

## Second Reading / Response: What is Normal?

Levels: Easy, Medium, Difficult, Advanced, Pro

Directions: Choose which level you want to read, and try your best to understand what the writer is talking about. Then answer the questions.

1. Which level did you choose?
2. What argument is the writer trying to make?
3. How can you tell he's trying to make that argument? Use examples from the text.
4. Do you agree or disagree with the argument? Why or why not?

Example:

1. I think the argument the writer is trying to make is that... (what is the writer trying to convince us about)?
2. I can tell he's trying to make this argument because he says... (copy and paste something from the reading) and (copy and paste something from the reading).
3. I agree/disagree with the author because... (write your opinion).

### Easy

#### WIDESPREAD FEELINGS

Lots of things we might think are weird or unusual about us are actually pretty common. But people don't always talk about them openly.

Everyone is different, and we all have feelings like being happy, sad, or angry.

Sometimes we feel shy or worried, and that's okay.

We know what we're feeling because we're inside our own heads. But we can't always tell what others are feeling because they don't always say. Sometimes, we might guess what someone is feeling by looking at their face, but it's not always easy.

We might feel like everyone else has it all together while we're struggling with our own feelings and thoughts. But really, everyone has their own quirks and worries.

Books, movies, and songs can help us understand that other people feel the same way we do. They can show us that it's normal to have all kinds of feelings.

We need help from our culture to understand that it's okay to have different feelings. We learn from what others around us think and feel. It's important to be honest about our feelings and to know that it's okay to feel different.

## **Medium**

### **COMMON EXPERIENCES**

Many things we might find strange or unusual about ourselves are actually quite common, even if people don't talk about them much.

The idea of what is "normal" doesn't always match up with the reality of human experiences. Each person is complex, with a range of emotions and behaviors that may not always fit societal expectations.

The challenge starts with how our minds work: we can easily understand our own feelings, but understanding others requires their openness and our interpretation of their expressions, which isn't always accurate.

We can't always assume that others share the same deep thoughts and feelings as us, which can make us feel isolated and misunderstood.

Culture plays a role in helping us understand that it's okay to have different experiences and emotions. Books, movies, and music can expose us to a wide range of human experiences, helping us realize that our quirks and vulnerabilities are part of being human.

We rely on society to provide a framework for understanding ourselves and others. Our level of self-awareness is influenced by the attitudes and values of those around us. Greater honesty about our feelings can lead to a more compassionate and understanding society.

## **Difficult**

### **UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE**

Many aspects of human behavior that we might think of as unusual or strange are actually quite common, though they're not often openly discussed.

The concept of normalcy is flawed because it doesn't accurately reflect the diversity of human experiences. Each individual is complex, with a wide range of emotions and behaviors that may not conform to societal norms.

The challenge lies in the fact that while we have direct access to our own thoughts and feelings, understanding others requires interpretation based on limited information, such as facial expressions.

We can't always assume that others share our deepest thoughts and feelings, which can lead to feelings of isolation and misunderstanding.

Culture can play a crucial role in broadening our understanding of human experiences.

Literature, film, and music can expose us to a variety of perspectives, helping us recognize that our struggles and vulnerabilities are part of the human condition.

Our understanding of ourselves is shaped by the attitudes and values of the society we live in. Greater openness and honesty about our emotions can lead to a more empathetic and inclusive community.

## **Advanced**

### THE NATURE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Many phenomena that may seem peculiar or unsettling about human behavior are, in fact, widespread but often remain unspoken in public discourse.

The prevailing notion of normalcy fails to capture the rich tapestry of human experiences. Each individual is endowed with a myriad of emotions and traits that defy simplistic categorization.

The crux of the issue lies in the epistemological disparity between our immediate access to our own internal states and the inherent ambiguity in interpreting the inner lives of others, often based on superficial cues.

The presumption that others share our deepest vulnerabilities is precarious, leading to a sense of isolation and incomprehension.

Culture serves as a lens through which we can explore the vast spectrum of human experiences. Literature, cinema, and music provide avenues for empathy and understanding, revealing the universality of human struggles and triumphs.

Our self-awareness is contingent upon the collective consciousness of society. A culture of openness and authenticity fosters mutual understanding and acceptance, enriching our comprehension of the human condition.

Moreover, acknowledging the complexities of human nature necessitates a reevaluation of societal norms and values. The rigid dichotomy between normal and abnormal fails to account for the nuances of individual experiences. By embracing diversity and inclusivity, we can create a more tolerant and compassionate society.

Furthermore, delving into the intricacies of human psychology requires a multifaceted approach. While introspection offers insight into our own thoughts and feelings, empathy enables us to navigate the complexities of interpersonal relationships.

In essence, the journey to self-awareness and understanding requires continuous introspection and engagement with diverse perspectives. By transcending societal constraints and embracing the full spectrum of human experience, we can foster a more empathetic and enlightened society.

## **Pro**

### **A MORE NORMAL NORMALCY**

If part of the reason we don't look more regularly into ourselves is our shame and fear at the unusual nature of what we may find there, then a crucial collective resource in the path to self-knowledge is a redrawn sense of what is normal.

Our picture of acceptability is very often way out of line with what is actually true and widespread. Many things that we might assume to be uniquely odd or disconcertingly strange about us are in reality wholly ubiquitous, though rarely spoken of in the reserved and cautious public sphere.

Any idea of the normal currently in circulation is not an accurate map of what is customary for a human to be. We are, each one of us, far more compulsive, anxious, sexual, tender, mean, generous, playful, thoughtful, dazed, and at sea than we are encouraged to accept.

The misunderstanding begins with a basic fact about our minds: that we know through immediate experience what is going on inside us, but can only know about others from what they choose to tell us—which will almost always be a very edited version of the truth. We know our somewhat shocking reality from close up; we are left to guess about other people's from what their faces tell us, which is not very much.

We simply cannot trust that sides of our deep selves will have counterparts in those we meet, and so remain silent and shy, struggling to believe that the imposing, competent strangers we encounter can have any of the vulnerabilities, perversions, and idiocies we're so intimately familiar with inside our own characters.

Ideally, the task of culture would be to compensate for the failings of our brains. It should assist us to a more correct vision of what other people are normally like—by taking us, in realistic and sensitive ways, into the inner lives of strangers. Novels, movies, and songs should constantly be defining and evoking states of mind we thought we were alone in experiencing but that belong to the typical lot of humankind. We should put down the average novel wondering, with relief, how the novelist had come to know so much about us. We should begin to understand that an average stranger is always far more likely to be as we know we are—with all our quirks, fragilities, compulsions, and surprising aspects—than they are to resemble the apparently “normal” person their exterior implies.

We need culture to take on the task because we cannot do it all by

ourselves. In order to know ourselves well, we rely on the level of selfawareness, courage, and honesty circulating in society as a whole. We will be as hypocritical as the most representative voices around us and we will, conversely, be freed by what society is prepared to countenance as acceptable.

There is, at present, so much we pretend not to feel. Starting in childhood, we have instilled in us, so subtly we don't even notice, strong notions about what is and is not permissible to experience. Traditionally, boys were not allowed to acknowledge that they felt like crying and girls weren't allowed to entertain certain kinds of ambitions. We might not have such obviously naive prohibitions today, but other, equally powerful ones have taken their place. We may have picked up covert but forceful indications that no decent person could be enthusiastic about making money or unable to cope at work, tempted by an affair or still upset over a breakup. Furthermore, despite the apparently sexually liberated spirit of the times, the lion's share of our sexual impulses remains impossible to avow. There is still a great deal we are not meant to feel in order to fit that most desirable of categories: a good boy or girl.

The way to greater honesty follows some of the techniques evident from the rehabilitation of the people who commit crimes. We must reduce the shame and danger of confession. We need a broader, more reassuring sense of what is common. Of course it is normal to be envious, crude, sexual, weak, in need, childlike, grandiose, terrified, and furious. It is normal to desire random adventures even within loving, committed unions. It is normal to be hurt by "small" signs of rejection, and to be made quickly very insecure by any evidence of neglect by a partner. It is normal to harbor hopes for ourselves professionally that go far beyond what we have currently been able to achieve. It is normal to envy other people, many times a day, to be very upset by any kind of criticism of our work or performance, and to be so sad we regularly daydream of flight or a premature end.

The journey to self-knowledge needs to begin with a better map of the terrain of normality.

***This text is adapted in five different levels from the book School of Life by Alain De Batton***