (1058-1111) spiritual psychology as an example. Both involved striving to know oneself or to remember one's original nature, i.e., the normal.

As a philosopher, Ibn Sina's psychology is essentially Peripatetic in that it adheres closely to the description of the soul by Plato and Aristotle combined with ideas from Neoplatonic sources as well as Islamic teachings. Ibn Sina, like other philosophers of his time, focused not on things as appeared in the external physical world, but on things as known or their realities. To understand the true nature of things in the cosmos, intellect or *'aql* (includes both reason [ratio] and intellect [nous] which constitute a unity) is deemed sufficient to achieve the goal of understanding oneself and the world. For Ibn Sina, the purpose of human life is to actualize the potential of the theoretical intellect, or to perfect one's rational soul. In his psychology, the soul is divided into three parts; the vegetative, animal and rational souls. What is implied by these three souls is that man has within him the nature of the plants, animals and potentially the nature of the angels or intelligences. Each has its own entelechy (movement from potentiality to actuality or perfection), function and faculties, whose activities it must constantly monitor (Chittick 2001). Man, in this case, is seen as a microcosm who possesses all the levels of existence within himself with the intellect as the inner principle of his being. The faculties/powers of the various souls within man are the many stages between the vegetative and angelic life that he has to traverse.

This psychology has immense descriptive power for it is able to embrace and explain both one's inner world and its personal dynamics. It has its own value system, in that body and soul are not equal, nor are all souls, or the faculties of each individual soul. The soul is "higher" and superior compared to the body. Among the soul's three divisions, there is again a hierarchical progression from the vegetative soul to the animal soul to the rational one, signifying ontological ascent from lesser to greater perfection.

Again, there is a clear ontological distinction between the two lower souls and the rational soul, where the former souls being connected with the body, perishes with the body at death, but the rational soul subsists "disembodied" after death. Hierarchy exists also within the rational soul. The intellect is "commander and superior" of the rational soul. Within the intellect too, there are gradations, from material intellect to habitual to acquired, to prophetic intellect, which is the highest level of perfection (Heath 1992, Nasr 1997).

The Sufi approach, on the other hand, is more mystical where the *nafs*/soul as the source that makes man selfish and self-centred has to undergo proper spiritual disciplines to transform itself to realize it-self. The journey consists of an arduous path of constant struggle against the oppressiveness of one's own soul. This is the struggle that the Prophet (peace be upon him) referred to as the greater *jihad;* the struggle against the evil of one's soul. In the journey, the soul undergoes several transformations until it discovers its own Centre. This emphasis on inner purification is usually a guided approach by a spiritual teacher and is seen as a journey of the self to Self or of increasing self-awareness to attain higher levels of consciousness. In other words, it is for the self to know its original nature.

In the Sufi view of reality, human beings exist on a vertical axis, from the lowest dimension of reality (the visible world) to the highest (transcendent God). If a person remains at the lower levels and refuses to struggle against his own self, his soul continues to forget. But, if the self is able to turn towards God, his soul increasingly becomes more aware. Thus, the soul moves from one that command itself to evil or being forgetful and heedless, to one that remembers its original nature and reproaches itself for its failings, to one that is able to be at peace with itself and with God. At each level, there is confrontation of the self with self, before it can attain to the perfection of its original nature (Murata 1989, Nasr 1993).

Al-Ghazali (2016) sees the self as comprised of different tendencies or attributes that must be brought into equilibrium before perfection can be attained. The two most important are the "lordly" and the "satanic" that pull the self in opposing directions; the former upwards to God and the latter downwards to the world. If the former dominates, the soul will in due course be at peace with God. But, if the latter rules, the soul will remain forgetful and be at the lower rung where it commands the self to wrong doings. The other two tendencies—passion and anger—are contingent on these two central tendencies. If the lordly tendency prevails, they will be

positive and vice versa if the satanic one predominates. Equilibrium is established when the wise man (or intellect) is able to lessen passion's greed by making anger as its master, while at the same time resisting the viciousness of anger by making passion rule over it. Only then can justice prevail within the self (Murata 1989). In other words, there must be proper relations between the self's attributes; else, the self's negative tendencies will take over as witness in the many ugly character or moral traits of man.

These are two views from the Islamic tradition, one more philosophical while the other more spiritual. Both, however, seemed to describe the human soul as a traveller in this world who has forgotten his original abode or his natural nature, and needs to find his bearing or to remember so that he can return to his original home. In both, the concept of verticality is inherent, and as a sacred being, his task to journey upwards to return to the Spirit.

More recently, Wolfgang Smith (2005), another physicist, has reclaimed the distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans* to indicate that the former is contingent on the latter or that the *natura naturata* presupposes *natura naturans*, using the state vector collapse[2] (105-107). In other words, using findings in quantum physics, he argued on a vertical dimension that transcends the bound of space and time, where everything that exists and has its being do so by the act of this First Cause. Because modern science has done away with the transcendent, the universe is perceived as a closed system that can be understood only in terms of natural causality; or causality only at the horizontal, temporal level. In contrast, tradition (which include all traditional religions, see Lakhani 2002; Nasr 2017) is rooted in the metaphysical structure of reality or the transcendent whose immutable principles, the *sophia perennis* or primordial wisdom, in reality govern all things which are made known to man through revelation.

According to Nasr (1993), if modern psychology remains only at the level of the psyche with nothing higher than this individual self, then "…there cannot but be the highest degree of conflict between limited egos which would claim for themselves absolute rights, usually in conflict with the claims of other egos—rights which belong to the Self alone..." (20). Put in other words, the self would never know itself but knows only the things that are its baggage. Indeed, traditional religions are not interested in

knowing the "lesser selves," rather their concern is to know the Spirit that dwells within, and with which the lesser selves must learn to conform.

Thus, traditional religious perspectives see only one Self, which lies at the centre of oneself and every self. Man's task is to learn to seek out and listen to this higher self and to resolve the contested relationship between them. Traditional cosmologies furthermore look at the phenomenal world as a theophany, where the cosmos manifests God's signs and God's Names, and is meaningful. This is the vertical dimension—that which has been taken out by modern science. But, it is this dimension that provides value and meaning to life, which makes us fully human and which is the prerequisite to existence itself. By taking this dimension out, it is not only the universe that has flattened but also the conceptualization of man himself. Put in other words, being fully human entails meaning. And this is aptly mentioned by Huston Smith "…a meaningful life is not finally possible in a meaningless world" (2003, 106).

Thus, psychology too, needs to return to its religious and philosophical roots. In Divine Governance of the Human Kingdom, Ibn Arabi (1997) presents the parable of man as a kingdom who needs to be properly governed by God's deputy, the soul, very similar to al-Ghazali's spiritual psychology. To keep order in its kingdom, the soul must first know itself; else, disorder results.

In conclusion, traditional religious psychologies imply that we live simultaneously in two distinct "worlds." One is the world of matter, measurable and scientifically explainable. The other is the subjective experience as a sacred being with consciousness as the foundation of existence, our ground of being whose natural nature is the *fiṭrah* or the "normal" that knows itself, its Creator and His creations. This is the part that has been rejected in the empirical science description of reality. To be relevant, psychology must bring back the transcendent, the spiritual heart experience, and cannot be dependent on only the mental experience. In other words, to remember that spark that God breathe into Adam and which is imprinted onto his heart—that makes us human in the highest sense of the word. It is also what makes the angels prostrate before Adam—the *ruh* of God in us. Thus, we set over lives according to the norms of God, not that of man.

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