

## **Individuality and Normality - battle or balance?**

Individuality. My first reaction to this title was a memory, of people whose main aim in life was to assert their individuality. They took up lifestyles: hippies, mods and rockers, later punks. High Mohawk hairstyles in lurid colours, the jangle of piercings and huge safety pins. So, in the quest to become individuals, punks rejected normal norms, and took up a different set: normal punkhood. Call it self-expression. (Or the Bloomsbury Group.)

So, individuals became somethings: punks. The larger philosophical lesson from that seems to be: every *thing* is an individual thing; but is also an individual *something*. We humans (and probably most animals) group somethings into categories. These can be denoted by nouns – man, dog, punk, politician) and/or by the qualities they possess (tall, old, shaggy, smelly...). Which brings overlapping sets and Venn diagrams to mind, plus an extremely complex, adaptable vocabulary to handle them.

But, within each set and overlap, each individual is quite *normal*. And this normality is defined by *norms* of description – hence the connection between normality and norms: a purple-haired punk with four nose-rings is a normal example of the set of purple-haired punks with four nose-rings. At the same time, within the brain of that punkish person there is a burning desire to assert and display *their* individuality. And, once a punk, there is a desire to be a *proper* punk, one of the punk type, but better.

Kierkegaard gives the example of a guru (not his word) who announces to his followers that no-one should either follow him, or try to attract followers. And is thenceforth followed by crowds who repeat that message. We might see this situation as a trap, which blocks our quite *normal* desire to assert our individuality. Which may account for the observable, normal, tendencies of rebellious groups to fragment into sub-groups. Hence my title: is this process an inevitable tension, a battle for supremacy between two human drives? Or is it a dialectic? A thesis-antithesis opposition that resolves into a synthesis? Since Hegel sees the dialectic as an historical pattern, let's see how this works out in time.

### **FROM WHAT TO WHO, AND BACK – a biography**

We are each of us born a product of the natural world: as individuals, we have nothing to do with that process. Nothing to be proud of, or ashamed of. At birth, we are totally dependent on the world, knowing and performing only our needs. A date, time and place, a weight and a sex. A what. Only later do we become individuals, whos. Our end, though, may descend into something very similar to that beginning, a thing to be disposed of.

In our various manifestations, over a lifetime, we run the gamut between individual and normal: from infant to final sputtering ember of self. On the way, we dip in and out. At onset, biology determines all; we conform to norms or die.

We become individual persons, whos, only when we find out we can make *choices*, and discover agency. We then choose ever-narrowing forking paths that commit us to the individual *who* we become. Recognition of choices, and of responsibility for them, marks the transformation from infant object into individual adult.

We begin as a bundle of categories, we also use them. It is our *normal* habit to categorise not just things but also the strangers in the street; we may choose our acquaintance on the basis of *what* they are, only later discovering *who*. We describe others by qualities and categories; names of persons come much later – as if all the universals had agglomerated into a specified collective individual proper name. Employers specify ‘what’ they require, a category, and choose a ‘who’, an individual. We are each our past, our learned skills and prejudices, and consequent limited potential. Interestingly, this process is quite like that described by Russell in his epistemology: universals first, particulars much later, if ever. It also bears resemblance to biological determination, as evolution branches out and loops around to form a new norm – composed of norms, where time meets taxonomy. A normal form, as idealised by Plato. The individual, individuation and individualism are *normal* forms of the natural process. Or, in philosophic jargon, ‘instantiations’ of that form, or type, or idea.

But we humans are used to thinking of ourselves as different, distinct, even exempt, in some ways from the determined juggernaut of natural evolution: we are not mere products, but producers. Active, not just passive. We, each one of us, is a *who*, not just a what.

**WHAT AM I? A kind of thing, a type or token, categorised by norms of description. A product of natural law.**

**WHO AM I? A particular individual, specified, unique, named, a point of view. An autonomous agent.**

These two would be very different kinds of people wouldn't they? One an automaton, the other autonomous. One normal, in that he/she fits in and falls in line like a soldier in uniform; the other standing out like a sore thumb, meeting the sergeant's extreme displeasure – the soldier obeys norms; the individual ignores them: he/she is their own person.

But without norms, individuals resist definition: we need norms, or universals, to classify ourselves, to find our place in the world – and that of others. However: in order to *recognise* individuals we may not need to *categorise* them. Recognition is different from definition: recognition is often instant; definition of objects is a process. (The English double meaning of ‘to know’ embodies this distinction.) As individuals and proud of it, we resist the norms that would

flatten us into objects. And, at the same time, we embrace them: for many, normality is an ambition. Two contrary drives, but synthesised, somehow, in each of us. How?

### **INDIVIDUALISM – the drive in time**

The drive towards *becoming* individuals is something any parent among us will recognise, as charming children become bolshie adolescents. Normality is rejected and new signifiers are sought and displayed, signs of rebellion against the norms *imposed* by older generations. So, becoming an individual is seen as *not* conforming to normal norms. Individuals are *non*-conformists. It's a NO – a rude gesture to old, normalised fuddy-duddies like us – sorry, I mean like *me*. So, what next? A rude gesture becomes a movement, conformity becomes rebellion, classical criteria of form and beauty become curated rubbish; what matters is just how *individual* you are, master of your fate and captain of your soul: *individualism* becomes the norm. You can even buy a T-shirt with 'Nonconformist' proudly blazoned across the chest: a sign of belonging, without irony.

*Individualism* exploded in philosophy and the arts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Romanticism: in the writings of Nietzsche, Goethe, Keats, Hugo, and in rebel musical and visual forms. One of Romanticism's tenets was that the work can be judged *only* by its author. Individuals are self-justifying. "No-one understands me but me" is the typical cry of the Romantic. After them came the existentialists, each wearing black, thus displaying conspicuous corporate individuality – 'authenticity' as Heidegger called it. But then, what does it mean to be 'one of these individuals'? Do they understand each other? Judge each other?

Behind this ... what? Paradox? Dilemma? Puzzle?... lies the inevitability of confronting the question: individual *what?* For only objects and subjects can be individual, and these cannot be unique, or they will not be somethings: reach out to touch each one and it will evaporate, like a rainbow, or one of Wittgenstein's unnameable sensations marked with an 'S' in his diary.

### **'A PLAY OF OPPOSITIONS'**

Well before the Romantics, back in 1694, 300 years ago, a certain Mr Burthogge wrote "If a man had never seen but one thing ... he could never be sensible or conscious he did see it." Perception needs differences, distinctions. [The subtitle here comes from de Saussure, father of structuralism.]

Looked at from a purely semantic point of view, the idea of an 'individual' object needs its contrary – the group or class; neither can exist without the other. That is a semantic necessity – for objects, but not for persons; we do not speak of

named individual persons having contraries. But rebellious individuals need to signify what kind of rebels they are, because they might be rebelling against some other rebels, not normal rebels. Flags, and T-shirts, are labels. They conform to norms of labelling, and rebelling.

Descriptions and systemic symbolic representations require norms of representation. Which, in turn, require regular systems. Which impose, or discern, regularities on our worlds of experience. These regularities may be **descriptive**, *a posteriori* labels, designed for reports of experience; or **prescriptive**, designed to impose *a priori* order – cultural, legal, logical, structural, taxonomic... etc. At first sight, the relation to normality is not obvious: but it turns out that normality is a state of order and regularity that *needs* systems of norms. The philosophical position underlying this view, of a kind of necessity, goes quite deep; so, for now, I simply describe it, without either prescribing it or mounting a defence. (Though one such defence might begin with Plato's cave allegory.) So, I should now like to return to the dullest, most inherently uninteresting subject of all – where nothing, literally nothing, is happening (except more of the same): normality.

#### **DOES NORMAL EQUAL BORING?**

To a detective investigating a normal crime (an abnormal event) a witness may describe the offender as 'normal' (or 'average', or 'ordinary') in appearance, which is not helpful – there's a lot of us about. Normality, when examined, is surprisingly difficult to pin down. Normality merges individuals into a grey inchoate mass, the equivalent of background music – a state of high entropy. It neither contains nor conveys information. Pity the poor detective. Perhaps 'normal' is simply a zero point on a scale of *abnormality*, an absence of anything to notice, be aware of. But a norm also implies an imperative – a drive to be 'normal'; prescription as well as description.

Doctors measure our temperature, weight, BMI, blood pressure and blood contents, sight, hearing, looking for *abnormalities*. Normality needs no doctor or concern. Our public servants - police, fire, medicine, water, electricity... - are there to restore it. The differently abled may yearn for it. Outcasts want it back: "If you cut me, do I not bleed?" pleads Shylock, the Jew from the ghetto. It is the default option. Neutral on the gearbox.

#### **THE NORM AS FORM. AND FORM AS NORM.**

Normality is necessary: it is the foundation of reason, of natural law, of reliability and our reliance on it. Without it, we would have no choices; because each would have unknowable, unreliable consequences. We could not even be 'ourselves' because there would be no constants. Individual persons may be 'instantiations' of the norms, or they may be the foundation from which observed normality is inferred. Philosophers have held both views, possibly at the same time. A physical conjunction of norms is both an expression of

normality and an ideal form – to which no realised ‘object’ actually corresponds. Hence the allegory of Plato’s Cave; where philosophy begins and ends.

A century or so ago, Russell had difficulty making the transition from ‘sense-data’ to individual objects. The senses feed on universals, qualities; objects have to be inferred. From the orangeness of an orange to the fruit in his hand was a quantum leap (as they now say). But numbers need objects to count and measure – at least, until you progress to the maths of ideas. So we need to have a philosophical account of the relation and transition.

That lack of a relationship is a function of our ‘objective’, symbolic thinking, calculating and reasoning – all based in assumptions of normality when applied to the world. But we all *feel* like individuals. If not, we seek more.

### **POLITICAL NORMALITY**

The tension between normality and individuality is not just an armchair game for philosophers; it underlies common political dimensions: the right idealises free *individual* economic competition while the left has a different concept of freedom - freedom from want – ‘positive’, as Isaiah Berlin calls it. Which implies upsetting the hierarchical social order. But economic freedom for individuals is a destabilising force too. Real life blunts ideals with compromise.

In normal pragmatic politics however, the cult of the *individual* leader is inseparable from popular support, producing the paradox, or oxymoron, of the ‘libertarian strong leader’. His, or her, political convictions are irrelevant to success; what matters is the individual performance, the style: “Normal people love me,” he says, “because I am an exceptional individual.”

### **AND PHILOSOPHY?**

But, since this is Philsoc, back to philosophy. I happened upon a book review recently, about four ‘fifties French female philosophers’ (from the effing intellectual elite perhaps?). Between them, they span the whole gamut of viewpoints on this subject. And establish the link to politics.

On my very far right, the high watermark of individualism, disciple of Nietzsche, superwoman Ayn Rand. In her worship of self-interest she bowed to no-one and nothing; so fled to the USA where she found an audience to bow to her. At the opposite extreme, a self-abnegator to the point of self-sacrifice, Simone Weil. And somewhere between, exhibiting some of the tensions we’ve looked at, Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt – the latter perhaps the most analytic writer in this bunch. Incidentally, she used the phrase “terribly and terrifyingly normal” to describe Eichmann. “The banality of evil” is her most famous quote.

The link to banal normality is interesting here: evil is integrated with the everyday – which, by the way, *en route*, denigrates us all: it’s a rude gesture to you and me. One individual smears his guilt over us all. Though I don’t think she

meant to do that: 'evil' in the romantic guise of Satan, is glamorous; hers was an aesthetic irony.

Rand, whose dogma was nothing like Arendt's analysis, does something similarly careless in her Nietzschean ravings: the norm is the base (in all senses) from which the individual rises in a blaze of glory, snobbery and indifference. He wins; which makes the rest of us losers. Simone de Beauvoir simply cuts herself free from normal norms and wraps herself in her own unique individuality – though becoming, at the same time, confusingly, both a Marxist and a (possibly *the*) feminist. And, probably, an authentic existentialist. The other Simone, Weil, subdued her individuality to God, and/or all creation, and immolated her individual self.

### WHOS AND WHATS

Now each of these has become a 'who', a recognisable individual. Much more interesting than a female philosopher – a 'what'; perhaps because individuals have individual histories, and normal, countable, anonymous objects don't. Histories play a part in *recognition*, a shortcut to identity.

Russell, for example, tells how we integrate universals in order to constitute the object; but leaves out how we distinguish *that particular* object. In brute practice, we may need graded differences in quantity and quality of universals. Middles no longer excluded, but of the essence, *pace* Aristotle.

Imagine an antique dealer examining an object. In order to value it, authenticate it – treat it, in other words, as an individual – she has to calibrate properties: colour, textures, signs of wear, and track along a timeline to an *individual* time, place and creator. Recognition by accidents, not essences. Our memories and knowledge are at least as much made up of individuals as of universals – which some say, are just abstractions from individuals (also known as 'instances'). Which, in fact, come first? The type or the token? Does it matter? The pure volume of post-Kantian philosophy indicates that it does, to many.

I am saying that the tension between these two ideas, in the case of a human being, can be tracked over time. At birth we accept norms without complaint or resistance. Then, as we become more self-conscious, conscious of self, and conscious 'others', we ask questions: Am I one of *them*, or am I just me? Do I fit in, or stand out? The idea of me as individual begins to take shape. We see differences, which resist fitting in. The climax of this conflict comes in adolescence – 15-17 say; the 'difficult' age, as any teacher will tell you.

Except, the individual is destined to become the norm – which, we discover, is full of individuals just like us. From the external observers' point of view, this is the normal pattern: individuals make normality. The exceptions we treat warily or 'cure', in our society, or lock away in some others.

So, the pattern is, from normality to peak individual and back again – with perhaps a recidivist retirement. From needs to desires to choices to agency to maturity.

The tension, growth that feels like conflict, is actually the dilemma, or sequence of dilemmas, set up by choice. Choices make us who, *who*, we become – as the existentialists say. That could be my summary, my ending; but here's an image.

### **AN INDIVIDUAL MEETS HIS MAKER**

Choices bring us to the supermarket - built to maximise, optimise and realise abundant choice. We are invited to enter. I take a trolley. In choosing what to put in my trolley (this being now a part of me) I grow, become, develop. In Aristotelean terms I become what my essence is *meant* to be. I, plus my full trolley, am fully myself, idealised and realised. (Though not yet paid for.)

But, and not all of us know this, a Big Benign Brother is watching over all. He lists my choices, sorts them out into categories, tracks my development: I am become DATA. It is this data that establishes, describes and defines both normality and my individuality. (That does not, by the way, mean ordinariness, or – heaven forbid! – averageness. The average parent has 2.3 children – which would be very abnormal.) My data is just part of the immensity of all data; which, and here's the neat bit, then determines what choices are offered to me. The circle closes. My precious individuality – my gourmet tastes, for example, or my nose for bargains - now has form (perhaps not Platonic form, but I'm hard put to it to specify the distinction). It is no longer a who; it is a what. Via my supermarket I am transformed from man to market, from name to number. Measured, if not recognised. So tightly formed is this circle of demand and supply, of choice and the chosen, that an expert (or a computer) can take a few, items from my trolley, and from this little data draw a detailed model of my type: where I live, go on holiday, which films I shall see and what I read. I can be *identified* from scraps of my identity, as if from a fingerprint or DNA. I am my DATA.

### **THE SYNTHETIC INDIVIDUAL**

That's what happens; but philosophy, notoriously, is not very interested in such vulgar, High-Street happenings, contingent effects. Latterly, it has become even more fascinated by inner goings-on, the ineffable, mysterious muddle in the middle we call consciousness (for want of a better term). This is the last bastion of the beleaguered individual fighting off the ranks of the normals. It is a bitter irony that the open variousness of the supermarket shelves should, in the end, use our free choices to transform us back into a normal, natural, utterly predictable kind. (Me and my trolley, that is.)

What the supermarket example teaches us is that everyone is normal in needing choices, but each of us is an individual *kind* of normality (if I weren't, I

would need no choices and have none). Difference is normal; indeed, essential. Without it, there would be, literally, nothing. Differences drive the universe: between masses, energies, potentials, times and places and directions. Each node in the network of differences is an individual. In our evolution, our coming into life and form, differences have converged on an individual. So, no need to try to be one. But equally, without the norms of a normal universe, there would be no universe (as we know it, Scotty).

That is the dialectic: thesis - normality; antithesis - individuality; synthesis - all our choices, there in the trolley. My individual normality - all that there is to know about me.

## NOTES

The individual is recognised holistically, by instant integration of sensual inputs, not subject to measurement. The category may be measurable, distinguished by kind and quantity [is this a criterion for objectivity?]

I want to be categorised as a normal person, not a freak. But I want to be recognised as me, by (individual) name.

We hear seekers after individuality say "I want to find myself" as if their self had been lost, or extinguished.

A quote: 'Dimes Square is a small pocket of lower Manhattan that skateboarders and fashion kids gravitated to last year. Followed by many so-called taste makers and influencers. It managed to earn itself its very own reality TV show and nickname as the first ever meme neighborhood. ... Memes are impossible to get away from... meme culture'