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German Ethics Council: Scrutinising concepts of normality more closely

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The German Ethics Council publishes its Impulse Paper “Normality as a process” today. In it, the Council examines how ideas about what is normal exert normative effects in many areas of society. By discussing specific examples, the paper aims to raise awareness for the changeability, contextuality and ambiguity of such concepts of normality.

Concepts of normality provide orientation: questions such as “Is my body weight within the normal range?” or “Is it still normal that I have been mourning the death of my mother for so long?” shape not only our understanding of ourselves, but also our understanding of the world. The moral indignation which quite often accompanies everyday statements such as “That’s not normal!” illustrates just how normatively charged discourses of normality tend to be. Some deviations from the norm, on the other hand, are explicitly judged positively, for example extraordinary achievements in sports or arts.

“With its Impulse Paper, the German Ethics Council wants to encourage reflection: Can normality be determined just like that? Who decides what is considered ‘normal’? And what impact do our concepts of normality have on personal decisions on the one hand and on social discourses, for example pertaining to moral or legal issues, on the other? We believe that these questions should be given more consideration, including in the media and in educational and health institutions,” explains Petra Bahr, spokesperson for the Ethics Council’s working group on the topic.

One important starting point for the Impulse Paper is the finding that neither what is considered normal nor, in contrast, what appears to be abnormal, deviant or conspicuous is simply “given”. Sometimes, ideas of normality change gradually and imperceptibly; in other cases, open revolt against them is the aim of political campaigns. “From an ethical perspective, particular attention must be paid to whether and when concepts of normality develop that are incompatible with fundamental moral values such as human dignity, self-determination and justice”, Petra Bahr emphasises.

Concepts of normality in the life sciences

The German Ethics Council pays particular attention to controversial notions of normality in medicine and other life sciences. The distinction between health and disease often refers explicitly or at least implicitly to normality. In the field of mental health, for example, this distinction is highly controversial. Exemplarily, the Impulse Paper analyses the debate on the concept of neurodiversity as a discourse on normalisation. Many people who see themselves as neurodiverse refuse to be pathologised and merely claim to be “differently normal” compared to “neurotypical” persons.

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Predictive genetics, images of age and the body

The Ethics Council continues to illustrate the numerous lines of conflict in society's management of concepts of normality by referring to predictive genetic tests, body images and concepts of age. New methods of non-invasive prenatal diagnostics raise the question of whether there is such a thing as "genetic normality" and its implications for our understanding of disability. The change from previous, predominantly deficit-oriented views of old age to positive images of ageing that focus on the abilities and potentials of older and even very old persons makes the variability of ideas of normality particularly clear. The Ethics Council analyses the growing power of digital media on normalisation discourses using the example of the body positivity movement, which aims to break down problematic body ideals.

In contrast to the Opinions regularly published by the German Ethics Council, the Impulse Paper does not contain any specific recommendations. Rather, it is intended to provide food for thought on the complex relationships between normality and normativity and to raise awareness of the ambivalences of the "normal".

The Impulse Paper "Normality as a process" is available on the website of the German Ethics Council at www.ethikrat.org/publikationen/stellungnahmen/normalitaet-als-prozess – currently in German only (English version to follow).